

SEPTEMBER OCTOBER 2021

AramcoWorld





6 Woman of the Steppe, Pride of the Nation

Written by **Piney Kesting**

Photographed by **Islam Utegenov**

Born in 1893 in a village near Kazakhstan's border with Russia, Akkagaz Doszhanova in 1922 became the first woman from her homeland to graduate from a medical university in the Soviet Union. Over the decade that followed, she advocated for women's access to education and health care, as well as famine relief and rural health care, until her death from disease, perhaps contracted in the course of her profession, at age 39. Pioneer, role model, heroine—these are the words used to describe her in Kazakhstan today. Yet her legacy was almost another casualty of Soviet purges of the late 1930s. Her descendants and historians uncover her story.

12 Rust and Dreams on the Beirut-Damascus Railroad

Written by **Zina Hemady and Norbert Schiller**

Photographed by **Norbert Schiller**

Built with a third, toothed rail to help it over the mountains, the railroad between the capitals was a world-class engineering feat of the late 19th century. It ran for 80 years, and hopes for its revival may yet be gathering steam.

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We distribute *AramcoWorld* in print and online to increase cross-cultural understanding by broadening knowledge of the histories, cultures and geography of the Arab and Muslim worlds and their global connections.

FRONT COVER Posing for this snapshot in early 1975, train driver Assad Namrud, left, drove his last run the following year. Now 93, Namrud is the last living driver of the Beirut-Damascus railroad. Photo: Train/Train / Norbert Schiller.

BACK COVER When the world's largest airship of its time overflew the Giza Pyramid Complex on April 11, 1931, Mohammedani Ibrahim, whose camerawork in his later years reached beyond archeology, was there to record the historic moment. Photo by Mohammedani Ibrahim / Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



20 The Sweetness of My Middle Eastern Vegan Kitchen

Written by **Beliz Tecirli**
Art by **Matthew Bromley**

From hummus to harira to olive oil, ever since the dawn of agriculture, the Middle East has offered delicious, healthy, environmentally low-impact foodways that honor tradition while embracing innovation.

26 Egyptology's Eloquent Eye

Written by **Dianna Wray**
Photographs by **Mohammedani Ibrahim / Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**

As a young man in 1906, Mohammedani Ibrahim joined the work crew of US archeologist George Reisner, who used cameras to record systematically what shovels and picks were unearthing. Ibrahim mastered the technology, and over 30 years he made more than 9,000 exceptionally artful images.

34 Spice Migrations: Cumin

Written by **Jeff Koehler**
Art by **Linda Dalal Sawaya**

Aromatically sharp, earthy and haylike, cumin is essential in cuisines from Asia to Latin America. It is also one of the world's oldest spices, one that has served as a remedy, a seasoning and a commodity for nearly 4,000 years.

 **40 EVENTS**  **Online LEARNING CENTER**

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FIRST LOOK

Mi Leu, Ma Villo, Provençal (My Eyes, My Town, in Provence)

Photographs by Rebecca Marshall

One day I encountered a photo of a man looking through a car window as sunlight reflected his view of the nearby cityscape. Soon afterward, I began this portrait series, of which four images are shown here, in my hometown of Vence, near Nice, France. I photographed residents in moments of daily life while looking through glass, and I added further perspective with interviews. It was a challenge to create such multilayered narrative portraits, especially as I was determined to avoid digital retouching. The area before the glass had to be in deep shadow for the reflected scene to be visible. The reflected scene, in turn, had to be extremely bright. My subjects had to hold the glass in a precise position while excluding me, the camera, and my assistant holding the softbox flash that provided supplementary light.

—Rebecca Marshall
rebecca-marshall.com
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TOP LEFT "When I was little, I used to sit by the window at night and look at the moon for ages. I was born with an organ malformation and had eight operations before I was 6 years old. I'm still a bit of a dreamer ... outdoors, in the town's open spaces, I feel free."
—Hugo, 16

TOP RIGHT "The medieval town center is pretty. There are lots of shortcuts when you know your way around, but I don't like coming here on my own. The streets are empty and dark, and I feel afraid. I'm learning judo. It's good to be strong."
—Mathilde, 11

BOTTOM LEFT "I lived the first 20 years of my life in this street, and I loved it. All the kids used to play together in the street, on bikes, on roller skates, while our grandparents sat around keeping an eye on us. At Eid and Easter, all our neighbors had big communal meals together."
—Nadia, 42

BOTTOM RIGHT "My identity as Mediterranean comes before my identity as French, and Vence is a Mediterranean town to me. I feel I have more in common with a Tunisian than a Parisian. We share the same chat, the same laughter, the same light."
—Anthony, 33





FLAVORS

Rice with Carrots and Raisins (Kabuli Palaw)

Recipe by
Farida Ayubi

Description by
Durkhanai Ayubi

Photograph by
Alicia Taylor

This beautiful and balanced rice is Afghanistan's national dish.

In a time before the convenience of julienne slicers and store-bought peeled and slivered nuts, kabuli palaw was time-consuming and elaborate to prepare and was reserved primarily for ceremonial events. These days, although it takes less time to make, it still commands reverence. The delicate blend of spices and a crowning glory of glistening carrots, raisins and nuts give kabuli palaw pride of place among Afghan rice dishes.

(Serves 4–6)

For the palaw

½ cup (125 milliliters)
sunflower oil

2 medium yellow onions,
finely diced

500 grams (1 pound
2 ounces) diced boneless
lamb leg

3 cups (600 grams) sella
basmati rice, soaked for
2 to 3 hours

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground
cardamom

For The Topping

2 cups (500 milliliters)
sunflower oil

2 medium carrots, trimmed,
peeled and cut into thin
matchsticks

1 heaped cup (170 grams)
raisins or golden raisins

1 heaped tablespoon slivered
almonds

1 heaped tablespoon slivered
pistachios

2 teaspoons white sugar

1 teaspoon ground
cardamom

Salt

To prepare the palaw rice, add the oil and onion to a pressure cooker pan over high heat and fry for 5 minutes, or until golden brown. Add the lamb and stir occasionally for 5 minutes, or until the meat is browned and sealed. Add 4 ¼ cups (1 liter) hot water and a heaped tablespoon of salt, place the lid on the pressure cooker and bring to high pressure. Cook at high pressure for 15 minutes, then carefully release the pressure to remove the lid. Using a slotted spoon, take out the meat (which should be lovely and tender) and set aside. Reserve the stock to flavor the rice.

Bring 10 cups (2.5 liters) water to a boil in a large pot. Meanwhile, drain excess water from the rice, add it to the boiling water with 1 tablespoon salt and cook for 6 to 8 minutes or until the rice is parboiled and the grains look like they have doubled in length.

Drain the rice in a colander and return to the pot. Pour the meat stock over the rice, then add the cumin, cardamom and 1 tablespoon salt to the

mixture. Using a large, flat, slotted spoon, known to Afghans as a *kafgeer*, mix gently. With the *kafgeer*, create a well in the center of the rice and place the lamb in the well. Cover the meat with rice and place the lid on the pot. Cook over high heat until steam escapes from under the lid, then reduce the heat to very low and cook for 20 minutes.

For the topping, heat the oil in a frying pan over high heat until shimmering. Add the carrots and fry for 4 to 5 minutes, or until slightly softened. Remove with a slotted spoon and set aside in a bowl. Add the raisins to the oil and fry for 3 minutes, or until they are plump and float to the surface. Remove with a slotted spoon and add to the bowl with the carrots. Add the nuts, sugar and cardamom to the bowl and mix gently.

Using the *kafgeer*, layer the rice and lamb onto a large serving platter, creating a heap. Liberally spoon over the topping and serve immediately.

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**Parwana: Recipes
and Stories From an
Afghan Kitchen**

Durkhanai Ayubi
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Freelance food writer and restaurateur **Durkhanai Ayubi** is involved in day-to-day responsibilities of two family-run eateries in Adelaide, Australia: Parwana and Kutchi Deli Parwana. She has written for several international newspapers and websites. Daughter of Afghani refugees Zelmani and Farida Ayubi, she tells her family's story from her own perspective while passing along memories and recipes from her parents. *Parwana* is her first book, and it won the 2021 Art of Eating Prize.





WOMAN OF THE STEPPE PRIDE OF THE NATION

WRITTEN BY PINEY KESTING | PHOTOGRAPHED BY ISLAM UTEGENOV

In the fall of 1937, Alimgirey Yershin gathered his late wife’s personal belongings from their home in the capital of Kazakhstan, Alma-ata (now Almaty). In fear and with a heavy heart, he destroyed all but two items: an antique porcelain dish and a small wooden table with a drawer designed for medical instruments. His wife, Dr. Akkagaz Doszhanova, a medical pioneer and women’s advocate, had succumbed five years earlier,

at age 39—some who were close to her said to tuberculosis, while others said to malaria or some other disease contracted during one of her rural home visits.

A few months before this, Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin had effected Operational Order No. 00447, initiating what became known as the Great Purge. The order authorized “repression operations” against landowning peasants, “criminals and counter-revolutionary elements.” Two

weeks later a supplemental order added families of “traitors to the motherland.” The orders did not gloss their intent: to “eradicate once and for all” writers, thinkers and scholars along with any spouse—like Yershin.

“The entire thinking part of society—public and political active figures—was subject to repression,” says Dinara Assanova, founder of the Women of Kazakhstan virtual museum and a doctoral candidate

in women's studies at the National Pedagogical University in Almaty.

Throughout Kazakhstan, one of the USSR's five Soviet Central Asian republics, men and women were arrested by the thousands, often at night, sent to work camps, imprisoned, and many were executed. Because Doszhanova advocated for medical progress and women's rights—especially for the right to education—Yershin worried that her activities could risk drawing the government's eye to him and their 11-year-old son, Shakhbaz.

Assanova surmises

Doszhanova knew all along that her public service carried political risks. "Were people afraid? Undoubtedly. Did Doszhanova continue her career? Yes, undoubtedly. ... [But] she considered it her duty to serve society," Assanova says.

Doszhanova succeeded in her brief lifetime in becoming the



OPPOSITE In 1922, friends and former members of the Alash Party assembled for a photo to celebrate the graduation of Akkagaz Doszhanova (second row, center) from the Faculty of Medicine at Turkestan University in Tashkent (now in Uzbekistan) where Doszhanova became the first Kazakh woman from the Soviet Union to earn a higher degree in medicine. **ABOVE** In her home in Almaty, Kazakhstan, Doszhanova's granddaughter Aizhan Yershina proudly maintains a shelf of family photos that includes a portrait of her grandmother as a young woman taken from a 1913 photo, **LOWER**, that shows Doszhanova flanked by classmates at the time of her graduation from secondary school at the Women's Gymnasium of Orenburg.

first Kazakh woman in the whole of Central Asia to graduate from a Soviet university with a degree in medicine. She dedicated her efforts both to her profession and to her work as a social activist. Although this put her at the forefront of early Soviet modernization efforts, Doszhanova, under the guardianship of her elder brother Sagyndyk Doszhanov, a noted educator, and through her circle of friends, became personally acquainted with members of the Alash Party, a constitutional democratic party and liberation movement that advocated equal treat-

ment of Kazakhs. It was Doszhanova's connection to Alash, which had been abruptly dismantled in 1920 by the Soviet government, that worried Yershin almost 20 years later in 1937. He knew former Alash members were being arrested. In the end he was spared, but the fear never lifted, and for the rest of his days,





he spoke rarely of his wife.

Born in 1893, Doszhanova grew up in a Kazakh aul (village, nomadic encampment), near Borte, a large settlement outside the city of Aktobe in northwestern Kazakhstan, not far from the border with what was then tsarist Russia. As the daughter of cattle breeders from the Kete Kazakh tribe, she was expected to marry by age 16, and there would be no opportunity for formal education. These expectations, however, would begin to change when in 1902 or 1903 (the date is uncertain) her mother passed away and, a few years later, her father died, too. Her brother was at the time 27, and he assumed guardianship of his sister, according to physician and author Zhibek Qangtarbaeva, who in 1974 wrote the only known biographical account of Doszhanova. Simply titled *Aqqag'az Doszhanova*, it was written under a commission from the Kazakh SSR government.

Doszhanov, whom Qangtarbaeva calls “an educated, progressive man of his time,” was a certified teacher whose affiliations in higher-education circles aligned him with 19th-century Kazakh pedagogue and educator Ibray Altynsarin, whose progressive efforts influenced Doszhanov’s career and helped him open schools in auls and towns throughout western Kazakhstan. Following their mother’s death, Qangtarbaeva wrote,



Due to 71 years of “Russification” from 1920 to 1991, Doszhanova’s descendants have only in recent years begun to understand her impact on medical and social reforms throughout Central Asia. Discussing the family records they have compiled are, **ABOVE**, from left to right, Doszhanova’s daughter-in-law, Ainakul Yershina, grandson Shingiz Yershin, grandniece Altyn S. Isaeva, and eldest granddaughter, Aizhan Yershina. **LEFT** A portrait from 1927 in Tashkent shows Doszhanova, then aged 34 or 35, with her husband, Alimgirey Yershin, their son, Sakhbaz, and two nieces; Doszhanova lived five more years.

