

# A Video Cookbook Documents the Diverse Food Experiences of New York City

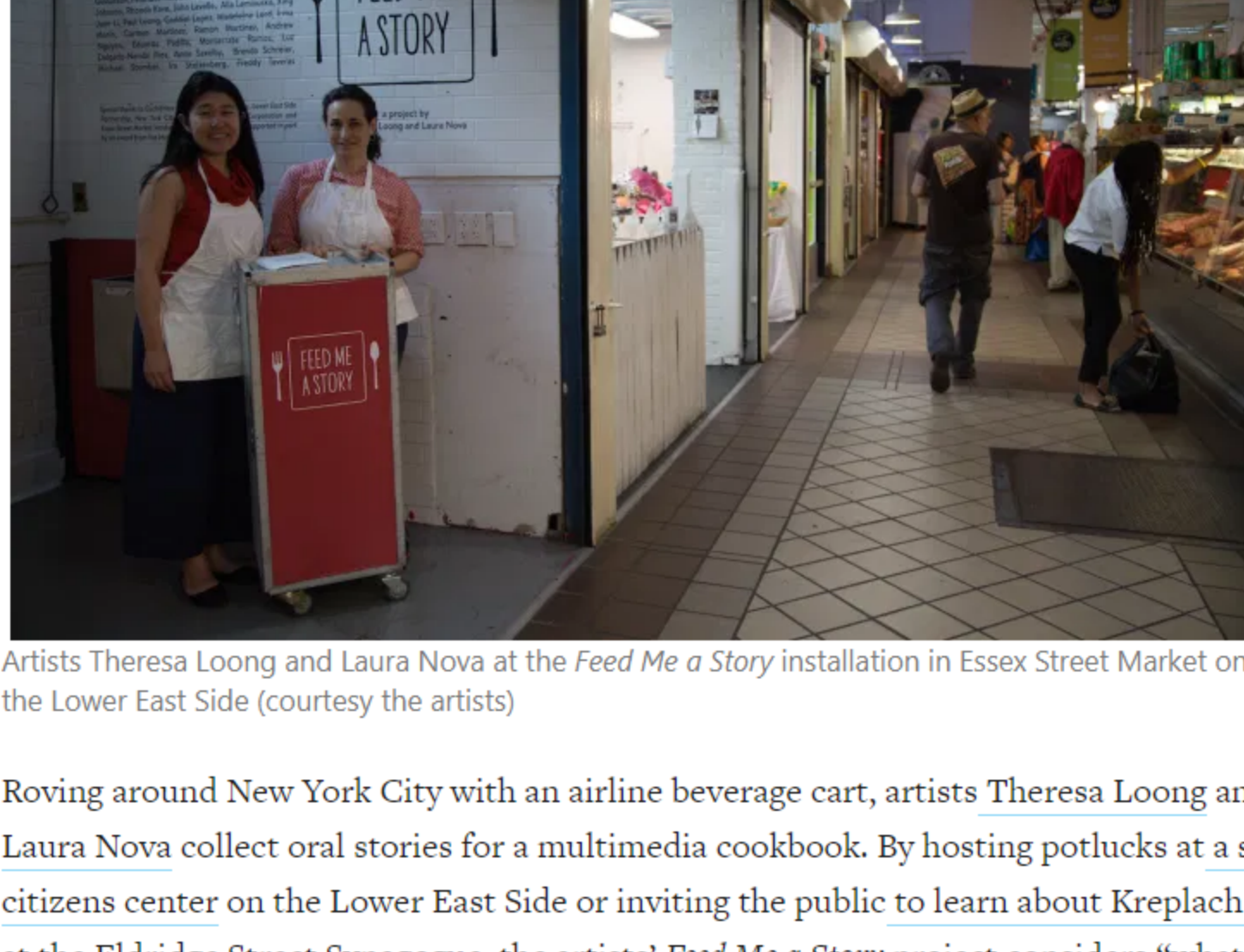
Artists Theresa Loong and Laura Nova's "Feed Me a Story" gathers family recipes and immigrant food experiences through a roving social engagement project.



