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Postcolonial Entanglements, Culinary Nostalgia: Dutch Indonesian Grocery Stores in Southern California After World War II

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Abstract

This article explores the history of Dutch Indonesian grocery stores in Southern California. Following World War II and the Indonesian War of Independence, thousands of Dutch and Dutch Indonesians migrated to the United States and established themselves throughout Southern California. Among the neighborhoods of Los Angeles, immigrants opened dozens of Dutch Indonesian supermarkets that catered to both communities. This article unpacks the complex relationship between Dutch and Dutch Indonesian immigrants in the postcolonial era and the legacies of Dutch colonialism in the US context. I argue that these stores not only serve as the main cultural connection between immigrants and their homeland, but also are sites of cultural discussions over Dutch Indonesian connections. Additionally, this article also situates Dutch Indonesian cuisine within the rising popularity of Indonesian cuisine in Los Angeles and examines the status of Dutch Indonesian stores in Southern California.

Introduction

Nestled within the patchwork of cities in Los Angeles County is Bellflower. A small town that grew during the post-World War II building boom into a large suburb, Bellflower became a home for new immigrants and workers hoping to capitalize on the postwar prosperity and building craze that made life in the area accessible to middle-class (usually white) families. Much as D. J. Waldie described neighboring Lakewood as a suburban utopia in his memoir, *Holy Land*, Bellflower became a village

for working-class families to capture a part of the California dream that was within their price range.¹

Along with attracting internal migrants from other parts of the US, Bellflower was one such part of Los Angeles County that became the final destination for many new immigrants. Among those who flocked to Southern California were Dutch emigrants from the Netherlands and its former colony, the Dutch East Indies, or Indonesia when, in the wake of Indonesian Independence in 1949, thousands of Dutch, Indonesian, and Dutch Indonesian—or Indo—left their homelands for the United States.² Most chose to settle in Southern California, where they adapted quickly to their new lives thousands of kilometers away from home. Although the majority of the immigrants took up American citizenship, many remained fundamentally Dutch or Indonesian in other ways. One way they expressed their connection to their heritage was through their love of food, which was supported by a small network of grocery stores and travelling salesmen who catered to the Dutch and Indonesian expat communities.³

Decades later, a small handful of such Dutch stores remain in Southern California. Yet aside from offering tourists Dutch treats like *stroopwafels* and homesick immigrants cultural classics like *bitterballen* and *haring*, these stores represent a cultural space that captures the history of Dutch imperialism. In the post-World War II period through to the present, many such grocery stores targeted not only Dutch expats but also new Indonesian immigrants during the decolonization of Indonesia in 1940s and through the postwar years. Perhaps one of the more unique aspects of this history is that many of these stores have been managed by Dutch Indonesian immigrants, who came to Los Angeles as a result of the Indonesian War of Independence (1945–1949). As a result, stores like the Holland America Market (later rebranded as Holland International Market) in Bellflower, while marketed as stereotypically Dutch, offer Indonesian groceries that speak to the legacies of colonialism that persist among expat communities.

This article offers a microhistory of Dutch Indonesian grocery stores in Southern California. I refer to these stores as Dutch Indonesian because not only did the goods they sell cater to Dutch and Indonesian immigrants, but also because many Dutch Indonesian immigrants, often referred to as Indos, managed these stores. This article contributes to the small yet growing field of Indonesian American studies that explores the diversity of experiences from immigrants who left the archipelago nation, one with the largest Muslim population in the world and home to thousands of different ethnic groups, and migrated to the United States.⁴ In this particular case, this article examines the experiences of Indo immigrants who left Indonesia following independence, and migrated first to the Netherlands before coming to the United States, or moved directly the United States. In the pre-1965 era, before the United States eliminated the quota system under the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Cellar Act), Indo Americans composed a small minority among Asian Americans migrating to the US.

Citing a range of sources from newspaper accounts to interviews, this article explores the existence of these Dutch Indonesian stores as part of the broader history of Indonesian immigration to the US, along with Dutch Indonesian contributions to Los Angeles food culture. Building upon existing literature in immigration studies and food studies, this article shows how Dutch Indonesian grocery stores served as a site for cultural preservation for the immigrant community.⁵ It also offers a view into the unique perspective of Dutch Indonesians, who fled racism in the Netherlands and sought to establish their own identity within the United States. Important to this story is understanding the movement of Indos from Indonesia to the United States and how their relationship to both cultures is expressed through food.

In the context of immigration studies, Indo Americans, like other immigrants of color, can be seen as caught within broader dynamics of racial politics within the US. Indo Americans can be classified as what Harry H. L. Kitano referred to as a *middleman minority* who acted as a broker between Dutch and Indonesian immigrants and worked to preserve both cultures within the United States.⁶ In line with Claire Jean Kim's theory of racial triangulation, Indo Americans, like other Asian American immigrants, negotiated their place among the patchwork of immigrant communities of color in the Southland.⁷ Building off of previous scholarship by historians and sociologists who have written critically on the model minority myth and the pressures facing immigrants of color, this study shows how the migration of Indos from Indonesia to the United States enforced their position as interpreters of both cultures. The migration of Indos to the United States in the 1940s and 1950s represents a distinct period when many Indos used their Dutch citizenship status to bypass restrictive immigration laws in the US, predating the more recent arrival of Indonesian immigrants after 1965. Upon arriving in the United States, Indos often found themselves negotiating identity between various groups, operating between their status as former Dutch subjects and as Indonesians when interacting with Dutch immigrants or other Indonesians. Most of all, Indos developed a unique identity that emerged as a result of their migration experience, one that stands out from both Dutch and Indonesian migration narratives.

