

DATEBOOK



Photos by PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

Northwestern University art Professor Michael Rakowitz demonstrates how to make a meatball dumpling for a traditional Iraqi dish called *kubba bamia*.

It's not just food, it's art — and it's about the war

Connie Sheng was dicing an onion and thinking about the war in Iraq. "I feel a lot less proud to be an American," the Saratoga High School student said, resting her knife on the cutting board for a moment. "It seems like we've lost our purpose."

Sheng's classmate Niamh McGinley stood nearby, chopping tomatoes for a salad that would include peppers, onions, cucumbers and a pickled mango preparation called *amba*. "Most of us were too young to realize why we got into Iraq," she said. "The idea of spreading democracy is all well and nice, but . . ." Her thought trailed off.

"It's not just President Bush," put in Arjun Shenoy. "People don't trust this government anymore. We need to find some way to re-establish that."

Across the worktable, Vivian Hsiao was hand-rolling rice-flour dumplings for *kubba bamia*, a traditional Iraqi dish the Saratoga students were preparing for their lunch at the Montalvo Arts Center Villa one day last week. "This war has made me wonder what it would be like to love my country," said Hsiao.

The cooking and conversation were occurring under the guidance of Michael Rakowitz, a 34-year-old artist who was in residence at Montalvo. In an ongoing project he calls "Enemy Kitchen," Rakowitz invites groups of students or adults to prepare and eat a meal using his Iraqi-Jewish mother's recipes.

The aim is to open new channels of ideas and feelings about the Iraq war and its underlying issues. Food, he believes, creates a leveling "social platform and circumstance" that can stimulate what he calls a "cultural puncture" among separate geographical, political and psychological realms.

Rakowitz, who was raised on New York's Long Island, has never visited Iraq

Steven Winn *The Culture*

and now teaches art theory and practice at Northwestern University, can sound pretty woolly when he gets going on the conceptual framework of his work. Cooking and eating with people, he said later, "is a public act that enlists an audience as vital collaborators in the production of meaning." Doing that in the United States with Iraqi recipes, he went on, invokes "the poetry inscribed in the notion of consuming the enemy."

But when he's working with a group of California teenagers, all of them dressed in "Enemy Kitchen" aprons bearing an image of the Iraqi flag, Rakowitz projects a receptive, curious and altogether accessible air. A dark beard, dark corkscrew curls and blue-gray eyes give him the look of a genial satyr. His Socratic dialogues are firmly grounded in the tactile, sensual nature of cooking.

Grabbing a handful of turmeric to season the *kubba bamia's* stew base, Rakowitz invited the students to come closer and get the full effect of the spice releasing its vapors in the hot oil. "You guys should eat more turmeric," he said. "It's



Rakowitz teaches Saratoga High School students how to make *kubba bamia*, a traditional Iraqi dish. The art professor presented the "Enemy Kitchen" project at the Montalvo Arts Center Villa in Saratoga.

the elixir of life. Also," he added, holding up his bright yellow palms, "they (Iraqis) use it as a dye."

Rakowitz spent 45 minutes each with two groups of about a dozen students, all of whom are enrolled in one of Judith Sutton's poetry writing classes. He asked questions, gently steered discussion and volunteered experiences of his own. He talked about his Iraqi grandparents' emigration in 1946 and told the students about the lines outside the door at Khyber Pass, an Afghan restaurant in New York, a few nights after Sept. 11, 2001. "People

were there as a gesture of peace, as we were getting ready to attack Afghanistan," he said. "I thought that was really beautiful."

Rakowitz asked the students if they knew of any Iraqi restaurants in the Bay Area. When they couldn't name one, he asked if they knew any Vietnamese restaurants. They all nodded. Pointing out that we were once at war with Vietnam, he offered this wishful thought: "The thing I hope is that it will be very normal one day for people here to be eating Iraqi food." Ingredients hold both literal and sym-

bolic importance for Rakowitz. He held up the bag and told the students they were using California rice flour for the dumplings instead of an Iraqi product unavailable because of trade sanctions. "Which is pretty funny when you think about," he said, "since we're supposedly trying to rebuild the country."

