Enemy Kitchen
An Interview with Michael Rakowitz

In the gentrified neighborhoods of Brooklyn, New York, shoppers expect to know how their food was produced. The specialty and organic labels at the Red Hook Fairway detail the provenance of their salmon. Signs proclaim who raised their olives and baby carrots, and what parenting techniques. At the Park Slope Food Coop everyone stands in the aisles reading handwritten signs or small distributor’s tags indicate the points of origin for produce and characterize the fair trade that is or is not certified in the history of each coffee bean. The section of Atlantic Avenue where I live remains a center for Middle Eastern groceries and Muslim products. Each morning I can watch whole skinned animals being carted into the halal butcher down the street. There, especially, it has always been important to know the food’s history and treatment.

You could say that all this information is radical. It sheds light on the mysteries of food in a community and exposes the hidden social relationships on which food products depend. Luxury food shopping has normalized this revolution by including information about the “relations of production” as part of the product, thereby adding to its value. For example, this morning I paid fourteen dollars at a specialty grocer for a package of credenaldated egg noodles and a very small, but reputable, bag of vegetables.

Somehow this added value of provenance and history has not accrued to products beyond the food world. Fourteen dollars is almost exactly the same amount I paid for the pants I am wearing, about whose history I know nothing. The cost of these pants suggests that the person who sewed them was not highly remunerated for her labor, yet I was justiﬁed to think about that while I was buying them. If I knew more, I would probably feel worse.
But with food, we feel better when we know where our products come from, and because this knowledge makes us feel better, we are willing to pay more for it. Last fall, though, I walked into a neighborhood grocery store where the same type of product information was brilliantly restructured to make me feel worse. Davison & Co., a temporary grocery on Atlantic Avenue, was both a storefront and a public art project by Michael Rakowitz, poised precisely between the luxury of feel-good product knowledge and the troubling labor relations that most commodities work to hide from us. The shop foregrounded its products’ histories in ways meant to elicit curious feelings about the rational and political history of its specialty food import: the Iraqi date.

In American mass culture, feelings about Iraq remain largely unacknowledged—perhaps because they are too horrifying, too implicating, too enormous, while at the same time being too vague, too remote, and too easy to ignore. By appealing to the presumably harmless registers of meaning we associate with shopping for food, Rakowitz found a platform for a more specific conversation: Who carried which dates to which airport? What was their experience? What were they paid? What can we know—not just about the statistical persons we grasp in the abstract when CNN informs us that sixty people have been killed by a car bomb in Baghdad, but about the concrete persons and stories behind the horrific events? And how can food help us to know it?

The original Davison & Co. was opened in 1946 by Rakowitz’s late grandfather, Nissim Isaac David, an exiled Iraqi Jew. It closed in 1965. In 2006 Rakowitz reopened the shop in a new location, as a public art project sponsored by the arts organization Creative Time. He lettered the window of his storefront with his grandfather’s legs, along with the messages “Free Shipping to Iraq” and “Iraqi dates.” This new incarnation of Davison & Co. remained open for business from September through December 2006, a site for narrating the histories of labor, violence, politics, and rational memory that lie behind the dates, an Iraqi national treasure and once a major export.

Davison & Co. attracted a broad range of random shoppers, as well as intentional visitors who had seen Rakowitz’s ads in Amanuca or read the article about his project in the New York Times. When customers entered the store, they encountered a drop box for shipping goods to Iraq and a table spread with Iraqi-seed dates grown in California, displayed for sale much as they are in typical Middle Eastern groceries. Shelves of Iraqi date-based products such as Mamlouk cookies and date syrup were also available, often packaged with labels marked “Product of Dubai” or “Product of Lebanon.” One wall displayed an enormous timeline chronicling the ancient and modern history of dates, in both English and Arabic. Another wall displayed selected Middle Eastern food products with details about the history of each one’s production and shipping. Three different historical Iraqi flag designs were painted on the wall near the cash register. Customers could also see snapshots of the Iraqi dates that, for most of the time the store was open, had not yet arrived, for reasons that paralleled the humanitarian crisis taking place within Iraq and along its borders.