In general historiography, most studies of Indonesia and the US focus primarily on foreign relations. While most historians examine diplomatic connections following independence in 1949, some have argued US connections to Indonesia predate the total control over the islands exerted by the Dutch following the Aceh War (1873–1904). The primary historian to do so, David F. Long, notes in his article “Martial Thunder” for the 1979 issue of the *Pacific Historical Review* that contact between Americans and Indonesians began in the early nineteenth century as a part of the pepper trade.⁸ Arguably, the most well-known history on US-Indonesian relations is Robert McMahon's *Colonialism and the Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence*.⁹ McMahon's book is remarkable as the first serious study of US reactions to one of the first wars of European decolonization. While the US initially was apprehensive about supporting European colonial efforts in Southeast Asia, McMahon points out that despite the vocal opposition of the United States to

European imperialism, anticolonial principles played only a minor role in shaping US foreign policy in Southeast Asia. Eerily similar to French colonial efforts in Vietnam and Algeria, the US supported the Dutch for most of the war years, providing equipment and munitions to the Royal Dutch Indonesian Army (KNIL). Following the brutal Second Police Action of 1949, when the Dutch waged a brutal antiguerrilla campaign, American officials realized that it was in their best interest to support Indonesian Independence for several reasons: “the weight of domestic and international opinion, concern for the viability of the United Nations, and the strength of a vigorous Indonesian guerrilla movement that thwarted all Dutch efforts to pacify the islands.”¹⁰ As the Indonesian Independence movement did not promote communism, the US forced the Netherlands’ hand by threatening to cut off economic aid if the Dutch did not enter negotiations with the independence movement.

Alongside US-Indonesian relations, this study fits into the broader field of migration studies, where very few works touch on Indonesian Americans. An illustrative example of the lack of scholarship on Indonesian Americans can be seen in Ronald Takaki’s landmark book *Strangers from a Different Shore*; there are no mentions of Indonesian Americans, and even the map of Asia used by Takaki at the beginning includes most Asian states except Indonesia.¹¹ Among the few notable works are sociologists Azlan Tajuddin and Jamie Stern’s groundbreaking study on the migration of Dutch Indonesians to the US, “From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans: Changing Identity of the Dutch-Indonesian (Indo) Diaspora in America.”¹² More recently, historian Dorothy Fujita-Rony illustrates the migration saga of Indonesian Americans through her family memoir, *The Memorykeepers*.¹³ Perhaps one of the most insightful books on Indonesian Americans to date, *The Memorykeepers* serves as a wonderful starting point for the growing field of Indonesian American studies. As such, this article contributes a new perspective on how Dutch Indonesians preserved their culture and found belonging within Southern California.

Likewise, this study is influenced by and contributes to the field of postcolonial studies and memories of Dutch colonialism among the global Indo diaspora. In recent decades, writers and scholars around the world have begun to examine memories of decolonization in Indonesia within diasporic studies. Perhaps the most relevant study to this essay is the 2013 edited volume *Shifting the Compass: Pluricontinental Connections in Dutch Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*.¹⁴ Dutch writer Adriaan van Dis, the child of Dutch refugees from Indonesia, has written extensively on the afterlives of Dutch and Indonesian nationals in the wake of Indonesian independence. In his essay for *Shifting the Compass*, titled “Squeezed Between Rice and Potato’: Personal Reflections on a Dutch (Post) Colonial Youth,” van Dis recounts his own family history and his decision to write about his family’s experiences in Indonesia.¹⁵ As part of his essay, van Dis shared anecdotes that many of his novels on his family’s experiences in Indonesia, such as *Indische Duinen*, had, to him, “broken a long silence” among Indos in the Netherlands.¹⁶ Of greater relevance to this essay is Jeoren Dewulf’s chapter on Indo writer Tjalie Robinson (also known as Jan Boon) and his advocacy for the

formation of an Indo cultural identity among Indo immigrants to the US. Robinson, who was considered by many (including van Dis) as the writer of the Indo experience, travelled to the US in 1961 and lived there until 1968.¹⁷ There he organized a Dutch-language newsletter, *The American Tong Tong*, borrowing the name from the *Tong Tong* magazine he first published in the Netherlands to organize Indos, to reach the Indo expatriate community in Southern California. Dewulf, framing Robinson's work within the broader Civil Rights Movement, demonstrates how Robinson transformed the migration of Indos to the US into an opportunity to preserve Indo, rather than solely Dutch or Indonesian, culture within the immigrant community.¹⁸ In this regard, this study of Dutch Indonesian grocery stores underscores the work of Tjalie Robinson—the formation of a broader Indo cultural legacy through foodways that both catered to Dutch and Indonesian migrants and preserved a unique sense of Indo identity.

Lastly, this study joins a number of recent publications on Asian American foodways. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur's edited volume, *Eating More Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, offers fresh perspectives on Asian American culinary history and the role of food in preserving Asian American cultures in the face of racial discrimination. Of primary relevance to this study are those chapters related to the Vietnamese refugee community and the importance of food as a means of forming cultural bonds in the post-1975 migration to the US.¹⁹ Alyssa Paredes and Marvin Joseph F. Montefrio's *Halo-Halo Ecologies: The Emergent Environments behind Filipino Food*, likewise maps the intersections between food and empire in their study of Filipino foodways—a story that parallels the Indo experience.²⁰

Colonial Legacies

For over three centuries, the Dutch empire colonized the Indonesian archipelago. Although Dutch colonizers had travelled to Indonesia in the 1600s to capitalize on the spice trade, the Dutch colonial regime took root in the nineteenth century amidst several conflicts with Indonesian kingdoms. Over the course of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the Dutch waged several wars to maintain total control over the islands and defend their possessions. The largest of these conflicts, the Aceh War (1873–1904), led to a protracted war against the Aceh Sultanate and resulted in a military occupation of the islands. Throughout the war, both sides waged guerrilla warfare, and on several occasions the Dutch Royal Indonesian Army (KNIL) committed atrocities, such as the Kuta Reh Massacre on June 14, 1904. In the wake of the war, the Dutch instituted a brutal regime, forcing subjects to help exploit the islands' natural resources, such as spices, petroleum, coffee, and rubber. Until the Japanese invasion of the Netherlands East Indies, the Dutch maintained a hierarchical regime that privileged Dutch colonizers.