by Allison Meier  
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Artists Theresa Loong and Laura Nova at the *Feed Me a Story* installation in Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side (courtesy the artists)

Roving around New York City with an airline beverage cart, artists Theresa Loong and Laura Nova collect oral stories for a multimedia cookbook. By hosting potlucks at a senior citizens center on the Lower East Side or inviting the public to learn about Kreplach soup at the Eldridge Street Synagogue, the artists' *Feed Me a Story* project considers "what it means to be an American." Their current installation in a vendor stall of the Essex Street Market includes over 20 video stories recorded last year during the week of Thanksgiving.

"There's quite a diverse history in the city, and what's fascinating about the Lower East Side in particular is which immigrants were there in the 1800s, and then the 1900s," Loong told Hyperallergic. "We're touching upon different cultures, including Jewish culture and people from Puerto Rico and Latin America, and working with other organizations and people who frequent the area both as residents and also who are shopping and socializing. There is a culture that is something that's been changing."



Loong and Nova met in the Essex Street Market, at the counter of the eclectic Shopsin's. Five years later, they created the installation in collaboration with Cuchifritos Gallery + Project Space, a program of Artists Alliance Inc.

"The project really brings our backgrounds together nicely, with Theresa coming from more of the film and documentary side and me from more social engagement public artworks," Nova said. The duo also noted that their personal histories are complementary, with Loong growing up in New Jersey and often visiting Chinatown in Manhattan with her Chinese-American family, while Nova's Jewish grandparents lived on the Lower East Side soon after immigrating, a neighborhood in which she later lived.



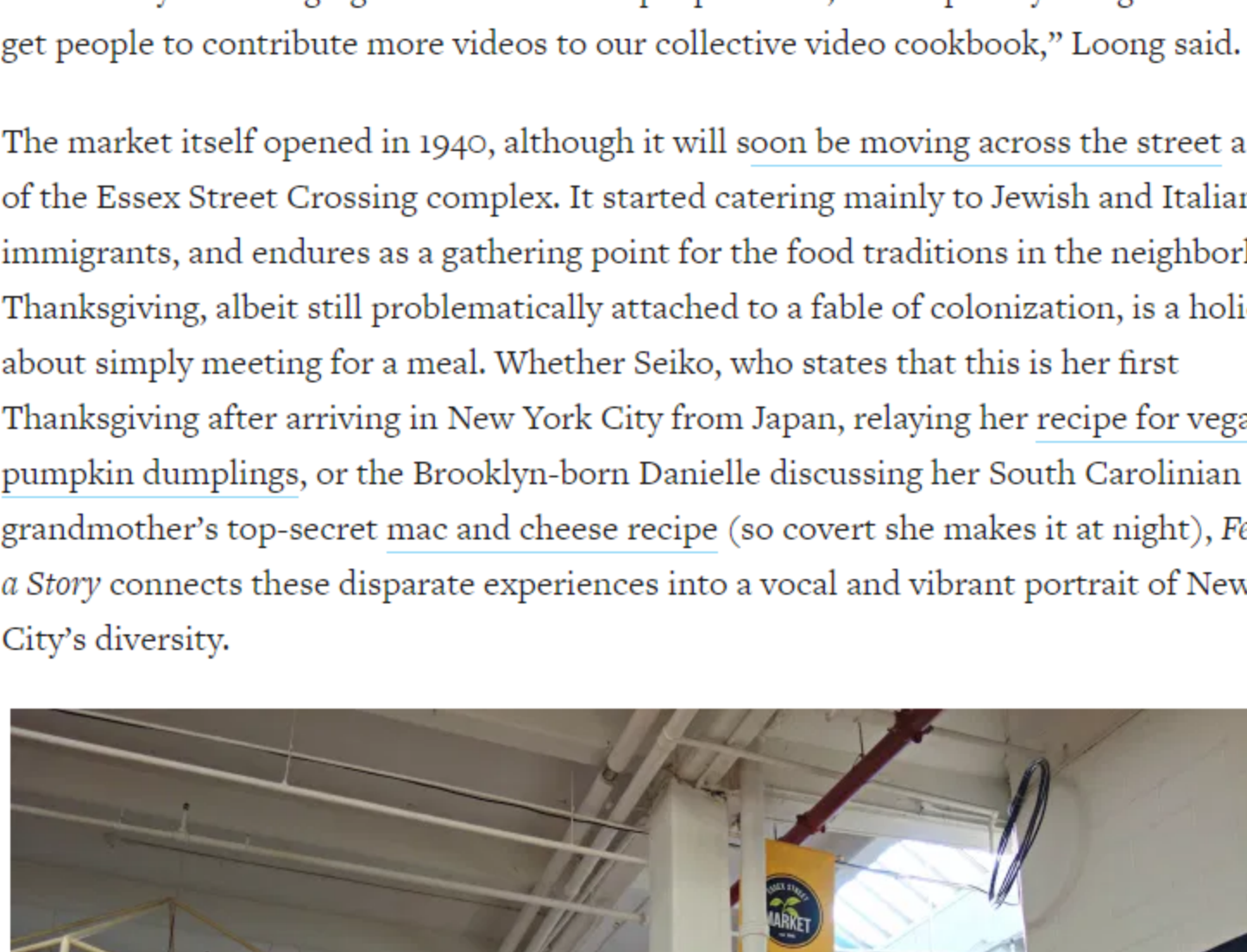
Each iteration of *Feed Me a Story* involves investigating the cultural heritage of an area, such as tracking down an army wife's 1845 wedding punch to serve at an intervention in 2012 on the ferry to the demilitarized Governors Island, where the artists traded cups for food stories. On Ellis Island, they exchanged donuts for oral family recipes, referencing the donuts handed out by Salvation Army volunteers to immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century. By asking questions like "What was the first recipe you learned to cook?" and "What dish reminds you of home?," Loong and Nova encourage sensorial memories on two of our oldest community activities: talking and sharing a meal.