Rakowitz successfully turned a private retail space into a site for alternative public discussion. Conversations with patrons about the dates—where the shipment was, who was driving the truck, whether the dates would make it into Jordan, whether they would make it out of Jordan—led to a three-month verbal exchange between Rakowitz and the public. With the Iraqi date as a starting point, his grocery became a forum for information wildly different in content and tone from what Rakowitz calls the “green-tinted version of Baghdad we see on CNN.”

I spoke with Michael Rakowitz in December 2006.

LJ: Until opening Davison & Co. as your own storefront, you focused on exports, not imports. Your 2004 project. Return at Jamaica Center for the Arts and Learning in Queens invited people to bring in items for free shipping to Iraq. Even when you created Davison & Co., you provided an opportunity for exports there, too.

MR: Yes, initially I focused on exports, thanks to the help of cultural funds. I offered free shipping—shipping was normally very expensive. I took out ads in Amanuca to announce what I was doing, and right away I began receiving phone calls from people asking why I was doing this. They were somewhat skeptical. The conversation would always reach a point where people would say, Well, you’re Jewish, how do you feel about what’s happening in Iraq now? So there’s a point in the discussion when you recognize how impossible it is to be perceived as an Arab Jew of Iraqi descent. The concept of an Arab Jew disappeared in the twentieth century, with what all the upheavals in the region and the creation of Israel. But that kind of discussion is very important to me. It addresses the inevitable, which is that this is a project done by an artist who is both Jewish and of Iraqi descent. I’m not looking to turn this project into autobiography, but since I am the person maintaining the shop, since I am the proprietor, it is there. But so many other histories and stories come along with mine, because there were other Iraqi Jews, hundreds of thousands of them. It was the oldest Jewish community in the world. So they become part of the discussion, too.

One woman, Hara, from East Peterbourgh, Penn., called up with the same set of questions, the same story. I eventually convinced her husband that it would be very good for them to send stuff for free to their family in Dwayniyeh, Iraq. Hara told me she needed to send things because her niece had died of cancer in 2004, leaving behind a newborn baby. Her niece’s husband had a photographer with a studio in town. One evening I was working in the studio when a group of men walked in. They were extremists, and they said that photographing his subjects was un-Islamic, so they executed him. The body was left and was taken in by relatives. Hara gathered all the old toys and clothing and stuffed animals she had from raising her own three kids and decided to send all of it to Iraq. We sent what we could. Somewhere else in the country, things were still able to be sent, but we sent seven things, maybe nine. The objects became proof: a way, of the people who were going to receive them.

The story Hara told was a very critical moment in the project. You create a platform where these things can be sent, and you begin to hear stories that nobody really focuses on. We see the news, but nobody focuses on the face of a single victim, which keeps us at a safe distance. We can agree that it is normal for us to hear sixty-five people have been killed in Baghdad in one month: there is a singular story, which many people can relate to.

LJ: So how did the importing part of this project happen? I right that it began when you went shopping for goods in

MR: Yes. My mother introduced us to shopping at S. after the first Gulf War, when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. Suddenly, being Iraqi meant something different to me and my brothers. Growing up, we knew we were Jews, but we never really connected with that on a cultural level. We grew up during the Iran-Iraq war, in Great Neck, New York, where there was a large Persian population. It really meant for us was that if we were on the bazaar court and we lost the basketball game, then I would be the one other Iraqi kid and we’d turn to the Persians’ side and say, okay, we lost the game but we’re not the war. Being Iraqi Jews had an abstract kind of meaning to us. We had a friend’s brother in Iraq on our brain about what was going on in that country. If Persian Gulf War really did create a moment when I about to go to college and was suddenly faced with it that this country that I’m living in was about to bomb me that my grandmother and grandfather had Bed. Obviously is going to create a bit of an interest in what heritage is, and so my mother took me to Saddam’s for
One woman, Haru, from East Petersburg, Pennsylvania, called up with the same set of questions, the same skepticism. I finally convinced her husband that it would be very good for them to send stuff for free to their family in Ad Dissanjah, Iraq. Haru told me she needed to send these things because her niece had died of cancer in 2004, leaving behind a newborn baby. Her niece’s husband had been a photographer with a studio in town. One evening he was working in the studio when a group of men walked in. They were extremists, and they said that photographing human subjects was un-Islamic, so they executed him. The baby was left an orphan and was taken in by relatives. Haru had gathered all the old toys and clothing and strollers and high chairs she had from raising her own three kids and decided to send all of it to Iraq. We sent what we could. Some of the bigger things we weren’t able to send, but we sent six or seven things, maybe nine. The objects became portraits, in a way, of the people who were going to receive them.