During the colonial regime, several generations of individuals of Dutch and Indonesian ancestry were born. Often referred to as "Indos," an abbreviation of the

Dutch term “Indo-Europeanen,” the term was used to distinguish those of both Dutch and Indonesian ancestry, while *Indische Nederlander* referred to all those associated with the colonial project.²¹ The result of a combination of cultural mixing and sexual violence, many Indos occupied a complicated space within colonial society. While many Indos came from poor backgrounds, a select group of elite Indos vied for power within the colonial system. As Ann Laura Stoler notes in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Indo elites worked closely with the colonial regime to garner recognition and support for the Indo community. While poor Indos often received little help from the Dutch colonial government, their association with the Dutch alienated them from the Indonesian nationalist movement. Thus, many Indos, who worked within the colonial system but remained marginalized in colonial society, found themselves stuck between two identities.²²

The colonialism system, however, was shattered following the invasion of the archipelago by the Imperial Japanese Army in March 1942. During the war, the Japanese occupation of the Dutch East Indies fundamentally destroyed the prewar colonial system and paved the way for revolution. Two days after the Japanese military surrendered to Allied forces on August 15, 1945, the Indonesian National Revolution, led by future president Sukarno, broadcast a radio message declaring the end of Dutch colonialism and the formation of a new Indonesian republic. Like other European colonies after World War II, Indonesia declared its independence from the Netherlands. When Dutch forces returned to reclaim their colony in 1945, they were met with strong resistance by independence fighters. Over the course of four years, fighting raged between the Dutch, their supporters, and the Indonesian independence movement over control of the archipelago. Often, the Dutch used excessive violence and torture as part of their campaigns—a policy that the Dutch government acknowledged and formally apologized for in 2022. The United States initially supplied the Dutch military with munitions, equipment, and training for Dutch soldiers returning to the Dutch East Indies, and even deported Indonesian sailors seeking refuge in the United States.²³ In the case of the Indonesian seamen, the US government detained them at the Crystal City Internment Camp in Texas, where thousands of Japanese Americans and Latin Americans awaited deportation.

In 1948, the tide of the war turned against the Dutch. After the Dutch military launched a brutal second offensive—euphemistically called a “police action”—in violation of a UN Security Council resolution, international opinion turned against the Dutch. By January 1949, the United States threatened to withhold Marshall Plan funds to the Netherlands if it continued the conflict.²⁴ Queen Wilhelmina, already in poor health and facing criticism for her handling of the Indonesian crisis, abdicated the throne in May 1948 to her daughter, Juliana, leaving her the responsibility of resolving the Indonesian question. On December 27, 1949, Queen Juliana signed an agreement to formally recognize Indonesia’s sovereignty.²⁵

Caught in the crossfire of World War II and the Indonesian independence movement were Indos. During the occupation of Indonesia, the Japanese subjected

Indos, like many Dutch, to torture and forced labor in internment camps across the archipelago. After the war, Indonesian revolutionaries mistrusted Indos for being “too Dutch,” resulting in a second wave of Indo persecution. The war ignited longstanding tensions between Indonesians and Indos who worked as intermediaries within the colonial system. While many Indos supported the Dutch military, with some serving in the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, some Indos joined the revolution and supported the erasure of their colonial heritage as part of the transformation of Indonesia into an independent nation. Yet even among supporters of the revolution, the past associations between Indos and the colonial government led to additional persecution and an exodus of Indos. In 1949, nearly 300,000 Indos repatriated to the Netherlands. Many Indos and Indonesian refugees faced discrimination from locals and xenophobia in the Netherlands despite their support of the colonial government. Within the broader Indonesian community, ethnic groups such as the Aceh and Moluccans faced varying experiences of discrimination.²⁶ Politicians regularly claimed that the newcomers, although having served in the Dutch colonial system, taxed the existing welfare system and were unable to integrate into Dutch society. All Indos faced policies of racial assimilation that forced most to hide their Indonesian heritage, leading many to question their decision to permanently settle in the Netherlands.²⁷

Yet many Indos remained in the Netherlands and established themselves within Dutch society. Still, the effects of discrimination led thousands of Indos to leave (such as the family of guitarist Eddie van Halen). Many headed for the United States in the 1950s amidst a wave of Dutch migration sparked by economic depression and environmental disasters in the Netherlands. In 1953, Congress passed the Refugee Relief Act to allow several refugee groups to enter the US due to environmental disasters. The act allowed fifteen thousand Dutch refugees of the North Sea Floods of that year to migrate to the US. In September 1958, the US Congress passed the Pastore-Walter Act. Named after the bill’s authors, Senator John Pastore and Representative Francis Walter, who had visited the Netherlands in 1956, the act amended the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 to allow Indo refugees and others displaced by the Indonesian War of Independence to bypass the quota system. Among those included were Indo repatriates hoping to leave the Netherlands.²⁸ Between 1958 and 1962, 6,272 Indos received visas for migration to the US, and by 1970 an estimated sixty thousand Indo repatriates had migrated to the US.²⁹ Many Indos possessed Dutch passports, which also allowed them to circumvent the pre-1965, race-based immigration laws that prevented non-European immigrants from entering the country.³⁰ As Dahlia Gratia Setiyawan notes in her entry “Indonesian Americans” for the *Asian American Encyclopedia*, Indos settled primarily in Southern California as a result of resettlement efforts by Christian missionary organizations.³¹ Other factors, such as Southern California’s warm climate—more comparable to Indonesia’s weather than the Netherlands—influenced the decision of Indo immigrants to settle in the Los Angeles area. As of 2025, the Pew Research Center estimates that, among Indonesian populations in the US, Los Angeles is home to the largest Indonesian community of eleven thousand individuals.³²

