



Dining for Women

Making Connections
December 2006
Iraq

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As a crossroad for several eastern and western cultures, Iraq had the ingredients for a multiracial society. Nowhere this pluralistic culture is more evident than in the little street in Baghdad where I grew up. It was a middle-class neighborhood, with eucalyptus trees lining both sides of the street, and in the springtime the whole neighborhood would be infused with the intoxicating aroma of the blossoms of citrus trees planted all along the fences. Those shady places were like magnets for the neighborhood kids, where we used to play.... As lunchtime approached, the time for the main meal of the day, we started playing our guessing game as the pleasant and most welcome aromas of food sneaked out of the simmering pots, and meandered along our street. We would sniff those floating aromas and guess whose mom is cooking what for that day. Although the dominant aroma would be that of stew and rice, cooked practically everyday, the guessing would still be intriguing for there were so many kinds of stews to guess at. And almost always there would be a single distinctive aroma of a special dish, and we knew that one of us would soon be called by his or her mom to distribute samplings of that dish for the neighbors. As the custom had always been, it was not fit to return the neighbor's dish empty, so it would be returned with a comparable dish that is equally if not more delicious. Thus our guessing game was kept alive by this exchange of hospitality, and from those little dishes coming and going we came to learn a lot about people coming from all walks of life, and of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Such diversity was not a unique situation in the city of Baghdad, which across the centuries became a melting pot of sorts for all these groups.

--Nawal Nasrallah

Nawal Nasrallah's childhood memory is especially poignant these days as we hear so much of the rampant sectarian violence—of civil war—in Iraq. We'll hear more from Nawal later about her attempt to preserve not only her memories of Iraq but also the culinary heritage of those mothers of whom she speaks so lovingly.

While the general level of violence in Iraq continues to dominate the news, there is another story of terror that is only beginning to gain attention from the media. It's a story that is emerging from many of those same kitchens of which Nawal speaks, a story about mothers and daughters who are increasingly afraid to leave their homes. It's the story of "the other side of war," to use the phrase of Iraqi-born Zainab Salbi (see *MC October*).

Between the time of Nawal's childhood and the Hussein regime (1979-2003), Iraq experienced enormous progress in educational and employment opportunities for women and social services that met the needs of women and children. Equal rights for women became part its constitution and women actually received equitable pay for their work. They made up half of the workforce, forty percent of the physicians.

During the last two decades of the 20th century, however, these gains began to slip away. Much has been written of the general disregard and hostility toward human rights and the erosion of society that took place in Iraq, but there were specific consequences for women. The situation worsened after the Gulf War (1990-1), when conservative religious leaders became allied to the Iraqi government and insisted on restrictions on women that reflected their reading of Islamic teaching. At the same time, sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations, which lasted for 13 years, were devastating to the economy, social services, and education. They virtually destroyed (or ran out of the country) large portions of the well-educated professional and middle classes and made life for the poor even more miserable. But they had particularly devastating effects on women and children. Women were banned from certain jobs; men were given preference for most others. Widows of the war tried to raise children without access to employment. Families that could not afford to send all their children to school kept the girls at home. Pre-natal care became rare as malnutrition and anemia in women of child-bearing years grew; infant mortality became all too common. And at the same time, women increasingly became targets of violence —by those seeking monetary gain, by religious zealots, by rival political factions; by domestic and foreign military forces. Even by their own families: The U.N. estimates that between 1991 and 2001, 4000 women and girls were victims of “honor killings” (that usually involve family members).

Since the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraqi women have seen little if any improvement in their situation. All the factors that brought such hardship and danger still persist in one way or another. Economic sanctions, for example, have eased, but economic opportunity for most women has not improved. Some factors have been exacerbated—many fear beyond control. Particularly, the restrictions imposed on women by conservative religious influence on governance and society are becoming increasingly severe. This is most visible in the dress restrictions and limitations on freedom of movement. Recent reports indicate that the *hijab* (headcovering, usually a scarf) has become necessary; in some areas women must wear even more restrictive covering in order to protect themselves from reproach and violence. (For more on the concept of “covering” or *purdah*, see **MC July: Pakistan**.) Now, with a new constitution that upholds *Sharia* (Islamic Law), there is much worry about its implementation regarding women, especially related to inheritance, divorce, and work. Moderate Muslims and scholars of Islam are quick to underline that Islamic influence does not have to mean the end of women's rights. (Indeed many argue that Islam properly interpreted protects them.) Yet it is the conservative parties that seem most likely to hold sway.

While the U.S. used the rhetoric of women's liberation both before and during the Iraqi invasion to justify its actions, it has failed, according to observers on both sides of the political aisle, to follow through in some very important ways. While the U.S. has allocated millions of dollars for the training and education of Iraqi women and pledged to promote women's leadership in the new government, it compromised with conservative religious parties that were known to favor the imposition of more restrictive laws related

to women. Paul Bremer, when top U.S. official in Iraq, stopped the most extreme measures that conservatives attempted to introduce into family law; however, moderate Iraqis worry that when the U.S. is gone, more radical implementations of Sharia will follow by the same parties. The U.S. has also been unable to stem the rampant violence against women. Most tragically and shamefully, it has even been unable to prevent violence perpetrated on Iraqi women by its own personnel. While the focus of the Abu Ghraib investigations was on the torture, beating, and rape of male prisoners, human rights agencies have evidence of similar treatment of women prisoners. (Because of the stigma of rape and potential for further violence from family members who perceive a raped woman as an inflictor of shame on the family, it is very difficult to get women victims to discuss their abuse.) Just last spring, some U.S. soldiers were accused of a horrible crime, the rape and murder of a young girl, and subsequently, her family members. (Some of the accused have pled guilty, but the case is still in process).

Reports by humanitarian agencies in the past year and a half have drawn an alarming picture of the increasing threat of violence against women, while the established media has only begun to take interest in the past few months. Peter Beaumont, writing for *The Observer* in October, summarizes the situation: "Iraq's women are living with a fear that is increasing in line with the number dying violently every month. They die for being a member of the wrong sect and for helping their fellow women. (Many women activists have been victims or threatened.) They die for doing jobs that the (religious) militants have decreed that they cannot do: for working in hospitals and ministries and universities. They are murdered, too, because they are the softest targets for Iraq's criminal gangs." Council Representative Aida Ussayaran puts it more simply: "This is the worst time ever in Iraqi women's lives."

