

The future of food is at Philadelphia's Print Center. It's a taco

"Taste of Exile" is a pop-up virtual reality experience that links immigrant labor to a real taco.



By [Peter Crimmins](#) - January 9, 2026



An unidentified woman eats a taco while experiencing a "A Taste of Exile" by Illya Mousavijad, a virtual reality installation at The Print Center. (Photo courtesy of The Print Center)

This weekend the Print Center in Philadelphia is hosting a virtual reality experience that invites participants to sit down to a meal viewed through a digital headset. While experiencing virtual food, they can also taste an actual taco prepared by James Beard award-winning chef Cristina Martinez.

["Taste of Exile"](#) by digital artist Illya Mousavijad immerses participants in an animated meal prepared by immigrant chefs. He uses food to explore the immigrant experience of displacement and resilience.

Interfacing with VR technology is, itself, displacing. Mousavijad writes in an introductory essay that virtual experiences force people to disassociate from their immediate physical surroundings, mimicking the immigrant experience of being removed from familiar relationships and lifestyles of home.

"Virtual reality is the architecture of the exiled," he wrote.



An image from the VR installation "Taste of Exile" by Illya Mousavijad, which present digital animations of culturally specific foods. (Photo courtesy of The Print Center)

Mousavijad recalled watching his Iranian grandmother constantly prepare food in great abundance for family, friends, neighbors and large religious events. Although rarely given credit, he saw how his grandmother's food was a staple that pulled people together.

"I learned how a world is made—through gestures, repetition, ritual, and the steady rhythm of care," Mousavijad wrote. "Every taco in Philadelphia, every dumpling dish in Queens, is an archive of a distant homeland."

Mousavijad studied in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the University of Pennsylvania, and now teaches at Ohio State University. He asked Martinez to prepare actual food for the VR experience based on her personal story of coming to the U.S. from Mexico as an undocumented immigrant and working in Philadelphia restaurants, from which she was fired at least once for her immigration status.

Ultimately, Martinez's is a success story, rising from the shadows of largely invisible kitchen work commonly done by immigrant laborers to becoming a celebrated and award-winning restaurant owner. She has used her popularity and her connections with the Mexican workforce to advocate for immigrant labor.

Paloma Martinez-Cruz, a professor of Latino studies at Ohio State University of Naperville, Illinois, contributed scholarly work to "Taste of Exile." In an essay, she wrote that food is both metaphor and medium, a sensual experience that can evoke critical engagement with immigration.



A 3D scan of a Philly food truck leans into the glitches of the technology to reflect the disjointed immigrant experience. It's part of MenuFesto, a gallery exhibit at The Print Center accompanying the "Taste of Exile" VR experience by Illya Mousavijad. (Photo courtesy of The Print Center)

"Technology becomes an embodied ritual for exploring the complexities of forced migration," she wrote. "Chef Martinez's story anchors this experience, contextualizing broader themes of undocumented labor, the Mexican/Latinx diaspora, and the politics of the U.S.-Mexico border."

The virtual reality experience of “Taste of Exile” is a single-person experience lasting about 15 minutes, and can only be available by [preregistering for a time slot](#). The pop-up is paired with a multimedia gallery exhibition “MenuFesto,” which includes digital composites of food trucks accompanied by a soundtrack of audio interviews with immigrant laborers who cook inside of them.

The VR and gallery pop-up will be at The Print Center, 1614 Latimer in Rittenhouse Square, this weekend only Jan. 10 and 11.

<https://whyy.org/articles/taste-of-exile-print-center-vr-taco/>