Dutch Indonesian Cuisine in Southern California

Perhaps nothing better illustrates the persisting colonial nostalgia among Dutch and Indo communities than the intertwined nature of Dutch and Indonesian cuisine. Dutch colonial rule introduced cooking traditions from the Netherlands and incorporated Indonesian practices. Perhaps the best example of this is *rijsttafel*—a rice dish served with several side dishes that is a staple of Dutch Indonesian cuisine. Several Dutch dishes, such as *spekkoek* (bacon cake), *klappertaart* (coconut tart), and *Ewrtensoep* (pea soup), became a part of Indonesian cuisine.³³ Following decolonization, hundreds of Indonesian restaurants appeared across the Netherlands. Today, they remain popular among consumers and are referred to as *tokos*, a borrowed term from the Indonesian word for shop.³⁴ Indonesian food products are stocked alongside traditional Dutch foods in grocery stores such as Albert Heijn, and the Dutch brand Conimex (a portmanteau of “Continental en Import Export”) remains one of the leading brands for Asian food products in the country. Even in the Dutch Navy, sailors maintain the tradition of preparing a dish, “blauwe hap,” which is based on *rijsttafel*. And in Indonesia, *frikandel*—a Dutch fried mincemeat sausage—is a common sight at street markets.³⁵

In the United States, the story of Dutch Indonesian cuisine is more representative of the Indo migration story. As with other Asian American communities, Indonesian Americans found economic opportunities in the establishment of grocery stores that cater to the existing immigrant community. In the context of the United States, however, the overwhelming number of Dutch immigrants present in Southern California led those Indo and Indonesian American shop owners to cater to the tastes of Dutch immigrants. This phenomenon can be seen especially in Los Angeles, where, starting in the 1950s, new Dutch and Indo immigrants would open more than one shop as a means of maintaining cultural ties with both countries. Even after departing the Netherlands, many Indos emphasized their connection to the Netherlands alongside their Indonesian heritage. For these immigrants, one way to express their cultural identity was through food. As food scholars have noted, grocery stores often serve as a means of preserving culinary traditions and reinforcing ethnic identities among immigrants in the United States.³⁶ For Indos operating grocery stores, it allowed them to carve out a space for preserving Indonesian culinary traditions while maintaining a connection with the Netherlands. Alzan Tajuddin and Jamie Stern note in their article on Indo Americans that food has served as part of a cultural network for maintaining ties between Indos in the US and Indos in the Netherlands. For the American-born descendants of Indo immigrants, food serves as an introduction to their heritage and offers a means of bridging both identities.³⁷

In contrast to other immigrant cultures, where foods have been introduced to mainstream American culinary culture, Dutch and Indo immigrants operated grocery stores to cater uniquely to their communities, which could not find their culture represented in larger grocery stores. Much of this can be attributed to the fact that

both Dutch and Indonesian cuisine remain a fringe culinary tradition in the United States when compared to other European (French, Italian, German), East (Chinese, Japanese, Korean), and even Southeast Asian (i.e., Filipino, Vietnamese, Thai) food cultures.

Among the few accounts of Dutch Indonesian stores that exist are those found in newspaper archives. The presence of Dutch and Indonesian markets in Los Angeles garnered the attention of food journalists, often intrigued by the existence of a small yet distinct community in the region and hoping to cover the multicultural nature of Los Angeles's culinary scene. In December 1971, *Los Angeles Times* staff writer Rose Dosti composed a list of ethnic grocery stores in Southern California, and listed the Holland American Market in Bellflower as a purveyor of Dutch and Indonesian goods.³⁸ Groups such as the Young Dutch Club, an organization comprised of Dutch Indonesians living in Los Angeles, hosted night markets in cities like Buena Park that showcased Dutch Indonesian fare like *ketan klapper*—sticky rice with shaved coconut.³⁹ A decade later, in 1987, the *San Bernardino Sun* published a recipe by Indo Maryann Nieto of Wrightwood for *lempur*: a rice roll with spiced meat filling. The author added a note that many Indos brought their recipes with them when they left Indonesia, and noted that ingredients could be found in “Dutch-Indonesian food store(s) in the Long Beach or Cerritos area.”⁴⁰ One of the popular Indonesian products sold in these stores was tempeh, a fermented soybean curd that is now a popular meat substitute.

While a few articles included only fleeting references to these markets, some journalists wrote in detail about the connected histories of Dutch and Indonesian cuisine through restaurant reviews. Food critics began devoting attention to the presence of Dutch Indonesian stores as part of a growing interest during the 1980s in Indonesian cuisine, which was treated as a discovery of an unknown cuisine. The *Los Angeles Times* included a directory of new Indonesian restaurants in the city as part of a longer article disconcertingly titled “A Taste for the Exotic.” In his review of Krakatoa restaurant in Brentwood, John Pashdag notes the restaurant included Chinese-style dishes on the menu beyond the usual offerings of rijsttafel, arguing that the restaurant “gives as much importance to the Chinese influence in Indonesian cooking as the other Indonesian restaurants in LA give to the dominant Dutch influence.”⁴¹

In many cases, restaurants simultaneously served as delicatessens and import stores. Among the restaurants Pashdag profiled was Dewi. Opened by Dutch Indonesian couple Edith Vredevoogd and Chuck Gilhuys, the restaurant first appeared in Los Angeles's Chinatown in 1981. Years later, the restaurant reopened in Huntington Beach, where the couple operated both a restaurant and a grocery store. Upon visiting the restaurant, food critic Max Jacobson interviewed Vredevoogd and Gilhuys about their migration journey and their ambivalent relationship between Dutch and Indonesian cultures as Indos. “We Dutch Indonesians are all mixed up,” Edith responded. She told Jacobson that she and her husband both came from Dutch and Indonesian ancestry, with Edith's family from Semarang in central Java and Chuck's from Jakarta. Jacobson observed that this clash of cultures appeared in the little corner shop, where

you could find *sambal badjak*—pepper paste with onion in a jar—alongside Dutch treats, and on the restaurant’s menu, where *saucijzenbroodje*—a Dutch snack of sausage in a roll—appeared along *lumpia*. In lieu of rijsttafel, the chefs prepared *nasi rames*, a smaller mixed-rice plate.⁴²

