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Behind the Swinging Door

Along With Stories, a Dish From Nazareth

By NANCY HARMON JENKINS

THE name Rawia in Arabic means storyteller. When Rawia Bishara, a Brooklyn chef and restaurateur, talks about food, she tells stories, complete with elaborate gestures as she widens or narrows her striking eyes. There are stories about her mother; about her childhood in Nazareth, the Arab town in northern Israel where she was born; and about the traditional food ways of Palestinian cooks and households.

"They all knew exactly where their flour came from," she said of her neighbors, "and who made the finest cracked wheat burghul. They always got the best olive oil" — originally from her grandparents' groves, later, after government land confiscations, from whoever had the region's famously lush green oil to sell.

"Back then we even made our soap from olive oil," she added, "and in late summer all the rooftops were covered with tomatoes and figs cut in pieces, and tobacco and herbs like mint and zaatar put out to dry."

To this day, the olive oil she uses at Tanoreen, her delightful small restaurant in Bay Ridge, comes from the West Bank, imported by a Chicago company, and her secret spice mixture, which she calls the foundation of her cooking, is roasted and ground for her back home in Nazareth.

The last time she was there she sent back about 55 pounds of it, she said. "When I use it with chicken, I might add a little more cumin," she continued. "When I use it with lamb, a little more coriander. But I always begin with my spices."

So what are they, exactly? (Of course, I won't get an answer, exactly.)

Mrs. Bishara sprinkled the dark, rusty-brown mix into my palm. I sniffed cautiously, recognizing allspice and a hint of cloves.

"Yes," she said, "and a little cinnamon, a little coriander, some cumin, some nutmeg. Dried ginger." She paused, then said: "Rosebuds, too." Closing my eyes, I breathed the complex aromas of a Middle Eastern souk, very far from the Third Avenue approach to the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge.

Mrs. Bishara left Nazareth 32 years ago to come to the United States as a young bride. Together with her husband she worked many jobs, running supermarkets, selling insurance, mothering her two children, taking classes at Hunter College, and for three years presiding over the Union of Palestinian Women's Associations in America, an organization that disbanded voluntarily after the 1993 Oslo agreement.

Seven years ago, following a long-cherished dream, she opened Tanoreen (the name comes from a song by the beloved Lebanese singer Fayrouz).

"I always wanted to do it, and people always told me how difficult it is," she said.

But she looks to her late mother as a role model. "She was a school teacher with five kids to care for, but she was always cooking," Mrs. Bishara recalled. "When people had weddings, when they had funerals, they called my mother to make something, like stuffed artichokes or mousakhan."

Mousakhan is the quintessential Palestinian dish, a savory, sumptuous banquet feast of whole chickens oven-roasted atop freshly baked Arab flatbread with lots of sweet onions and tart, deep-red sumac. Mrs. Bishara does a simplified version at Tanoreen, and she will do the real thing if it is ordered in advance.

Mousakhan apart, Palestinian cooking shares a lot with Jordanian and Lebanese cuisines, as well as with modern Israeli food. The use of exotic spices like cumin, sumac and dried rosebuds is balanced by an emphasis on sweetly pungent green herbs like parsley and cilantro, while the richness of olive oil, roasted almonds and pine nuts is offset by the prominence of flawlessly fresh vegetables and the bright tang of lemon.

A good example is musaqa, a vegetarian dish that Mrs. Bishara made for me. (If you hear the echo of Greek moussaka, you have heard correctly.) Musaqa, layers of eggplant, zucchini and lamb, baked in an oven, is ubiquitous from the Sea of Marmara to the Gulf of Aqaba. But in this Lenten version the meat and dairy products are set aside in favor of a luscious mix of caramelized onions, toasted nuts, cilantro and fresh lemon juice.

Ingredients like these, along with bunches of fresh mint and parsley, are always on hand in Mrs. Bishara's kitchen. They are tossed into a sauce or stuffing for an eggplant, mixed into a pilaf called shairiyah, which includes toasted vermicelli noodles, or, as in musaqa, layered between slices of potato, eggplant and Arab squash (kousa, which is increasingly available in farmers' markets and produce stalls, although zucchini can be substituted).

It is a complicated dish, but much of it can be prepared well in advance, and the rewards are great.

"You see," Mrs. Bishara said, talking about her homeland cuisine as she strewed caramelized onions over the eggplant, "it's not just hummus and kebab."