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FROM THE LEMPert REPORT



from our newsletter, broadcast on
Monday July 25, 2011

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In the Kitchen with Chef Joumana Accad

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IN THE KITCHEN

Chef Joumana Accad educates consumers about Lebanese cooking customs. Her popular www.TasteOfBeirut.com blog explores Lebanese cuisine with a focus on providing practical tips for creating exotic and healthy dishes for the home cook. Born in Beirut, Lebanon, Accad traveled to Paris at the age of 17 to finish her formal education. She eventually settled in Dallas, studied to be a pastry chef, and began teaching Middle Eastern cooking at Whole Foods Markets. Her blog garners close to 50,000 visitors a month. We talked to Accad about the joy of reconstructing traditional Lebanese dishes to fit the needs of a modern palate.

What is the main focus of your cooking?

In my cooking, I strive to incorporate the Lebanese flavors that are part of my heritage and create easy, healthy and delicious meals. Traditional dishes are streamlined to both cut down on the time and steps required and to preserve the flavor. I am perpetuating what I learned from my grandmother; traditional cooking which uses fresh and seasonal ingredients but eliminating as much as possible the labor-intensive aspect of that type of cuisine.

Is there a particular nutritional focus of your menus?

Lebanese cuisine epitomizes the Mediterranean diet, touted as the healthiest diet in the world; my focus is on staying true to the spirit of this cuisine, which has an underlying health component. When one studies Lebanese cuisine, one realizes that health is foremost in the creation of a dish. For example, in mujaddara, a rice and lentil porridge, rice is believed to contain a starch, which helps the body absorb the iron present in the lentils. Yogurt, for example, is consumed daily in the Lebanese home and was believed to help digestion. Yogurt cheese, made at home for breakfast with olives and fresh tomatoes and herbs, in a stew with rice or in a salad for lunch or dinner, is customary. Herbs are also used to make teas that help with certain conditions.



Chef Joumana Accad

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In fact, the health concerns of the Lebanese were the main focus and drive of their diet. Local proverbs even talk about these concerns. Two proverbs in particular come to mind: "lentils are the nails holding one's ankles," which is a reference to the iron and protein in lentils, and "if you visit a new village, make sure to eat their onions," a belief that onions, having antiseptic properties, would help a person's immunity when changing their environment.

What is your relationship with local farmers?

I try to support local farmers as much as possible. I have met pecan and berry growers as well as a goat cheese producer and have sourced my food there as well as through the Dallas and Fort Worth farmer's markets which are producer-driven markets and represent farmers in the area. Through word of mouth, I have discovered small farmers (for example, one couple raising grass-fed lamb) and support these folks first and foremost.

Are you incorporating locally grown food into your dishes? How?

The Dallas area where I live offers a plethora of locally produced foods; Paula Lambert and her Mozzarella Cheese Company is a reliable source of excellent cheeses used daily in the Lebanese kitchen, such as her feta, mozzarella or fresh ricotta which is similar to the Lebanese *areesh*. I belong to a local CSA and have met many small farmers who grow vegetables used in Lebanese cooking such as Armenian cucumbers and baby eggplants. I also patronize farmer's markets such as the CowTown Market, which only sells food raised directly from producers within a 150-mile radius. I have picked pecans and berries in small farms close to my home and often substitute Texas pecans for the pine nuts that are consumed in Lebanon but only available imported from China or Turkey.

What steps do you take toward conservation in your meal planning?

Growing up in Lebanon, a beautiful country with scant natural resources, conservation in food is weaved into the ancestral culinary traditions; people learn to conserve because the future is always uncertain. Every traditional house has a vegetable garden and grapevines; in our home in the Chouf mountains, we press our olives for oil, we also make olive oil soap and verjuice from some of the grapes. Grape molasses is made as well at the village press, rose water is distilled from the rose bushes, and onions are dried in the sun and braided to last for up to a year in perfect condition. Living in the U.S., I recycle and compost as much as I can. In addition, I do not waste anything I cook with; when making stuffed greens, I use the stalks to make a traditional salad with tahini sauce; I use radish tops for pesto and soup and making pasta. If I make carrot purée, I incorporate carrot tops. Every bit of food is utilized and enjoyed in one form or another.

What are the major concerns today of your readers at TasteofBeirut.com when it comes to making Mediterranean meals at home? And how are you addressing them?

The overwhelming concern is sourcing the ingredients and the spices used in this type of cooking. The other is lack of time as most traditional recipes require a lot of steps. I have addressed the first concern by offering easy solutions: A recipe that

calls for fresh grape leaves can be made with the same delicious results with fresh swiss chard leaves or collard greens, which are both more easily available. I also provide substitutions: A spice like sumac for example is used to give a sour, lemony taste to a dish and was used traditionally when lemons were not in season. Someone who has trouble getting the sumac in a recipe can use lemon instead. I have also tried to find U.S.-based producers of Middle-Eastern foods; Allen Hill Farm in New York State produces an apple cider molasses based on a traditional pioneer recipe; this is identical to the apple molasses made in the Chouf mountains in Lebanon and therefore can be used for traditional Lebanese recipes.

I have developed methods to cut down considerably on the amount of time required to prepare traditional dishes; for example, by crumpling a sheet of phyllo when making a tray of baklava, one can make baklava from start to finish in 10 minutes, without sacrificing taste. I have included videos to show these techniques. A traditional meat pie called *sfeeha*, which normally takes hours to make (the dough has to be prepared from scratch and the meat paste prepared), is transformed into *sfeeha on pita*. The meat paste is combined in minutes in the food processor, slathered on a pita bread and baked in the oven for seven minutes. Here again, the flavor is preserved but the preparation time is significantly reduced.

Finally, I have provided recipes on how to make some of these traditional Lebanese foods in a home kitchen, such as grape molasses, which was used almost exclusively to sweeten food before the widespread distribution of white refined sugar and is still produced throughout Lebanon in communal village presses.

How important is sustainability?

Sustainability is extremely important. I have seen the irreversible damages to the environment in Lebanon caused by some folks whose only concern was greed and personal gain. This is unfortunately an ongoing problem. The hookah parlors, which have become so popular, get their charcoal from Lebanon where people are effectively depleting entire forests for their own profit. In the Mediterranean alongside the Lebanese coastline, fishermen have used dynamite and compressor fishing for decades. As a result, the natural habitat today is significantly altered and dozens of fish species are either extinct or dangerously threatened, such as the red mullet and seabass that used to crown Lebanese tables. I have seen in Lebanon entire mountains destroyed by people using dynamite to dig up rocks in quarries in order to build huge multi-storied buildings, not to mention that cedars, which used to cover the mountains, are now almost completely gone. We must carefully weigh the benefits of our current lifestyle against the possible damages it can have on future generations and the earth as a whole.



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