Other writers took a more academic approach to observing the relations between Dutch and Indonesian cuisine. Linda Burum’s review of Ann’s Dutch Imports on Tujunga Avenue in Studio City in November 1991 incisively described to readers that not only was the store an oddity in the Southland but that it also captured how colonialism shaped Dutch cuisine:

The entire back wall, stocked with exotic spices, sambals and Dutch-style Indonesian convenience foods, reminds you that some of the best food in Holland has been adopted from its former colony, Indonesia. [...] Three hundred and fifty years of Dutch presence in Indonesian and thousands of Indonesian immigrants living in the Netherlands have made this cuisine—which is about as different from Dutch traditional cooking as anyone could imagine—an integral part of Holland’s table.⁴³

Alongside a recipe for *nasi goreng*, Burum provided readers with a list of Dutch and Indonesian staples, such as Gouda cheese, croquettes, and various *bumbus* (seasonings) for *nasi kuning* and *mi goreng*. As the list indicated, the store emphasized a fusion of identities between Dutch and Indonesian ingredients. More troubling, though, is Burum’s argument that Indonesians only recently started shaping Dutch cuisine, a conjecture that elides the centuries-old origins of dishes like rijsttafel that originated from Indonesia.⁴⁴

Additionally, *Los Angeles Times* food critic Jonathan Gold foregrounded several Dutch Indonesian restaurants in his column “Counter Intelligence.” Well-known for his meticulous reviews and his championing of new immigrant restaurants instead of upper-class eateries, Gold took an almost anthropological approach to his reviews of eating establishments. In his March 19, 1993, column, Gold highlights Susie’s Deli in Artesia, a small grocery store and restaurant specializing in Indonesian food and operated by Indo Americans. Gold mentions that he had learned of the store from Johann, a Dutch friend and one of a select group of Indonesian cuisine enthusiasts in the Southland. Like Burum a decade before, Gold notes how Dutch and Indonesian cultures are intertwined within the aisles:

Local Dutch grocery stores stock as many Indonesian spices as they do Dutch cheese, and books from Amsterdam sit side by side with those from Jakarta. To judge from market shelves, Dutch emigrants have a nostalgia for fiery curries. Indonesians for Dutch spice cakes and licorice pastilles.⁴⁵

Gold's vivid description of market patrons emphasized the mutual interest Indos and Dutch patrons have for each group's food. Yet hidden within his review is a point that underscores the tension that exists within the Dutch Indonesian culinary relationship:

Perhaps it is a genuine symbiosis, perhaps it is the experience of fighting together against the Japanese in World War II. Perhaps it's the food, but there seems to be no closer relationship between a people and their former colonizers than there is between the Indonesians and the Dutch, whose cultures in the Southland are sometimes almost indistinguishable.⁴⁶

Despite the image of a warm relationship between the Dutch and Indonesians in these stores that Gold depicted, in his review he fails to address any aspects of the colonial violence that marred the Dutch-Indonesian relationship. If anything, Gold's remarks as an outsider underscore not only an ignorance of the history of Dutch colonialism, but a perceived transformation of Dutch and Indonesian immigrants as having a shared experience of adapting to American life. For Gold, food offered Dutch immigrants and Indonesians a means for building camaraderie, forced in part by being in the United States.

The uncritical view of the Dutch Indonesian postcolonial relationship persists. Eve Turow, writing for NPR in 2011, argues that, unlike Vietnam, where French colonizers left a deep impact on Vietnamese cuisine with dishes like *banh mi*, it was Dutch cuisine that was more influenced by Indonesia in the colonial relationship.⁴⁷ As part of a broader article comparing French Vietnam and Dutch Indonesia, Turow reports that her Dutch traveling companions characterized traditional Indonesian foods as also being traditional Dutch foods (why she did not ask Indonesians the same questions is uncertain). As Soleil Ho explains in her piercing review of the former San Francisco restaurant Le Colonial, the desire to romanticize colonialism through food remains a persistent trend in several restaurants in the United States. In the case of Le Colonial, patrons are encouraged to view themselves as French colonizers while ignoring the racial hierarchies that dominated French Indochinese society. Although there are few restaurants that emulate Le Colonial's style, several reviewers have mentioned Dutch colonial history in reviews of Indonesian restaurants in recent years.⁴⁸ One *LA Weekly* food critic in 2014 provocatively (and quite disingenuously) titled his review of Indonesian restaurant Ramayani, which offered *rijsttafel*, "Where To Eat Indonesian Food Like a Dutch Colonist in L.A."⁴⁹ Such reviews not only constrictively define the nature of Indonesian cuisine, but also illustrate a general ignorance on the part of the American public regarding Indo culture.

Contemporary Culinary Legacies

Nearly eighty years after Indonesian Independence, traces of the colonial legacy persist in the remaining Dutch grocery stores in Southern California. As of 2026, there are

only a small handful of Dutch Indonesian grocery stores that dot the landscape of Los Angeles. Today, the majority of Indonesian Americans in the US are recent immigrants who arrived during several waves of migration starting in the 1990s and were born after Indonesia gained its independence from the Netherlands.⁵⁰ As a result, the number of Indonesian stores and restaurants has grown since the 1990s, with many no longer serving dishes connected to Dutch colonialism, such as rijsttafel. Yet despite these changes, several Dutch Indonesian grocery stores remain, evidence of the dwindling presence of the first-generation Indo immigrants.

