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Elizabeth D. Herman for Al Jazeera America

The well-spiced life of Rawia Bis

by Katherine Lanpher (</profiles//katherine-lanpher.html>)

-  [@kathlanpher](http://www.twitter.com/kathlanpher) (<http://www.twitter.com/kathlanpher>) | February 1,

In "Olives, Lemons and Za'atar" the story of how the food of a Nazareth childhood became d

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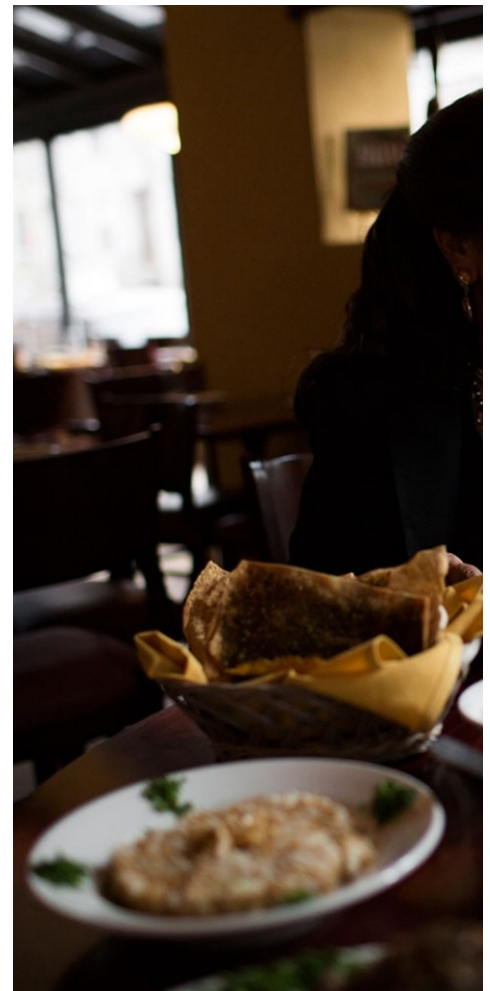
1. Home cooking in the Michelin guide

Someone had put the pan with the chicken stock too close to the live grill, so when Rawia Bishara picked it up, she noted calmly to the observers in the kitchen of her restaurant, Tanoreen: "I've burned my hand."

She was making freekeh with chicken — the former the latest grain to walk down the superfood runway, smoked green wheat berries that had already been roasting in the pan with Bishara's signature mix of spices, in this case heaping spoonfuls of allspice, cumin, black pepper, nutmeg and cardamom. The chicken was there as well, and the stock would first come to a boil and then simmer, so the grains could absorb the moisture.

Bishara calls her food "home cooking," but it's more than that. It's a distillation of her childhood in Nazareth, a call back to a time when her family harvested their own olives, when her parents were alive and summers and harvest times were spent in her parents' two ancestral villages in Galilee in northern Israel. Back then, Bishara could count on the colorful sight of fruits and vegetables drying on the roofs of the village homes, of the community baking together and the family gatherings centered on food and talk and maybe a little arak, the anise-flavored aperitif mixed with water.

It's home cooking, but it's also food that won the Bib Gourmand (<http://www.michelintravel.com/michelin-selections/what-are-bib-gourmands/>) from the Michelin guide (<http://www.viamichelin.com/web/Restaurant/Brooklyn-11209-Tanoreen-270956-41102>), a star



A rare moment of repose for the f

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/24/dining/reviews/24rest.html?pagewanted=all>) from The New York Times and a lofty ranking in the Zagat guide (<http://www.zagat.com/r/tanoreen-new-york>). The New Yorker (http://www.newyorker.com/arts/reviews/tables/2010/07/05/100705gota_GOAT_tables_stirl) has written about her place on a corner of an avenue of small businesses in Bay Ridge, a neighborhood in the far reaches of the borough of Brooklyn (it means something that people would take a taxi that far). And people come from farther away than Manhattan to eat her food: She has had guests from Scandinavia, the rest of Europe and South America. A couple from Ohio are practically regulars. A veteran of the war in Afghanistan showed up one day; he had read the New Yorker piece.

Her food has been called "narcotic," but now there's relief for some of the far-flung junkies. Her first cookbook, "Olives, Lemons and Za'atar," has a publication day of Feb. 14, the same day she'll make her annual only-on-Valentine's-Day chocolate-raspberry cake with Grand Marnier-maple sauce.

So she got burned. Big deal.

"We've been booked for weeks," she said.





awia Bishara, owner and chef at Tanoreen Restaurant, in her kitchen. Elizabeth D. Herman for Al Jazeera America

2. Mother cooks best

While Tanoreen (<http://www.tanoreen.com/>) is named after a village purportedly so beautiful that the Lebanese singer Fairuz (<http://fairuziat.com/fairouz/tribute/fb.html>) sang an ode to it, the restaurant and Bishara's cooking are really an ode to her mother, Monira, a schoolteacher who raised five children with her husband, Anton. The cookbook is dedicated to the two of them.

"They were best friends," Bishara said, noting that her father would care and cook for the family on the Saturdays her mother taught school, something that even wives in this century would note with gratitude.

"My mother was the best cook. Really, the best," she said when recalling the smells and memories of that home in Nazareth. "We never really got the chance to appreciate her, to do something for her. I promised myself if I ever do something with food, it will be in her memory."

In 1998, with her two children established in their own lives, Bishara set up a little storefront with a showcase of dishes and seven tables. The idea was that people would select food and either eat it there or get it to go. And then she started offering one special each day.