The Essex Street Market videos feature both customers and vendors, and can be watched from a bench in the market, as well as on the *Feed Me a Story* site, along with recipes. For instance, Brenda Schreier, a weekly shopper at the market, discusses her "Shabbas with a Little Dash," and how although she's married to a Jewish man and now practicing herself, she can still find kosher neck bones for her African-American family's old recipes. Chin, a Queens resident via Myanmar who works at Essex Farm, gives her Puerto and "a thoke" (Burmese Salad) Thanksgiving dish, and customers Ramon, from New Jersey, and Gaddiel, who lives on the Lower East Side, relate the Singing Butternut Squash Soup they're preparing (because "everything will taste better" if made while singing).

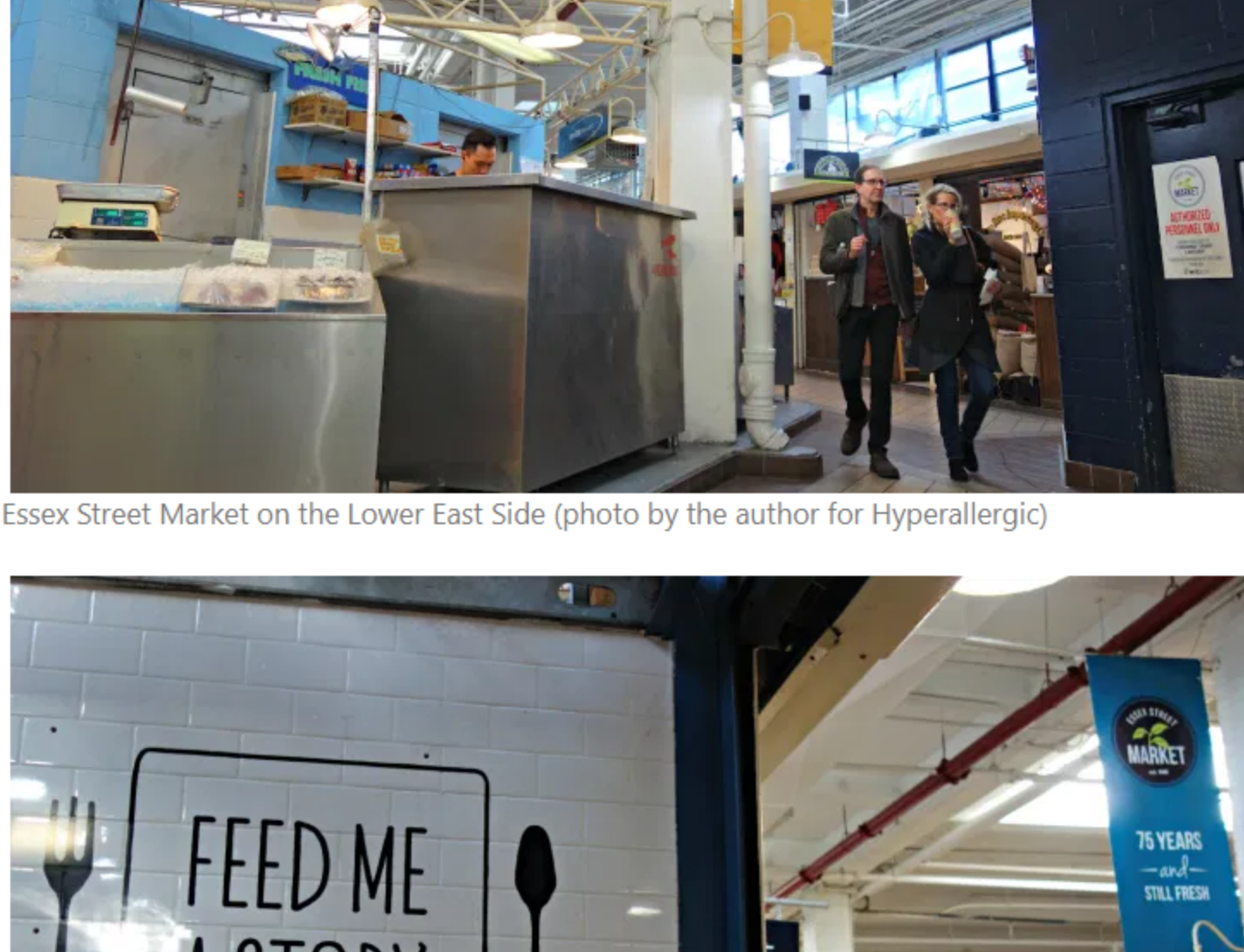


"We're looking to create more works like this where we're collaborating with the community and bringing these stories that people share, and hopefully using our website to get people to contribute more videos to our collective video cookbook," Loong said.

