

# Ethnic Entrepreneurship in Athens: Integration through Culture and Cuisine

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*Focusing on three case studies, this study analyses the relationship between ethnic entrepreneurship and cultural integration in Athens, Greece. Drawing on qualitative research conducted during the “Migration in the Margins of Europe” Winter School, it examines how migrant-owned restaurants serve as economic growth, cultural expression, and community building spaces. This paper highlights how Athens-based Nigerian, Georgian, and Turkish entrepreneurs navigate regulatory barriers, financial limitations, and social integration while establishing food businesses that reflect their cultural identities. Through in-depth interviews and comparative analysis, the study identifies common patterns and contrasts in funding access, customer demographics, and engagement with host communities. While ethnic entrepreneurship fosters a degree of socio-economic integration, gaps in public policy persist, especially concerning access to information, support networks, and banking. The article concludes with policy recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional support for ethnic entrepreneurs, advocating for more inclusive legal and financial frameworks. This study provides a grounded understanding of how the broader migration-integration nexus in urban Europe can shape ethnic food businesses.*

**Keywords:** ethnic entrepreneurship, cultural diplomacy, urban migration, socio-economic integration

## Introduction

In contemporary cities, everyday economic practices increasingly reflect the presence of culturally diverse communities, shaped significantly by the movement of people. Among the most visible expressions of this diversity is ethnic entrepreneurship, which refers to business activities rooted in the cultural identities and social networks of migrant groups (IBRAHIM–GALT 2011). These businesses are not only shaped by cultural traditions and community ties, but also by the structural conditions of the host society. As Kloosterman and Rath (2001) argue, immigrant entrepreneurs operate within a framework of mixed

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embeddedness, combining cultural resources with the opportunities and constraints of the institutional and economic environment. This dual positioning allows such businesses to function as cultural bridges, fostering interaction between minority and majority populations and contributing to social cohesion.

Migration has become a defining feature of contemporary European urban life, shaping not only demographic patterns but also the economic and cultural landscapes of cities (GLICK SCHILLER – ÇAĞLAR 2009; VERTOVEC 2007). Food entrepreneurship is a powerful medium for economic inclusion and cultural expression among the various avenues through which migrants participate in local economies. In Athens, a city marked by socio-economic challenges and rising diversity, migrant-owned food businesses offer a lens through which integration, resilience, and development can be studied (BALAMPANIDIS 2017).

This article contributes to the field of ethnic studies by examining the function of migrant-owned food businesses in Athens as spaces of cultural negotiation, identity performance, and socio-economic integration. Through the lens of ethnic entrepreneurship, this study explores how migrants mobilise cultural heritage and community networks to navigate urban life, thereby shaping and being shaped by the host society.

The research was conducted as part of the Winter School “Migration in the Margins of Europe”, organised by the Netherlands Institute at Athens, and employs a qualitative case study approach centred on three restaurants owned by migrants from Nigeria, Georgia, and Türkiye.

## Research questions

The study is guided by the following questions:

1. What strategies do migrant food entrepreneurs in Athens use to leverage cultural capital and agency to integrate into Greek society?
2. How does embeddedness in Greek social, economic, and institutional networks shape the business development trajectories of migrant-owned food businesses?
3. What policy measures can reduce bureaucratic and financial barriers and strengthen institutional support for migrant food entrepreneurs, improving their integration and business development outcomes?

In addressing these questions, the article situates ethnic entrepreneurship within the broader discourse of urban integration, economic development, social networks, and cultural hybridity.

## *Theoretical framework*

Ethnic entrepreneurship refers to business activities undertaken by migrants or ethnic minorities that are shaped by their cultural background, social networks, and migration

experiences (LIGHT–GOLD 2000; RAM et al. 2017). These ventures often emerge in response to structural labour market constraints and serve as economic survival and cultural expression mechanisms.

Food-related ethnic businesses have gained attention as sites of identity negotiation, community building, and intercultural exchange in the context of urban Europe (RATH 2007; KLOOSTERMAN–RATH 2001). Such enterprises are not only economic units but also cultural spaces where migrants perform and adapt their identities in relation to both diaspora and host communities.