The story Haru told was a very critical moment in the project. You create a platform where these things can happen, and you begin to hear stories that nobody is really focusing on. We see the mass grave, but nobody focuses in on the face of a single victim, which keeps us at a safe distance. We can agree that it is normal for us to hear that sixty-five people have been killed in Baghdad in one day, but here is a singular story, which so many people can relate to.

LE: So how did the importing part of this project happen? Am I right that it began when you were shopping for groceries?

MR: Yes. My mother introduced us to shopping at Sahadi’s after the first Gulf War, when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. Suddenly, being Israeli meant something different to me and my brothers. Growing up, we knew we were Iraqi Jews, but we never really connected with that on a conscious level. We grew up during the Iran-Iraq war, in Great Neck, New York, where there is a large Persian population. All it really meant for us was that we were on the basketball court and we lost the basketball game, then we would join with the other Iraqi kids and we’d turn to the Persians on the other side and say, okay, we lost the game but we’re winning the war. Being Iraqi Jews had an abstract kind of meaning in our brains about what was going on in that country. But the Persian Gulf War really did create a moment when I was just about to go to college and was suddenly faced with the fact that this country that I’m living in was about to bomb the one that my grandmother and grandfather had fled. And that obviously is going to create a bit of an interest in what your heritage is, and so my mother took us to Sahadi’s for the first time. When my grandparents came over from Iraq, that was where they had gone to buy their spices.

Later, I was actually living in that neighborhood with my wife. I went into Sahadi’s in October 2003 and noticed a kind of date syrup I’d never seen before. My grandfather always used to make date syrup—there was an important thing to have on the table during Passover. Instead of Ashkenazi haroset—the apple, walnut, date, and honey mixture that you dip the matzah in—Iraqi Jews use date syrup. You pour out a bowlful of the syrup and sprinkle crushed walnuts on top. My grandfather used to press the syrup from the dates himself. He died when I was too, but every year my mother buys date syrup, usually a brand made in Israel. She would always talk about how much better it was when my grandfather made it by hand. I’d never see any brand besides the Israeli one, so when I found the date syrup in Sahadi’s I thought, ‘Great, I’ll try it’ I was paying for it when Charlie Sahadi said, ‘Your mother’s going to love this, it’s from Baghdad.’ And I said, ‘Wow, it says product of Lebanon.’ And he explained that the date syrup is actually pressed in Baghdad, then tracked in plastic vats to Syria, where it is canned in an aluminum facility before going over the border into Lebanon, where it receives a label saying ‘Product of Lebanon.’

This is one way the Iraqis were able to beat the sanctions for so long, and they continue to do this even after the sanctions have been lifted. If you have something that says ‘Product of Iraq’ you can pretty much be guaranteed that US Customs is going to seize your whole shipment and then go through it by hand. Then they’ll charge you for the equipment use and for their time. So it’s not cost-effective to import Iraqi goods. It’s bad business, and that’s what got me started on this project.

