



Dining for Women

***Making Connections
Preview Edition
December 2006
Iraq***

This month's *MC Preview* will be brief because I'm eager to complete *MC* for chapters that will meet earlier than usual this month because of the holidays. Look for it by December 8.

What to expect in this month's MC:

- 1) An introduction to "the other side of war" (recall the phrase from S. Zalbi's book, recommended in *MC October*) in Iraq—that is, the difficulties, tragedies, and dangers that are affecting women particularly in Iraq and that have received little coverage by the media or attention by the governments involved in the war and reconstruction.
- 2) Book recommendations. We'll feature two recently published books by women who speak from their own experiences of Iraq. 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). While few journalists have considered the particular issues that face women in Iraq today and governments have given little more than lip service to them, Ditmars focuses on what has and is happening to women in Iraq who have endured years of sanctions, violence, and an erosion of rights and opportunity. She lovingly presents not only the harsh realities but also the attempts to find joy in life, to create art, and to retain human dignity. 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 become 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* and *Baghdad Burning II* (Feminist Press, 2005 and 2006). She continues to blog, when electricity and relative safety allow (just getting to an internet café is risky and getting more so), at <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com/>.
- 3) Since the dangerous nature of the work by Madre and OWFI in the Underground Railroad Project prevents us from hearing directly from the women involved in it,

- we'll rely (as thousands of people around the world do) on Riverbend to give us a chance to "hear" about Iraqi women's lives and perspectives (more below).
- 4) In *Dining with Women*, we have a great menu based on recipes that were written to comfort refugees and to help preserve the ancient and venerable cuisine of Iraq. Nawal Nasrallah was a literature professor in Iraq who came to the U.S. during the first Gulf War. She now lives in Boston. Her *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of Iraqi Cuisine* (Authorhouse, 2003) gracefully balances history and authenticity with a practical sensibility (based on much experience) about what will work in American kitchens. You'll find some real keepers in this book, especially if you love Middle Eastern foods. And if this will be your first time, you're in for quite a treat. Menu includes a lentil soup (with optional "sparrow's head" meatballs), a perfect-for-the-holidays eggplant relish, a delicious (and healthy!) Iraqi "pizza"—which has wound up permanently in my party-food repertoire, a zucchini dish that will dissuade anyone's fear of working with phyllo dough, and a mercifully not-too-sweet bar cookie. Everything can be made ahead, is easy, and is delicious.

Program Suggestions:

MC December will end with six excerpts taken from the Riverbend blog. They span from just after the invasion in 2003 to her last entry this November. I'll add an introduction to the excerpts. I suggest that you ask six members of your group to read the excerpts after you (or another member) reads the introduction. These are a bit lengthier than our usual quotations, so your volunteers might want to give them a read-through ahead of time. The excerpts are in order from most recent to earliest, except for the final excerpt, which is a Christmas story posted by Riverbend in 2003. I suggest you read them in the order in which they appear.

Provide a candle for each member. Have someone light hers and pass the flame to another before or as the introduction is read (depending on the size of the group—you'll want to avoid having some people struggling with the candles while others are trying to read the excerpts). Riverbend mentions repeatedly the frustrating and dangerous unreliability of electrical power in Iraq. At a time of year in which candles are decorative and festive for many of us, candles are a necessity for Iraqis. But also for many of us at this time, candles—in the Menorah, in the Advent Wreath—are symbols of hope, endurance, the struggle for justice and peace, and faith. It might be appropriate as you read Riverbend's stories, to make the connection between Riverbend's reality and the hopes of all women who seek understanding, peace, and the empowerment to lead fulfilling lives by turning off the electric lights and holding up candles to light the way.

Please enjoy some of the Iraqi dishes if not the whole menu. You could also supplement 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.) 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.

If you need the recipes or excerpts before Friday, Dec. 8, email me at corrienorman1959@yahoo.com