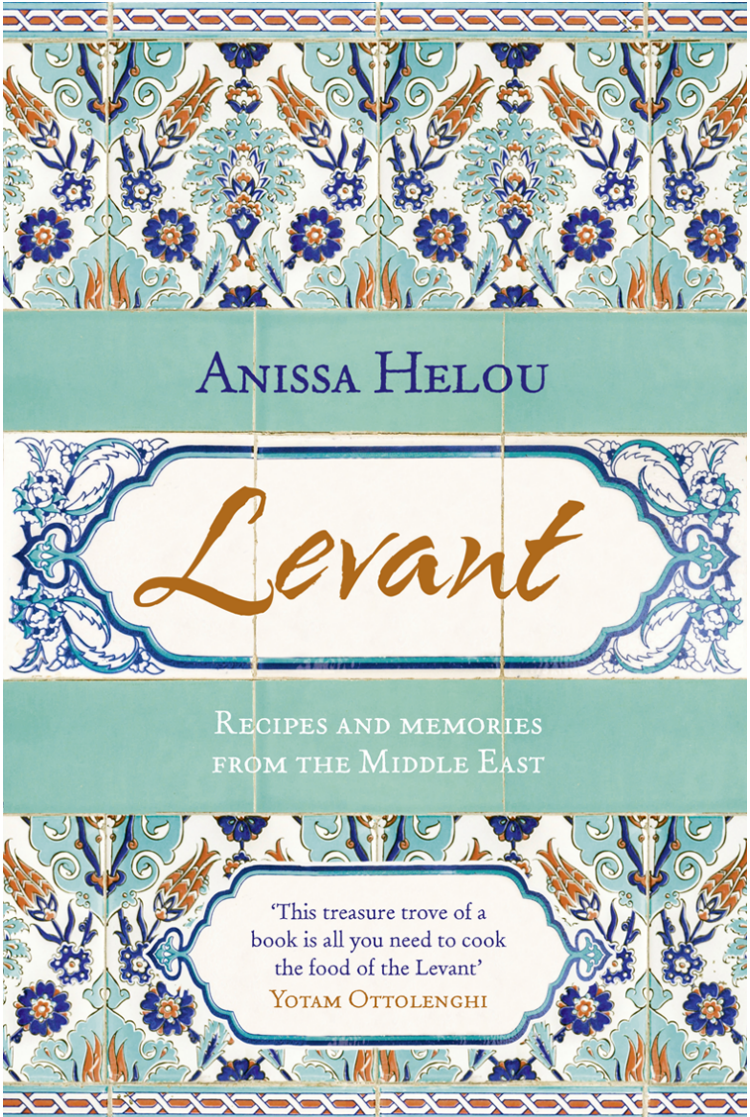
Anissa Helou
Levant
Recipes and memories
from the Middle East
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Levant: Recipes and memories from the Middle East

Аннотация

Anissa Helou's Levant is a collection of mouth-watering recipes inspired by Anissa's family and childhood in Beirut and Syria, and her travels around the exciting regions of the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East.'This treasure trove of a book is all you need, really, to cook the food of the Levant. It is as comprehensive and conclusive as it gets, but it also tells charming personal stories and masterfully takes you on a journey to all those enchanted lands.' Yotam OttolenghiLevant, or rising of the sun, is the crossroads where western Asia, eastern Mediterranean and northwest Africa meet. A land that is culturally diverse but united by common culinary threads.In this personal tour Anissa introduces the stunning food of Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Iran, Palestine and Jordan. She draws them together through the themes of family, farm, souks (markets), restaurants, bakeries and the sweetmakers and attempts to record the food traditions of countries that are changing beyond recognition and at risk of disappearing.Levant includes 150 inspired recipes for soups and sides, salads and mezze, meats, fish and vegetarian, sweets, preserves and breads. Dishes include Lemony Swiss Chard and Lentil Soup, Fried Eggs with Sumac, Kibbe Balls in Yoghurt Sauce, Cabbage and

Tomato Salad, Sweet Pistachio Pie, Wild Chicory in Olive Oil with Caramelized Onion, Grilled Aubergines with Tahini Sauce, Turkish Cheese Pie, Lebanese Morning Bread, Halva, and Milk Pudding.

Levant

Recipes and memories from the Middle East

Anissa Helou

For my mother and late father, who taught me to love food.

Also for my late grandmother and Aunt Zahiyeh.

And for my siblings who were the first to share with me all those delicious dishes we grew up with.