This study draws on the concept of cultural capital (BOURDIEU 1986) to understand how migrant entrepreneurs leverage culinary traditions and symbolic resources to establish legitimacy and visibility. It also engages with theories of social embeddedness (GRANOVETTER 1985) and mixed embeddedness (KLOOSTERMAN et al. 1999), which highlight the role of personal networks and institutional contexts in shaping entrepreneurial trajectories.

Recent scholarship emphasises the importance of urban space in shaping migrant experiences (GLICK SCHILLER – ÇAĞLAR 2009), suggesting that cities are not passive backdrops but active arenas of integration and exclusion. In Athens, a city marked by economic precarity and increasing diversity, ethnic food businesses offer a lens through which to examine the intersection of migration, entrepreneurship, and urban transformation.

By situating this research within ethnic studies, the article contributes to ongoing debates about migrant agency, cultural hybridity, and entrepreneurship's role in shaping inclusive urban futures.

### *Methodology*

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach rooted in ethnic studies and explores how migrant entrepreneurs in Athens use food businesses as platforms for cultural expression and social integration. Qualitative methods are particularly suited to this inquiry because they allow for a deep exploration of lived experiences, identity construction, and community dynamics. As Creswell and Poth (2018) argue, qualitative inquiry is especially effective when the research seeks to understand complex social phenomena from the perspective of those directly involved.

In the context of ethnic entrepreneurship, qualitative approaches have proven valuable in capturing the multifaceted relationship between migrant identity, business practices, and urban integration. Baycan-Levent and Nijkamp (2009) highlight how such methods enable researchers to uncover the socio-cultural dimensions of migrant entrepreneurship, particularly in European cities where diversity and economic participation intersect.

## *Research context and data collection*

The research was conducted during the “Migration in the Margins of Europe” Winter School organised by the Netherlands Institute at Athens. Fieldwork was conducted over a two-week period in January 2025. Three migrant-owned restaurants representing Nigerian, Georgian, and Turkish backgrounds were selected as case studies. The selection criteria were as follows: 1. ethnic culinary representation; 2. accessibility and willingness of owners to participate; and 3. relevance to themes of integration and entrepreneurship.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews with restaurant owners (one per case), each lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide consisted of 22 questions organised into five thematic areas: 1. Personal and Background: migration history, settlement decisions, and motivations for entrepreneurship; 2. Business Concept: operational challenges and future goals; 3. Migrant Experience: barriers to business establishment, experiences of discrimination, and support networks; 4. Community Connection and Integration: cultural exchange through food, language barriers, and local engagement; and 5. Policy: perspectives on regulations and recommendations for improving support for migrant business owners.

The guide was peer-reviewed during the Winter School programme to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment with the research objectives and during the fieldwork non-participant observation was conducted considering restaurant environment, customer interactions, and cultural elements (e.g. menu, decor, and language use).

Before data collection, all participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research. Given the potential vulnerability of migrant participants, interviews were conducted with sensitivity to their personal and migration experiences, avoiding questions that could cause distress. Efforts were made to respect linguistic and cultural preferences, with interviews conducted in English or Greek according to participant choice.

## **Case studies**

### *Case 1: Nigerian restaurant*

The owner of the Nigerian restaurant arrived in Greece in 2018 while pregnant, crossing into the country through Türkiye and spending her first period in the Moria refugee camp. Her early experiences in Greece were shaped by vulnerability and unstable employment. She worked mainly as a cleaner in positions where she was often under unfair labour conditions, sometimes not paid, and frequently discriminated against because she did not speak Greek. Despite these difficulties, she gradually built connections within the Nigerian diaspora in Athens. A close friend who worked as an accountant became especially important, guiding her toward the possibility of entrepreneurship. As she later reflected,

‘I always had a business spirit; I was thinking about location, numbers, and how to make it work.’