Doszhanov recognized his sister’s intellect and encouraged her to enroll in the local Tatar school. Doszhanov supported his then teenage sister’s move to Orenburg in western Kazakhstan, where he himself had attended secondary school, to enroll at the city’s Women’s Gymnasium. In 1913 Doszhanova graduated with honors, and the local newspaper, the *Orenburg Vestnik*, esteemed her accomplishment enough to publish an article about it.

Just a year earlier, in 1912, Doszhanov petitioned the regional Russian governor-general for a scholarship to allow Doszhanova to attend medical courses for women in Moscow. She arrived at Moscow University just before World War I broke out. Nearly a year later, she received an order from the Sisters of Mercy, run by the grand duchy of Russia, to immediately serve as a nurse on the

AKKAGAZ DOSZHANOVA AND THE ALASH PARTY

Claiming a name that harked back both to Mongol military units and to Kazakh legends, the liberation movement known as the Alash Party took inspiration also from the writings of latter-19th-century poet and philosopher Abai Qunanbaiulu, who reawakened cultural identity by articulating *Qazaqtyq* (Kazakhness), rooted in *adab*, or adherence to social norms of steppe culture as taught by elders.

Although Kazakh intellectuals and writers officially established the Alash Party in 1917 as a liberation movement, it originally grew out of opposition to imperial rule in the 1800s as a response to the “Russification” of the Turkic nomads. The party formed to preserve Kazakh identity while advancing education.

“The Alash Party built a foundation in the 1920s that is the basis for present day Kazakhstan,” explains Kulpash Mirzamuratovna, associate professor at the Eurasian University in Nur-Sultan,

Kazakhstan. “Their goals envisioned an autonomous nation, and they promoted ideas about education and ethnic identity that are being implemented today.”

In December 1917, encouraged by the fall of the tsarist government, the Alash Party announced the formation of the first Kazakh autonomous state: Alash Orda (Horde). Alikhan Bukeikhanov, a leading intellectual, was named president, and a provisional government of 25 members was established, with a new capital located in Alash Qalay, now Semey in northeastern

Kazakhstan. Despite widespread local support, the new Bolshevik government in Russia dismantled Alash Orda in November 1919.

Akkagaz Doszhanova “played an active role in Alash Orda’s attempts to establish its own state,” explains Mirzamuratovna, whose research of the Alash Party and the role of women in the movement is what led her to Doszhanova. “She was considered a role model in her lifetime, and she is still a role model for us today.”

front lines near Poland, where she and her fellow students spent the next two years.

The Moscow she returned to in 1917 was in the throes of the political turmoil that culminated the following year in the October Revolution. It was during this time that Doszhanova gained recognition as an activist in the communities of Muslims, particularly Tatars, who hold cultural and linguistic ties to Kazakhs and whose ways and concerns Doszhanova knew from her primary school days. Qangtarbaeva notes that during a February 1917 meeting in the Tatar Slobodka (district), Doszhanova, speaking to both members of the Society of Tatar Students and the Moscow Muslim Student Society, gave an impassioned speech, in Russian. Later that year, Ahmet Zaki Validi, head of the Tatar liberation movement, described Doszhanova as “one of the great women among the Eastern Turks,” an identifier that would stick with her.

“Doszhanova was a strong motivator and a role model for the women of Soviet Central Asia in her lifetime,” Assanova says, noting how Doszhanova’s reputation continued to grow during this time also as an advocate for the rights of women.

In May 1917 she became the only female delegate to the All Russian Congress of Muslims, where she helped represent the Turgai Regional Congress of Kazakhs. Addressing the congress, she spoke in favor of expanded roles for women in society and petitioned for women’s rights to education. She continued to press these topics in numerous articles she penned for Kazakh

magazines including *Aiel tendigi* (Women’s equality) and *Zhas azamat* (Young citizen).

“Our family couldn’t [fully] comprehend the contribution she made to the history of Kazakhstan until we began to actively search for information,” explains Indira Zankina, in her early 30s, and who, as Doszhanova’s youngest granddaughter, lovingly refers to her as *apa* (grandmother). It wasn’t until later in life that Zankina and other family members began to grasp the extent of Doszhanova’s impact also on medical





At the Aktobe Regional Museum of History and Local Lore, a display highlights major Kazakh historic figures of the late tsarist and early Soviet periods. The display features the 1913 photo of Doszhanova and her two classmates from the Women’s Gymnasium of Orenburg.

and social reforms in Central Asia.

Doszhanova’s eldest granddaughter, Aizhan Yershina, now in her 60s, recalls that their father, Shakhbaz Yershin, often shared family stories of his mother, who died when he was 6 years old. Although he knew her as a doctor, he remembered her more as a kind and loving mother.

“But the details of her life and work were not discussed in our extended family circle,” Yershina adds. “I was 11 or 12 years old and found a mention of my grandmother’s name in a 1920s publication of *Tar zhol, tayg’aq keshu* [The narrow road, the slippery crossing], a book we had to read in history class,” she says, recalling the semiautobiographical account of the struggle for independence by Saken Seyfullin, a Kazakh writer executed during the Great Purge.

It was during the same period the book was first published, well after the revolution, in 1920, that Doszhanova enrolled at Tomsk Medical Institute, now Siberian State Medical University. The following year she sought out an apprenticeship in the village of Kazakhstan’s national poet Abai Qunanbaiulu,

In addition to free nursing and midwife classes, in Tashkent Dozhanova treated thousands of children from famine-stricken areas.

an experience that exposed her to the widespread problems of healthcare access for rural women and children. In August 1921 she moved to Tashkent, capital of Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (now Uzbekistan), where she graduated with honors from the Faculty of Medicine at Turkestan University. She was among the first handful of young

women from Central Asia to receive the faculty’s medical degree, and the December 18, 1922, edition of *Pravda*, the Soviet state newspaper, lauded her achievement.

Among the many people who sent congratulations was prominent Kazakh writer Mukhtar Auezov, who hosted a gathering in her honor. The governing Council of People’s Commissars of the Turkestan Republic also created a scholarship to commemorate the achievement for future female medical students, and it issued a prestigious resolution awarding her a prize of 100,000 Soviet rubles—today roughly equal to US\$31,000—to equip her medical office.

Doszhanova continued to work in medicine and for social causes in Tashkent. She collaborated with Gulsum

In 2016 West Kazakhstan State Medical University in Aktobe honored Doszhanova's legacy by bestowing her name on its new concert hall and erecting a bust in its plaza. A nearby street also carries her name. She remains the first female physician of her time to be celebrated in this way.

Asfendiyarova, Russia's first Kazakh female doctor before the Revolution, to offer free nursing and midwife classes to women at the Children's City Hospital. She also dedicated much time to treating thousands of relocated, orphaned children from famine-stricken areas in the Volga and Ural regions, as well as Central Asia, often waiting at stations to greet train cars, each filled with as many as 1,500 children. "Despite her busy schedule ... Aqqag'az never forgot to serve others, to do good for others," wrote Qangtarbaeva, citing Russian physician Isaac Ivanovich Buchatsky, who also worked with Doszhanova at the Tashkent orphanages. She follows this with a quote from K. Yersh-in, who grew up an orphan under Doszhanova's care: "She took great care of us. ... Malaria, some with tuberculosis, others with scabies. [Doszhanova] paid special attention to each of them ... until they fully recovered."

In the course of her work in Tashkent, she met Alimgirey Yersh-in who, though recently graduated with a teaching certificate, had been appointed in 1920 to lead the city's department overseeing orphanages. Ten of these, Qangtarbaeva noted, were newly opened, and he was responsible as well for the city's boarding schools. The two married in 1925.

Today Doszhanova's descendants take pride in her legacy, but they have found discovering details about her life difficult. Kazakhstan's 71-year-long "Russification," from 1920 to 1991, led to the destruction of many documents and archival materials. Kazakhstan's withdrawal from the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, however, its subsequent declaration of independence in 1991 and the country's 2004 Cultural Heritage Program have allowed much of the country's rich history, including the life of Doszhanova, to come to light.

In the 1990s Doszhanova's son and granddaughters, along with other family members, welcomed archivists from the Aktobe Regional Museum of Local History when they came to the family with additional research they had uncovered about Doszhanova. Years later, family members and local museum officials approached Aktobe Mayor Saparbek Berdibekov about naming a street in her honor. In 2016 they joined local officials and residents in naming a new building in the West Kazakhstan State Medical University after her and in unveiling a bronze bust standing in front of it, along with dedicating a street named in her honor.

A. T. Taizhanov, a professor at the Medical University who



"[Akkagaz] Doszhanova was a strong motivator and a role model for the women of Soviet Central Asia in her lifetime."

—DINARA ASSANOVA

published one of the first comprehensive articles on Doszhanova in 2017, points to her achievements during a period of great inequity for both women and Kazakhs in general. Doszhanova, because of her achievements, serves as the perfect role model for young Kazakhs.

"Since independence, Kazakh society has always been interested in national history and in historic figures who have made a great contribution," Taizhanov says. "We view our past through the prism of their deeds. The life and work of personalities such as Ak-

kagaz Doszhanova can become a solid foundation in the formation of a new identity and pride for contemporary Kazakhs." 🌐



Piney Kesting is a Boston-based freelance writer and consultant who specializes in Middle Eastern cultures. **Islam Utegenov** (@utegenov_islam) is an Aktobe-based photographer and videographer who also mentors young athletes as a boxing coach.

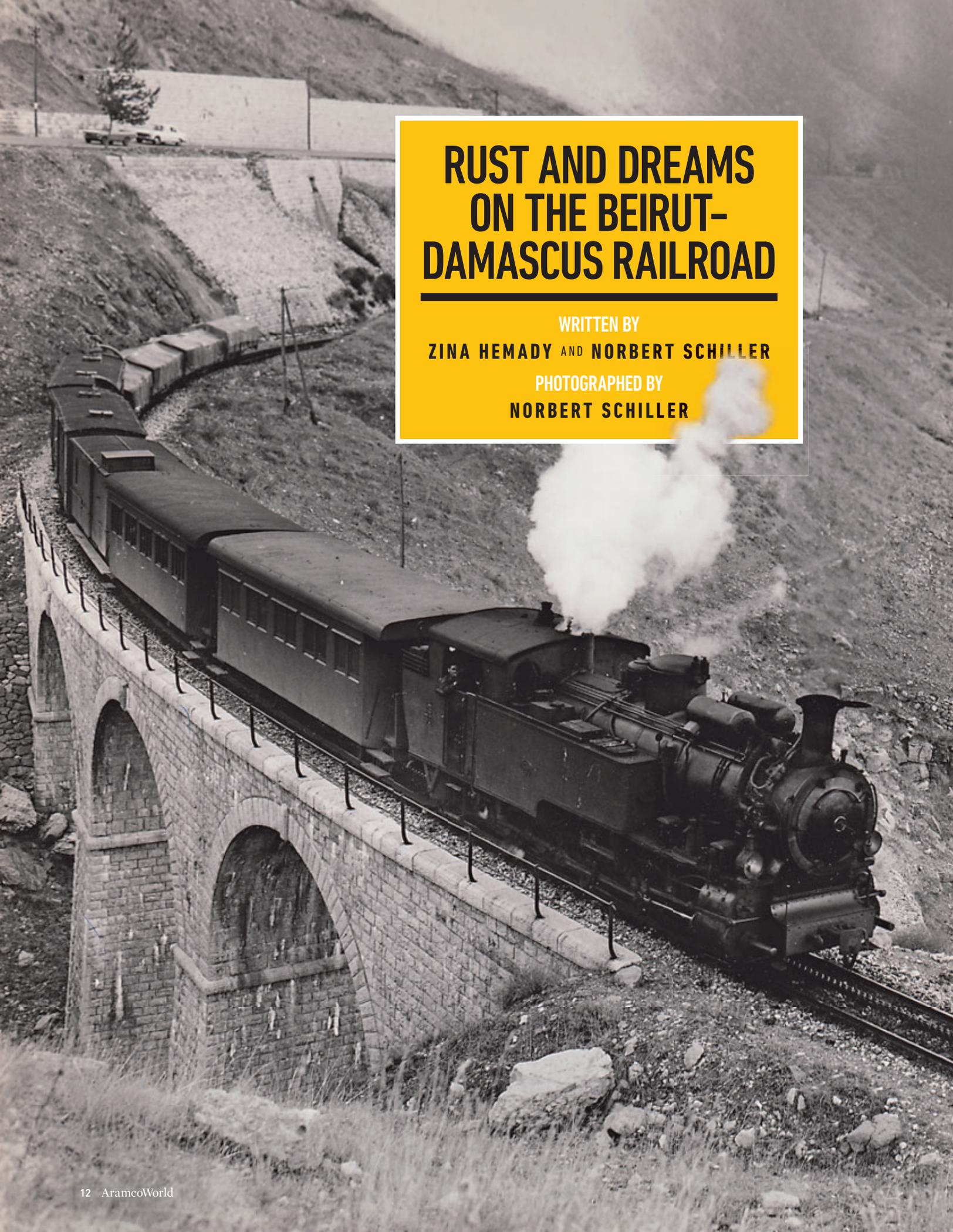


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RUST AND DREAMS ON THE BEIRUT- DAMASCUS RAILROAD

**WRITTEN BY
ZINA HEMADY AND NORBERT SCHILLER**

**PHOTOGRAPHED BY
NORBERT SCHILLER**

Custom designed to travel up and down the daunting slopes of the mountains that separate Beirut and Damascus, the railroad linking what are now the capitals of Lebanon and Syria was a world-class engineering feat of the late 19th century. It was also an economic booster to the eastern Mediterranean region for some eight decades until the Lebanese Civil War forced its closure in the 1970s. What remains is a historic route that last year marked its 125th anniversary.