Understanding the level of violence against women is not simple, however. Power, control, greed, religious fervor, male honor, fear, boredom, rage, revenge are among the motivations of its perpetrators, who are sometimes the very people charged to protect potential victims. Exposing the violence and stopping it are not simple either. But it does begin with paying attention—drawing attention—to it. The Madre/OWFI-sponsored Underground Railroad, which DFW is supporting this month, has the doubly difficult task of shedding light on honor killing while often literally working in the dark to protect its potential victims. (Please read more about honor killing in our Fact Sheet.)

While children played in the streets of Nawal Nasrallah's neighborhood of peaceful coexistence, women cooked up the human kindness that nourished it. For such peaceful coexistence ever to be realized in the "new Iraq," women are needed to nourish that same kindness in many ways and places—still in their kitchens perhaps, but not restricted to them. And especially, not restricted by the threat of violence.

Recommended Books

Two novels by Iraqi women have been translated recently for English readers. These come from women who live outside Iraq but remain actively engaged with their homeland. Haifa Zangana's *Women on a Journey* (University of Texas Press, 2005) tells the stories of five Iraqi women exiles trying to make sense of their pasts. From the press release: "Weaving between the women's memories of Iraq—nostalgic and nightmarish—and their lives as exiles in London, Zangana's novel gives voice to the richness and complexity of Iraqi women's experiences. Through their stories, the novel represents a

powerful critique of the violence done to ordinary people by those who hold power both in Iraq and in the West.” *Naphtalene* is a coming-of-age story about a young girl and the women around her in 1950s Baghdad. Written in 1986 in Arabic, it is the first novel by an Iraqi woman to be published in the United States. Author Alia Mamdouh is a recipient of the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Arabic Literature. Poet Choman Hardi has written three books of poetry in her native Kurdish. *Life for Us* is her first collection in English. She fled Iraq with her family when the Iraqi government used chemical weapons against the Kurds. Much of her work gives voice to the oppression of her people. You can read one of her poems at http://rahapen.org/Options_Poetry_choman2.htm.

While we encourage you as always to dip into the creative literature of women from the countries we study, we feature two new nonfiction works by women who have made important contributions that can help us understand what is happening in Iraq now. Anyone who cares—and we all should—should read these soon. Canadian journalist **Hadani Ditmars** has written an informative and moving book based on her six assignment trips to Iraq over the past decade: *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone* (Olive Branch Press, 2006). Few journalists have considered the particular issues that face women in Iraq today. Ditmars was the first in her highly acclaimed article on Iraqi women, written for *Ms Magazine* in 2001. Her *New York Times* series on the humanitarian crisis in Iraq under U.N. sanctions opened the eyes of many to the plight of Iraqis oppressed by international intervention as well as their own government. *Dancing in the No-Fly Zone* revisits these themes after the 2003 invasion. Ditmars presents not only the harsh realities but also the attempts of Iraqis from many walks of life to find joy, create art, and retain human dignity as she visits music performances, beauty shops, churches and mosques; even a wedding (a rare event in Iraq these days, she tells us).

Our other featured work is indeed a work in progress. “**Riverbend**” is the pseudonym for a twenty-something woman who lives in Baghdad with her family. Since 2003, her blog has provided a window inside Iraq that gives us a rare view at how “normal” Iraqis are trying to go on with life in midst of chaos. Most of her entries have been edited and published in two volumes, *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (which contains an excellent introduction on Iraq by journalist James Ridgeway) and *Baghdad Burning II* (both from Feminist Press, 2005 and 2006). She continues to blog at <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>. You’ll see some excerpts from the blog below; I think you’ll want to read more.

Also Recommended: On December 7, the NPR program *Speaking of Faith* focuses on Muslim Women, their realities, and outside perceptions. Leila Ahmed, Professor at Harvard Divinity School and one of world’s foremost scholars on women and Islam, is featured. The broadcast is entitled, “Muslim Women and Other Misunderstandings.” You can listen to the audio recording or read the full transcript after the 7th at <http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/>.

Dining With Women

Nawal Nasrallah was a literature professor in Iraq. She and her family left during the Gulf War and now live in Boston. But she didn’t want to—she couldn’t—leave her culture behind. As her native land was being torn apart by oppressive regime, war, and

sanctions, she set to work preserving one its most ancient and venerable aspects, its culinary tradition.

As it turns out, one of Iraq's most precious legacies had preceded Nawal to New England. Cuneiform tablets from Babylonia, dating from 1700 B.C.E., had been acquired by Yale University in 1933. Among other things, they contained what scholars believe to be the oldest recipes in the world (representing a cuisine that goes back almost 4000 years.) One of the tablets alone contains twenty-five different recipes for stew—probably a culinary innovation of the culture at the time, more complex than simply cooking meat over a fire.

Nawal has studied these and other ancient Mesopotamian culinary texts. She's also studied the long and interesting history of the region's cuisine that followed. Medieval Baghdad, especially, had a sophisticated cuisine. Its influence in highly spiced stews, sweet and sour dishes, various types of stuffed foods and breads, and intricate pastries has endured in modern middle eastern cooking, passed down from mothers to daughters in their kitchens as well in old cooking manuscripts preserved in libraries.

Nawal wanted to keep these culinary traditions alive for herself and for other refugees as a way of keeping the Iraq she had known and loved alive. Her book, *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of Iraqi Cuisine* (Authorhouse 2003) was published the same year that war returned to Iraq, that ancient treasures were looted from Iraq's libraries and museums. "Some might think that this is not the right time to write about food," she admitted, "but as a wife, a mother, a woman, and human being, I find in food and in memories of food my refuge, my comfort and consolation."