Her first entrepreneurial attempt was a Nigerian mini-market. Although it met an existing community need, she eventually had to close it due to repeated problems with importation and customs procedures, which made the business financially unsustainable. In 2022 she invested her personal savings and received support from friends and members of the Nigerian community to open a restaurant. The name of the establishment follows a cultural tradition in Nigeria in which a woman may be called by her child's name after becoming a mother, giving the restaurant a symbolic connection to identity and belonging.

The restaurant quickly became more than a place to eat. She prepares traditional Nigerian dishes using ingredients that she imports specifically to maintain authenticity, and the space functions as a site of cultural affirmation for migrants from Nigeria and other African countries. Her first customers came mainly through personal networks, but social media later expanded her visibility and attracted Greek customers who were curious about her cuisine and the mixture of flavours and cultural elements it offered. She described the evolution of the place by saying, 'My restaurant has become a meeting point for the Nigerian community in Athens', highlighting the way it developed into a social and cultural hub.

Running the restaurant also meant navigating the complexities of Greek bureaucracy. Access to banking services, municipal regulations and licensing procedures presented constant challenges, and she relied heavily on advice and informal support from members of her community. Her first location was in a residential area with many migrant residents, which initially felt familiar and accessible. However, the building lacked proper infrastructure for a restaurant, and tensions with neighbours soon emerged. Complaints about noise, smells escalated, and in several instances, neighbours threatened to call the police, making her fear for clients who might not have secure documentation. Concerned about exposing her customers to risk, she decided to relocate.

The new location provided both better infrastructure and a safer, more inclusive environment. It allowed her to serve Greek and migrant communities without fear of conflict, and it supported her broader vision for the restaurant as a cultural space where music, dance and art can be shared. Her entrepreneurial trajectory reflects a complex process of navigating institutional barriers, mobilising community networks and transforming personal migration experiences into a form of social and cultural presence within the urban landscape of Athens.

### *Case 2: Georgian restaurant*

The Georgian restaurant is run by a migrant woman who moved to Greece in 2008 to join her husband. The migration process was emotionally difficult for her, as she had to leave her children in Georgia and wait until they were adults before they could join her in Greece. Professionally she was trained as a nurse, and her first job in Greece was also in the health sector. When her daughter turned eighteen and finally moved to Greece, she encouraged her mother to open a Georgian restaurant, believing it would help her reconnect with her culture and build a more stable livelihood.

To finance the business, she sold her home in Georgia and secured a bank loan in Greece. The restaurant first operated as a small delivery service, but over time it developed into a well-established dining space. She always emphasises that she is not a professional chef, explaining, ‘I just cook the way I did for my children’, a phrase that reflects the intimate and family-based approach behind her cuisine. Although she uses mostly Greek products, she imports specific ingredients from Georgia to maintain authenticity in her dishes, reinforcing the restaurant’s role as a place of cultural representation and continuity.

Her clientele has grown increasingly diverse. She explains that ‘Georgians fill the place, but Greeks and tourists are always curious to try our food, they usually find us on Google’, highlighting both the importance of the diaspora community and the visibility gained through digital platforms. She describes the atmosphere with warmth, saying, ‘I think of my restaurant as a place with happy, smiley people and warmth in their hearts’, suggesting that the space functions not only as a business but as an emotional and cultural meeting point.

Her early challenges included navigating in the Greek banking system, adapting to bureaucratic procedures and dealing with language barriers. Family support and client loyalty played a crucial role in helping her manage these difficulties and sustain the business. Over the years the restaurant has grown substantially. What started as a small delivery operation has expanded into a large establishment with two dining rooms and ongoing plans for further expansion. The success of the restaurant is reflected in its current workforce, which includes twenty-five employees from both the Georgian diaspora and the local Greek population. Her entrepreneurial path shows how personal migration experiences, family encouragement and community engagement can converge to create successful and culturally meaningful businesses within the Greek urban environment.