Contents

Soleil levant means 'rising sun' in French and 'Levant' – the land to the east, where the sun rises – is the word that came to describe the eastern Mediterranean at a time when the Mediterranean, which links three continents, Europe, Asia and Africa, was the centre of the world.

The term became current in the late sixteenth century with the creation of the English Levant Company that traded with the Ottoman Empire. A century later, the French set up the Companie du Levant for the same purpose and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 'Levant' became widely used by travellers in their accounts of the region, although not always referring to the same countries.

My Levant encompasses my own home countries, Lebanon and Syria, which were called the Levant States by the French when they had a mandate over them from 1920 to 1946 – as a child, I spent the school year in Lebanon, in Beirut, and my summers in Mashta el-Helou in Syria. The term Levant for me also includes Turkey, Jordan, Palestine and northern Iran. Inclusion of the latter may be controversial, but Iranian cooking is the mother cuisine of the region. The Abbassid caliphs, who ruled from the eighth to the thirteenth centuries, favoured Persian cooks, and as their empire expanded, they took them along, which explains the sweeping influence of Persian cuisine over the cooking of the Middle East and North Africa. This, I think, gives me licence to include some of Iran's classic northern dishes. The non-inclusion of Israel may be construed as controversial

too, but as everyone knows, Israel is a very young state and many dishes that are now described as Israeli were originally, and still are, Palestinian, Lebanese or Egyptian, and I prefer to give the original rather than the assumed version of a dish where I can. Another country I could have included is Cyprus, which some historians and travel writers regard as part of the Levant. I have chosen not to include dishes from Cyprus in this book simply because this is a personal compilation of favourite recipes rather than a scholarly work, and as such I have made my own, very selective choice.

Most of the essential ingredients – be they grains, pulses, nuts and spices or seasonal produce – are common to the region as a whole. Many dishes are also shared between different countries, while just as many are specific to one country or another. Equally, when dishes are shared, there is enough of a difference in the way they are prepared to single them out as belonging to a particular country.

Anissa standing in front of one side of al-Dar in Mashta el-Helou, her father's ancestral home in Syria.

Even the dominant flavours can be defined from one country to another. There are no combinations of sweet and savoury in Lebanon where the emphasis is on tart, fresh flavours. By contrast, complex or intriguing flavours are preferred in Turkey, northern Syria and Iran where dishes combine meat with fruit,

and in some cases fruit juice, to create enticing sweet-savoury mixtures. Jordan and Palestine favour more subdued flavours and their dishes tend to be higher in fat, as do those from southern Syria. And Iran is the only region where rice is king, whereas burghul and *frikeh* ('burnt' green wheat that is dried and either cracked or left whole) are the staple elsewhere.

The main staple in the Levant is bread, an essential part of meals, but this too varies from one country to another. In Lebanon, a very thin, large pita is the most common type, used to scoop up food and to make wraps. Even though the country is tiny, there are regional variations, including *marqûq*, a very large, paper-thin mountain bread baked over a *saj* (a kind of inverted wok), and *mishtah*, a flatbread from the south that is flavoured with spices and has added cracked wheat (*jrish*). Both are single-layered whereas further north you will find *tabuneh*, which is double-layered like pita but larger and thinner. Neither *mishtah* nor *tabuneh* tend to be found outside their region; indeed, I never knew them when I lived in Lebanon, discovering them only a few years ago when I was researching my book on savoury baking.

In Syria, the common bread, at least in rural areas, is *tannur*, a large, round single-layered loaf that takes its name from the *tannur* that was the original pit oven, built either below or above ground. Pita is common in cities and small towns where there are commercial bakeries. A few bakeries make *marqûq* although the bread is not as common in Syria as it is in Lebanon. Jordan and Palestine have more or less the same type of bread, including

shraak, which is like *marqûq*, and *tabûn*, which is similar to *tannur* but baked in a regular wood-fired oven. As for Turkey, the choice tends to be between *pide*, a long, oval, spongy flatbread, and *lavash* or *yufka*, a cross between *marqûq* and *tannur* that is baked over a flat *saj*. Some regional Turkish bakeries offer a round flat loaf with deep indentations all over the top called *tırmaklı ekmek*, while many sell a fat, baguette-like bread that is used for sandwiches. Iran has three main types, all flat and each reserved for a specific meal. *Nan-e taftun* (similar to *nan-e lavash*) is the most common, a large, thin rectangular loaf that is used to scoop up food or to wrap around cheese and herbs or kebabs at lunch or dinner. *Nan-e barbari*, a thicker loaf resembling Turkish *pide* but made thinner and much larger, is normally eaten for breakfast, with cheese and omelettes or jam and butter. There is a sweet version made with milk and a little sugar which is served at teatime. My favourite is *nan-e sangak*, a large flat loaf made with a mixture of white and wholewheat flour and marked with distinctive indentations on the bottom as a result of being baked in a wood-fired oven lined with pebbles. It is found in *dizi* restaurants where they specialise in one meat and vegetable stew served in individual containers called *dizi*.