Though less than 100 kilometers apart on the map, Beirut and Damascus were connected for centuries only by mule paths. Due to the mountains, the journey took three to four days. In 1863 the French paved a road along the route using macadam, or compacted stone, making possible a one-day journey. The road soon became congested.

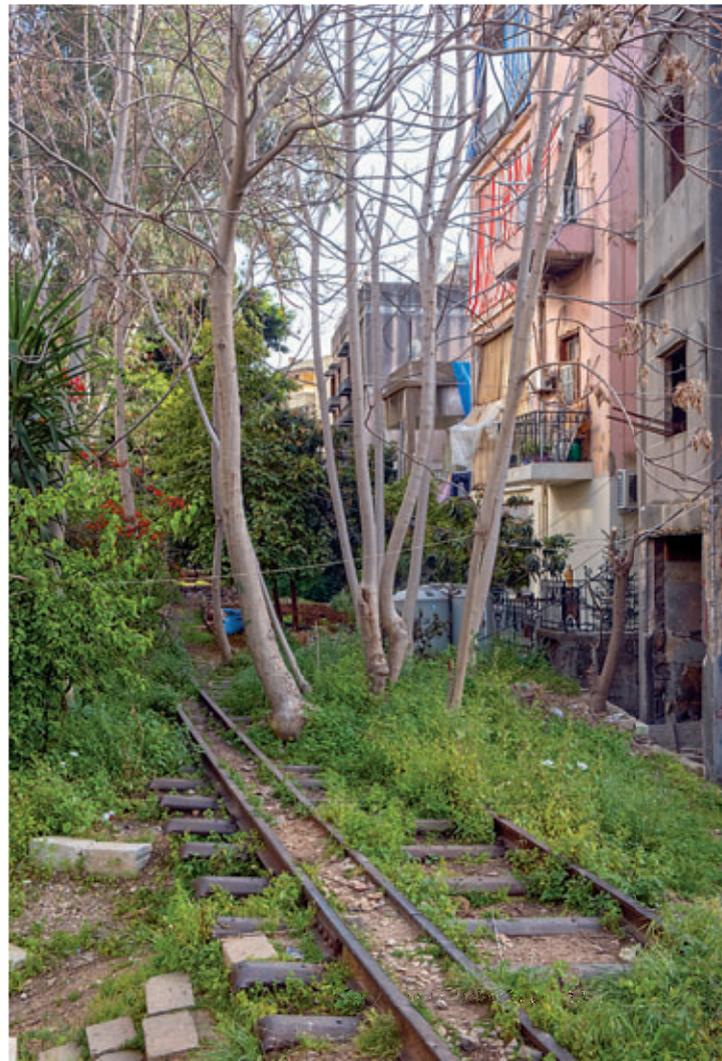
The decision to build a railroad between the cities came in the late 1880s along with plans to expand Beirut's port. Ottoman Sultan Abdel Hamid II gave the railway concession to the French; however, he also granted a similar deal to the British, who were proposing a rival railroad route to Damascus from a different port, Haifa, where they held influence. The French, worried that the British effort could eclipse their aspirations for Beirut, joined with Lebanese commercial leaders to thwart the plan. Funded mainly by French investors, surveys and construction began in 1891. Within four years trains were running, and the British line was never completed.

Inaugurated on August 4, 1895, the Beirut-Damascus railroad became the first major railway in the Levant, preceding the more famous Hijaz Railway by 13 years. The winding, 147-kilometer route took the steam engines just nine hours.

The builders addressed the challenge of the mountains by laying narrow-gauge tracks 1,050 millimeters apart. Where the track became too steep for the iron wheels to keep their grip, they laid a third, toothed rail in the center, with which the locomotive's rack-and-pinion cog system could mesh and provide mechanical traction. Other challenges included shortages of local expertise to operate trains, stations, switches and repair sheds, as well as resistance from busy stagecoach operators.

It did not take long for the railway to become established and vital to other rail lines that helped both passengers and freight reach farther

TOP Photographed near the time the Beirut-Damascus railroad was inaugurated in 1895, Mar Mikhael was the first station after the line's origin at Beirut Port on the Mediterranean Sea. **CENTER** Today the station houses the National Railway and Public Transportation Authority. This photo was made after the station was partially restored from damage suffered in the August 2020 explosion at the port. The city buses parked at left, like the derelict trains at the station, are no longer in use. **RIGHT** For a few hundred meters out of Mar Mikhael station, the railroad tracks were still visible under trees and overgrowth as they pass through what is now a densely populated neighborhood. **OPPOSITE** This photo from the 1960s shows a train descending the eastern side of Mount Lebanon, crossing the stone arches of the Khan Murad bridge, which was destroyed in the 1970s during the Lebanese Civil War. To cross the mountains, the narrow-gauge engines gripped a toothed rail, visible in front of the engine in between the tracks.



into Syria, to Jordan, Turkey and, from there, to Europe. According to historian Fawaz Traboulsi, author of *A History of Modern Lebanon*, by the early 20th century the Beirut port was handling three-fourths of the trade from the Mediterranean Sea to the Syrian interior.

The prosperity lasted until 1976.

“It’s a pity that we lost this train, because the train was not only connecting the Lebanese areas to each other. It was connected to the region, and Lebanon was connected to the world,” says Carlos Naffah, president of Train/Train, an NGO whose name reflects the group’s dual missions of preservation and future revival. When the Lebanese Civil War began, he explains, it took less than a year for the trains to stop operating, and soon the

Last spring, we set out on a series of walks to discover what remains along Lebanon’s 87 kilometers of once-vital railroad.

entire line fell into disrepair. Now most of the rails are gone, looted over the past 45 years by scrap metal profiteers and militias, but most of Lebanon’s 16 stations remain, along with more than two dozen locomotives, train cars and trainyard paraphernalia.

Last spring, we set out on a series of walks to discover what remains along Lebanon’s 87 kilometers of this once-vital railroad. To trace its route in the city, we relied on old diagrams, online maps and our own eyes as we searched out evidence of the crushed stone used for the track bed, castoff railroad spikes, crossing signposts and pieces of rail lying under veneers of asphalt. We began in the neighborhood of Mar Mikhael, home of the first station on the train’s route after its port terminal, which was destroyed in the war.

What we found was far from the kinds of glowing descriptions that pepper travelers’ accounts from bygone times. American author Albert Bigelow Paine, who had written travel books but is best known for his biographies of Mark Twain, in 1910 described departing the city through fields of flowers where “the crimson anemone mingled riotously with a gorgeous yellow flower. ... Never was such a prodigality of bloom.” The Mar Mikhael station was damaged from the catastrophic explosion of ammonium nitrate just a few hundred meters away on August 4, 2020, ironically 125 years to the day after the train’s inaugural trip. Outside the station, silently weathering under canopies of trees and underbrush, stand several old locomotives that were not greatly affected by the blast. The station, which serves as the headquarters of Lebanon’s Railway and Public Transportation Authority (RPTA), has been partially restored.

Following one of few visible stretches of track in Beirut, we saw no wildflowers. There was only the city’s maze of congested streets, concrete apartment blocks and piles of trash. Five kilometers to the southeast, the Furn el Chebbak station proved barely discernible amid shopping malls and new developments. In between, the parts of the railway that had not been devoured by the city were being reclaimed by nature. In some low-income areas, residents had planted vegetable gardens between the iron rails to help offset the current soaring costs of food as the country suffers through one of the worst economic crises since the late 19th century.

It wasn’t until we reached Hadath station, located in a southern suburb nine kilometers on at the base of Mount Lebanon, that we began to reliably follow the train’s route. Back alleys led to side streets and finally up a footpath where the



ABOVE The station at Baabda, 1895. **LEFT** The building became the residence of the family of a former railroad employee.

RIGHT After Chouit-Araya station, photographed here in the early 1970s, the track reached its steepest incline—so steep the train had to be switched to reverse up the five kilometers to Aley, where it was switched back to run forward. **CENTER** Today vines cover much of Chouit-Araya's station and water tower.



route begins its ascent toward the next stop at Baabda. Soon we were looking back on a view of Beirut and beyond to the Mediterranean.

It was on the climb out of Hadath that the grade steepened to exceed 25 percent, or about 12 degrees, which was slope enough to require a locomotive equipped with a rack rail system. Manufactured by the Swiss Locomotive and Machine Works, based in Winterthur, Switzerland, this system's technical name was rack-and-adhesion: Rack meant a toothed cogwheel that dropped like a gear to engage a similarly toothed middle track; adhesion meant simple, friction-based traction—the way trains normally travel.

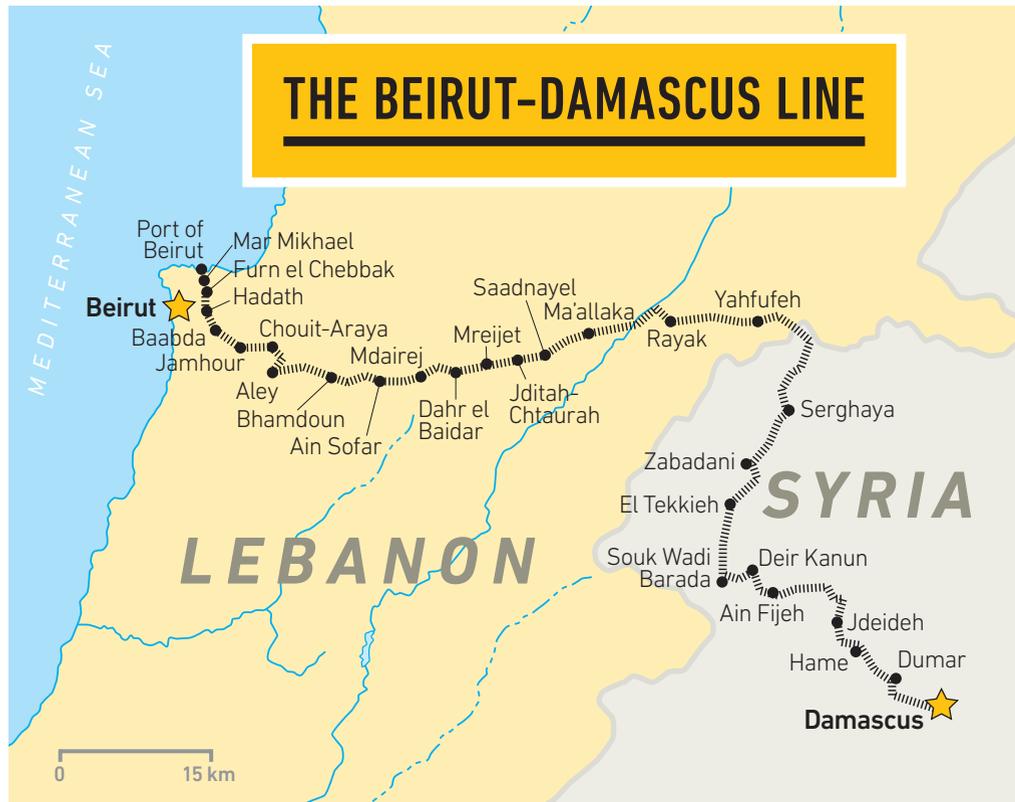
Whereas the Swiss had contributed technical expertise, the French had designed and built the stations. While most in Lebanon are in varying states of ruin, a few have been converted to government offices or even homes for former railroad employees, including those at Baabda and Jamhour, the two stops after Hadath. Faced with lack of funds and more urgent social priorities, little is being done at present to maintain these historic buildings.

The Chouit-Araya station came next. While its structure has suffered the same fate as its counterparts, its location distinguished it. Well outside the city, mountain mist gave the abandoned site, nestled in a fragrant pine forest, a mystical air. The life that thrived decades ago felt like it had been gone only for moments.

From Chouit-Araya the terrain became so steep and narrow the engineers who designed the line had to be creative to allow the train to continue traveling up the mountain. When it became impossible for the locomotive to either go forward or turn sharply, the driver had to reverse the train and switch onto another track that inclined as much as 70 percent, or about 35 degrees. The train traveled this way, in reverse, until it reached the Aley station five kilometers away, where could switch again and move forward.

