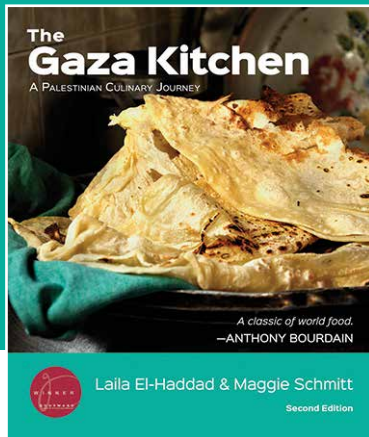


The Gaza Kitchen

A Palestinian Culinary Journey

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By Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt
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When we think of Gaza, we don't tend to think of food – except, of course, in the context of its absence or else unaffordability due to the effect of a persistent and deliberate blockade intended to deprive people of their ability to prosper, develop, and live free, ordinary lives.

Gaza and its people have the misfortune of being viewed as a caricature of sorts, whether by supporters or adversaries or brethren. We are brute, resilient, and steadfast; we are brutal, aggressive, and violent; we are wretched, dejected, and downtrodden.

But in the end, we are human beings who are more concerned with the immediate and pressing issue of our daily struggle to survive rather than how we are viewed by others.

In 2010, my co-author Maggie Schmitt and I went to Gaza and spent many weeks poking around in people's kitchens, joining their families for lavish meals often prepared on nothing more than a butane burner, massaging the warm, fertile composted soil with farmers, and listening as they all shared their collective hopes and fears and laughter and histories – all the rich details that get lost between the dichotomous and convenient media sound bytes and snapshots that allow us, the readers and viewers, to dismiss or pity Gaza.

Of course, the historical Gaza region occupies (as it were) a unique culinary position in its own right, a function of its position along a crossroads between continents and along ancient

trade routes; and in more modern times, as a holding place for massive numbers of Palestinian refugees from its surroundings, incorporating not only elements of the Mediterranean, such as dill and seafood, but also of the Bedouin tradition of Bir al-Saba and nearby Sinai, the flavors of the fellaheen of its eastern villages, the sophisticated and urbane tastes of Yaffa, and the much-loved piquancy and spice-heavy foods of Gaza City itself.

More than just pretty pictures or trendy recipes, or even “folklorized” ethnography, it is an ode to the ordinary, a guide to understanding a place and a people and their dogged persistence to keep cooking, living, retaining their dignity, and staying human, as well as their ability to keep alive the traditions and tastes of parts of historical Palestine of which no other trace exists, aside from its aromas and flavors and memories. And given the



Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt. Photo courtesy of Laila El-Haddad.

In 2013, I had the chance to return once more while filming an episode with acclaimed food critic and television personality Anthony Bourdain, before travel through Rafah Crossing was nearly halted. I revisited many of the same families, acquired a few new recipes, and received firsthand updates on the situation. Thus the second and updated edition of *The Gaza Kitchen* was born.

We have always thought of *The Gaza Kitchen* as a storybook of sorts, a window to understanding Gaza that turns the conventional camera-eye view of this troubled part of Palestine on its head, and in so doing, helps the reader understand the Palestinian experience in Gaza, as well as its inhabitants, their history, and their present.

constant threat of the appropriation and “invisibilization” of Palestinian history, we like to think that such a compilation is more important than ever.

Read it, cook from it, eat, contemplate, and then converse, act, and repeat. And above all, enjoy its recipes, much as Gazans would.

Laila El-Haddad