What Nawal has created is a testimony to Iraqi culture, an informative and interesting history, and a very usable cookbook. While she documents historical recipes, she also shows the process of adaptation and continues it by creating do-able recipes based in authenticity but adapted for American kitchens. And further, this ancient cuisine turns out to be not only do-able and delicious but also healthy. It's largely based on grains like bulgur, beans, and vegetables. Of course there is the use of meat, especially lamb (for which she often substitutes beef here), and there are those great pastries. This book is the one to go to if you want to learn to use phyllo dough to your best advantage (she has a number of great variations on baklava) or if you want to put together an easy, healthy, and quick meal with a middle eastern flair.

I've come up with a menu of Nawal's recipes that should work very well for a "potluck" gathering. It was difficult, but only because I had to choose from among so many delicious-sounding possibilities. When I consulted Nawal via email, she was delighted to learn of DFW and honored that we're using her recipes. She made some suggestions for the menu (including my favorite recipe here—Iraqi pizza) and wanted me to wish you all "bil-aafya," as they say in Iraq, "Enjoy in good health!"

I highly recommend the cookbook and if you haven't found the perfect gift for a gourmet friend, this is it. You can order it through amazon, although Nawal said it's a bit cheaper through her publisher (see the resource list). *Yet she reminded me that if you order from amazon through the DFW website, DFW receives a portion of the sale.* Nawal has also made a PBS show about ancient breads, and you can listen to an interview with her on WBUR at http://www.here-now.org/shows/2003/04/20030423_18.asp (there's also another recipe there). Her article on kebabs appears at

http://www.bookofrai.com/my_weblog/2006/08/kebab_an_ancien.html. An Iraqi kebab isn't exactly what you might think since we are more familiar with the Turkish shish kebab. Nevertheless, her recipe is sure to please the most ardent hamburger fan.

Please enjoy some of the Iraqi dishes if not the whole menu. You could supplement/substitute with almost any Middle Eastern food—pita, humus, grape leaves, olives, etc. (*Greenville/Simpsonville/Easley: Check out Pita House on S. Pleasantburg Drive for great foods and ingredients.*) Nawal suggested adding a rice dish to the menu. Her book has dozens of good ones, but you can also make a decent packaged pilaf (like Near Eastern brand) in a pinch. In everything I read about Iraq—even in the chaos—food, eating together, and hospitality shine through. Most Iraqis have experienced food shortages due to sanctions or war over recent decades. Many suffer from malnutrition. We won't forget that. Eating another culture's dishes, however, acknowledges its value and helps us “make connections” vital for appreciating it—and understanding perhaps a little better what it means when a people are deprived of something so basic to who they are and essential for life. Since women do most of the food preparation in Iraq (as in most places) and pride themselves on their hospitality, this is an especially significant way of acknowledging their gifts and contributions, at time when just going to the market can be a dangerous act for them. As we ponder Iraq today, let's also keep in mind Nawal's vision of peaceful neighbors enjoying each other's dishes.

Menu

Eggplant Relish with Pita bread

Lentil Soup (with meatballs)

Iraqi Pizza

Zucchini Squares

Tahini Bars

I've reproduced Nawal's recipes as she wrote them for the most part. I've added my own notes and suggestions at the end of each (“NB”).

Lentil Soup *Shorbat Adas*

Nawal calls this the “mother of all soups”—very close to ones that appear in ancient texts. It employs the yellow lentils and *rishta* (very thin thread-like noodles cut into short lengths) of which Medieval Baghdad was so fond. Most of us like them too.

2 c split(shelled) yellow or red lentils

2 t salt

1/2 t each: pepper, curry powder, turmeric

2 T tomato paste or 1/2 c tomato sauce

1/2 c broken vermicelli noodles

2 T olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

1 heaping T flour

1/4 c fresh lemon juice

Optional additions: tiny meatballs (see recipe below), 10oz package frozen chopped spinach (defrosted and drained of excess liquid)

1. Put lentils in a heavy large pot and cover with cold water by 3-4 inches (about 10 cups). Bring to a quick boil, skimming froth as needed. Lower heat to low and let simmer, covered, until the lentils are thoroughly cooked, about 30 minutes. If you have an immersion blender, blend until smooth for a nicer texture.
2. Add salt, spices, tomato paste, vermicelli, and spinach (if using). Simmer, stirring occasionally to keep soup from sticking, until nicely thickened, about 15 minutes.
3. Meanwhile in a small skillet sauté onion until it is golden brown. Add flour and mix until it is fragrant and changes color (a couple of minutes). Ladle some of the soup into the skillet and stir to dislodge anything sticking. Stir until smooth and pour back into the soup. Add meatballs, if using, Cook another five minutes. Add lemon juice and adjust spices if necessary. Serves around 8.

NB: This is a meal in itself, especially with the meatballs and spinach (both highly recommended.) The soup is lovely golden yellow (whether you use red or yellow lentils) and flecks of green from spinach (or a garnish of parsley) complement it well. Make it ahead and reheat it. It's great on the second day; you may need to add a little water if it seems too thick on reheating. As for the vermicelli, you can find Mexican brands already broken into small pieces or Middle Eastern varieties that come curled in balls like yarn. Cappellini will also work, but spaghetti is too thick.

“Sparrow’s Head” Meatballs *Ras al-Asfour*

1/2 lb lean ground meat (I used lamb; beef is fine)

1 small onion, grated or very finely chopped

3 T breadcrumbs

3/4 t salt

1/2 t pepper

1/4 t each: allspice, ginger, curry powder, hot pepper or chili flakes (the last is optional)

olive oil

Preheat oven to 450. Combine everything but the oil and knead lightly. With moistened fingers, form small balls (“sparrow’s heads”—a rounded teaspoon). Oil a sheet pan and place the balls on it. Bake 12-15 minutes, turning once halfway.

NB: These are great on their own as well as in the soup.

Iraqi “Pizza” *Uroug Masuliyya*

Maing *kubba*, doughs of grains, rice or potatoes stuffed with spiced meat and onions, is something of an art passed down by women to their daughters. The word itself may go back to the ancient Akkadian word for ball. In the Middle Ages, *kubba* or *kubabs* were used a lot in stews (as in the soup recipe above). There are multitudes of variations however: some fried, some baked in flat discs, etc. This “pizza” variation is a particularly easy one for us. It comes from the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. Bulgur is made from steamed, dried, and crushed whole wheatberries. It is very easy to work with and I recommend trying it here if it's new to you. (You may have had it in *tabouli*.) Farina, known also as “cream of wheat” (yes, the same as the cereal) serves as a binding agent in this and other Iraqi recipes.