In Aley, the only trace that remained of the railroad was the station and the water tower. Following the route on foot from the station was difficult, as the tracks had been covered by roads and illegal construction. We found the path by spotting the lines of cypress trees that had been planted near the stations and along the route to prevent erosion along the tracks. The fate of the iron rails here was similar to what has been happening to so many of them in Lebanon: During the civil war, the rails were ripped up and used as barriers, and to this day, they are being stolen for their value as scrap metal.

The railway path continued its ascent to Bhamdoun. If there is a chance of reviving a portion of the railroad, it could begin in this town. The next 25 or so kilometers,





LEFT AND LOWER Built in the 1940s, several cement tunnels, like the one depicted here, helped shield the tracks from snow accumulation.



walked with us there. He sees great potential in reviving the portion linking his hometown of Bhamdoun with Sofar by restoring the tracks and running a “Mountain Express” tourism project that could in time connect other towns and villages in the mountain districts.

“If we were to reestablish this today, how wonderful it will be to let the Lebanese people rediscover a beautiful patch of Lebanese territory,” said Boutros. “The train will energize so many villages along the way because we know that the train brings ecotourism.”

From Bhamdoun to the pass and down the eastern side of Mount Lebanon, in spring wildflowers blanket the slopes in displays of nature worthy of Paine’s description, softening landscapes still scarred by war. Old mansions along the stretch between Bhamdoun and Sofar had been gradually abandoned during the civil war, and then they were ransacked, damaged and many destroyed during the 1983 Mountain War. The Grand Sofar Hotel had served for a time as a barracks for the Syrian army. What remained of these grandiose structures was tattered, deserted except for those recently occupied by refugees from Syria.

From Ain Sofar, the mountain landscape opened as the route ascended above the treeline, heading for the pass at Dahr el Baidar, at 1,506 meters. There we walked through several cement tunnels built in the 1940s to protect the tracks from snow. At Dahr el Baidar, the train passed through a vaulted, 500-meter tunnel that cuts through the mountain.

For Assad Namrud, 93 and the only living train driver in Lebanon, the pass was one he had crossed routinely over his 47-year career. He remembered its challenges well.

“We used to drive into the tunnel in winter and slide on the snow. We would get stuck inside and get asphyxiated from the smoke. So, we covered our mouths with a wet cloth to protect ourselves.” He recalled also the joyful rides from Beirut up to Dahr el Baidar when passengers used to smoke *nargileh* (water pipes) and play the *derbakeh* (goblet drum) as they headed out to enjoy a day in the snow.

Namrud drove his last train in 1976.

He spoke with pride of his engine, number 303S, that he had driven as far as Jordan to the south and Turkey to the north, carrying freight of phosphates, sheep and much else. “I used to tell my assistant to polish the brass to make my machine look shiny. When I drove it up to Dahr el Baidar, it sparkled under the sun, and people stopped to photograph it.”

After walking down the eastern slopes

from Bhamdoun up over the pass at Dahr el Baidar and down to the western edge of the fertile, historic Bekaa Valley, was arguably the most scenic part of the route. During its heyday, it was the several towns along this stretch that had benefited the most, and Aley and Bhamdoun grew into major summer resorts for local and foreign tourists. In Sofar, the Ain Sofar station had been built just across from the Grand Sofar Hotel, which had catered to the glitterati of the Arab world.

Even though most of the tracks were gone, there were few obstacles to following this segment of the line, which became more like a rough walking trail. Naji Boutros, a financier by trade but who maintains he remains a farmer at heart,

“If we were to reestablish this today, how wonderful it will be to let the Lebanese people rediscover a beautiful patch of Lebanese territory.”

—NAJI BOUTROS



of Mount Lebanon, we reached the station at Mreijet, which was in better shape than others for having been restored recently as a film set. Farther down the mountain was the Jditah-Chtaurah station that was only a skeleton. It sat just below the unfinished Pan Arab Highway, a project that has been stalled for years and that, if not revived soon, may start to resemble the abandoned railroad.

Heading out of Chtaurah, long stretches of track reappeared, crossing town centers and running amid village homes. The next stop at Saadnayel had been converted to an outdoor museum and a park with a restored locomotive together with a railway car. And from there the traces of the line ended again for an interval, as the widening of the road between Chtaurah and Zahleh, two major cities in the Bekaa Valley, erased the railway that ran alongside. Near Zahleh, at Ma'allaka, the station had been replaced by a government hospital. All that remained was the old water tower.

From here the train traveled more due east, across the Bekaa Valley to the junction town of Rayak. It had been in Rayak that passengers transferred to a standard adhesion train for the rest of the trip to Damascus, as the grades on the remaining 60 kilometers were gentler, and the rack and its toothed rail was no longer required.

Beginning in 1902, travelers had also been able



TOP The train line, now a paved road, passes near a slope carpeted with spring wildflowers between Bhamdoun and Ain Sofar. The station at Dahr el Baidar, **CENTER AND RIGHT**, was built just below the pass that lies 1,506 meters above the line's origin at Beirut Port.

CENTER: JOHN KNOWELS / TRAIN/TRAIN; OPPOSITE, TOP: RON ZIEL / TRAIN/TRAIN

Following the August 2020 Beirut Port explosion, discussions about railroads may have a new chance.

to change at Rayak to a northbound train headed to Baalbek and its famous Roman ruins. Four years later that line had been extended farther north to the Syrian cities of Homs and Aleppo, and on through Turkey to Istanbul, from where the Orient Express departed for the cities of Europe. As Rayak became a major transit station, the town prospered quickly.

“In a place that was a backwater, a few years after the railway was introduced, we had a souk [market],” explained Train/Train founder Elias Maalouf, who is from Rayak. “Railway workers were taught French to communicate with the French engineers. A railway worker who started as a cleaner could drive a train after eight years. The railway company was like their religion, their *raison d’être*.”



In addition to an elaborate station reflecting its status, Rayak had been home to the region’s largest train repair yard. A foundry produced spare parts, and a workshop serviced the trains. During the Arab Revolt of 1916, as British Colonel T.E. Lawrence and his Arab allies had been blowing up tracks and trains along the Ottoman-run Hijaz

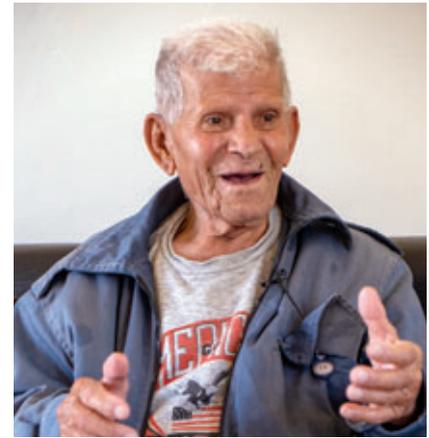
Railway, Rayak had been

supplying the parts to repair them. The town also hosted both German and French airbases at different times, and during World War II the train yard became a repair center for French fighter planes and weaponry. After the Syrian army entered Lebanon in 1976, its soldiers occupied the station and the train yard, turning them into a military base until they withdrew in 2005.

Much of the equipment and spare parts had been looted over the years, but still 22 locomotives made Rayak a veritable museum, all left to the elements, together with train cars choked by the vegetation that covered the compound. Here were 14 of the Swiss-made rack-and-adhesion locomotives, along with six German G8 trains dating from the turn of the 20th century, seized by the French at the end of World War I and transported to Lebanon during the French mandate of 1920-1943.

“The Swiss trains were specially made for our railway lines. The size of the trains was made specially for the Beirut-to-Damascus line. They are unique collection items that deserve to be restored,” declared Maalouf, who has spent 15 years researching the history of railways in Lebanon.

At Rayak our walking journey came to its end. The ongoing conflict in Syria made it impossible even to visit the last stop in Lebanon, Yahfufeh, 10 kilometers from the border. From there the train crossed to Serghaya in rural Syria, on its way to Zabadani, a town



“I used to tell my assistant to polish the brass to make my machine look shiny. When I drove it up to Dahr el Baidar, it sparkled under the sun, and people stopped to photograph it,” recalls Assad Namrud, 93, the last remaining train driver in Lebanon.

CENTER AND LEFT At the now-abandoned Rayak train yard, about 17 kilometers from the Syrian border, Carlos Naffah, president of Train/Train Lebanon, shows how one of the railway’s manual turntables allowed an engine to be switched to another track or turned around. The non-profit organization hopes to revive segments of the Beirut-Damascus line as part of its larger plan for the country’s rail transport and freight future. For now, some 22 locomotives remain in the yard. For decades the Rayak station was also a transfer point for connections on the line north to Baalbek and beyond, into northern Syria, Anatolia and, from there, to Europe.

RIGHT At the line's eastern terminus in Damascus, after 1908 passengers could connect to the Hijaz Railway that ran south to what is now Saudi Arabia. **LOWER RIGHT** When this photo was taken in 2003, a steam engine still sat outside the station. **LOWER** Ever since the Lebanese Civil War, many of the line's rails have been looted by militias and profiteers. One of the sections remaining that also includes the toothed center rail lies between Dahr el Baidar and Mreijet.

at 1,500 meters that had been established as a summer resort by the French and continued to attract local and international Arab tourists until the beginning of the Syrian war in 2011. After seven more stops, during which the train traveled along the Barada River, the main source of water for Damascus, it reached the station in downtown Damascus.

Fares Garabet, 59, remembered riding the train from Damascus to Serghaya as a child with his father, Anton Garabet, who had been a driver on the Syrian segment of the railway. After arriving at Serghaya in the late afternoon, he recalled they would spend the night before the return journey. "I had to wake up at 4 o'clock and saw the train when there was no fire in it. Then they started the fire, and the train came alive. I'll never forget this image," he reminisced.

In a region that has seen more conflict than stability in the past half century, restoring a historical railroad could seem superfluous. Yet following the August 2020 Beirut port catastrophe, discussions about the railroad may have a new chance.

"There is now an opportunity to rebuild the port of Beirut in a better way," says Yarob Badr, Regional Advisor for Transport and Logistics at the Economic and Social Commission



for Western Asia. "There is a need to consider railway connectivity in the port of Beirut which is now missing."

The plan would reconnect the port with the Syrian railway and, from there, to Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula countries. However, he adds, it is essential for Lebanese authorities to act before encroachment on the land along the train's path becomes irreversible. "The railway between the port of Beirut and Damascus gave the port a huge advantage over the port of Haifa," says Badr. "The port of Beirut can still win back its competitiveness. ... If there is a political will, it is now that it should be expressed." 🌐



Zina Hemady is a journalist, writer and editor who has worked for Reuters News Agency and The Associated Press in both Lebanon and Egypt. She has also written and designed curriculum for education at the K-12 level. Her present work focuses on Middle East heritage.

Norbert Schiller (nschiller@photorientalist.org) has been photographing the Middle East and North Africa for three decades and currently serves as the curator for photorientalist.org, dedicated to 19th- and 20th-century photography in those regions. He has worked for the Associated Press and Agence France Press, and has contributed to *Der Spiegel*, *The New York Times*, and *A Million Steps: Discovering the Lebanon Mountain Trail* (2011, Interlink Books).