Last year, in a project called "Return" that married art and a kind of Platonic commerce, Rakowitz reopened his grandfather's long-closed import-export shop in Brooklyn for the sole purpose of importing



PAUL CHINN / The Chronicle

Students and chaperones sit down to a meal they made in the dining room at Villa Montalvo, a sumptuous end to the “Enemy Kitchen” project.

Food opens students to Iraqi culture

► WINN
From Page E1

Iraqi dates. The fruit, in a convoluted series of events, became a “surrogate refugee,” as the shipment was shuttled from Baghdad to Amman, Jordan, and on to Syria, where the dates spoiled in the heat. Rakowitz did eventually succeed in getting five small boxes of dates through the bureaucratic maze of U.S. Customs and Homeland Security.

An Iraqi refugee named Shamoan, who had been visiting the Brooklyn storefront and struck up a friendship with Rakowitz, was one of the first to get a taste of *thik-*

**Jon Carroll
and Leah Garchik**
are on vacation.

ra, or homeland memory. Rakowitz got a faraway look when he described his friend’s half-blissful, half-anguished reaction. “‘This,’” he said of the date he had just eaten, “‘was 46 years in the making.’”

Rakowitz’s suggestive food-based art is part of “Iraq: Reframe,” an ambitious series of events, performances and talks sponsored by Montalvo and other organizations to explore “the significance of the current circumstances of Iraq in a global and historical context.” In addition to artist-in-residence projects at Montalvo, there have been exhibitions at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art (through Jan. 19) and San Francisco’s Triple Base Gallery (through Jan. 5); a hip-hop collaboration and a forthcoming performance of Heather Raffo’s solo play, “9 Parts of Desire” (March 29); and various lectures and pan-

els. Events on the “Iraq: Reframe” calendar continue through April.

An unavoidable, animating irony of the program is the use of art to address issues about a country that has been drained of its artistic and cultural lifeblood. That was apparent when the students took a break from cooking to visit “Al Dar Al Iraqi (Iraqi House),” a one-room, mud-brick shelter erected by refugee artist Wafaa Bilal down a grassy hill from the Italianate Montalvo villa.

Bilal, dressed in black, stood outside the flat-roofed one-room house and told his story. An aspiring artist in Iraq, his plans to attend art school in Baghdad were thwarted when a cousin was executed during Saddam Hussein’s reign. “If a family member was in trouble,” he explained, “you did not get good opportunity yourself.” Bilal refused

to fight in Iraq’s 1991 invasion of Kuwait and fled to Saudi Arabia. It was there, in a refugee tent camp, that he and others began building mud-brick structures. One motivation was to protect the paintings he was doing from blowing sand. The 125-degree heat was another.

“Shelter is an issue,” he said. “But hope is another issue.” A number of the Saratoga high schoolers wrote that down. They were assigned to write both poems and submit journal entries based on this field trip.

Bilal spent two years in the camp, made it to New Mexico in 1992, learned English and earned a master’s degree. Much of his work as an artist has been about “bridging the gap between here and there. War in Iraq,” he said, “never ends.” Bilal recently lived in a Chicago art gallery for 31 straight days, in an In-

ternet-inflected conceptual piece that involved people logging on to shoot paint balls at him. Thousands of people, from 138 countries, took him up on it.

At 11:30, the students gathered at a long table in the villa’s main hall to eat the *kubba bamia* and pickled-mango-dressed salad they had made together. Many of them liked the soft, meat-filled dumplings served over basmati rice. Some weren’t so sure and left food on their plates. Rakowitz sat at one end of the table and smiled as the room filled with the sounds of forks on plates, fizzing soda cans and high school chatter. At one point, he got everyone’s attention.

“My mother,” he said, “would be very proud of all of you.”

E-mail Steven Winn at swinn@sfchronicle.com.