

Sumac: Recipes and Stories from Syria

Anas Atassi

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Anas Atassi's inviting cookbook is named after a spice that is one of two keys to Syrian cuisine. The other indispensable element, Atassi contends, is figurative: "nafas," which literally means breath, but also connotes "the art of cooking where ingredients combine harmoniously."

Growing up in Saudi Arabia, where his parents found work, Atassi learned about world cuisines from television. His family spent summers back in Syria. When he left for university, he hankered after Syrian food. Now settled in Amsterdam, he finds that cooking dishes from his homeland is "a tangible, edible way of reminiscing." Breakfast might be eggs, flatbread, and labneh (yogurt cheese), while dips, drinks, pickles, salads, and stews adorn buffets alongside familiar Middle Eastern fare, including falafel, kebabs, and baklava.

With recipes whose ingredients and steps are kept to a minimum (unless a dough is involved), the book's dishes range from street food to unusual centerpieces like makloubé, a molded eggplant and beef pilaf that's served upside down. Atassi explains regional variations and conveys his mother's cooking tips. Most spreads include a personal note. Brief essays introduce each section with useful snippets of cultural context, including the fact that making hummus is considered a man's task, and a page on Ramadan meals.

Unusual combinations, like eggplant jam or lamb kebabs served with cherries, encourage broadening one's taste horizons. Jeroen van der Spek's photographs capture attractive plates and dinner table scenes. Pops of color are frequent thanks to the ubiquitous lemons, tomatoes, and pomegranate seeds, while the hand-embroidered Aghabani tablecloths that are unique to Syria are the perfect backdrops for mouthwatering meals.

Sumac is an appealing cookbook for foodies who are looking to expand their culinary repertoires while learning about Syria.

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