It also got me thinking about the cultural absence of anything that says ‘Iraq.’ When people think about the landscape of Baghdad, no one ever sees it without the green tint of CNN night vision showing the bombs falling. Something that always intrigued me is that when you have war, or some other kind of adventure when one country occupies another, there’s always this sort of cultural puncture that happens, where things flow both ways. You can’t walk too far in Paris without coming across a North African market or restaurant. This is, of course, a very different condition with the colonial occupation of Tunisia and Algeria and Morocco, but even so, we’re not getting that kind of flow in the United States today. When you create something like an Iraqi restaurant, it puts something out there that is suddenly about cultural presence and cultural visibility. It utilizes food as a point of entry and creates a
MR: My idea was to create a space that would function as a quotidian market that attempted to bring in an | product, and to offer for sale the products whose sale are veiled, such as Mamluk cookies. I've been told I | have importers that any Mamluk cookie coming from | Arabia or Damascus actually contains Iraqi dates, ex | through the label says "Select Saadi dates." The baki | dates used in these cookies come from Iraq—they're | better quality and they're also cheaper. Between 2002 a | there was a company in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates | that was bringing in dates from Basra, from a really | promising company called the Al Mosawi Date Company. They | packaging them as Dubai Dates and selling them to | of the world as a product of the UAE. | | That company stopped business in 2004 because | was a concern, actually a belief throughout the entire | that the US and Britain had used depleted uranium | bombs they dropped. From 90 million date palms in | 1975 the number fell to sixteen million, and by the e | the 2003 campaign Operation Iraqi Freedom, there v | three million date palms left in the entire country. | At palms were suffering from a land of Fusarium bacteri | which many scientists link to the use of depleted ur | The radiation lowers the tree's immune system. The | attack the trunk, making the trunk go flecked and the | fall over. They end up looking like weeping people, | I said, an ecological disaster that mirrors the human ci | | Another thing I found out is that whatever any | is labeled from these other countries, Iraqi business | take an enormous risk. We see only 30 percent of the | profit when these middlemen are involved. I talked | this with a representative from Dubai Dates. It was | thing he would never bring up with an Iraqi, because | relationship was so adverse. The Iraqis aren't mak | money, but it's the only way they can get their date | into the world. | | I was also told that even a professional us | would have problems bringing in Iraqi products. T | have to wait months. I realized I might have to wait | called Charlie Sahladi and asked, "Do you remember | said, "Listen, I found out we can import dates. I a | to a company in Iraq that thinks we can do it—in | work with me." He was saying things like, "Look, if | wrong, it's like a black mark on our record, a blen | dates could be scanned, and you'll end up paying $ | even before they get to our warehouse, and then the | [its Department of Agriculture] and the rtx [Food | Drug Administration] have to come and inspect the | then they might get sent back." So I tell Charlie I s | different platform by which people can enter into conver | sation. That's a story that hasn't been told enough—where the | points of mixture occur. It's a little raw to be thinking about this | right now, when Iraqis are dying by the thousands. | My research revealed that in the 1970s Iraq was the | most revered exporter of dates in the world. The country | had thirty million date palms, with 450 varieties. The whole | culture of dates was so strong that if you were going on a | business trip to Baghdad, your friends and your family asked you to bring back dates. It was the soil conditions, the heat— | things that just can't be replicated elsewhere, the way Cuban | tobacco is really special. I did more research and found out | that the California date industry began in 1912 when this | guy named Bernard Johnson purchased seeds from Iraq and | planted them in Mecca, California, in the Coachella Valley, with a grant from the [its Department of Agriculture]. That's | how the California date industry was born. Our dates are | from Iraqi seed. So it's the enemy within. | None of the date products actually originating in Iraq | enter the us bearing labels that identify them that way. So | the next thing I wanted to do—both as a cultural product | and as a gesture—was to attempt to bring in the first date | product actually labeled as a product of Iraq, to commu | nicate overtly that trade between our countries was in fact | happening, even though it was hidden. As Charlie had told | me, everything comes in with labels from other countries | in the region. So with the support of Creative Time, I | reopened my grandfather's import/export company. | Lf: Your project really demonstrates the unexpected political | potential of the particular forms of contact that take place | within the realm of commerce.
MR: My idea was to create a space that would function as a quandary market that attempted to bring in an Iraqi product, and to offer for sale the products whose origins are veiled, such as Mamoul cookies. I’ve been told by various importers that any Mamoul cookie coming from Saudi Arabia or Damascus actually contains Iraqi dates, even though the label says “Select Sahani dates.” The baking dates used in these cookies come from Iraq—they’re of better quality and they’re also cheaper. Between 2001 and 2004 there was a company in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, that was bringing in dates from Basra, from a really famous company called the Al Muosawi Date Company. They were packaging them as Dubai Dates and selling them to the rest of the world as a product of the UAE.

