

Middle Eastern magic

By Fiona Ralph

Renowned chef Rawia Bishara talks family, flatbread and far-flung influences with Fiona Ralph.



Renowned chef, Rawia Bishara. Photo / Peter Cassidy.

Rawia Bishara has taken her mother's homestyle - yet far from traditional - Middle Eastern cooking to the world, through her New York restaurant Tanoreen, her hugely popular cooking classes and now her first cookbook, *Olives, Lemons & Za'atar*.

The Palestinian-Arab chef famously blends the food of her youth - which was spent in Nazareth, Galilee - with Mediterranean-infused flavours gathered from trips to Spain and forages around New York's multicultural neighbourhoods, in particular that of her home in Bay Ridge, an old Italian settlement in Brooklyn.

She opened Tanoreen in 1998 with a simple 12-table storefront; demand for her authentic, soulful cooking necessitated a shift 10 years later to a 40-50 table site.

Numerous accolades followed, including being named in the 100 Best New York Restaurants (*Time Out New York*, 2012) and Top 5 Restaurants in Brooklyn (*New York Post*, 2010). I asked what it is that customers and critics love so much about her cooking. "That's the key word.

I honestly and truly love cooking and cook with love," she says. "I really put my soul into it. I cook for my customers like I cook for my family. And honestly, people taste it in the food. You'd be surprised how many times customers say to me, 'this tastes like my mother's food', or my favourite, 'this tastes like my grandmother's food'."

Years before sustainable and organic were buzzwords, Bishara's grandmother and mother were pressing their own olive oils, drying fruits and making goat's cheese, instilling the young Bishara with a potent love of food.

Remaining true to her name (Rawia is Arabic for storyteller), her first cookbook brings these stories to life through beautiful images, illustrative anecdotes and, most importantly, food that longs to be cooked.



Olives, Lemons & Za'atar by Rawia Bishara. Photo / Peter Cassidy.

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Paella-style sayadiyya (a traditional Middle Eastern fisherman's dish), sweet mamool walnut cookies, artichokes stuffed with meat and pine nuts, abundant mezze platters, and Bishara's favourite, the classic tabbouleh, "because it reminds me so much of the wonderful times of my childhood hiking with my family and friends in Nazareth".

Now based in Brooklyn with "beloved" husband of 40 years, Wafa, Bishara doesn't get back to Nazareth as often as she'd like, working six-day weeks at Tanoreen, but continues to surround herself with family, working alongside her daughter and son, and hosting a steady stream of relatives in her home, leading her son to nickname it the "Bishara hotel".

With her cookbook including recipes such as her sister-in-law's flatbread - or khubz bil filfil - and an aubergine stack designed to teach her son to like the unusual vegetable, you can see the familial-food connection is still very much alive. She talks to us about her family, her new book and what she gets up to on her rare days off.

Tell us about growing up in Nazareth. Is this where your love of cooking began? Interestingly, my mother did not allow us to cook when we were kids. My siblings and I were served delicious meals every night by a foodie's foodie in every aspect of that word.

My parents were extremely generous; there were always dinner guests. It was during this period I began to comprehend the true meaning of "food is love".

You are known for reinventing traditional Middle Eastern food - how do you do this?

I honestly just have my own tastes - thank God, people enjoy my taste in food. I don't believe cooking is something rigid, there is room for interpretation, creativity and inspiration. I experiment with my dishes. It's fun.



Olives, Lemons & Za'atar by Rawia Bishara. Photo / Peter Cassidy.

How has travel and living abroad influenced your traditional recipes?

I left my country for the first time at the age of 19, and after travelling and settling down in NYC, I found it most surprising that many of the Mediterranean foods I was tasting (Italian, Spanish, Greek etc) had many of the same ingredients as Middle Eastern cooking, but with different methods, techniques and maybe a few spices.

But the base was the same - lots of olive oil, garlic, tomatoes. It actually seemed quite organic to incorporate Mediterranean influences.

What motivated you to open Tanoreen?

Many things conspired to create the perfect storm. Firstly I loved to cook and have dinner parties almost nightly at home, then my kids left for college and I wanted to take my destiny into my own hands.

Also, I honestly felt that Middle Eastern food here in the US generally was gravely underestimated and was relegated to falafel, hummus and shish kabobs. In reality the food we grew up with had so much more character, so many flavour notes ... I wanted people to taste that food. And you can have hummus on the side.

What was the inspiration behind Olives, Lemons & Za'atar?

The influence behind my book was wanting to share. The response to the food was so profound at the restaurant that I wanted people to be able to make these recipes, like somewhere in New Zealand where I don't own a restaurant. Additionally, to honour my mother and her creativity, and continue my food tradition for my children.



Olives, Lemons & Za'atar by Rawia Bishara. Photo / Peter Cassidy.

Do you have any mentors?

My father. He was a great and kind man, and before I left home at 19, he was my best friend. He was extremely intellectual, spiritual and well grounded. He taught me about the world before I saw it. It was a formative connection for me.

What does an average day for you entail?

Work. Work. Work and work some more. Because I really enjoy what I do.

Aside from cooking, what hobbies do you have?

Movies on cold nights with warm popcorn, friends and family; I read constantly and love to play cards; when I'm in a bad mood, I love to shop.

What do you like to eat in your down time?

Simple things such as salads, greens, soup. I don't cook at home; when my son visits from LA he cooks for us all. Naughty indulgence is dark chocolate all the way. If I'm eating out, I enjoy either Thai or Italian. To be honest, I don't eat out as much I would like, I am at Tanoreen six nights a week. And on my seventh day, I prefer to rest and relax.



Olives, Lemons & Za'atar by Rawia Bishara. Photo / Peter Cassidy.

Do you have a dream dining destination?

The Italian countryside.

What ingredients and cooking utensils can you not live without?

Olive oil, lemon, garlic and my Tanoreen spices, which took me seven years to get exactly how I wanted them. I can only use a big chef knife and my tongs.

• *Olives, Lemons & Za'atar: The Best Middle Eastern Home Cooking* by Rawia Bishara, with photography by Peter Cassidy (\$49.99, Kyle Books, distributed by New Holland).

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