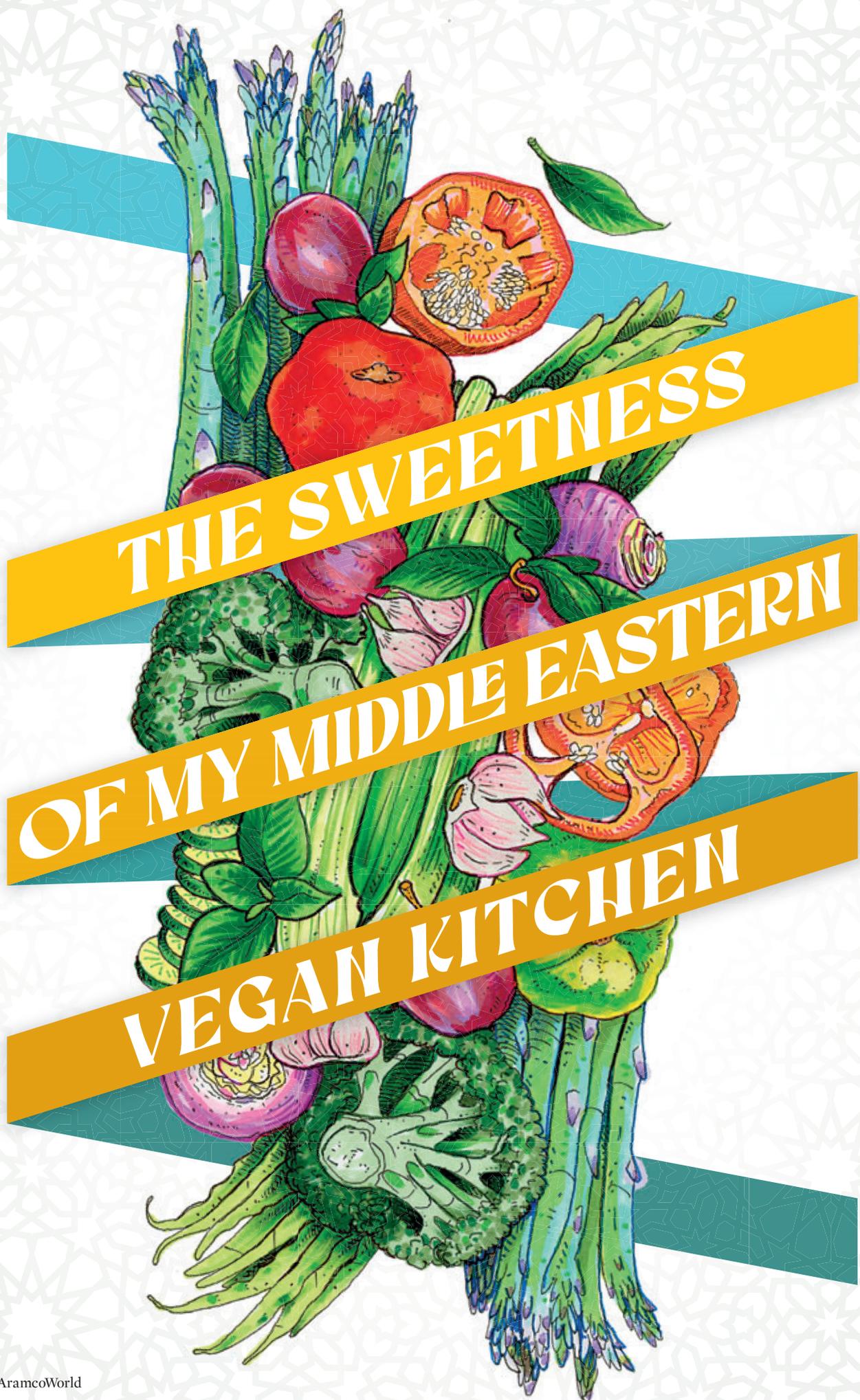


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THE SWEETNESS

OF MY MIDDLE EASTERN

VEGAN KITCHEN

THE DISH IS FAMOUS IN KITCHENS ACROSS THE MIDDLE EAST. MY MOTHER TAUGHT IT TO ME, AND TONIGHT I AM PREPARING IT FOR MY FAMILY. TAZE FASULYE—FRESH BEAN CASSEPOLE—HAS PROVEN TO BE A RICH, NOURISHING COMFORT FOOD AMID DURESS OVER THE PAST YEAR. BUT IN MY KITCHEN, THE BUTTER AND LAMB MY MOTHER USED HAVE BEEN REPLACED BY MY OLIVE OIL AND CHICKPEAS.

Written by **BELIZ TECIRLI** Art by **MATTHEW BROMLEY**

I am far from the only cook in the Middle East choosing to replace dairy, meat and other animal products with plant-based ingredients. The headlines and news features tell me it's a growing trend across this part of the world, too. What once had a reputation for bland flavors and strict rules has become abundant, delicious and popular, especially among the younger generations.

Last year the California-based trade group Plant-Based Foods Association released data showing that plant-based food sales in the United States increased 90 percent over the previous year and were outpacing conventional retail food sales by 35 percent. Across the Middle East and Africa, according to a 2019 report by UK-based Triton Market Research, the meat substitutes market is expected to grow annually over the next six years at a fraction under 10 percent. The same report details the rise in vegan cafes and restaurants in the region that parallels growing consumer access to plant-based food products. This year, Veganity, which claims to be the world's largest vegan restaurant, opened in Dubai with a menu of more than 200 choices.

This trend is especially significant because Middle Eastern and Mediterranean food, the cuisine I grew up on, so often features meat and fish. However, a number of the region's most famous foods have always been plant-based: hummus, the chickpea-based dish that is popularly consumed as a spread, dip or a base for sandwiches; falafel, a classic street food that usually comes as a deep-fried, spiced ball of either ground chickpeas or fava beans; kushari, the Egyptian comfort bowl of lentils, rice, chickpeas and tomato sauce topped with crispy onions; baba ghannouj, grilled eggplant mixed with tahini, olive oil and seasoning topped with pomegranate seeds; and tabbouleh, a salad made of finely chopped tomatoes, mint, onions, burghul and parsley.

As I have attempted over the past year to reimagine my mother's home cooking (and add inventions of my own), I have found it relatively easy to make adaptations. I've also found it's healthy. And perhaps most of all, it's changed the way I experience food:



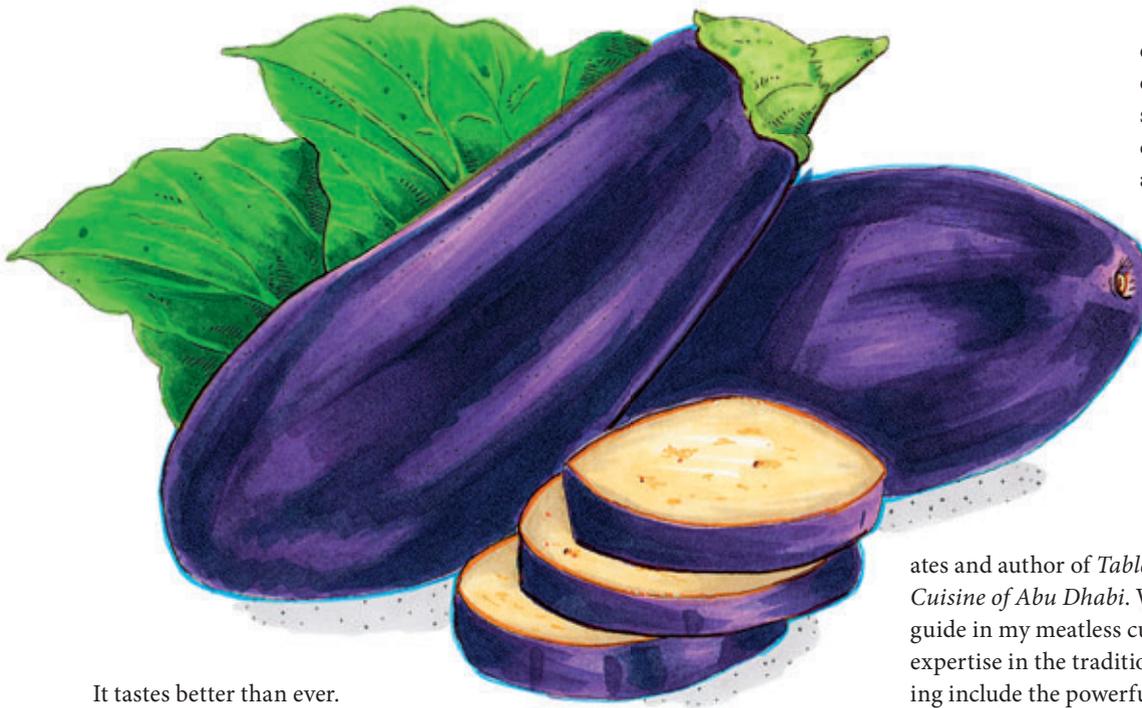
Taze Fasulye (Fresh Green Bean Stew)

Recipe by Emine and Beliz Tecirli

This dish can be prepared in just 10 to 15 minutes, with a cooking time of an hour. Serves four.

2 tablespoons olive oil	340 grams (12 ounces) fresh green beans, cut into 5-centimeter pieces
1 medium onion, diced	1 cup cooked or canned chickpeas, drained and rinsed
5 garlic cloves, minced	1½ cups vegetable broth
1¾ cups canned diced tomatoes	1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon tomato paste	Salt and pepper to taste
1 tablespoon sweet red pepper paste	Fresh parsley for garnish

1. Add olive oil to a medium pot and place it over medium-low heat. Add the onion and cook for about 25 to 30 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the onion starts to caramelize. Add the garlic and cook about 1 minute more.
2. Add the vegetable broth, tomatoes, tomato and sweet red pepper paste, green beans, chickpeas, and cumin to the pot and stir. Raise the heat to high until it begins to simmer. Lower heat and allow to simmer until the base has thickened and the beans are tender, about 20 to 30 minutes.
3. Remove from heat and season with salt and pepper to taste. Divide into bowls and garnish with parsley. Serve and enjoy!



It tastes better than ever.

“Processed foods are engineered to hit a ‘bliss point’ of salt, sugar and fat “that dig into our evolutionary survival drives,” says Dr. Michael Greger, a Maryland-based author and physician specializing in clinical nutrition. He’s also a member of the Council of Directors for True Health Initiative comprised of 350 academics, surgeon generals, athletes, doctors and environmentalists in 35 countries who support plant-based eating.

What many people find most surprising about plant-based

eating, he says, is that after only a few days, taste buds start to readjust, and the combinations of vegetables and legumes take on an unexpected depth of flavor—even before the spices that Middle East foods are particularly famous for get taken into account.

“Vegan diets can be followed quite easily in the region,” says Hanan Sayed Worrel, a longtime resident of the United Arab Emir-

ates and author of *Table Tales: The Global Nomad Cuisine of Abu Dhabi*. Worrel has been a constant guide in my meatless culinary adventures, and her expertise in the traditions of Middle Eastern cooking include the powerful role plants have played in Arab cuisine for thousands of years.

“Our dishes in the Levant have a nonmeat and nondairy option,” she says. “All the stuffed dishes like grape leaves and courgettes can be made without meat.”

So much of Arab cooking with meat is, like many other world cuisines, bound up in cultures of hospitality and holidays. For example, a guest at an Arab dinner table must by custom be offered the largest, most tender portion of meat. Eid al-Adha, the Islamic Feast of the Sacrifice, traditionally features lamb,

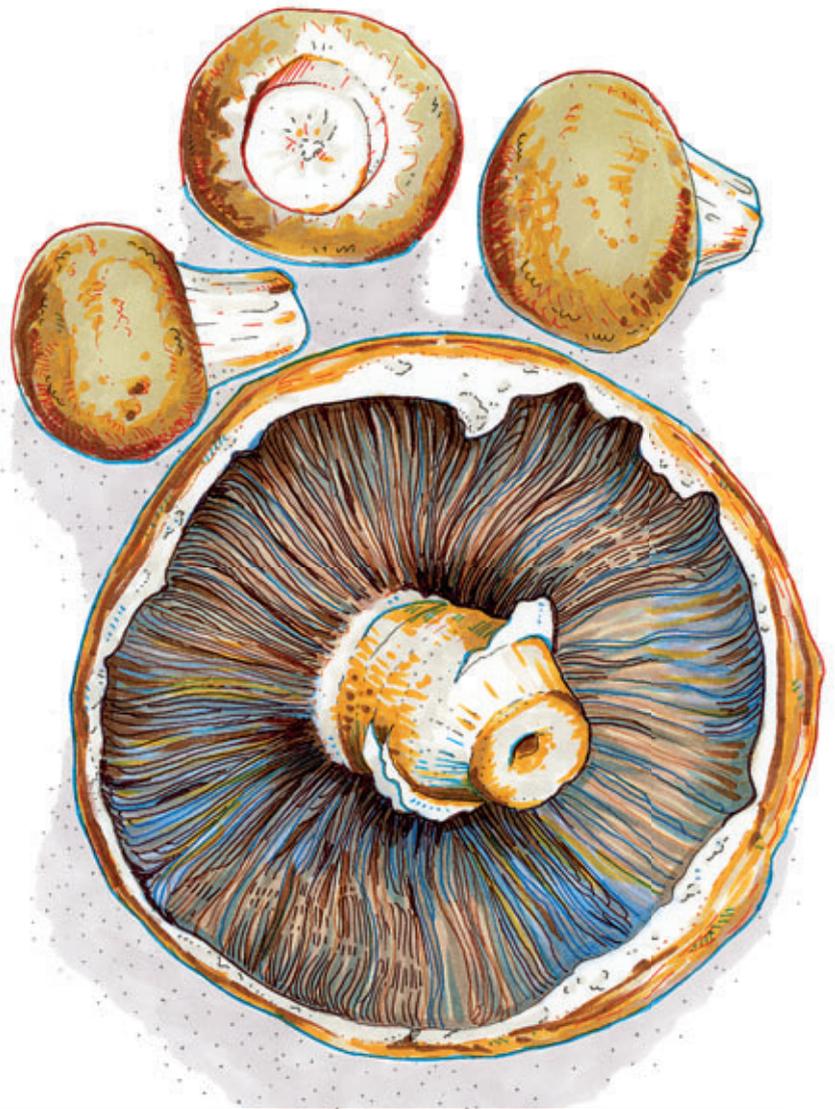


I HAVE FOUND IT RELATIVELY EASY TO MAKE ADAPTATIONS— AND FOOD TASTES BETTER THAN EVER.

sheep or goat for the dinner. This day is also the year's leading occasion for zakat, or charity, one of the five pillars of Islam, which is performed by the giving and receiving of meat, from those with the means to buy it to those without.