"Then it became 10 specials," she remembered with satisfaction. "And we had a line around the corner."

So what is this home cooking? There is hummus, of course, and lamb and kafta and kibbeh. But there are also dishes she saw only her mother make in Nazareth: artichokes stuffed with meat and pine nuts; generous helpings of cilantro on some dishes, when most people only used coriander, the seed; and a cake called harisa (pronounced similarly to the North African chili paste), with her mother's touch of coconut.

Bishara remembers waking up to the smell of that cake. And then she made sure she did the same for her two children: Jumana, who manages the restaurant and helped with the recipes for the cookbook, and Tarek, who coaxed stories out of his mother for the chapter introductions.

3. Food, love & politics

Elizabeth D. Herman for Al Jazeera America

It's hard to talk about Palestine, home cooking and childhood memories of a divided land — not to mention the unique position of Arab Israelis in their country — without wanting to talk about politics.

Certainly, her two brothers can address the subject. Azmi Bishara, a controversial former member of the Knesset in Israel and now a citizen of Qatar, is a writer and intellectual, while Marwan Bishara (<http://www.aljazeera.com/profile/marwan-bishara.html>) (full disclosure) is a senior political analyst for Al Jazeera English.

“There are no politics in my food,” Rawia Bishara said flatly when asked. “There is love in my food. No politics at all.”

Darra Goldstein (<http://darragoldstein.com/>), the founder of the online food and culture journal *Gastronomica* (<http://www.gastronomica.org/>), has worked with the Council of Europe (<http://hub.coe.int/>) on using food as a way to bridge the differences between Palestinians and Israelis.

"I do think food has a power to heal," she said, "but at the same time it can become a source of divisiveness."

But the hold that food can have on a diaspora is quite extraordinary, she added.

"A native language will be lost before the native food ways are lost," she said.

Noted food writer and cookbook author Joan Nathan (<http://joannathan.com/>) has eaten at Tanoreen and speaks of it fondly.

"Food is not just food — it's a place," she said. "The food becomes memory, and she's bringing that memory to the U.S. "

She paused, with what sounded like pangs of food longing: "She's such a good cook."

Perhaps that's because of her culinary theory, which Rawia Bishara repeated: "The only way to cook is with love."

She unspooled her theory. If you are cooking for someone and you love him or her, then you remember whether your love likes cilantro. And if your sweetheart does not, then you cook with parsley instead. Love guides the hand that stirs the pot, chops the herbs, sears the meat and sprinkles the almonds.

"I am not kidding about cooking with love," she said, and soon after, a server brought a plate with a braised lamb shank to the table where she sat.

"This is very popular," she said, pointing to the plate. "Food is culture. And I am spreading my culture."

4. The well-coiffed cook

Elizabeth D. Herman for Al Jazeera America

The notion of home cooking, from anyone's homeland or childhood, does suggest a whiff of the quotidian. But there is nothing everyday about the vision Bishara presented in front of her stovetop, her hair pulled back in immaculate curls, a black and gold tunic subtly covered by a black apron underneath her suit jacket, three gold chains draped around her neck, gold dangling from her ears and wrists, with nails painted gold and a ring on her left hand with a stone the size of a quail egg.

"I'm always here," she said with a "that's the way it is" shrug, "so I wear my jewelry."

She takes only one day off each week and cooks at the restaurant every day she is there.

"Yes, I still actually cook," she said. "Every day. Anyone who thinks the owner of a restaurant doesn't have to cook is going to ruin his business. Your hands are supposed to be in your kitchen all the time."

The first day Bishara arrived in New York, her husband took her to the apartment he had shared with other friends from their homeland. She opened the door, she said, and all she saw were empty tuna cans on the floor. Tin after empty tin of canned tuna.

She asked: "What are you doing?"

The men, she explained, had been working long days and coming home to simple meals of canned tuna and onions before falling into bed. Now, with a woman in the house, they were hoping for better fare.

"We're saying goodbye to the tuna," they told her.

Luckily, Bishara had come to the U.S. with kitchen gifts packed by her mother, items she would need to cook in the manner of the home she had grown up in: packets of her mother's ground spice mix; of Za'atar, the wild thyme mixed with sumac, toasted sesame seeds and salt; homemade cheeses packed in jars of olive oil; and grains like freekeh.

Bishara went to her first supermarket — "I got lost because everything is in cans and boxes and I'm not used to that" — and eventually managed to make them a meal: stuffed artichokes.

"There is nothing better," she said, "than feeding hungry people."

Freekeh Bel Lahmeh

Freekeh is the latest grain to gain popularity. While this recipe calls for lamb, you can easily make it with chicken or do a vegetarian version. [Click on the photo to get the recipe.](#)



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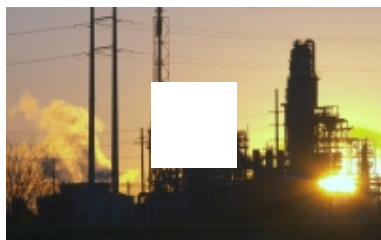
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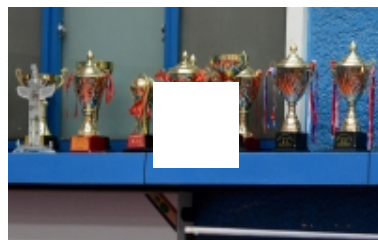
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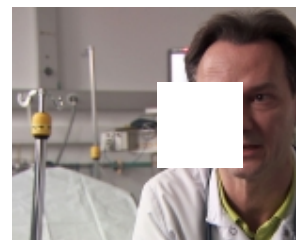
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