Each neighbourhood has at least one bakery, which is always mobbed just before mealtimes by customers eager to buy fresh bread to eat with their meals. The neighbourhood bakeries are also where people who do not have an oven bring their food to be cooked. Nowadays this applies more in small towns and villages

but it can still be seen in large cities too. Not so long ago I stopped at lunchtime at a bakery in Gaziantep in south-eastern Turkey and noticed people collecting baked dishes that had been lined up in the window on the slats where loaves are normally spread to cool. One man walked away with a fabulous-looking dish full of anchovies while a woman picked up a baking dish brimming with the Turkish equivalent of ratatouille. I also saw a man bring in a dish of marinated chicken pieces wedged between vegetables to be cooked for the family meal that night.

Throughout the Levant the accent is on seasonality with cooks rarely using produce that is out of season. Meat is almost always an adjunct to vegetables rather than the other way round; it is only in dishes such as *kibbeh* or *kafta* or when it is being grilled that meat takes centre stage. Even then, grilled meat is always served with a mound of fresh herbs and salads to add freshness. And in almost all cooked dishes, especially one-pot meals, the ratio of meat to vegetables, grains or pulses is smaller. In winter, when people didn't have easy access to transport or refrigeration, and with insufficient grazing to maintain their flocks, they ate or cooked with preserved meat (*qawarma*, a kind of confit of minced lamb). In summer, when there is bountiful produce, cooks have always made sure they don't let any of it go to waste, preserving it – usually by drying or pickling – to use during the fallow winter months.

Anissa's maternal grandmother and aunt in their kitchen in Beirut.

In fact, there is a strong philosophy of no waste throughout the Levant. I still remember watching with fascination as my mother and grandmother prepared stuffed aubergines or courgettes, marvelling at their dexterity as they cored the vegetables and how careful they were not to waste anything. Once they had loosened the core inside each aubergine, they would gently squeeze it

out in one piece and lay it on the bottom of the pan in which they cooked the vegetables. Once cooked, the stuffed vegetables would be arranged on a serving platter and the juicy cores gently scooped out to serve on the side. My mother and grandmother were less careful with the courgette cores, however, which they chopped up and squeezed dry to use in frittatas. I'm sure that if they could have thought of a way to use the stalks, they would have. My aunt in Syria was just as frugal, using every scrap of food, and when she couldn't incorporate leftovers into a dish or make one out of them, she fed them to her cows or chickens. Sustainable living long before it became a buzzword.

But the philosophy of no waste is not the only reason why you should want to explore the food of the Levant. It really fits in with contemporary life being naturally healthy, economical, and on the whole simple to prepare. Some readers may wonder at all the specialist ingredients, but given today's interest in global cooking, you will find most of these on supermarket shelves. Admittedly what is available in supermarkets may not be the best of its kind, but with Lebanese and Turkish cuisine becoming more and more popular, specialist shops offering a range of different and better-quality brands are popping up everywhere, not to mention online stores.

Another appealing aspect of Levantine cuisine is the vegetarian repertoire, which is both large and exciting thanks to the bountiful produce of the region and the wide range of vegetable dishes cooked in olive oil, the main fat used in cooking.

Known in Arabic as *bil-zeyt* and in Turkish as *zeytinyağlı*, these are usually served as starters although they are also eaten as a main course by Christians during Lent and on Friday when good Christians abstain from eating meat.

And because the diet is vegetable-based, with meat playing a supporting role, you can produce a beautiful meal on a modest budget. You can also use minced meat without worrying about appearing cheap because minced meat provides the basis of some of the most elegant Levantine dishes. No self-respecting cook would buy it ready-minced, however. Instead, he/she will instruct the butcher to prepare a choice cut of meat, skinning it and trimming it of fat before mincing it to just the right degree.

