



Olives, Lemons & Za'atar: The Best Middle Eastern Home Cooking

Rawia Bishara

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Rawia, in Arabic, means storyteller. And that is what I am. I tell the stories of my life's journey, culture, and family through my cooking. A delicious meal is the greatest companion to the memories we cherish most. I was born into a food-loving Palestinian-Arab family in Nazareth, a beautiful town in the southern Galilee. Though the words “organic,” “locavore,” and “sustainable” were unknown then, my parents' approach qualified on all counts. My respect for the sources of food, how it is grown and prepared, originates in my early years at home.

My grandmother had ceramic urns filled with fruity olive oil, pressed from the trees on her family's land picked by my aunts and uncles. My mother, too, made her own olive oil, and used the remaining “crude” oil to make soap; she also distilled her own vinegar, sun-dried her own herbs and fruits, made fresh batches of goat cheese, as well as sweet wine from our vineyards, and jarred jewel-colored jams from the bounty of the local orchards.

After moving to New York, I opened my restaurant Tanoreen to honor my mother and her imaginative cooking as well as the rich Middle Eastern gastronomic culture that is rarely experienced outside the region. Tanoreen is unique because it showcases Middle Eastern home cooking as I experienced it growing up. The 135 recipes in this book celebrate tradition and embrace change. I cook without rigidly following recipes, though I do respect tradition. My dishes are based on our culture's recipes that are flexible enough to accommodate both adventurous and conservative contemporary palates.

Organized by Breakfasts, Mezze, Salads, Soups and Stews, Main Courses (including vegetarian, fish, chicken, lamb and beef), Sides, Pickles and Sauces, and Desserts, in each chapter I maintain the authenticity of a dish, re-creating it as it has been made for generations; but sometimes I might opt to experiment a bit, to make the recipe more contemporary, perhaps adding a spice or offering a few shortcuts. My favorite examples of these are my preparation of Brussels Sprouts with Panko (and tahini), Spice Rubbed Braised Lamb Shank (marinated in ginger and rose buds), Tanoreen Kafta Roll, (a reconstructed classic) or Eggplant Napoleon (baba ghanouge layered between crisp eggplant and topped with basil and tomatoes). A dish like Egyptian Rice with Lamb and Pine Nuts shows this cookbook goes beyond Nazareth, and is more of a bible of Middle Eastern food, sharing my culinary journey from Nazareth to New York, with many stops in between.

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