### *Case 3: Turkish restaurant*

The Turkish restaurant is run by a man who migrated to Greece in 2002 as a political refugee. He holds a degree in finance, but upon arrival he began working in jobs that were available to him at the time, including delivery for a courier service and later three years in construction. He also offered private Turkish language tutoring to supplement his income. Although he has lived in Greece for more than twenty years, he recalls two incidents in which he experienced discrimination. The first occurred in 2002 during an encounter with the police that he describes as a misunderstanding but still distressing. The second took place while he was working in construction, where his supervisors repeatedly made derogatory comments about his origin, his name and his status as a refugee in Greece.

His restaurant initially started as a cooperative project but eventually transformed into a sole proprietorship. He self-funded the venture, relying on his own savings and the support of close friends, as he received very limited institutional assistance. Over time the restaurant evolved into a space that reflects both his personal background and

the multicultural influences present in his daily life. The cuisine blends Turkish, Arabic, Armenian and Greek elements, a fusion that mirrors the diverse histories of the region and the communities he interacts with. For him, food is more than a business; it is a political and social practice. As he explained: 'Food can only unite people; democracy is about sharing all opinions equally, even when we disagree.'

The clientele is diverse and includes migrants, politically engaged locals and people who appreciate the cultural and culinary mix offered by the restaurant. It has become a place where discussions unfold naturally, not only about food but also about politics, migration and social life in Greece. The space functions as both a gathering point and a site of exchange, reflecting the owner's commitment to inclusivity and dialogue.

Despite obstacles, his approach to integration emphasises democratic participation, solidarity and a belief in the social role of shared spaces. His restaurant embodies this philosophy, serving as a setting where different communities can interact, where cultural boundaries become fluid and where political conversations are welcomed rather than avoided. In this sense, his business represents not only an economic activity but also an ongoing effort to cultivate inclusion and understanding within the urban environment of Athens.

### **Comparative analysis**

This study applies a structured analytical framework grounded in ethnic studies and urban migration literature to enable a meaningful comparison across the three case studies. The framework draws on the concept of mixed embeddedness (KLOOSTERMAN et al. 1999), emphasising the interplay among individual agency, social networks, and institutional contexts in shaping migrant entrepreneurship.

To support this comparative approach, transcripts and field notes were analysed using thematic coding. The coding process was guided by key concepts from the theoretical framework, including mixed embeddedness, cultural capital, and social networks. Themes were refined iteratively to ensure alignment with the research questions and theoretical constructs.

The following analytical dimensions were used to compare cases: 1. Migration background: How migration trajectories and legal conditions influence entrepreneurial opportunities; 2. Business formation and access to capital: Sources of funding, financial strategies, and institutional support; 3. Cultural representation and identity: How food and space are used to express ethnic identity and engage with cultural heritage; 4. Community engagement and clientele: Interactions with diaspora communities, local residents, and the broader urban society; 5. Institutional challenges and integration strategies: Bureaucratic barriers, language issues, and adaptation mechanisms.

This framework allows for both horizontal comparison (across cases) and vertical analysis (within each case), revealing how diverse factors shape ethnic entrepreneurship in the urban environment of Athens (Table 1).

Table 1: Comparative case study analysis: Thematic patterns

Analytical dimension	Nigerian restaurant	Georgian restaurant	Turkish restaurant
<b>Migration background</b>	Refugee, irregular entry, Moria camp	Family reunification, regular resident	Political refugee, long-term settlement
<b>Legal status</b>	Regularised through asylum	Regular residency	Refugee status
<b>Business formation</b>	Personal savings, diaspora support	Property sale, bank loan	Cooperative turned sole proprietorship
<b>Access to capital</b>	Informal networks	Formal banking	Self-funded, minimal support
<b>Cultural representation</b>	Nigerian cuisine, imported ingredients	Georgian cuisine, hybrid ingredients	Turkish–Arabic–Armenian–Greek fusion
<b>Clientele</b>	African diaspora, some Greeks	Locals and tourists	Mixed, politically engaged
<b>Community engagement</b>	Informal support networks	Family-based, social interaction	Cultural events, political dialogue
<b>Institutional challenges</b>	Bureaucracy, banking, licensing	Language, financial risk	Racism, lack of support
<b>Integration strategies</b>	Cultural authenticity, informal ties	Language learning, client loyalty	Inclusion through activism and cultural fusion

Source: compiled by the author based on case study data

All three cases underscore the role of ethnic food businesses in fostering migrant resilience and community engagement. However, they also reveal varied levels of integration, access to funding, and societal reception. The Nigerian entrepreneur relied on diaspora networks and private funding, while the Georgian owner accessed formal banking support. Language barriers and bureaucratic obstacles are common challenges in the three case studies, while food serves as a unifying element across cultural lines.

