

DINING & WINE

A Gust of Sesame and Saffron

By JULIA MOSKIN APRIL 29, 2014

When Ghaya Oliveira was appointed head pastry chef for the restaurant empire of Daniel Boulud, she began a stealth campaign. As she constructed new desserts for Daniel, the very French flagship in a very upscale ZIP code, she started to sneak in the flavors of her childhood in Tunisia: jasmine and sesame, rosewater and saffron.

“We didn’t list them on the menu,” she recalled. (After 14 years cooking in New York City, she knew that customers were cautious about these tastes.) “Only when the plate went on the table, then the server mentioned it.”

She was not only persistent, but prescient. Today Ms. Oliveira is one of many chefs, with and without roots in the Middle East and North Africa, who are pulling those regions’ rich and ancient culinary traditions into the limelight. And though there is still some hesitation — political as well as practical — to label the food Middle Eastern, it is becoming a key component in New York’s busy palette of cuisines. Long available as cheap street food, it now has a secure foothold in fine dining.

At creative new Middle Eastern restaurants like Glasserie, Bar Bolonat and Zizi Limona, there is no room on the menu for basic falafel and plain hummus, no matter how expertly prepared. In their place are brilliant combinations like wood-smoked baba ghanouj spiked with fresh basil and feta; tabbouleh tossed with cauliflower, yogurt and pistachios; and chocolate falafel, a surprisingly successful fusion of molten-centered chocolate cake and sesame crust.

Fattoush, a standard salad across the Middle East with tomatoes, greens and crisp shards of bread, has lost its tomato in the hands of Einat Admony, the chef at Bar Bolonat, but gained silky avocado, handfuls of fresh mint and a sharp dressing with lemon and mustard, accompanied by a drop of honey to smooth things over. Springing up in various places are creations like harissa oil and

peanut tahini, arugula yogurt and Persian lemon crème fraîche.

Young entrepreneurs are taking advantage of the city's robust food markets to introduce treats old and new: spreadable halvah from Brooklyn Sesame, savory yogurt with spices from Sohha Yogurt, and manousheh, a staple street food in Lebanon. It's made from a very thin flatbread called manakeesh, painted with za'atar and wrapped around tomatoes, cucumbers and jibneh, fresh cheese that is crumbly like feta but mild like mozzarella.

Ziad Hermez was so certain that New York would embrace the manousheh that he bought a commercial dough roller and special domed griddle, shipped them here from Lebanon and opened Manousheh, a chic, short-lived pop-up in an abandoned subway station in NoLIta. (It proved popular, and Mr. Hermez is now shopping for a permanent space.)

At the high end, Eldad Shem Tov, the newly installed chef at Glasserie, has a most glamorous résumé, including stints at Aquavit and at Noma in Copenhagen. He opened one of the first restaurants in Israel to offer tasting menus, high-end counter dining and its own greenhouse produce. Israel has experienced a culinary revolution similar to that of the United States, but in fast forward: over the last 20 years, rather than 50.

"We went from French, to Italian, to modernist, to local, all in my lifetime," Mr. Shem Tov said. "Now I just cook food that tastes good to me."

That covers the spectrum: from a rethought kebab of tuna and halibut wrapped around a cinnamon "skewer" and served with the cinnamon stick aflame at both ends, to a homely feast of stuffed vegetables surrounded by fresh herbs, pickled baby carrots and turnips, yogurt, smoky flatbread and red and green chile relishes.

Though Middle Eastern street foods — falafel, shawarma — have long been popular in this country, the region's lavish and sophisticated home cooking remains unknown to most chefs here, to say nothing of ingredients like carob molasses and halvah floss. But the chefs are learning, just as home cooks have been galvanized by the influential cookbooks of the chefs Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi.

Elsewhere in the nation, chefs like Michael Solomonov in Philadelphia, Mourad Lahlou in San Francisco and Alon Shaya in New Orleans are delving into the Middle Eastern pantry. And some chefs who have no connection to the region but who embrace a global, nowhere-but-everywhere cooking style are

rifling through the cupboards of Middle Eastern kitchens, then riffing on what they find there: new grains and syrups, cheeses and pickles, fresh herbs and dried beans.

“It’s always good to open up the game and have more to play with,” said Ignacio Mattos, the chef at Estela, who credits Atef Boulaabi, an owner of the East Village ingredient emporium SOS Chefs, with educating his palate. “Most people, even chefs, don’t know yet that there is a real difference between a freshly dried chickpea and an old one.”

Defining where the Middle East begins and ends is as difficult from a culinary perspective as it is from a political one. Historically, Arabia and Asia traded spices and flavors back and forth, as merchants crossed through Persia, famous for its luxurious cuisine. Rice came from China, chiles arrived from South America via a detour to South Asia; all these belong firmly to the Middle East today.