That company stopped business in 2004 because there was a concern, actually a belief throughout the entire region, that the US and Britain had used depleted uranium in the bombs they dropped. From 20 million date palms in the mid-1970s the number fell to sixteen million, and by the end of the 2009 campaign Operation Freedom Tower, there were only three million date palms left in the entire country. And these palms were suffering from a kind of Fourtième bacterium, which many scientists link to the use of depleted uranium. The radiation lowers the tree’s immune system. The bacteria attack the trunk, making the trunks go flaccid and the crowns fall over. They end up looking like weeping willows. It’s very sad, an ecological disaster that mirrors the human disaster.

Another thing I found out is that whenever anything is labeled from these other countries, Iraqi businessmen take an enormous hit. They see only 30 percent of their profit when these middlemen are involved. I talked about this with a representative from Dubai Dates. It was something he would never bring up with an Iraqi, because the relationship was so adverse. The Iraqis aren’t making any money, but it’s the only way they can get their dates out into the world.

I was also told that every a professional vs importer would have problems bringing in Iraqi products. They’d have to wait months. I realized I might have to wait years. I talked to Charlie Sahadi and asked, “Do you remember me?” I said, “Listen, I found out we can import dates. I’m talking to a company in Iraq that thinks we can do it—will you work with me?” He was saying things like, “Look, if this goes wrong, it’s like a black mark on our record, a blinism. The dates could be scanned, and you’ll end up paying $1,500.00 even before they get to our warehouse, and then the FDA [Department of Agriculture] and the FDA Food and Drug Administration] have to come and inspect them, and then they might get sent back.” So I tell Charlie I understand, but that I have a budget, and it’s cultural money. He said, “You know this is bad business.” And I said, Yeah, but it might be really good art. And he understood. He understood that if this works out, a big step could be made.

He told me to call his son-in-law Pat Whelan. I was expecting a ten-minute phone call, but I spoke with him for half an hour. At the end he said, “I have no problem with this in principle; let me talk to my customs broker, and I’ll let you know.” Two days later I get an e-mail saying, “Good morning, Michael, we can work together on this, let me know when you have information from the company in Iraq.” I hit the ceiling—it was beautiful. It meant the project could happen and that people from the professional community were willing to take a stand and put themselves on the line, to actually participate in importing this stuff that’s so much more than just stuff. These dates were going to make people stop and ask questions. They were going to have this word “Iraq” on them, which would create a moment of delay and make people consider their relationship to that word.

I put an ad on the Baghdad Business Center’s Internet site, telling them I was reopening my grandfather’s company. We wanted to sign the first deal to bring in Iraqi dates clearly labeled as such, in what we believed would be the first such transaction in over thirty years. Nothing labeled “Product of Iraq” had hit American store shelves since the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war.

I wanted this to be something more than just a business transaction, however. The project inevitably became personally meaningful, since I am half Iraqi. The week after the advertisement was translated into Arabic, I began receiving e-mails. These were gorgeous messages. The first came from a man named Majid, who essentially welcomed me back, saying, We are glad to do business with the son of our city’s daughter. I had similar conversations with nearly all of the business people, either by Skype or by e-mail. The first thing they would ask was, “What was your grandfather’s name?” He had Anglicized his name to David, from the Arabic Daoud. I would say that his name was Nisam Daoud. And they would always say, Welcome back, Daoud. This may have been superficial on some level, framed within a business transaction meant to benefit everyone. But there was something very meaningful on both ends. I think.

I got a lease for the store beginning in September, and the e-mails kept rolling in. One came from Basam—for security purposes it’s not his real name—who wrote, “Thank you for your email. Now we understand why you are interested to work in dates and you get it from your mother’s side of the family. Because it’s said that all Iraqi

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people have a date in their genes. It is a tradition to put a date in the mouth of the baby after its birth so it is the first food that the Iraqi people taste, so the first taste of life is sweet.” Then he went on to list fifteen different kinds of dates he could get me by the time the store was operating. All this reinforced the place of the date in Iraqi culture, the fact that it is the pride of the people. When you think about where the situation is now, it’s heartbreaking also to realize that the sweetness alluded to in the ritual use of the fruit is so different from the reality of Iraq’s lives now.