Ingredients:

2 c bulgur (use fine or medium--#1 or #2, not coarse)

1 c farina (also called “cream of wheat” cereal)
2 1/4 c warm water
1 lb lean ground meat (lamb is great but beef works fine)
2 medium onions, finely chopped
1 1/2t salt
1/2 t pepper
1 t cumin
1/2 t each: allspice, cinnamon
1/4, chili flake or red pepper (more or less, depending on your taste)
2 T olive oil
2 rounded T tomato paste
1 egg, beaten
1 T olive oil
blanched almonds for garnish, optional (see NB below)

1. Preheat oven to 400. Put bulgur and farina in a large bowl and pour in the warm water. Mix with a fork, cover and set aside for half an hour, stirring a couple times. When you can press a small amount between your fingers and it hold together in a soft, sticky dough, it’s ready. If it won’t hold after 30 minutes, add a little more hot water and let it sit another 10 minutes.
2. When the bulgur mixture is ready, add the meat, onion, spices, and 2 T olive oil. Knead to make a meatloaf-like dough that is well blended.
3. Form the dough. Make four 9” round, 1/2” thick “pizzas” and arrange on well-oiled cookie sheets. Or, make one or two larger rounds or rectangles—shape is up to you, but keep the dough 1/2” thick.
4. Once the dough is placed on the baking sheet(s), combine the tomato paste, egg, and 1T olive oil. Brush this mixture all over the surface of the dough.
5. With a table knife, score the surface of the dough into wedges, squares, or whatever shapes you want. Press an almond (other options below) in the center of each portion. (Or, simply leave them unadorned.)
6. Bake for 20 minutes, or until the surface is golden brown. Re-cut and serve hot.

NB: These are terrific! If you only make one of these dishes, this is the one to make; it’s exceptionally good and easy and you may find that it becomes a party staple. I like them for appetizers, garnished with pieces of olive or feta cheese and served with a dip made of really good full-fat yogurt (such as the Greek brand Phage or Fage), thinned with a little water and seasoned with a bit of dill, garlic, and finely diced cucumber . Nawal suggests serving them as a main course with salad and olives. These are best hot out of the oven, but they hold well for quite a while and can be reheated.

Zucchini Squares *Murabba’at al-Shijar*

One of the many ways of using phyllo dough to make a savory pastry. This recipe was a winner in a *Gourmet Magazine* contest.

1 1/2lbs zucchini, shredded (food processor time!)

1 t salt
2 medium carrots, shredded (ditto!)
1/2 c sun-dried tomatoes, soaked in hot water, drained, and chopped, optional (see below)
1/4 c plain yogurt (a good full-fat one works best)
5 eggs total, 3 for the filling and 2 for the custard topping
1/2 t each: salt, pepper, freshly grated nutmeg
1 T chopped fresh dill or 1 t dried dill
1 c breadcrumbs
1 1lb package of phyllo (filo) dough (thawed overnight in the fridge and rested at room temp for an hour or so)
1/2 c or so olive oil
1 c milk
a dash of pepper
1/4 c grated Romano cheese

1. Preheat oven to 375 and oil a 15 x 10 baking pan. (NB: You could use a 13x9, but you'd need to shorten the phyllo sheets a bit and perhaps bake slightly longer.)
2. Put shredded zucchini in a colander and sprinkle with 1 t salt. Mix and allow to drain 30 minutes. Press out excess moisture well.
3. Mix carrots, tomatoes, yogurt, 3 eggs, spices and 1/4 breadcrumbs. Add drained zucchini and mix well.
4. Take the phyllo dough out of the package and keep it covered with a damp cloth as you work. Spread one sheet in the pan evenly, allowing it to follow up and over the sides. Brush very lightly with olive oil (if it tears, don't worry). Sprinkle lightly with some of the breadcrumbs. Repeat this 9 more times, using half the package of dough. (A package usually contains 18-20 sheets.)
5. Spread the zucchini filling over the phyllo. Cover with the remaining phyllo sheets as you did in step 4, using the oil and breadcrumbs. Fold the dough hanging over the sides over the top and press slightly.
6. Mix the 2 eggs, milk, pepper, and cheese. Pour over the entire pastry. Sprinkle with breadcrumbs again.
7. Bake for 45-55 minutes to a golden brown. Allow to set for 10 minutes. With a spatula, loosen the bottom and sides. With a sharp knife, cut into squares. Serve warm. Makes approximately 18 snack-size bars.

NB: Unlike the crunchy, phyllo-based spanikopita that many of us know, this pastry is soft due to the milk custard poured over it before baking. It's great in small squares for a party and also in larger pieces as a brunch or lunch dish. Best fresh, but can be reheated. I think the sun-dried tomatoes are a must: they add a ton of flavor. I used chopped tomatoes packed in oil, well-drained. Romano cheese approximates the hard, salty sheep's milk cheese used in Iraq. You could use any hard, grating cheese, but I found parmesan a bit too mild. If you find you have a lot of excess phyllo hanging over the corners of your pan, go ahead and trim some of it before folding the edges onto the top of the pastry. Because of the custard, the bottom crust may have a tendency to stick to the

pan. To prevent this, line the bottom of the pan with parchment paper. (If it does stick, it cleans up easily anyway.)

Tahini Cookies *Biskit as-Rashi*

This is reminiscent of the medieval middle-eastern candy made from tahini, *halwa*.

1/2 c vegetable oil

1/2 c tahini (sesame paste—found in most grocery stores and mostly used to make *hummus*. Use at room temperature and stir tahini to reincorporate the separated oil before measuring.)