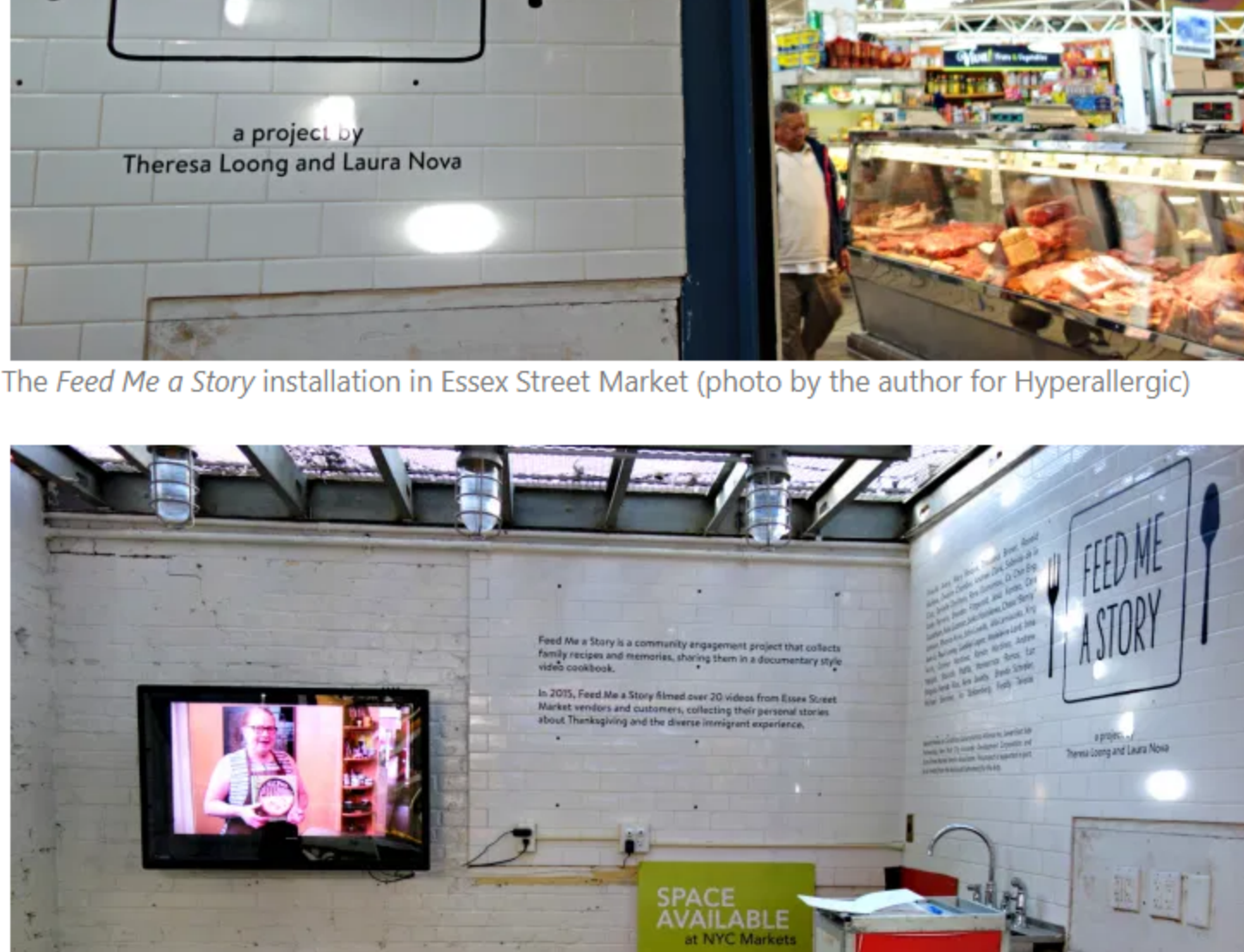
The market itself opened in 1940, although it will soon be moving across the street as part of the Essex Street Crossing complex. It started catering mainly to Jewish and Italian immigrants, and endures as a gathering point for the food traditions in the neighborhood. Thanksgiving, albeit still problematically attached to a fable of colonization, is a holiday all about simply meeting for a meal. Whether Seiko, who states that this is her first Thanksgiving after arriving in New York City from Japan, relaying her recipe for vegan pumpkin dumplings, or the Brooklyn-born Danielle discussing her South Carolinian grandmother's top-secret mac and cheese recipe (so covert she makes it at night), *Feed Me a Story* connects these disparate experiences into a vocal and vibrant portrait of New York City's diversity.