On the seventh of September we signed a deal with Bassam’s company for one thousand kilos, or one ton, of Kastesi dates. They said that the dates would arrive in the US within twenty-one days. They also said that US Customs would hold the dates for two or three weeks, so we’d have them before the store closed. It was pretty much a wash-and-see project—the sanctions may have been lifted in 2003, but for all intents and purposes they are still in place.

Right about then US troops were talking about building a trench around Baghdad, and I hadn’t heard from my contact at Bassam’s company for an entire week, even though we had been in touch pretty often by that point. I sent him a couple of e-mails saying, Listen, all the news that we’re getting from Baghdad is horrendous, please let me know you’re okay. I’m kind of terrified, I don’t really know what to do. I’m in a state of paralysis, I don’t have anyone to contact who’s friends with him. Eventually he writes an e-mail that says, I’m sorry for my silence, I’ve been relocating my family from Baghdad to Amman.” His wife, I later found out, had seen somebody get shot in front of their children at a café, and that was it. In a later conversation he said, “Now I’m like your grandfather.” It wasn’t about the dates any longer.

During the process, the Iraqi farmers would climb their date palms and send me photos saying, “This is how your dates are doing, okay?” Bassam’s company designed the boxes. I told them, “This is going to be the first product since 1990 that says ‘Product of Syria.’” Design it however you like; if you want to say something, say it.” So all this stuff is happening, and all the dates end up in the boxes, in the warehouse, ready for shipping. They end up on a truck from Baghdad to Amman, where they’re scheduled to be put on a direct flight to the US.

This was in the beginning of October. The route from Baghdad to Amman is the most dangerous road in all of Iraq. Our truck drove to the border, where it got caught up in a days-long line of cars filled with refugees trying to flee the sectarian violence. The Jordanian officials were turning away most of the cars because they had already accepted so many Lebanese refugees because of the war there. The flux of Iraqis was just too much for them to handle, and it was increasing every month. So there the dates were in that line, along with the people. They were waiting in the hot sun, where the temperature in the back of the truck could get as high as 140 degrees Fahrenheit.

I really thought that the dates would intermingle what was happening on this side of the ocean. I never thought they would become surrogates for the people waiting at the border.

When the truck finally got to the border, the Jordanian officials looked to see what the cargo was and said, “You have to go back to Baghdad and get a certificate from the Ministry of Environment Radiation Protection Centre.” This corroborated the report about depleted uranium being used in the war. If you fact-check it with the US government they’ll deny it up and down, but Jordan is still not letting in cucumbers from Iraq without a certificate.

So the dates went back to Baghdad, and it took days for the scans to come through. The truck finally got back to the border. The driver gets to the front of the line of cars, and this time the Jordanian officials just outright reject the cargo. They say it’s for security concerns, and there’s no conversation to be had. At this point the driver has been driving back and forth between Baghdad and the border for the last twenty days, and he’s beside himself. He gets on the phone with the company, and they tell him to go north.

So the driver headed north, to try his luck with Syria. He dropped the dates off at the international airport in Damascus, then headed back to Iraq. The next day the company gets a call from the Syrian airport, and the officials say, “Your driver left without signing a particular piece of paper, it’s going to cost you $2,000 to ship this.” They were saying, “We can do it for free, but then we have to list everything as a product of Syria.” Which would have been a disaster for us—the dates never would have gotten in because the boxes said “Product of Iraq.” Bassam was just beside himself. He said, this is not legitimate, this is a bribe, I am not going to participate in this kind of business, we should stand our ground. He was furious. His position was, these are two hundred boxes of dates, it’s a big shipment, and pretty soon it’s going to be blocking something they need to get to. So they’ll have to move it physically, and they’ll get it on the plane. By this time it’s already the end of October, and I’m signing an extension of the lease to bring the project into mid-November. A week later, Syria released the dates and Bassam was going to go to Syria to arrange the flights for them, but then he realized he had an Iraqi passport. He would have no problem getting into Syria, but when he returned from Syria to Jordan, there would be a problem, and he would be deported back to Iraq.