1 egg

2 t baking powder

1/4 t salt

1 t cardamom

2 c flour

1/2 c toasted chopped walnuts (toast until fragrant and slightly darker in a skillet on the stovetop or in the oven at 300, turning once or twice. Watch carefully—they go from toasted to burnt quickly)

Melted dark chocolate for finishing (see note below)

1. Preheat oven to 350. Prepare 13x9 baking pan (see note below).
2. Blend ingredients listed through cardamom in a medium bowl with a mixer. Beat about two minutes to incorporate smoothly.
3. With a large spoon, stir in flour and nuts. Stir (or hand-knead) just to combine ingredients until they come together in a ball.
4. Press the dough in to the prepared pan evenly.
5. Bake for 30 minutes or until golden brown.
6. Cool pan on a rack for 15 minutes. Unmold (see note) and cut into pieces the size of a domino (7/8 x 1 1/4 inch rectangles). See note about finishing. Makes 46 small bars.

NB: A nice change from the very sweet cookies we tend to eat during the holidays and so quick and easy to make. Use a good, nutty tahini. Nawal suggests dipping the cookies in melted dark chocolate and then decorating them with melted white chocolate or mini-chocolate chips. I just drizzled melted dark chocolate in a zig-zag pattern over the tops. A melted butterscotch chip drizzle would be good too. These improve with age—I recommend making them a couple of days ahead and storing them in an airtight container. To get “cleaner” bars, line your baking pan with foil before beginning. Turn the pan on its top and mold a sheet of foil around it. Make sure the sheet is about 4” longer than the pan—2” longer on each short side. Remove the foil, turn the pan right side up, and insert the foil in the pan, pressing to fit and rolling the long overhang on the short sides back under the pan or its handles. Then brush the foil with melted butter or oil. After baking, simply lift out the contents by the “handles” provided by the overhanging foil. Peel back the foil and cut the bars. Check bottoms for any clinging foil before serving. (This trick is also great for sticky bars like brownies.)

Spicy Eggplant Dip *Misaqua’at Betinjan*

1 1 1/2 lb eggplant

1 medium onion, finely chopped (optional)

2 T olive oil
1/2 t salt
1/4 t pepper
1 garlic clove, pressed or grated
1/2 t each: ground cumin, ground coriander, chile flakes
chopped parsley, chopped tomato and/or pomegranate seeds for garnish
warm pita bread for serving

NB: I first learned of Nawal Nasrallah from a wonderful annual cookbook series edited by Fran McCullough and Molly Stevens, *The Best American Recipes*. This recipe of Nawal's was included in the 2004-2005 edition. It goes back to the 9th century, but as the editors say, "something simple and good will never go out of style." It only makes a cup or so. Double or triple the recipe for a group and serve with pita bread, perhaps along with hummus, olives, and feta cheese. Garnished with pomegranate seeds and chopped parsley, this is drop-dead gorgeous and so "holiday-ish." The pomegranate seeds also add a little crunch and sour bite to this unctuous dip. As written, it's spicy and garlicky (especially if made ahead). If you like things milder, cook the garlic in the oil in step 3 and hold back on the chile flakes. You can make this a day ahead, but wait to garnish until serving.

1. Preheat oven to 450. Wash and dry eggplant and pierce the skin with a knife in a few places. Bake directly on an oven rack (with foil on another rack underneath it to catch any liquids that run out and prevent an oven mess). Bake until soft, turning once or twice, about 45 minutes. Set aside on a plate to cool awhile (15 minutes or so).
2. Cut off the eggplant's stem and remove the peel. Discard any juices. Remove as many of the seeds as you can without sacrificing pulp. Place the pulp in a medium bowl and mash it with a fork. (It will still be a little chunky. If it's very stringy, use two forks to help you separate strands.)

Heat the olive in small skillet until it sizzles and pour over the eggplant. (If using onion, sauté it in the olive oil until it begins to turn golden and then pour it and the oil over the eggplant.) Add the other ingredients and mix well. Spread on a plate in a 1" layer and garnish. Serve at cool room temperature.

Light in the Darkness: Messages from Riverbend in Iraq

Excerpted from <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>. All but the most recent are also available in either *Baghdad Burning: Girl Blog from Iraq* (Feminist Press, 2005) or *Baghdad Burning II* (Feminist Press, 2006). I encourage you to seek out the books and/or the blog.

NOTE TO LEADER AND READERS: These excerpts are designed to be read as the group stands or sits in a circle. Everyone might want to have a copy of the entire reading, but each of the six excerpts and the introduction should be read aloud by a different person while everyone else listens. (See the “note to reader” at the beginning of the last excerpt—you may want to recruit more than one reader for this one.) You’ll want to read the date at the beginning of each excerpt. For reasons explained in the introduction, I’ve suggested that you read this by candlelight, with everyone holding a candle and with the lights turned off. Depending on the size of your group, you might light the candles—one person passing her flame to another—while the introduction is being read or before. You don’t want to be fiddling with the candles while the excerpts are read. Each reader will want to read over her passage before the group reading. They’re quite easy to read in a very conversational style. The last entry requires a little more “acting ability” to be really effective because it involves a mock conversation at the very end. Give that one to your resident “drama queen”!

Introduction

Since the dangerous and secret nature of the work by Madre and OWFI in the Underground Railroad Project prevents us from hearing from the women involved in it, we’ll rely, as thousands of people around the world do, on Riverbend to give a voice to women’s experience in Iraq. Not that she would attempt to speak for all women there, or that anyone could (in any situation). But since this twenty-something, unemployed computer-programmer in a suburb somewhere in Baghdad began blogging in 2003, her knowledge and perspective on her country and world politics have impressed her readers. Her ability to describe people and events—the most profound and mundane—in an artful and yet natural way (and in her second language!) has amazed us. Her passion, wit, and humanity have moved us—and moved us a bit closer to understanding how many Iraqis must feel and what they must endure.

Riverbend is an unusual voice for us to “hear” for many reasons. She is well-educated and middle-class—better off even in the hardships of war and its aftermath than most of the women we encounter in DFW. Yet as she speaks of her experience—of a brother, “E.” she adores, her cleaning-obsessed mother, friends who still try to have a good time—she speaks also of the dangers and hardships that Iraqi women endure on many levels. The threat of violence, the restrictions on freedom and clothing, the loss of opportunity; the loss of loved ones.