One of the most prominent Dutch Indonesian shops in Los Angeles is the aforementioned Holland International Market in Bellflower. Originally founded in 1943 by Dutch immigrants as a bakery, the market soon grew as a major importer for Dutch and, later, Indonesian food products. Although the original store closed in 2014 after the death of the owner, a former assistant purchased the store at the urging of customers.⁵¹ The store still caters to the Los Angeles Dutch Indonesian community, offering aisles of Dutch import goods like *Bolletje* rusks (a wafer usually eaten at breakfast), Edam and *Komijne kaas* (cheese), and even salted herring, alongside Indonesian condiments like *sambal*, *satay sauce*, and *ketjap manis* (a sweet soy sauce). In East Los Angeles County, Dutch Bakery and Variety Foods of Ontario boasts a similar selection, with one half of the store displaying Dutch import groceries and the other showcasing Indonesian goods. Hanging on the wall above are several display signs referencing Dutch culture (like “Opa (grandfather) is the greatest!”) alongside football jerseys from the Dutch national team. Even large-scale Asian grocery chains now incorporate Dutch Indonesian foods. At several branches of the popular grocery chain 99 Ranch Market, which offers primarily imported Chinese food products, shoppers can find a wide range of Conimex products and tempeh. And, if you look closely, you may find Dutch *speculaas* and peanut *kletsoppen* cookies imported from the Netherlands and hidden in the confectionery aisle.

Most of all, these stores today represent an effort to maintain the cultural heritage of Indos throughout California. Since the 1990s, several Indo writers have written about the Dutch Indonesian experience as immigrants to the US and the complexities of translating Dutch Indonesian culture. In 2009, the Indo Project was founded in Boston as an initiative to raise awareness of Indo contributions to American society.⁵² The website serves as a social network for thousands of Indos living globally and is active in fundraising and educational initiatives to support the Indo community. It also promotes Dutch Indonesian stores such as the Holland International Market.

Among the leading proponents of Dutch Indonesian cuisine is Jeff Keasberry. The grandson of an Indo woman who opened one of the first Indonesian restaurants in the Netherlands in the 1950s and was an authority on Indo cuisine, Keasberry himself is now a leading expert on Indo cuisine in the United States. A chef born in Amsterdam and now living in Los Angeles, he has published several cookbooks and teaches Indo-Dutch culinary traditions to newer audiences. When I interviewed Keasberry about his reasons for moving to Southern California, an important motivation was the existing

Dutch Indonesian community in the region. Since living in the US, Keasberry has become more active in preserving Dutch Indonesian history through food education:

I feel like an ambassador for both cultures and am actively involved in nonprofit organizations that promote and educate Americans about these histories and traditions. My mission is to ensure it [Indo-Dutch cuisine] gets the recognition it deserves—not only as part of Dutch-Indonesian history but also for its role in promoting Indonesian cuisine globally through the *Rijsttafel* and representing a vibrant, yet often silent, Indo-Dutch community.⁵³

Along with Keasberry, a new generation of Indo-American writers has begun to share their stories about their heritage. Writing for *Smithsonian Folklife*, Gwenna Claproth penned a history of rijsttafel that includes a reflection on growing up Indo in Southern California. In her article, Claproth relates the history of rijsttafel in connection to her childhood in Southern California, where she and her family frequented Dutch Indonesian stores.⁵⁴

Conclusion

In 2026, Indonesian food is receiving attention in Los Angeles as the latest “new” food culture in the city. In major grocery store chains, products like Indomie ramen are now ubiquitous and have come to represent the proliferation of Indonesian cuisine.⁵⁵ While Indonesian Americans represent only a small fraction of the Asian American community in the US, their presence is widely felt, thanks in part to the popularity of Indonesian cuisine. This is particularly true of Los Angeles, where a third of all Indonesian Americans reside.⁵⁶ Yet even as most new Indonesian stores cater to newer tastes, occasional traces of Dutch colonialism can be found in the products sold.

While this article highlights the efforts of several grocery stores to preserve Dutch-Indonesian cuisine in Los Angeles, it should also offer a call for additional scholarship on Indonesian Americans. Beyond the history of Dutch colonialism, few scholars have dug into the influence of Dutch colonialism upon Indonesian and Indo immigrant communities. As previously noted, within Asian American studies, Indonesian Americans have received little attention from scholars. As historian Dorothy Fujita-Rony notes in her book *The Memorykeepers*, Indonesian American stories are often depicted by scholars as secondary to general narratives about Southeast Asian Americans. And, often forgotten in discussions about the Indonesian American community, is the diversity of thousands of different ethnic groups, in addition to Indos descended from Dutch and Indonesian ancestry. Comparable to the legacies of French colonialism vis-à-vis Vietnamese communities in the US, there is a greater need to understand the entangled relationship between Dutch Indonesian identity as it manifests itself in the Indonesian American community. Fujita-Rony’s *The Memorykeepers* offers one of the few comprehensive studies on the Indonesian immigrant experience

in the US through the biographies of her grandmother and mother. Like rijsttafel, the history of Dutch Indonesian food in the US, and the stories of the immigrants that prepare it, is diverse and complex.⁵⁷

The preservation of Dutch and Indonesian food culture among expat communities, primarily Indos, underscores the complexities of colonial nostalgia and the uniqueness of Indo identity. Along with preserving cherished dishes and offering often-missed foods, these stores illustrate the tensions of dual identities. For many Indos, who were persecuted by the Indonesian revolution and later faced racism in the Netherlands, life abroad offered opportunities to rethink their identity in different social contexts. In the United States, Indos not only found opportunities to integrate economically in the US by opening grocery stores, but also garner acceptance by both Dutch and Indonesian immigrants. For Dutch immigrants like my father and his family, stores like the Holland International Market became a point of pride in a foreign land. For Indo Americans, it affirmed an identity that was out of reach within the Netherlands and, in some cases, Indonesia. Again, a similar comparison can be made with Vietnamese Americans. As Viet Thanh Nguyen argues, many Vietnamese of French ancestry, including those who migrated to the US, proudly identify themselves as French. For Nguyen, the wars in Vietnam all represent a long history of French colonialism. When a Frenchman of Vietnamese descent told Nguyen: “You are white here,” he responded, “I am not white in America, or not yet. I was made in America but born in Vietnam.”⁵⁸