But among the rising generation, Earth- and health-conscience choices are often top of mind, and new alternatives may emerge. A 2016 University of Oxford study published in the UK-based *Proceedings of National Academy of Sciences journal* found that by 2050, “food-related greenhouse gas emissions could account for half of the emissions the world” and “adopting global dietary guidelines would cut food-related emissions by 29 percent, vegetarian diets by 63 percent, and vegan diets, 70 percent.”

Worrel's vegan adaptations of classic Middle Eastern recipes include dishes such as a simple and bright fennel and beetroot salad with tahini and dill, usually served with yogurt. She also loves



OPPOSITE, LOWER: MARTIN NICOLAS KUNZ, HEKE FADEMRECHT / HANAN SAYED WORREL

Harira (Moroccan Tomato Lentil Soup)

Recipe courtesy Hanan Sayed Worrel

Harira can be considered the national soup of Morocco, prepared in unending variations in every city, street and home. Comforting and nourishing, it feeds the soul as well as the stomach. It is especially popular in Ramadan, when families cook it to break the fast at sunset, often serving it with a couple of dates on the side. This recipe serves 8 to 10.

2 tablespoons olive oil	1 cup fresh coriander, finely chopped	1 teaspoon white pepper	2 tablespoons tomato paste
340 grams (12 ounces) yellow onions, finely chopped	1 tablespoon salt	1 teaspoon turmeric or Moroccan yellow colorant	¼ cup all-purpose flour
450 grams (1 pound) portobello mushrooms	1 tablespoon cumin	255 grams (9 ounces) cooked chickpeas	3 tablespoons vermicelli, uncooked
225 grams (8 ounces) celery stalks with leaves, finely chopped	1 tablespoon coriander powder	½ cup lentils, washed	¼ cup lemon juice
½ cup parsley, finely chopped	1½ teaspoons paprika	900 grams (2 pounds) tomatoes, peeled and pureed, or canned	
	1 teaspoon cinnamon		
	1 tablespoon ground ginger		

In a large Dutch oven, heat the oil and butter over medium heat; sauté the onions for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the meat, stirring until it is browned on all sides. (If using mushrooms instead of meat, heat the oil and sauté the onions for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the mushrooms and continue with the next ingredients.) Add the celery, parsley, fresh coriander, salt, cumin, coriander powder, paprika, cinnamon, ginger, white pepper, and turmeric or colorant; stir well for 2 minutes. Add the chickpeas and 1 litre (1 quart) of water and bring to a boil. Add the lentils and simmer for 30 minutes. Add the tomato puree, tomato paste, and 1 litre (1 quart) of hot water and simmer for 45 minutes. Check the liquid occasionally and add more water if needed.

While the soup is cooking, make the tadouira by mixing the flour with ½ cup of water. Stir or whisk the mixture occasionally. The flour will eventually blend with the water. If the mixture still has lumps, pass it through a sieve.

When the lentils and chickpeas are soft, sprinkle the vermicelli into the soup and let it simmer for another 10 minutes. Drizzle the tadouira into the soup in a steady stream while continuously stirring so the flour doesn't stick to the bottom of the pan. Simmer for 5 to 10 more minutes. Remove from the heat and stir in the lemon juice.

Serve in individual soup bowls with a lemon wedge on the side and a couple of dates in the tradition of breaking the Ramadan fast.



Fennel, Beetroot, and Orange Salad with Cumin Dressing

Recipe courtesy Hanan Sayed Worrel

Serves: 6 to 8

Salad

3 large beetroots
Coarse salt
3 large oranges
3 large fennel bulbs
¼ cup dried cranberries
½ cup pecans, whole

Dressing

1½ tablespoons walnut oil
1½ tablespoons hazelnut oil
3 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon orange zest
½ teaspoon cumin
½ teaspoon coriander powder
½ teaspoon cayenne pepper
Salt and black pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 200 degrees Celsius (400 degrees Fahrenheit).

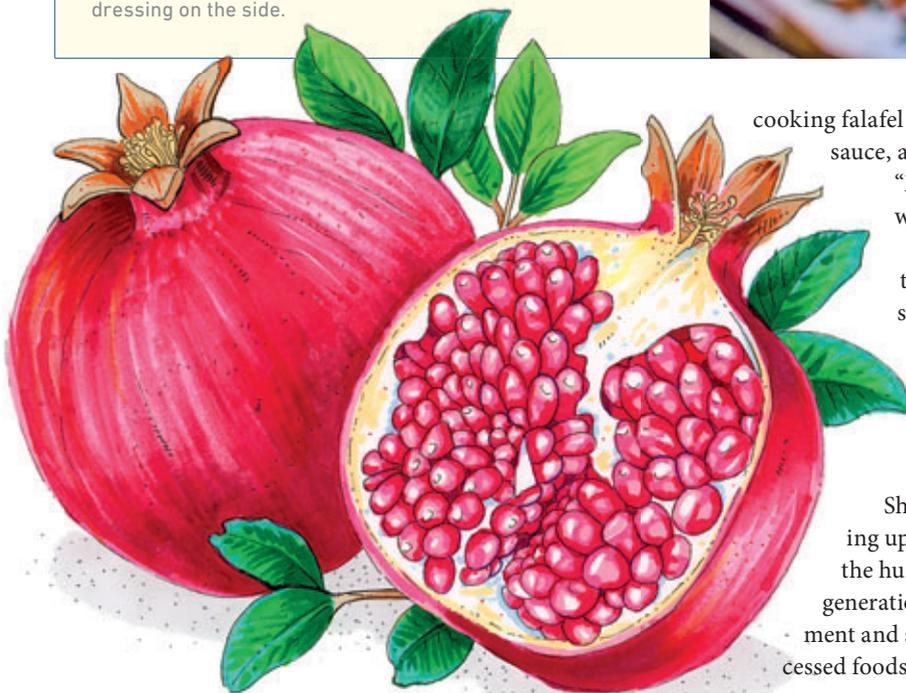
Sprinkle each beetroot with the salt and wrap individually in aluminium foil. Bake for 1½ to 2 hours, until tender when pierced with a fork. Test them periodically. Unwrap and set them aside to cool.

Measure the dressing ingredients into a jar with a tight-fitting lid. Shake well to combine and chill until ready to use.

Peel the oranges and remove as much of the white thread-like material as possible. Slice them into 1-centimeter (½-inch) thick circles, discarding the small circles. Peel the beetroot and slice into 1-centimeter (½-inch) thick circles, discarding the small end pieces. If the beetroots are bigger than the oranges, use a round cookie cutter to make them a similar size. Remove the outer leaves of the fennel and slice it thinly.

When ready to serve, arrange the beetroot and orange circles in alternating layers on a large, round serving platter. Pile the fennel in the center and sprinkle with dried cranberries. Decorate with the whole pecans.

Lightly drizzle the dressing over the salad and serve the extra dressing on the side.



cooking falafel and hummus dishes, runner beans with tomato sauce, and harira soup with mushrooms.

“My most-recent favorite is a fresh coconut drink with cashews,” Worrel says.

Reflecting on why veganism is on the rise in the region, Worrel also notes millennials’ exposure to special dietary preferences and acceptance of accommodating food restrictions.

“Now when I have dinner parties, I need to remember to ask my guests whether they have dietary restrictions. Five years ago, I didn’t have to do that,” she says.

She also notes how younger generations are growing up with a more open ethical question regarding the human relationship to other animals. For older generations, she says, meat represents culture, nourishment and stability, but younger people often see over-processed foods, health hazards and a globally shared sense of

“I HAVE NOTICED THE RISE OF VEGANISM IN THE REGION, FIRSTLY AMONG MILLENNIALS AND THEN MORE BROADLY. NOW WHEN I HAVE DINNER PARTIES, I NEED TO REMEMBER TO ASK MY GUESTS IF THEY HAVE DIETARY RESTRICTIONS. FIVE YEARS AGO I DIDN'T HAVE TO DO THAT.”

—HANAN SAYED WORREL



responsibility for sustainable lifestyles.

Sukkari Life is the YouTube channel and website of Saudi-based yoga instructor and plant-based diet teacher Raoum AlSuhaibani. She speaks to more than 265,000 followers each week, many in the Arabian Peninsula region, from long-time vegans to those newly curious. She explains that in Arabic, *sukkari* means “sugary,” and it’s her way of reminding viewers that plant-based eating can make life a little better, a little sweeter. It also has a personal connection: “I named it after my favorite types of dates, the Sukkari dates that are grown in my hometown al-Qassim, Saudi Arabia.” Her favorite ingredients, she says, “are simple and local. I love to add dates to my recipes and legumes, such as fava, garbanzo and lentils.”

But more broadly, she says, plant-based diets and veganism resonates with her sense of how the world could be. And though she approached the recipes as a challenge, she has favored the simple kinds of dishes most of us can make with limited time and resources. She encourages experimenting with tastes and textures, for example sometimes adding edible flowers to style her dishes.

She’s also no absolutist. She feels that claims of all-or-nothing lifestyles can be off-putting to newcomers. This is where “flexitarian,” or part-time plant-based eating, is important. “Personally, I find it easy to eat plant-based,” she says, “but it gets tricky sometimes when it comes to other aspects of life.”

Does her success surprise her? “Sometimes,” she says. “Especially when I meet people in person and they tell me how much my channel has affected their lives.”

The food culture is changing in the Middle East, she says.

“When I was a vegetarian, a lot of people commented, teased and showed signs of concern. Now, even though I’m vegan, people are usually asking questions out of curiosity, as they want to try to live this way.”

As I pull my taze fasulye from the oven, its aromas fill the kitchen, and my cats Mimi and Koko weave around my feet. They are as much a part of my family as anyone, and my affection for them carries me over to other non-human animals—pets, wild and on farms. Such thoughts make me feel good about the plant-based eating journey I set out on. It makes the taze fasulye as delicious and as filling as ever it was when I was a child—and even a little sweeter. 🌱



A specialist in urban cultural development, **Beliz Tecirli, Ph.D.**, advises on business sustainability and responsibility while writing about art, culture and lifestyle in the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. Artist, illustrator and publication designer **Matthew Bromley** runs Graphic Engine Design in Austin, Texas, and he is the graphic designer of *AramcoWorld*. Contact him at mbromley@graphicengine.net, @robot.matthew.bromley on Instagram.



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EGYPTOLOGY'S ELOQUENT EYE

Written by DIANNA WRAY

Photographs by MOHAMMEDANI IBRAHIM / MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

An Egyptian granodiorite statue of a seated woman emerged from the desert sands of a Nubian excavation site in Kerma, unearthed—methodically—according to new scientific approaches espoused by early-20th-century US archeologist George Reisner. It was December of 1913, and at each stage of uncovering the meter-high statue, one man used a camera to capture artful, beautifully toned images, each on its own glass negative.



Behind the lens was Mohammedani Ibrahim, one of the first Egyptian-born archeological photographers and one of the most skilled. Ibrahim's photos of the statue identified as depicting Lady Sennuwy of Asyut, wife of Djefaihapi of Asyut, and dated to the 12th dynasty of Egypt's Middle Kingdom between 1771 and 1926 BCE, were later shipped with the statue to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Ever since, Ibrahim's photos of Lady Sennuwy's statue have been among his most viewed. While others were displayed in the museum or published in Reisner's academic papers, most were deposited in the museum's archives together with Reisner's records. The only reason anyone knows Ibrahim's name, despite leaving behind more than 9,000 photographs, is thanks largely to Reisner. Ibrahim, who spent more than 30 years documenting fragments of bygone eras of his homeland, has remained nonetheless almost as obscure as the long-ago architects, masons, sculptors and painters whose works he recorded on film.

But how did one of the first Egyptian archeology photographers working with Reisner, later hailed as one of the founders of scientific archeology and the father of American archeology—in large part because of his use of photography to track his decades of work, primarily in Giza—become a nearly invisible historical footnote?

“There’s no pure process of writing history out there,” says Christina Riggs, who specializes in the history of archeological photography at Durham University in the UK. “These stories develop, but a lot of the people involved disappear out of the story even when they’re on the page and in the photos.” Riggs continues, “Nothing is produced—no knowledge, no collection, no field—without being a part of a historical moment.”

Ibrahim's and Reisner's moment was bound up in the history of Egypt. The country had been grappled over by foreign powers

since Roman days in the first century CE. Although Egypt remained a de jure province of the Ottoman Empire until the after World War I, Ottoman influence in the region had been waning for more than a century as European powers vied for influence—and artifacts. Napoleon's French army came first, in 1798, bringing with it a contingent of scientific savants who, in addition to producing the monumental survey *Description de l'Égypte*, filched more than a few artifacts, including the Rosetta Stone, which the British later stole from them. Then there were the British, uneasy about an Egyptian nationalist movement, who invaded in 1882. The camera, meanwhile, invented as the metal-plate daguerreotype in 1839, had already been deployed to capture many of the country's monuments.