Another important aspect that emerged during the research, although gender was not a primary focus of the study, is the role of women migrant entrepreneurs. Two of the three businesses examined in the case studies were founded and led by migrant women, a phenomenon that aligns with a growing frame of research on gendered pathways into entrepreneurship. While the analysis centres primarily on migration, identity and institutional barriers, it became relevant to consider how gender intersects with these dimensions. The experiences of the women entrepreneurs highlight specific challenges in relation to market access, integration and the broader expectations placed on them as women, migrants and business owners. At the same time, gender played a significant role in their motivations for entrepreneurship. In both cases, their decision to create a business was strongly connected to providing better opportunities for their

children and gaining greater flexibility to balance family life with income generation. These elements illustrate the importance of recognising gendered dynamics even within research frameworks where gender is not the explicit analytical focus.

## **Discussion**

This study addressed three central research questions: 1. What strategies do migrant food entrepreneurs in Athens use to leverage cultural capital and agency to integrate into Greek society? 2. How does embeddedness in Greek social, economic, and institutional networks shape the business development trajectories of migrant-owned food businesses? 3. What policy measures can reduce bureaucratic and financial barriers and strengthen institutional support for migrant food entrepreneurs, improving their integration and business development outcomes?

### *Ethnic entrepreneurship and integration*

Ethnic entrepreneurship emerged as a key pathway for migrants' integration into urban Athens. Although none of the three entrepreneurs interviewed were professional chefs, they turned to cooking and business creation as a response to employment challenges. Their ventures not only provided economic opportunities but also platforms for cultural expression and community engagement. Through their restaurants, they shared traditions, built connections within their cultural networks, and interacted with diverse customer groups. This exposure encouraged them to improve their Greek language skills and facilitated contact with various stakeholders, including diaspora communities, civil society organisations, suppliers, and host society members. These interactions contributed to the development of support networks and enhanced their social integration.

These findings echo Lazaridis and Koumandraki's (2003) observation that Greek ethnic entrepreneurs often operate within a mosaic of informal and formal activities, using their businesses as platforms for both survival and cultural expression. Moreover, the diversity of the selected cases reflects the heterogeneous landscape of ethnic entrepreneurship in Athens, as described by Balampanidis (2017), where entrepreneurs navigate within a range of different motivations, migration pathways, and socioeconomic conditions.

### *Barriers and enablers in business trajectories*

Access to funding was identified as a major factor influencing business development. None of the entrepreneurs received institutional or governmental financial support. Instead, they relied on personal savings, informal networks, and community resources. For instance, despite being located in strategic urban areas, the Nigerian and Turkish restaurants were financed through personal and community support and operated in modest spaces. In contrast, the Georgian restaurant secured a bank loan, allowing it

to establish itself in a larger venue within a tourist-oriented district, which positively impacted its visibility and growth.

The complexity of bureaucratic procedures and language-related challenges were also significant barriers to the study. Navigating the legal and regulatory environment in a non-native language was difficult for all participants. As Hatziprokopiou (2008) noted, the institutional framework in Greece presents significant challenges for migrant entrepreneurs, particularly in navigating complex legal and bureaucratic systems. In the absence of formal support, entrepreneurs rely heavily on social capital (PORTES 1998), mobilising personal networks to access resources and overcome structural barriers. These findings are consistent with Piperopoulos (2010), who highlighted the limited access to formal financial mechanisms among Greek businesses belonging to ethnic minority groups.

### **Policy recommendations and broader implications**

The interviews also revealed policy recommendations aligned with the third research question. Participants emphasised the need to simplify administrative procedures for business registration and to develop financial instruments tailored to migrant entrepreneurs. These suggestions highlight the importance of inclusive policy frameworks that recognise the potential of migrant entrepreneurship as a driver of integration and economic development.