It's true that some dishes like stuffed vegetables or *kibbeh* are time-consuming to prepare, but many others like dips or even flatbreads are simple to make, and with today's accent on casual eating what better than a meal made up of mezze dishes to enjoy with your family and/or friends. A proper mezze spread remains the preserve of restaurants, but you can still whip up an impressive mezze at home by preparing three or four dishes yourself – a dip, a salad, a savoury pastry and a vegetable cooked in olive oil and tomatoes, perhaps also some grilled chicken wings – then supplement the spread with shop-bought items like feta cheese drizzled with olive oil and sprinkled with fresh or dried herbs, toasted nuts (or fresh when they are in season), olives, crudités and bread of course. Much more convivial than a regular three-course meal. To finish, you can

offer an amazing assortment of baklava or a sweet you have made yourself, although Levantines rarely conclude their meals with a sweet dessert, however fond they are of them – and they are famous for their sweet tooth. They normally end the meal with coffee or tea and fruit, reserving sweets to enjoy with more coffee or tea in between meals either on their own or when they have visitors.

Another advantage is that many of the dishes can be prepared well ahead of time and either served at room temperature – a very common way of serving most vegetarian dishes – or reheated to serve on the day, which makes Levantine food ideal for contemporary cooks with busy lives.

The Levant is changing fast, both because of the spread of modern technology and because of the Arab Spring, which in Syria has tragically led to the killing of thousands and the destruction of much of the country. I have not been back since the beginning of the uprising, which sadly morphed into a civil war owing to the government's brutality and intransigence – their refusal to accept that people would want to liberate themselves from a repressive regime. One day I will return, although when I do I fear I may not find many of the people I describe in this book. Perhaps even some culinary traditions will have vanished too. This happened when I returned to Lebanon after the long civil war that tore the country apart. Other countries have escaped such violence and destruction, but things are changing elsewhere too. Iran is now an Islamic republic suffering under

the weight of strict sanctions, while Turkey and Jordan are developing at great speed. Meanwhile, Palestine is being eroded and may eventually exist only in name. All these changes make it even more pressing for me to record Levantine culinary traditions that have either disappeared or are at risk of disappearing.

A sexy ambulant greengrocer in Ouzai in Beirut, Lebanon.

When I started out in adult life, cooking was the last thing I

wanted to do, but this book, which brings together my favourite recipes from the Levant, is in a way the culmination of my liberation from my former attitude to cooking which I equated with being domesticated. It includes stories from my childhood and youth growing up in Lebanon and Syria as well as anecdotes from my culinary travels throughout the region. I hope these accounts will inspire you to cook the dishes and visit the region itself, although you may have to wait before you visit Syria, and even Iran is not the easiest place to travel in, especially if you are a woman. The other countries I mention here are safe, however, and definitely worth exploring if you haven't done so already.

Tasting the food in situ and seeing the ingredients in the markets – the vibrant spices and mounds of fresh produce – will make you appreciate the different cuisines of the Levant even more. All of which brings me to say a few words about the ingredients needed for the recipes. We are all aware now about the difference the quality of ingredients makes to a dish, especially if it is one that you haven't made before. Many of the essential ingredients that I call for in the recipes will last in your kitchen cupboard and I would urge you to source them carefully to achieve the best results.

I would also recommend you follow the recipe carefully too. I still remember, when tabbuleh became fashionable, how many recipes advocated soaking the burghul. I couldn't understand why cookbook writers would advise such a step as we normally rinse and drain the burghul and use it straight away. Later, I

developed my own method of letting the burghul sit after rinsing and draining so that it fluffs up and absorbs just the right amount of dressing. Then I realised that the soaking instructions were because the writers were using coarse-grade burghul which we reserve for cooking only, using the fine-grade variety that doesn't need any soaking for salads and *kibbeh*. In fact, soaking fine-grade burghul makes it mushy. This is only one example but it illustrates the importance of sourcing the ingredients properly. So, go to a specialist store, buy the best you can afford, having read the recipe carefully, and you will be rewarded with superior results that will impress your family and friends.

And finally a word about the transliteration and spelling of foreign terms. There are many different ways of transliterating Arabic and, browsing online or looking through other books, you will see different spellings for the same word or recipe name. I have relied both on a classic form of transliteration and a phonetic one to transcribe words as I would say them in Arabic, whereas I have used only the classic transliteration for Iranian. The Turkish alphabet has been used for words in Turkish.

Anissa Helou

London, February 2013

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.