Yet in comparison with Vietnamese Americans, Indo Americans face different cultural questions. Because of the more distant history of colonialism and the lack of US involvement in the Indonesian war of decolonization, many Dutch Indonesians formed a separate identity that is not connected to any one homeland. For many of them, being able to secure their American identity allowed for space to develop a separate Dutch Indonesian identity. As Tajuddin and Stern conclude: “Indos no longer have a country of return. Nor do they desire one. Their heritage is distinctly Dutch Indonesian, formed from a bygone era no longer affiliated with any specific territory or nation in the current world.”⁵⁹ Perhaps, for Indo Americans, the grocery store evolved into a sort of homeland.

Notes

¹ D. J. Waldie, *Holy Land* (W. W. Norton, 2005).

² The author’s father and his parents were among the immigrants to settle in Bellflower during this period. The author’s cousin’s family settled in nearby Lakewood.

- ³ Rita Pyrrillis, "Little Bits of Holland is Mostly Memories," *Los Angeles Times*, April 26, 1987. According to a representative of the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Washington, DC who spoke with Pyrrillis, the largest influx of immigrants from the Netherlands to the US up to 1987 was between 1948 and 1949. In the 1950s, 100,000 Dutch migrants lived in the Los Angeles area.
- ⁴ See also Clark E. Cunningham, "Unity and Diversity Among Indonesian Migrants to the United States," in *Emerging Voices: Experiences of Underrepresented Asian Americans*, ed. Huping Ling (Rutgers University Press, 2008); Mary Yu Danico, ed., "Indonesian Americans," in *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia* (Sage, 2014); Greta Kwik, *The Indos in Southern California* (AMS Press, 1989); and Dorothy Fujita-Rony with Maya Soetero, "Maya Soetero and the Making of Indonesian America," in *Foundations and Futures: Asian American and Pacific Islander Multimedia Textbook*, 2026. <https://wwwFOUNDATIONSandFUTURES.org/chapter/maya-soetero-and-the-making-of-indonesian-america/>
- ⁵ Michelle Chen, "A Taste of Home: How Ethnic Grocery Stores Create Community." *Yes!*, December 22, 2022; and Nir Avieli, "Making Sense of Vietnamese Cuisine," *Education About Asia* 16, no. 3 (2014): 42–45.
- ⁶ Harry H. L. Kitano, "Japanese Americans: The Development of a Middleman Minority," *Pacific Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (November 1974): 500–519.
- ⁷ Claire Jean Kim, "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans," *Politics & Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999): 105–138; see also Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in America: Beyond Black and White* (Basic Books, 2002).
- ⁸ David F. Long, "'Martial Thunder': The First Official American Armed Intervention in Asia," *Pacific Historical Review* 42, no. 2 (1973): 143–162.
- ⁹ Robert McMahon, *Colonialism and the Cold War: The United States and the Struggle for Indonesian Independence, 1945–49* (Cornell University Press, 1981).
- ¹⁰ McMahon, *Colonialism and the Cold War*, 304.
- ¹¹ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Little, Brown, and Company, 1989).
- ¹² Azlan Tajuddin and Jamie Stern, "From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans: Changing Identity of the Dutch-Indonesian (Indo) Diaspora in America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 4 (2015): 349–376.
- ¹³ Dorothy Fujita-Rony, *The Memorykeepers: Gendered Knowledges, Empires, and Indonesian American History* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

- ¹⁴ Jeoren Dewulf, Olf Praamsta, and Michiel van Kempen, eds., *Shifting the Compass: Pluricontinental Connections in Dutch Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).
- ¹⁵ Adriaan van Dis, "Squeezed Between Rice and Potato: Personal Reflections on a Dutch (Post) Colonial Youth," in *Shifting the Compass*, ed. Jeoren Dewulf, Olf Praamsta, and Michiel van Kempen (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).
- ¹⁶ van Dis, "Squeezed Between Rice and Potato," 35.
- ¹⁷ Vivian Boon, "Living Monuments of an Immortal Past," *The Indo Project*, May 3, 2021. The author is the granddaughter of Tjalie Robinson.
- ¹⁸ Jeoren Dewulf, "Tjalie Robinson and *The American Tong Tong*: Framing Eurasian Identity in the American Sixties," in *Shifting the Compass: Pluricontinental Connections in Dutch Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, ed. Jeoren Dewulf, Olf Praamsta, and Michiel van Kempen (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).
- ¹⁹ Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan, and Anita Mannur, eds., *Eating More Asian America: A Food Studies Reader* (New York University Press, 2025).
- ²⁰ Alyssa Paredes and Marvin Joseph F. Montefrio, *Halo-Halo Ecologies: The Emergent Environments behind Filipino Food* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2025).
- ²¹ The term has since become associated with Dutch Indonesian identity. See Hans van Amersfoort and Mies van Niekerk, "Immigration as a Colonial Inheritance: Post-Colonial Immigrants in the Netherlands, 1945–2002," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 32, no. 3 (April 2006): 323–346.
- ²² Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (University of California Press, 2002); and Daniel E. Bender, "Lucile's Scrapbook: A Voyage Around the World, 1937," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food Studies*, 20, no. 4 (2020): 90–104.
- ²³ Greg Robinson, "The Great Unknown and the Unknown Great: The Incarceration of Indonesians in the United States: An Untold Story," *Nichi Bei Weekly*, January 22, 2015, <https://www.nichibei.org/2015/01/the-great-unknown-and-the-unknown-great-the-incarceration-of-indonesians-in-the-united-states-an-untold-story/>.
- ²⁴ McMahon, *Colonialism and Cold War*.
- ²⁵ Debates regarding the memory of the Indonesian War of Independence have emerged in recent years in response to the Dutch government's apologies for war crimes committed by the Dutch Army during the war. See Daniel Boffey, "Dutch PM Apologizes for State's Role in Abuses in 1940s Indonesian War," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2022.