Meanwhile, everyone coming into my store is getting the story from me. We have the California dates for seed, but not the Iraqi ones yet. There’s a sign in the showroom that tells where the dates are, that lets everyone we’re expecting them on October 10. Different people come in with different responses. One Moroccan man said he read the article in the New York Times and that he’s in to pick up some Iraqi dates. I explained we didn’t have them yet, and he was really exasperated. He said, “I know how long it took me to get to Brooklyn today, weekend train?” And I’m explaining, “Well, the date on a truck that’s been stuck at the border for days the Jordanians behind thousands of Iraqi refugees.” His face just crumpled completely, and he said, “The dates are like the passports Bassam’s sales agent, Samir, went to Syria on his Jordanian passport to look into flights. He thought I’d the boxes to make sure the dates were ok, opened up twenty-five boxes, and the skin was peel from the body of the dates. They were still perfectly
Meanwhile, everyone coming into my store is getting the story from me. We have the California dates from Iraqi seed, but not the Iraqi ones yet. There's a sign in the window that tells where the dates are, that lets everyone know we're expecting them on October 10. Different people came in with different responses. One Moroccan man said he'd read the article in the New York Times and that he'd come in to pick up some Iraqi dates. I explained we didn't have them yet, and he was really exasperated. He said, "Do you know how long it took me to get to Brooklyn today, with the weekend traffic?" And I'm explaining, "Well, the dates are on a truck that's been stuck for days at the Jordanian border, behind thousands of Iraqi refugees." His face just changed completely, and he said, "The dates are like the people." Basam's sales agent, Samir, went to Syria on his Jordanian passport to look into flights. He thought he'd better check the boxes to make sure the dates were okay. He opened up twenty-five boxes, and the skin was peeling away from the body of the dates. They were still perfectly fine for

human consumption, but they looked terrible. They ended up selling them to a Downtown market, probably for hiking. But Basam was determined to get something to my store, come hell or high water. So he's watching all this with great interest—if things worked out, Basam could be a sustainable partner for them. We made an agreement that they would send ten boxes out of Baghdad directly to New York. We made the deal on Election Day. The next day I spoke with Basam, just to firm up the deal. He said, "Listen, I'm going to send you eleven boxes, because in Arabic tradition, you are supposed to hand things out in celebration when something good happens. So you've got to stand outside your store and hand these out, because the Democrats won the House and the Senate, and so maybe the policy can change in this country."
The Disappearance of Hunger in America

The timing of the announcement could not have been worse. Last fall, a few days before the American feast of Thanksgiving, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced that it was eliminating the word hunger from its official assessment of food security in America and replacing it with the term very low food security. Not surprisingly, anti-hunger advocates condemned this decision, as did the press. An article in the San Antonio Express-News titled it "a shallow attempt to sugarcoat serious national health problem," while an editorial in the Winston-Salem Journal suggested it was "an effort to either hide some of the facts or to make political inroads." An August column in the U.S. News & World Report accused the USDA of "semantics to sweep a dirty problem under the rug.

The media portrayed the substitution of food insecurity for hunger as a political maneuver to deflect attention from the persistence of hunger in the face of plenty. The story is both more complicated and interesting than that. It is not that the United States has become less food-secure than it once was. The popularity of books like Eric Schlosser's Fast Food Nation, Michael Pollan's Omnivore's Dilemma, and Greg Crittenden's Fat Land films like Morgan Spurlock's Supersize Me, and the generalization that Americans are increasingly interested in local and organic food, have increased public awareness of the problems in the food system and the need for solutions. These efforts are also intended to address social justice issues, including the most obvious of which is hunger in America. However, the idea that hunger is not a growing problem is not new. By eliminating the term hunger, the USDA is simply announcing an "innocent" statistical reality. Specifically, USDA guidelines state that food insecurity is a broad social problem of limited or uncertain access to food, whereas hunger is an individual physiological issue.