So although traditional Yemeni food may not look much like the cuisine of the fertile Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, the region shares some building blocks: sesame, za’atar, yogurt, grapes, apricots, coffee and spice mixes that occupy an entirely different space than they do in Western kitchens. “You have to understand that these spices are not only something you add to food,” said Lior Lev Sercarz, a New York spice purveyor whose clientele at La Boîte includes top chefs. “They are a food in themselves.”

One fundamental seasoning of the region is za’atar; confusingly, it exists in two forms. The fresh green herb called za’atar is related to oregano and savory, but it also has notes of thyme, mint and sage. For the mixture called za’atar, the dried herb is ground with sumac and salt, sometimes with dried thyme and mint, and mixed with whole sesame seeds, in as many variations as there are cooks.

In many home kitchens, a jar of za’atar covered with olive oil is always at hand. It turns plain yogurt into breakfast and flatbread into lunch, and it never grows boring. There is no equivalent to za’atar in Western cuisine; such a seasoning would have to combine the familiarity of salt and pepper, the tang of lemon and the roundness of butter.

“A really good za’atar has umami,” said Mr. Lev Sercarz, who grew up in Galilee, referring to the savory “fifth taste.” “It should have a satisfying sharpness, never bitter or murky.” Other fragrant combinations are bazaar from Libya, bright with turmeric, and dukkah, identified with Egypt (nuts, coriander

seed, caraway, cumin, pepper and anise).

When Tanoreen, one of New York's best and longest-running Middle Eastern restaurants, opened in 1998 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, none of Rawia Bishara's customers had heard of za'atar or dukkah; cumin was still exotic. Ms. Bishara's new book, "Olives, Lemons and Za'atar," charts the evolution of her cooking from strictly traditional to personal.

"We didn't have brussels sprouts in Nazareth," she said, referring to one of Tanoreen's signature dishes. "My mother never mixed pomegranate molasses with tahini, although she used them all the time. I've been here 40 years, my palate has changed, and now the food is New York just as much as Nazareth."

As Middle Eastern food traditions flourish in the United States, the political turmoil and persistent war in many parts of that region endanger them there. The ancient covered food market in Aleppo, a Unesco World Heritage site, was destroyed in 2012, one of the early casualties of civil war in Syria. The peaceful, low-tech agricultural life described in "Olives, Lemons and Za'atar" is under threat. Culinary skills like scouring outdoor markets for perfect-size eggplants and ripe pomegranates; making smooth hollows in zucchinis and eggplants for stuffing; drying herbs, tomatoes, sesame seeds and figs in the summer sun; and rolling out delicate dough for date and walnut cookies are slowly fading.

Chefs here are determined to celebrate and preserve the cooking of their ancestors. Ms. Oliveira's new dessert, scented with coffee and orange, was inspired by the Tunisian habit of softening the bitter edge of a cup of dark coffee with a few drops of flower water.

Israel is another place where the gastronomic heritage of places like Libya and Yemen, Iran and Syria have been preserved, and today it serves as a sort of ark for Middle Eastern food. Even as Jews have left those countries for Israel, they have continued to cook in the style of their ancestors: with chickpeas and sesame, lamb and allspice, pomegranates and apricots. Modern staples there include amba, a strong mango pickle from Iraq; zhug, a fresh chile sauce from Yemen; and spice pastes like harissa and charmoula from North Africa, ancestral home of the Mizrahi Jews, who have strongly influenced modern Israeli cooking.

Ms. Admony, of Bar Bolonat, grew up in Israel; her mother's family is from Iran, her father's from Yemen, and her cooking crisscrosses regional lines of nation and religion.

What is easy for spices has proved difficult for people. And the troubles of

the Middle East have had repercussions for chefs here, including a reluctance among many to draw attention to their background.

Although Ms. Bishara proudly calls herself a Palestinian-American, she rarely uses the word Palestine in her book. Others avoid the term Middle Eastern, identifying their food as Arabian, Mediterranean, Sephardic or Moorish. Mr. Mattos, of Estela, said he changed the name of a flatbread on the menu: “matzo” became “cracker” after friends convinced him that the word invited controversy.

But Mr. Lev Sercarz, the spice merchant, is eager to trumpet his Middle Eastern heritage from the rooftops.

“I am a proud ambassador of the Middle East, and I am not quiet about it,” he said. “I’m proud of the food, and I’m proud of the hospitality.

“When I’m back there, we are always doing business over coffee and something to eat. In New York, you could die of thirst in a meeting before someone offered you a glass of water.”

Recipes: **Avocado Fattoush With Mint Vinaigrette | Brussels Sprouts With Pomegranate-Tahini Sauce**

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