Riverbend frequently mentions the frustrating and dangerous unreliability of electrical power in Iraq. At a time of year in which candles are decorative and festive for us, candles are a necessity for Iraqis (have been for a long time and will be for the foreseeable future). For many of us at this time, candles—in the Menorah, in the Advent Wreath—are also symbols of hope, endurance, the struggle for justice and peace, and faith. By holding up candles in the darkness as we listen to Riverbend, as we allow her to shed light on Iraq for us, we symbolize our desire to make connection to her, to the women running in the darkness toward the light of day in the Underground Railroad

Project, to all Iraqi women and to women everywhere who seek understanding, peace, justice, and the empowerment to lead fulfilling lives.

A few explanations before we begin:

Hijab: the covering—a scarf usually—that some Muslim women wear over their hair. Some Muslim women wear fuller coverings that enclose part or practically the entire face and body.

Eid: a festive celebration that marks the end of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting. It involves thanksgiving and feasting. Gifts are usually given within families and charity distributed to the needy. It is also a time of reconciliation and community-building.

“E” is Riverbend’s brother. Two different young women called “M,” an old friend and a girl lodged at a neighbor’s house, are discussed in these excerpts.

October 18, 2006

The latest horror is the study published in the Lancet Journal concluding that over 600,000 Iraqis have been killed since the war.... We literally do not know a single Iraqi family that has not seen the violent death of a first or second-degree relative these last three years. Abductions, militias, sectarian violence, revenge killings, assassinations, car-bombs, suicide bombers, American military strikes, Iraqi military raids, death squads, extremists, armed robberies, executions, detentions, secret prisons, torture, mysterious weapons.... There are Iraqi women who have not shed their black mourning robes since 2003 because each time the end of the proper mourning period comes around, some other relative dies and the countdown begins once again.

August 5, 2006

For me, June marked the first month I don’t dare leave the house without a *hijab*, or headscarf. I don’t wear a *hijab* usually, but it’s no longer possible to drive around Baghdad without one. It’s just not a good idea. (Take note that when I say ‘drive’ I actually mean ‘sit in the back seat of the car’ - I haven’t driven for the longest time.) Going around bare-headed in a car or in the street also puts the family members with you in danger. You risk hearing something you don’t want to hear and then the father or the brother or cousin or uncle can’t just sit by and let it happen. I haven’t driven for the longest time. If you’re a female, you risk being attacked.

I look at my older clothes- the jeans and t-shirts and colorful skirts- and it’s like I’m studying a wardrobe from another country, another lifetime... There are no laws that say we have to wear a *hijab* (yet), but there are the men in head-to-toe black and the turbans, the extremists and fanatics who were liberated by the occupation, and at some point, you tire of the defiance. You no longer want to be seen. I feel like the black or white scarf I fling haphazardly on my head as I walk out the door makes me invisible to a certain degree- it’s easier to blend in with the masses shrouded in black. If you’re a female, you don’t want the attention- you don’t want it from Iraqi police, you don’t want it from the black-clad militia man, you don’t want it from the American soldier. You don’t want to be noticed or seen.

I have nothing against the *hijab*, of course, as long as it is being worn by choice. Many of my relatives and friends wear a headscarf. Most of them began wearing it after the war. It started out as a way to avoid trouble and undue attention, and now they just

keep it on because it makes no sense to take it off. What is happening to the country?

I realized how common it had become only in mid-July when M., a childhood friend, came to say goodbye before leaving the country. She walked into the house, complaining of the heat and the roads, her brother following closely behind. It took me to the end of the visit for the peculiarity of the situation to hit me. She was getting ready to leave before the sun set, and she picked up the beige headscarf folded neatly by her side. As she told me about one of her neighbors being shot, she opened up the scarf with a flourish, set it on her head like a pro, and pinned it snugly under her chin with the precision of a seasoned *hijab*-wearer. All this without a mirror- like she had done it a hundred times over... Which would be fine, except that M. is Christian. If M. can wear one quietly—so can I.

May 2, 2005

These last few days have been explosive- quite literally. It started about 4 days ago and it hasn't let up since. They say there were around 14 car bombs in Baghdad alone a couple of days ago- although we only heard 6 from our area. Cars are making me very nervous lately. All cars look suspicious- small ones and large ones. Old cars and new cars. Cars with drivers and cars parked in front of restaurants and shops. They all have a sinister look to them these days.

The worst day for us was the day before yesterday. We were sitting in the living room with an aunt and her 16-year-old son and listening patiently as she scolded the household for *still* having our rugs spread. In Iraq, people don't keep their carpeting all year round. We begin removing the carpeting around April and it doesn't come back until around October. We don't have wall to wall carpeting here like abroad. Instead, we have lovely rugs that we usually spread in the middle of the room... When we were younger, E. and I would sit and stare at them, trying to 'read' the colors and designs. Having them on the ground is almost like having a woolly blog for the floor.

So my aunt sat there, telling us we should have had the rugs cleaned and packed away long ago- like the beginning of April. And she was right. The proper thing would be to give the rugs a good cleaning and roll them up for storage in their corner in the hallway upstairs, to stand tall and firm for almost 7 months, like sentinels of the second floor. The reason we hadn't gotten around to doing this yet was quite simple- the water situation in our area didn't allow for washing the rugs in April and so we had procrastinated the rug situation, until one week became two weeks and two weeks melted into three...

(T)he aunt decided she was going to stay and help us remove said rugs the next day. We would go upstairs to clean the roof of the house very thoroughly. We would drag the rugs to the roof the next day and one by one, beat them thoroughly to get out the excess dust, then wipe down the larger ones with my aunts secret rug-cleaning mix and wash the smaller ones and set them out to dry on the hot roof.

Her son couldn't spend the night however, and he decided to return home the same day.... He listened to my aunt as she gave him instructions about heating lunch for his father, studying, washing fruit before eating it, picking up carrots on the way home, watching out for suspicious cars and people and calling as soon as he walked through the door so she could relax. He shook his head in the affirmative, waved goodbye and walked out the gate towards the main street.

Three minutes later, an explosion rocked the house. The windows rattled

momentarily and a door slammed somewhere upstairs. I was clutching a corner of the living room rug where I had pulled it back to assure my aunt that there were no bugs living under it.