- ²⁶ Antje Missbach's work in particular speaks to the various experiences of the small Aceh diasporic community. Missbach estimates that in the US as of 2006, there were approximately three hundred Acehnese. See Antje Missbach, "The Waxing and Waning of the Acehnese Diaspora's Long-Distance Politics," *Modern Asian Studies* 47, no. 3 (2013): 1055–1082.
- ²⁷ Julia Doornbos, Bettina van Hoven, and Peter Groote, "Negotiating Claims of 'whiteness': Indo-European Everyday Experiences and 'mixed-race' Identities in the Netherlands," *Social Identities* 28, no. 3 (2022): 383–399.
- ²⁸ Wim Willems, *De uittocht uit Indie (1945–1995): De geschiedenis van Indische Nederlanders* (Bert Bakker, 2001), 254.
- ²⁹ Marlou Schrover and Marijke van Faasen, "A 'Sunny Destination' For Minority Groups? Dutch Emigration 1945–1965," *Journal of Migration History* 11 (2025): 394.
- ³⁰ Azlan Tajuddin and Jamie Stern, "From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans: Changing Identity of the Dutch-Indonesian (Indo) Diaspora in America," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28, no. 4 (2015): 349–376.
- ³¹ Dahlia Gratia Setiyawan, "Indonesian Americans: History, People, and Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau (3 vols., Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010), 515–20. Also see Inge Oosterhof, "How Dutch Indonesians Found Home in San Diego," *San Diego Magazine*, May 29, 2024.
- ³² "Facts about Indonesians in the U.S.," Pew Research Center, updated May 1, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/chart/top-10-u-s-metropolitan-areas-by-indonesian-population-2019/>
- ³³ See Tajuddin and Stern, "From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans."
- ³⁴ José van Mil, "Dutch Treat," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food Studies* 4, no. 3 (2004): 100–104.
- ³⁵ De Aardaappeleters, "Rijsttafel," *NTR Nederlands*, tv documentary, 24:00, December 17, 2019.
- ³⁶ Meredith Oda, "'Kikkoman, USA': The Economic and Residential Integration of Japanese Americans and Japanese Foods," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 2 (2020): 265–295; and Haiming Lui and Lianlin Lin, "Food, Culinary Identity, and Transnational Culture: Chinese Restaurant Business in Southern California," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 12, no. 2 (2009): 135–162.
- ³⁷ Tajuddin and Stern, "From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans."

- ³⁸ Rose Dosti, "Specialty Fare for Christmas Season," *Los Angeles Times*, December 20, 1971.
- ³⁹ Barbara Hansen, "Indonesian Delights at a Fair," *Los Angeles Times*, October 20, 1977. Also see Barbara Hansen, "Colonial Cooking: A Blending of Cultures," *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 1981.
- ⁴⁰ "Cultures Crossed to Create Lumpers," *The San Bernadino Sun*, July 30, 1987.
- ⁴¹ John Pashdag, "A Taste for the Exotic," *Los Angeles Times*, July 28, 1981.
- ⁴² Max Jacobson, "Restaurants: Dewi is Casual but Exotic," *Los Angeles Times*, April 30, 1992.
- ⁴³ Linda Burum, "A World of Bumbus, Sambals, Krupuk and Speculaas," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1991.
- ⁴⁴ Burum, "A World of Bumbus, Sambals, Krupuk and Speculaas."
- ⁴⁵ Jonathan Gold, "Counter Intelligence: Ayam, I Said," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1993.
- ⁴⁶ Gold, "Counter Intelligence: Ayam, I Said."
- ⁴⁷ Eve Turow, "Colonizers' Influence Infuses Southeast Asian Cuisine," *NPR*, October 19, 2011.
- ⁴⁸ Soleil Ho, "Does a Restaurant Celebrating French Colonialism Belong in San Francisco?" *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 23, 2019.
- ⁴⁹ James Gordon, "Where to Eat Indonesian Food Like a Dutch Colonist in L.A.," *LA Weekly*, July 22, 2014.
- ⁵⁰ Barbara A. Amodio, "Indonesian Americans: Restaurants and Cuisine," in *Encyclopedia of Asian American Folklore and Folklife*, ed. Jonathan H. X. Lee and Kathleen Nadeau, (3 vols., Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2010), 557–560.
- ⁵¹ "Maria Serves the Dutch Indo Community," *The Indo Project*, March 1, 2022. <https://theindoproject.org/maria-serves-dutch-indo-community/>
- ⁵² "Our Story." *The Indo Project*. <https://theindoproject.org/about/history/>
- ⁵³ Jeff Keasberry, interviewed by the author, October 3, 2024.
- ⁵⁴ Gwenna Claproth, "What is Rijsttafel? A Dish to Bridge Dutch and Indonesian Identities," *Smithsonian Folklife Magazine*, May 17, 2023.
- ⁵⁵ Joe Clifford, "The Nation and the Noodle: Indomie and Identity in Indonesia," *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food Studies* 22, no. 1 (2022): 1–10.

- ⁵⁶ Fiona Chandra, "Where to Eat Indonesian Food In LA Right now," *LAist*, November 14, 2018.
- ⁵⁷ Fujita-Rony, *The Memorykeepers*.
- ⁵⁸ Viet Thanh Nguyen, "I Love America: That's Why I Have to Tell the Truth About It," *Time*, November 15, 2018.
- ⁵⁹ Tajuddin and Stern, "From Brown Dutchmen to Indo-Americans," 374.

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