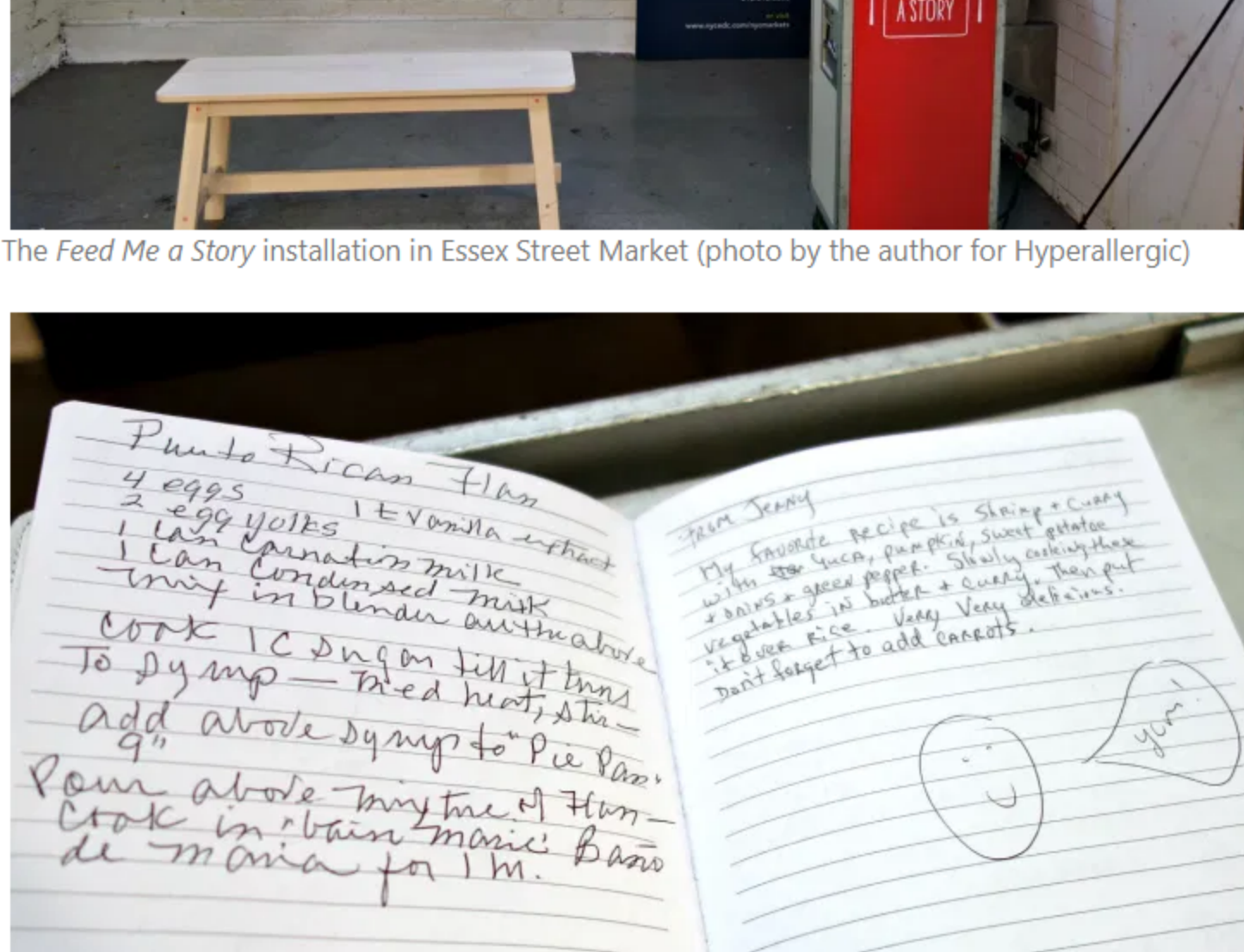
Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