"Car bomb." E. said grimly, running outside to see where it had come from. I looked at my aunt apprehensively and she sat, pale, her hands shaking as she adjusted the head scarf she wore, preparing to go outside.

"F. just went out the door..." she said, breathlessly referring to her son. I dropped the handful of carpeting and ran outside to follow E. My heart was beating wildly as I tried to decide the direction of the explosion. I sensed my aunt not far behind me.

"Do you see him?" She called out weakly. I was in the middle of the street by then and some of the neighbors were standing around outside.

"Where did it come from?" I called across the street to one of the neighborhood children.

"The main street." He answered back, pointing in the direction my cousin had gone.

"Did it come from the main street?" My aunt cried out from the gate.

"No." I lied, searching for E. "No—it came from the other side." I was trying to decide whether I should go ahead and run out to the main street where it seemed more and more people were gathering, when I saw E. rounding the corner, an arm casually draped around my cousin who seemed to be talking excitedly. I turned to smile encouragingly at my aunt who was sagging with relief at the gate.

"He's fine." She said. "He's fine."

"I was near the explosion!" F. said excitedly as he neared the house. My aunt grabbed him by the shoulders and began inspecting him- his face, his neck, his arms.

"I'm fine mother..." he shrugged her off as she began a long prayer of thanks interspersed with irrational scolding about how he should be more careful...

Back in the house, E. and I decided he'd go back and see if he could help. We gathered up some gauze, medical tape, antiseptic and a couple of bottles of cold water. I turned back to my cousin after E. had left. He was excited and tense, eyes wide with disbelief. His voice was shaking slightly as he spoke and his lower lip trembled.

"I was just going to cross the street but I remembered I should buy the carrots." He spoke rapidly, "So I stopped by that guy who sells vegetables and just as I was buying them- a big BOOM and a car exploded and the one next to it began to burn... If I hadn't stopped for the carrots..." The cousin began waving his arms around in the air and I leaned back to avoid one in the face.

My aunt gasped, stopping in the living room, "The carrots saved you!" She cried out, holding a hand to her heart. My cousin looked at her incredulously and the color slowly began to return to his face. "Carrots." He murmured, throwing himself down on the sofa and grabbing one of the cushions, "Carrots saved me."

E. came home an hour later, tired and disheveled. Two people had died- the third would probably survive- but at least a dozen others were wounded. Every time I look at my cousin, I wonder- gratefully- how it was that we were so lucky.

March 29, 2004

On a cold night in November, M., her mother, and four brothers had been sleeping when their door suddenly came crashing down during the early hours of the morning. The scene that followed was one of chaos and confusion... screaming, shouting, cursing,

pushing and pulling followed. The family were all gathered into the living room and the four sons- one of them only 15- were dragged away with bags over their heads. The mother and daughter were questioned- who was the man in the picture hanging on the wall? He was M.'s father who had died 6 years ago of a stroke. You're lying, they were told- wasn't he a part of some secret underground resistance cell? M.'s mother was hysterical by then- he was her dead husband and why were they taking away her sons? What had they done? They were supporting the resistance, came the answer through the interpreter.

How were they supporting the resistance, their mother wanted to know? "You are contributing large sums of money to terrorists." The interpreter explained. The troops had received an anonymous tip that M.'s family were giving funds to support attacks on the troops.

It was useless trying to explain that the family didn't have any 'funds'- ever since two of her sons lost their jobs at a factory that had closed down after the war, the family had been living off of the little money they got from ...a little shop that sold cigarettes, biscuits and candy to people in the neighborhood. They barely made enough to cover the cost of food!... The mother and daughter were also taken away, with bags over their heads....

M. remembers being in a room, with a bag over her head and bright lights above.... She was made to sit on her knees, in the interrogation room while her mother was kicked and beaten to the ground. ..."I heard my mother begging them to please let me go and not hurt me... she told them she'd do anything- say anything- if they just let me go." After a couple hours of general abuse, the mother and daughter were divided, each one thrown into a separate room for questioning.... Hours later, the mother and daughter were taken to the infamous Abu Ghraib prison- home to thousands of criminals and innocents alike.

In Abu Ghraib, they were separated.... A couple of terrible months later- after witnessing several beatings and the rape of a male prisoner by one of the jailors- in mid-January, M. was suddenly set free and taken to her uncle's home where she found her youngest brother waiting for her. Her uncle, through some lawyers and contacts, had managed to extract M. and her 15-year-old brother from two different prisons. M. also learned that her mother was still in Abu Ghraib but they weren't sure about her three brothers.

M. and her uncle later learned that a certain neighbor had made the false accusation against her family. The neighbor's 20-year-old son was still bitter over a fight he had several years ago with one of M.'s brothers. All he had to do was contact a certain translator who worked for the troops and give M.'s address. It was that easy.

By the end of her tale, M. was crying silently.... All I could do was repeat, "I'm so sorry... I'm really sorry..." and a lot of other useless words. She shook her head and waved away my words of sympathy, "It's ok- really- I'm one of the lucky ones... all they did was beat me."

August 24, 2003

The story of how I lost my job isn't unique. It has actually become very common—despondently, depressingly, unbearably common. ...I'm a computer science graduate.... I loved my job—I was “good” at my job. I came and went to work on my own. At 8am I'd walk in lugging a backpack filled with enough cds, floppies, notebooks,

chewed-on pens, paperclips, and screwdrivers to make Bill Gates proud. I made as much money as my two male colleagues and got an equal amount of respect from the manager (that was because he was clueless when it came to any type of programming and anyone who could do it was worthy of respect... a girl, no less—you get the picture.)

What I'm trying to say is that no matter what anyone heard, females in Iraq were a lot better off than females in other parts of the Arab world (and some part of the western world—we had equal salaries!) We made up over 50% of the working force. We were doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, professors... and more.

During the first week of June, I heard my company was back in business. It took several hours... but finally I convinced everyone that it was necessary for my sanity to go back to work....

The moment "I walked through the door, I noticed it. Everything looked shabbier somehow—sadder.... But A was there! I couldn't believe it—a familiar, welcoming face. He looked at me for a moment, without really seeing me, then his eyes opened wide and disbelief took over.... He congratulated me on being alive, asked about my family, and told me that ... I should go home and stay safe....

