Cooking

A Fistful of Lentils: Syrian-Jewish Cooking from Grandma Fritzie's Kitchen
Jennifer Felicia Abadi
Harvard Common Press
978-1-55832-218-9
(February 28, 2002)

Abadi is of the new generation of Jews who share and celebrate their heritage with others. Her guardian angel of cooking is Grandmother Fritzie. Abadi dedicates her book to this Syrian grandmother who carried a bottle of Tabasco sauce in her purse and loved vodka gimlets. Abadi's homey, friendly cookbook reads like a novel with photos and recipes. Spending an afternoon with it, readers will feel as if they have been absorbed into a spirited and passionate family that loves to eat.

Abadi brims over with history, food information, recipes, quotes and stories from friends and relatives about Sephardic Jews who originated in Syria. She relates how a friend suggested to a store owner that he should put more prepared foods on the shelves of his store instead of hiding them back in his kitchen. He refused and replied that he did not want to make it too easy on Syrian girls for fear it would cause them to lose the art of Syrian cooking.

Abadi explains that Jews descend from three areas: Ashkenazic Jews from Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia; Mizrahni Jews from the Middle East; and the Sephardic Jews who had roots in Spain. When the climate in Spain became intolerable for Jews many fled to Arabic countries like Turkey, Morocco, and Syria. These Sephardic Jews took with them a rich collection of dishes that integrated with and were transformed by Persian seasonings like cilantro, cinnamon, cumin, allspice, tamarind, rose and orange flower water, and pomegranate. Abadi shares with readers her precious Sephardic (Kosher) family dishes.

User-friendly, the recipes are mostly simple techniques that cooks can easily master at home. Abadi thoughtfully gives alternatives to exotic ingredients like tamarind. Readers acquainted with Middle Eastern food will find familiar recipes with a tasty Syrian twist. M'jedrah (rice and lentils), kibbeh (stuffed bulgur "torpedoes") and stuffed grape leaves rub elbows with less familiar dishes like eggs with rhubarb, chicken with crispy spaghetti, stuffed pancakes with nuts and orange blossom syrup, and stuffed artichokes with meat.

Food can bridge our cultural differences and build fellowship. With this book Abadi throws wide the doors to her family and community. In doing so she helps to rend the mystery surrounding Middle Eastern Jewish culture and extend to the reader a sense of warmth and welcome.

Nancy K. Allen