While the object of most early photography in Egypt was the recording of legacies left in stone, there was little interest living civilization of the day. Many early photos of Egypt are landscapes deliberately devoid of humans.

“Modern Egyptians were almost never in the photos, and that was no accident,” says Pomona University professor of art history Kathleen Howe, who specializes in how photography has shaped Western views of Egyptian culture. “It was a lot easier to take

things from a people who just were not really there. The native Egyptians just didn't count. They were seen as mere cogs in the machine, even as they pulled tourists up and down the Nile and worked alongside the famed white, male archeologists that were setting up shop there.”

But while the camera was being used as one tool of imperial ambition, it was also increasingly deployed in archeology. These cameras were heavy and fragile, and their individually coated glass plates were ill-adapted to heat, sand and dust, making their use a matter of perseverance and craft.

“While people like Reisner and Ibrahim would be working as true archeologists in the years to come,” Howe says, the first people working at these sites would be better classified as antiquarians, many of whom “weren't approaching what they were doing scientifically or systematically” but “just grabbing

OPPOSITE AND ABOVE Photographing at a royal necropolis in Kerma, Nubia (now in northern Sudan), on December 16, 1913, Mohammedani Ibrahim made a series of photographs as the dig team of US archeologist George Reisner excavated an exquisitely intact statue, later identified as depicting Lady Sennuwy of Asyut, a city on the Nile far to the north. How the statue came to Kerma is a question that remains, and Ibrahim's photographs demonstrate the methodical excavation and record-making techniques that earned Reisner the title of one of the founders of scientific archeology: Every step of the process was documented—with photography. Ibrahim used large-format cameras that used single glass plates for each exposure; aiming such a heavy camera downward at sharp angles often required anchoring or rebalancing the tripod to keep it from tipping. Ibrahim likely trained under Reisner's early chief photographer, Said Ahmed Said—also Egyptian—but Said went on to work as a site foreman, and Ibrahim kept the job as Reisner's preferred documentarian for more than two decades.



In addition to producing records of artifacts, Ibrahim also photographed activity around the dig sites, including this image, **ABOVE**, that shows Reisner taking survey measurements on March 2, 1920, at Gebel Barkal in Nubia. Three seasons earlier, when the sarcophagus of Nubian King Anlamani was dragged from Nuri's Pyramid 6 on April 12, 1917, **RIGHT**, Ibrahim chose a point of view that used perspective and shadow to accentuate the depth of the excavation, and he tripped the shutter at a moment that communicated the heavy labor of his fellow Egyptian crewmen.

up stuff they unearthed and taking it back to Europe and America.”

However, as antiquarians gave way to archeologists—people who believed someone shouldn't dig straight into the heart of a mound at first sight but rather peel it back layer by careful layer—the two fields diverged.

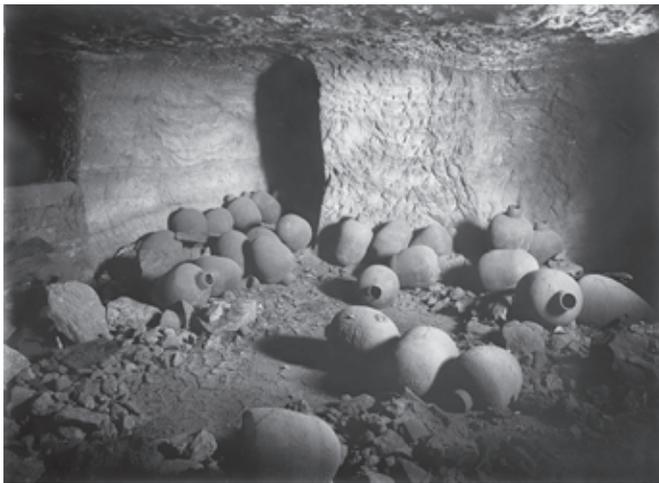
“This was a different mindset, and it gave rise to a whole different approach to archeology photography,” Howe says. “A systematic approach was developed with site overviews, photographing certain angles, all details that soon made this very different from the guys trying to get an angle on the Luxor Halls that tourists will want to buy and take home.”

Gradually cameras became easier to operate, too, with the advent of pretreated glass plates in the early 1900s, just as Reisner and a new generation of archeologists were beginning to delve into Egypt. Reisner understood the value of documenting field work as it unfolded and favored the lens over the artist's sketch. In writing a detailed guide to archeological photography in 1924, Reisner wrote, “When I first began work



in 1899 I laid down the principle that every observation should be supported as far as possible by a mechanical, that is photographic, record of the facts observed. Now in 1924 I would lay down the same principle.” For Reisner, hiring an able photographer with an acuity of vision was crucial. Although higher level professions in archeology were not generally open to Egyptians, Ibrahim, whose birth year—although unknown—was likely in the 1890s, proved exceptionally talented.

A school to train Egyptian archeologists opened in 1869 in Cairo and closed a few years later due to lack of funds. But it produced one of the first Egyptian archeologists, Ahmad Kamal, who later served as curator of the Egyptian Museum. It took Kamal decades to secure a job with Egypt's antiquities



LEFT Demonstrating his understanding of light, Ibrahim sought the best times of day to photograph aspects of the sites and how best to capture details in the highlights and shadows, as shown in this 1918 photo of the Nuri Pyramid 52 entrance stairway. Similarly, at **CENTER**, light rakes pottery vessels in this 1921 photo of the Begrawia Pyramid N 17, giving depth and detail to the space. **LOWER** Creating his own light source for the background, this photo from 1927 in Giza—where Reisner did most of his excavations—shows evenly lit detail on two planes in the subterranean chapel of Queen Meresankh III.

ministry. Although educated at the School of Ancient Egyptian Language under one of the premier German professors in the field, Kamal and his fellow aspiring Egyptian archeologists were blocked for years from positions in the French-dominated Egyptian Antiquities Service.

While Kamal managed to oversee some of his own excavations, he worked primarily as a German tutor until he persuaded Egypt's prime minister to have him appointed as a translator and secretary of the museum that famed French Egyptologist and the first head of Egypt's Antiquities Service, Auguste Mariette, had founded in Cairo. However, Mariette and the other Frenchmen who subsequently occupied that post were not interested in promoting Egyptians. Shortly before Kamal's death in 1923, his plea to another French Antiquities director to train Egyptians in Egyptology was dismissed with the claim that Kamal was the only Egyptian in the entire country interested in the field. Kamal's riposte was sharp: "Ah M. Lacau," he wrote, "in the sixty-five years you French have directed the Service, what opportunities have you given us?"

Although the French and other Western archeologists kept tight control of the work being done in Egypt, one of Kamal's own students, Selim Hasan, made further inroads. Hasan would become the first Egyptian Egyptologist to run his own excavation site and, in the 1930s, discovered a series of tombs in a Giza plot near Reisner's that international reporters eagerly chronicled. But while Hasan was receiving acclaim, Ibrahim was working primarily in the same cemetery, with his photos appearing in academic journals for more than 20 years, generally without a byline. The absence of credit, however, was not atypical for the time. Early photography in general was regarded as more of a mechanical process than an art, and many of these first photographers were not given attribution for their work. Ibrahim's photographs, however, stood out.

"From what I know of the Giza photo archive, Mohammedani's photographs were of especially high quality," Riggs says. "At that time, while all archeologists were using cameras in their work, some were better photographers than others, and some spent more money and time on it than others." He was "among the most proficient photographers working in the early 20th century in Egypt—and deserves more study," she says.

Little is known about Ibrahim's upbringing. He hailed from Qift, a village about 40 kilometers north of Luxor, at a bend along the Nile. By the time he was born, the town was already famous for the archeological workers it produced.

William Flinders Petrie, who would become known as the father of British Egyptology, put the town on archeology's map when he began recruiting and training workers almost exclusively from there in the 1890s. When Petrie set up a dig site near Qift, he started training workers along the specific lines he had created for a more scientific approach to archeology. From there other archeologists, including Reisner, arrived in Egypt and began following in his footsteps, so when it came time to hire workers, they too sought out men from Qift who already had specific skills required for the work. It is a tradition that continued well into the 20th century, and there are still those who hail from Qift working at Egyptian archeological sites today.

"It's not that there weren't people who were talented at archeological work from other places in Egypt," says Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, antiquities curator Lawrence Berman, "but they were particularly talented there, and they developed a reputation."

Reisner first arrived in Egypt in 1897 as part of a contingent of international experts who were working to organize the Egyptian Museum of Cairo's already extensive collection, but

RIGHT In January 1930 Ibrahim photographed an excavation mound at Giza with the Great Pyramid of Khufu peering from behind, rising only slightly taller in the frame, juxtaposing past and present. By this time Ibrahim's two decades of experience behind the lens showed in his articulate visual storytelling through composition and association, as well as dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and in his expert control of the tonal ranges within images that he produced in the field camp's darkroom. **LOWER** One of Ibrahim's earlier compositions, from 1912, taken at the Western Cemetery site in Giza, features the early stage of unearthing an unusual, three-figure statue known now as the "Pseudo-group statue of Penmeru," which dated to the fifth dynasty of Egypt's Old Kingdom.





ABOVE Ibrahim directed this portrait of workers at the Gebel Barkal Pyramid 3 in February 1916, which has become one of his most recognized photographs, in part due to the scarcity of photographs that focus on the people who carried out the actual digging with pickaxes, shovels, trowels and shoulder-borne basket after shoulder-borne basket of sand and stones. **RIGHT** Thanks to Ibrahim's skillful edge lighting in this August 1929 photo, details are clear in a wall relief in a chapel room of Giza's Eastern Cemetery. It shows, at left, Khufukahf I, a high priest from the fourth dynasty of the Old Kingdom, 2575-2465 BCE, and one of his queens, right.



within a couple of years he'd secured funding and government dispensation to start his own dig site on the Giza plateau. Initially funded by Phoebe Hearst, mother of US publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst, and later in 1905 funded by his alma mater Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Reisner took Petrie's innovations—including a more methodical approach to unearthing sites and employing cameras to document excavation progress—and refined them to establish the most-calculated approach to archeology to the date. It depended much on photography.

Reisner also took another page from Petrie's book by choosing to hire his workers from Qift, even when he was working far to the south in Nubia or other locations outside of Egypt. Early on Reisner began training a select few to handle the cameras. Petrie had shot all of his photos himself, but Reisner didn't have time. Instead, Reisner's team had four plate cameras in constant use, a



In October 1927 Ibrahim photographed this boatman crossing inundated fields just east of the Giza Pyramid Complex during the annual Nile flood, an event that ended in the 1960s with the completion of the Aswan High Dam.

“very well-made snapshot camera” for informal photos, and seven high quality lenses, including a Zeiss wide angle lens. He trained his crew to take and develop photos on site of the digs and issued “standing orders” about what views to take and what plate sizes to use. He also put photography into a chain of onsite documentation, so every good photo negative was registered and prints were crosslinked to record cards for each tomb. One set of prints was numbered in running order to mark the time it was taken while another set was put in a loose-leaf album divided up by subject matter.

Once Ibrahim was recruited, around 1906, he began his training as part of the photography crew. “He wasn’t from a photographic family, but he clearly had a passion for this,” says Amr Omar, assistant director for Middle East and Egyptology Collections at the American University of Cairo. “Sometimes, if you hire a professional photographer, he will do his work and get his salary, but that’s not what Mohammedani was doing. He was doing this work with perfectionism, the kind of professionalism that translates to produce exacting, specific excellent work.”

While most early archeological photographers were anonymous employees, Reisner took a different approach. The Indiana native known for a sharp sense of humor and an uncanny resemblance to US President Theodore Roosevelt, made a point of attributing his photography team’s work in the expedition diaries, on each glass-plate negative shipped to Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and in the academic articles published.

Reisner wrote Ibrahim’s name on every print, but cropping in publication often left the matter of credit—or not—to editors.

“He was crucial to Reisner’s work,” Omar says about Ibrahim. “Soon Mohammedani was so important that his absence or attendance would be recorded in day-to-day business.”

Although Ibrahim followed Reisner’s instructions for views and angles, many of his images are hauntingly beautiful, visually eloquent with subtleties of composition, light and shadow that convey emotion as clearly as they detail the unearthing of a statue, the echoing darkness of a queen’s tomb or a casual evening gathering at the Giza Harvard Camp that housed Reisner, his family and the other foreign members of the team.

Reisner’s mentoring and promotion of Ibrahim, who was named senior photographer in 1914, was unusual at the time. Other Western archeologists treated Egyptian workers just as dismissively as the Antiquities Service treated aspiring local leadership. Western photographers could achieve a higher profile far more easily, such as British archeological photographer Harry Burton, whose photographs of the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb and treasures won him acclaim around the world. But no one among the massive Egyptian crew that was working alongside Carter was ever acknowledged.

“It’s not always seen in the photos, but lots of Egyptians were working in all kinds of capacities on these digs,” Riggs says. “It’s only now that we are beginning to acknowledge the Egyptians that were right there every step of the way.”