A and I... paused on the second floor ...to talk to one of the former department directors. I asked when he thought things would be functioning; he wouldn't look at me. His eyes glued to A's face as he told him that females weren't welcome right now—especially females who "couldn't be protected." He finally turned to me and told me, in so many words, to go home because "they" refused to be responsible for what might happen to me....

I'm not important. I'm not vital. Over a month ago, a prominent electrical engineer... named Henna Aziz was assassinated in front of her family.... She was threatened by some fundamentalists, ...told to stay at home because she was a woman, she shouldn't be in charge. She refused—the country needed her expertise to get things functioning.... She lost her life—she wasn't the first, she won't be the last.

December 26, 2003

Note to reader: There is a mock telephone conversation at the end of this excerpt. This works most effectively if you "name" the speakers, "Iraqi- inside-Iraq" and "Iraqi-outside-Iraq," only once or twice at the beginning and try to indicate them and the narration in italics by changes in your voice inflection for the rest of the passage. Or, you could recruit helpers to play the two parts while you read the narration.

Explosions and bombing almost all day yesterday and deep into the night. At some points it gets hard to tell who is bombing who? Resistance or Americans? Tanks or mortars? Cluster bombs or IEDs? ... and the sirens. I hate the sirens. I can stand the explosions, the rattling windows, the slamming doors, the planes, the helicopters... but I feel like my heart is wailing when I hear the sirens.

The explosions haven't really put anyone in a very festive spirit. The highlight of the last few days, for me, was when we went to our Christian friends' home to keep them company on Christmas Eve. We live in a neighborhood with a number of Christian families and, under normal circumstances, the area would be quite festive this time of year- little plastic Santas on green lawns, an occasional plastic wreath on a door and some colored, blinking lights on trees.

Our particular friends...specialized in the lights. Every year, a week before

Christmas, they would not only decorate their own plastic tree (evergreens are hard to come by in Iraq), but they would decorate 4 different olive trees in the little garden in front of their home with long strings of red lights. Passing by their house, the scene of the green olive trees with branches tangled in little red lights always brought a smile... you couldn't help but feel the 'Christmas spirit'- Christians and Muslims alike.... This year the trees weren't decorated because, as their father put it, "We don't want to attract too much attention... and it wouldn't be right with the electricity shortage." The tree inside of their house was decorated, however, and it was almost sagging with ornaments....

Kids in Iraq also believe in Santa Claus, but people here call him 'Baba Noel' which means, "Father Noel". I asked the children what he looked like and they generally agreed that he was fat, cheerful, decked in red and had white hair. (Their impertinent 11-year-old explains that he's fat because of the dates, cheerful because of the alcohol and wears red because he's a communist!) He doesn't drop into Iraqi homes through the chimney, though, because very few Iraqi homes actually have chimneys. He also doesn't drop in unexpectedly in the middle of the night because that's just rude. He acts as more of an inspiration to parents when they are out buying Christmas gifts for the kids; a holiday muse, if you will. The reindeer are a foreign concept here.

The annual ritual around Christmas for many Christians in Baghdad used to be generally hanging out with family and friends on Christmas Eve, exchanging gifts and food (always food- if you're Iraqi, it's going to be food) and receiving guests and well-wishers. At 12 am, many would attend a Christmas service at their local church and light candles to greet the Christmas spirit. Christmas day would be like our first day of Eid- eating and drinking, receiving family, friends and neighbors and preparing for the inevitable Christmas party in the evening at either a friend's house or in one of the various recreational clubs in Baghdad. ...This year, the Christmas service was early and many people didn't go because they either didn't have gasoline, or just didn't feel safe driving around Baghdad in the evening. Many of them also couldn't join their families because of the security situation.

At one point during the evening, the house was dark and there was no electricity. We sat, gathered around on the ground, eating date-balls and watching... (the) dog chew on the lowest branch of the tree. The living room was lit by the warm light radiating from the kerosene heater and a few Christmas candles set on the coffee table. (The) phone suddenly rang shrilly and (our neighbor) ran to pick it up. It was his brother in Toronto and it was the perfect Christmas gift because it was the first time (he) got an overseas call since the war- we were all amazed. An Iraqi phone conversation goes like this these days:

Iraqi Inside Iraq (III): Alloo?

Iraqi Outside Iraq (IOI): ALLOO?!

III: ALLOOOO? MINNOOO? (Hello? Who is it?)

IOI: Shlonkum? (How are you?)

III: ...Is it really you?!

(Chorus of family in the background, "Who is it?! Who is it?!")

IOI: How are... *(the voice cracks here with emotion)* you?

III: We're... *(the line crackles)* ...and is doing well.

IOI: I CAN'T HEAR YOU! Doing well? Thank God...

III: Alloo? Alloo...? *(speaker turns to speak to someone in the background, "Sshhh... I can't hear anything!") The family go silent and hold their breaths.)*

III: Alloo? Alloo?!

IOI: Alloo? Yes, yes, your voice is back- are you ok?

III: Fine, fine.

IOI: Is my mother ok? My brothers and sisters?

III: All fine... we're fine, thank God.

IOI: Thank God (*the voice cracks again*)

III: How are you? (*a vague echo with 'you...you... you...'*)

IOI: We're fine but terribly worried about all of YOU...

III: Don't worry- we're doing alright... no electricity or fuel, but we'll be alright...

IOI: (*crackling line... fading voices*) ... tried and tried to call but... (*more crackling line*)
... and we heard horrible.... (*static*)

III: Alloo? Allooouooooo? Are you there? (*silence on the other end*)

III: Alloo? If you can hear me, I can't hear you... (the hovering relatives all hold their breath)

III: ... I still can't hear you... if you can hear me just know that we're fine. We're ok. We're alive and wondering about your health. Don't worry... don't worry. Alloo... Alloo...?

And everyone exhales feeling a bit more relieved and a little bit empty as the phone is returned to the cradle and the momentous event passes.... Merry Christmas.

Resources

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<http://www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=11280>

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<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/article/0,,7374-1548015,00.html>

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