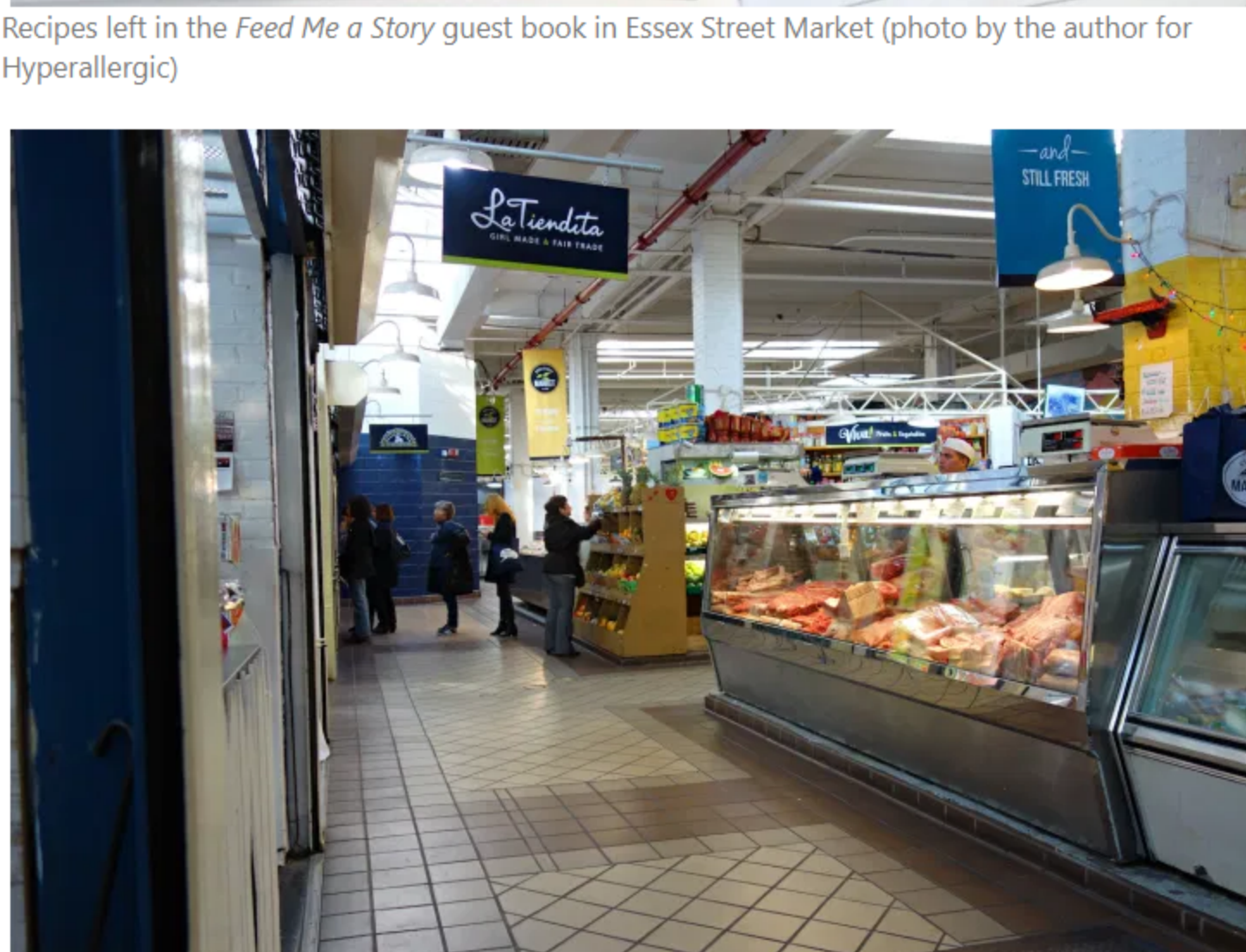
The *Feed Me a Story* installation in Essex Street Market (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



The *Feed Me a Story* installation in Essex Street Market (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Recipes left in the *Feed Me a Story* guest book in Essex Street Market (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



View from the *Feed Me a Story* installation into Essex Street Market (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)



Outside Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

*Feed Me a Story* by Theresa Loong and Laura Nova continues at the Essex Street Market (120 Essex Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan) through December 15.