Based on comparative insights and the findings of this study, the following policy recommendations are proposed to support ethnic entrepreneurship in Greece, starting with simplifying registration procedures and documentation requirements for ethnic entrepreneurs to reduce bureaucratic barriers (HATZIPROKOPIOU 2008; VAN HEELSUM 2012). Furthermore, the need to increase awareness and accessibility of EU and national funding opportunities, such as the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Social Fund Plus (European Commission 2023). In addition, strengthen municipal support networks and integration centres by incorporating business training and advisory services tailored to migrant needs (RATH et al. 2011). Finally, foster partnerships between financial institutions and migrant communities to facilitate access to banking and credit mechanisms (International Rescue Committee 2018; VAN HEELSUM 2010).

While this research focused on the urban context of Athens, comparisons with previous studies underscore the broader relevance of entrepreneurship and economic innovation as pathways for migrant integration. Entrepreneurship enables migrants to demonstrate their potential as active members of society, contributing positively to cultural exchange, social cohesion, and local economies. These findings align with research conducted in other European urban settings (RATH et al. 2011; VAN HEELSUM 2012), which emphasise the nexus between migration and entrepreneurship in shaping integration processes. They also reinforce the importance of supportive policies at both local and national levels to foster entrepreneurial practices among migrant communities.

### *Sample and case selection*

The study was based on three in-depth case studies of migrant entrepreneurs operating restaurants in Athens. The selection of participants was guided by a mapping process described in the methodology section and aimed to capture diversity across several dimensions: cultural background, migration routes and pathways, motivations for entrepreneurship, and socioeconomic status. This approach ensured representation of different regions of origin and experiences, allowing for a nuanced understanding of ethnic entrepreneurship. Despite their differences, the entrepreneurs shared common challenges and strategies, illustrating both the diversity and convergence of migrant entrepreneurial experiences.

### **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable insights into the experiences of ethnic entrepreneurs in Athens, several limitations must be acknowledged.

First, the research was conducted over a two-week period, which constrained the depth and breadth of data collection. Due to time limitations and logistical challenges, only three businesses were able to participate in the study. Although the selected cases were diverse in terms of cultural background, migration pathways, and business models, the small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings.

Second, language barriers posed a challenge during the interview process. While efforts were made to ensure mutual understanding, some nuances may have been lost or misinterpreted due to the use of non-native languages by both the researcher and participants. This may have affected the richness of the data and the accuracy of certain interpretations.

Third, the study focused primarily on the perspectives of migrant entrepreneurs themselves. Future research would benefit from incorporating the views of other key stakeholders who influence the success and integration of ethnic businesses. These include customers, local and national authorities, policymakers, and financial institutions. Understanding the interactions between entrepreneurs and these actors could provide a more comprehensive picture of the ecosystem surrounding ethnic entrepreneurship and its role in migrant integration.

Despite these limitations, the study offers a meaningful contribution to the understanding of migrant entrepreneurship in Greece and lays the groundwork for further research in this field.

### **Conclusion**

Ethnic entrepreneurs in the food industry in Athens are more than economic ventures, they are spaces of resilience, cultural dialogue, and social integration. Despite facing structural barriers, the entrepreneurs in this study demonstrate significant agency in navigating the Greek socio-economic environment.

These narratives reflect broader trajectories of integration, where entrepreneurship becomes a vehicle not only for survival but for meaningful participation in urban life. The restaurants and food businesses they build are more than service points; they are cultural spaces, often serving as bridges between migrant communities and the broader Greek society. However, the persistence of legal, financial, and linguistic barriers highlights the need for more inclusive and supportive policies.

Policymakers and civil society actors must recognise the value of ethnic and culturally based businesses not only for economic development but also for the enrichment of urban multicultural life. A supportive institutional framework that is inclusive and accessible is essential for ensuring that ethnic entrepreneurship continues to thrive and contribute meaningfully to the social fabric of European cities like Athens.

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