Reisner was certainly progressive for his time, notes Harvard Egyptology professor and Reisner expert Peter Der Manuelian. Reisner lived in Egypt year-round, was fluent in



Of the 9,000 images now archived under his name, there is only one that may show Ibrahim himself: Researchers believe that he may be the man reclining in the center of this 1938 shot of the archeology team at the Harvard Camp in Giza.

Arabic, and earned a reputation as a considerate employer whom his Egyptian team came to rely on.

Berman observes that Reisner “had people who worked for him, from young boys to old men, and he took care of them, always making sure to find them work. ... He said, ‘Without them we wouldn’t be where we are. These are the people who helped us discover these masterpieces. We owe them.’”

While notable that Reisner usually provided credit for his photographers, he went a step further by publishing the names of every crew member in his academic papers. However, the photos, upon which the photographer’s name was written, were often closely cropped in reproduction, which left the matter of byline to the editors of the publication, and most of the Reisner expedition photos appeared only in scholarly works or to illustrate an artifact at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

Although he wasn’t receiving acclaim outside of the Harvard Camp, within it, other than the foreman, Ibrahim was the most-important Egyptian on the team, Omar notes. Ibrahim appears regularly in the expedition records and diaries, with notations about him taking photos at a particular site, going vacationing in Qift, visiting a sick daughter, “going to town without permission,” as one note mentions, or taking a photo that is not part of Reisner’s recordkeeping system without asking first.

The only photo that may show Ibrahim himself is a playful group photo from 1938 showing Harvard Camp’s Egyptian crew, all lined up in rows and smiling proudly. All except for the unidentified man whom researchers believe is likely Ibrahim, stretched out like an enormous cat front and center, slim, mustachioed, propping himself up on one arm and flashing the camera a mischievous grin. He only ceases to appear in the

expedition’s published records around Reisner’s final years.

Reisner died in his sleep at Harvard Camp in 1942, and his grave marker in Cairo notes that he was mourned by his family, friends, colleagues, and “by his Egyptian workmen in honor of their *mudir* [director] and friend.”

The expedition continued for a few more years. “The backers felt honor-bound to ensure that the families who’d depended on Reisner for a living for decades were able to slowly finish up the work and to find other employment gradually and without too much pressure placed on them,” Der Manuelian explains.

From there it’s unclear what happened to Ibrahim, but there are hopes more may be learned about him in the coming years. Many scholars believe that, as they continue to delve into archives and previously overlooked expedition records, just as Egypt’s own sands continue to yield discoveries, they too may find more.

“His photos were never perfunctory. They captured the moments, the details, information that can even help us today to better understand things,” Omar says. “He shot so many photos as well. If a picture is worth a thousand words, Mohammedani Ibrahim gave us a wealth of knowledge.” 🌐

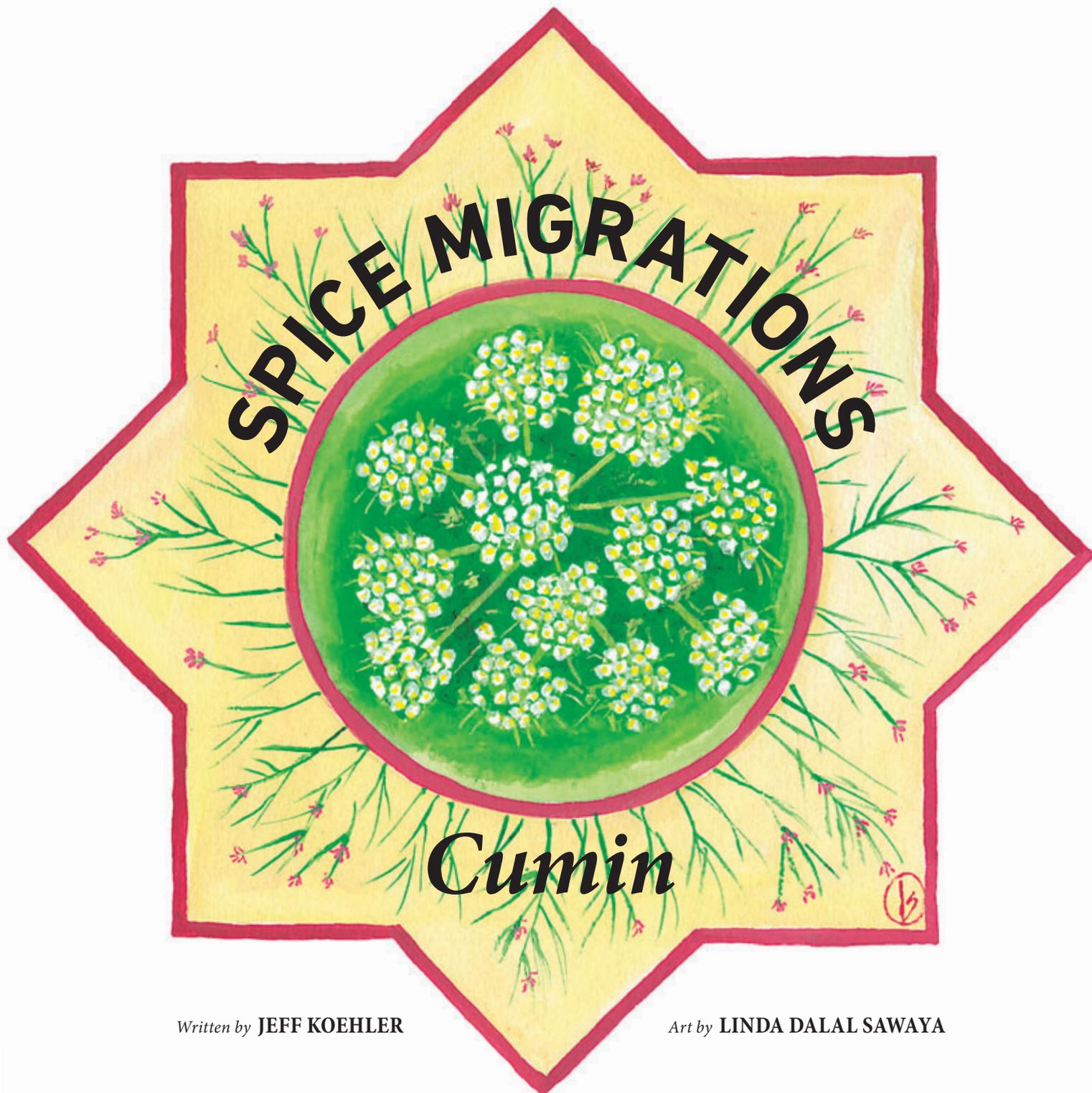


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Written by **JEFF KOEHLER**

Art by **LINDA DALAL SAWAYA**

While working on her book *The Flavour of Spice, Times of India* food columnist Marryam Reshii asked contacts around the world to send her locally sourced samples of cumin. While some 70 percent of this spice is harvested in India, mostly in the western states of Gujarat and Rajasthan, cumin grows in a range of countries that span the globe, from Asia to the Mediterranean to Latin America.

The packages of cumin that arrived to her in Delhi all exuded

cumin's warm, earthy flavors and deep, haylike aromas. "But the shapes, sizes and colors varied substantially," she says. "The Chinese sample was larger than average and had a yellowish tinge. The Iranian one was very dark and slim. ... The [one from] Uzbekistan was squat and fat." When she put the seeds under her microscope, she saw their similarities. "Every last sample had the exact same number of ridges running down its length and three microscopic bristles at one end, where they are joined

Handwritten text in a script, possibly Indic, arranged in vertical columns on a parchment-like background.



to the plant,” she says.

Historically, she adds, “almost every spice started off in one corner of the globe, traveled naturally or forcibly to another.” Cumin, however, has taken such deep root in local cuisines that in some places it has become associated more with its adopted home than its home of origin.

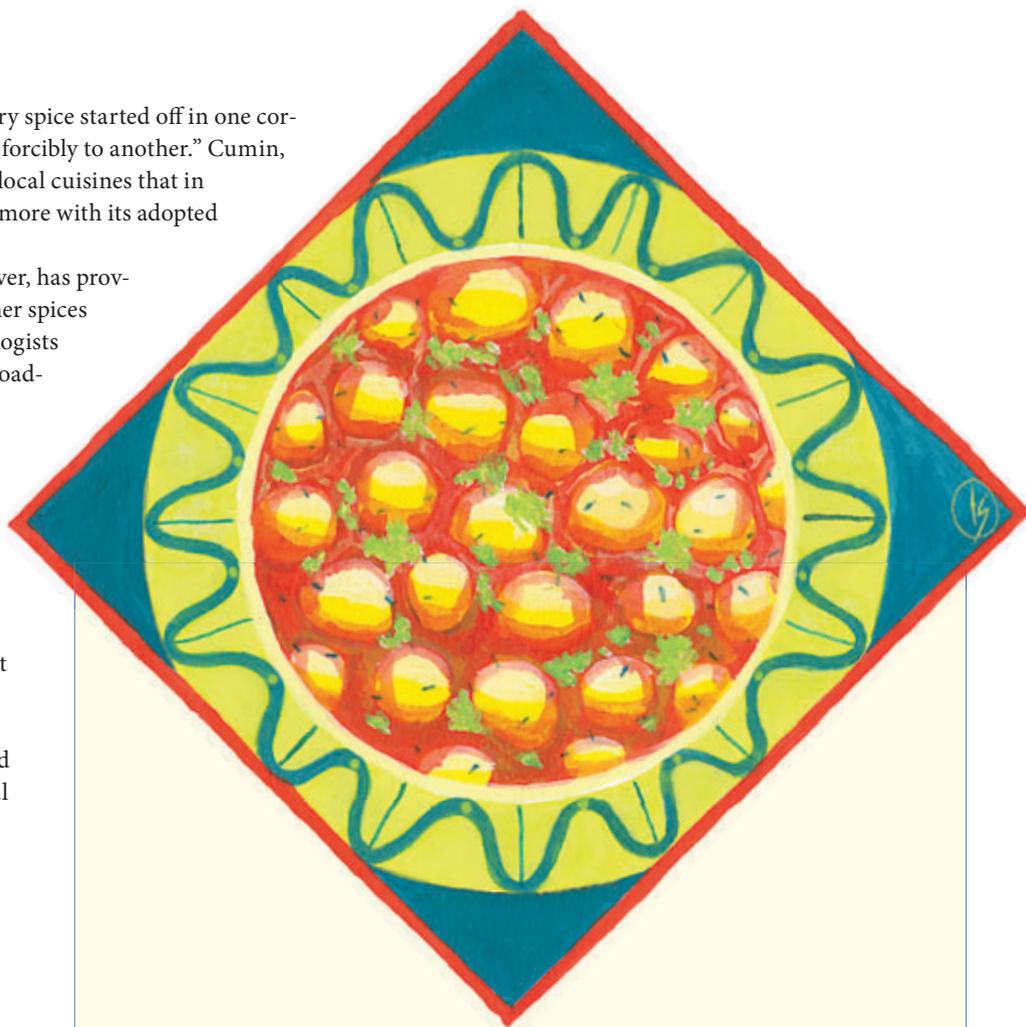
Exactly where that origin is, however, has proven hard to pin down. While many other spices have precisely known origins, archeologists have been able to trace cumin only broadly. Most evidence points toward the lands around the Eastern Mediterranean, the Nile Valley or the western region of Asia.

In written records, cumin first appears in the Akkadian language, in cuneiform script, on a trio of Old Babylonian clay tablets, circa 1700 BCE. “The first recorded cooking recipes in human history were written on cuneiform tablets,” explains Iraqi American food writer, historian and translator Nawal Nasrallah. “Cumin was one of the many spices.”

Take for example its recipe for “raised turnips: You throw fat in it ... onion, dorsal thorn ... coriander, cumin.” It also appears in recipes for broths of fresh and salted venison, entrails and mutton. The cuneiform script renders the spice’s name as *kamûnu*—not that far from today’s *kamun* in Arabic and the Latin scientific name *Cuminum cyminum*, though Nasrallah admits she hasn’t been able to “associate the name with a meaning, just its function.” What is clear is that cumin’s popularity over the millennia is not just about cooking.

The earliest medieval cookbook, *Kitab al-Tabikh (Annals of the Caliphs’ Kitchens)*, written in 10th-century Baghdad by Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq and translated by Nasrallah in 2010, deemed cumin “beneficial in combating flatulence, facilitating digestion and inducing burping,” she says.

It’s for this reason cumin remained important in the region’s cooking. The early Egyptians had recognized the therapeutic properties of cumin. They used the seeds for a range of ailments, including upset stomach (milk boiled with cumin and goose fat), cough (milk with cumin and honey), and for tongue problems, a



Aloo Dum (Slow-Cooked Potatoes)

This classic dish is popular across much of the Indian subcontinent. This recipe has been adapted from the author’s 2015 book *Darjeeling: A History of the World’s Greatest Tea*.

(Serves 4 to 6)

910 grams (2 pounds) small or medium white potatoes	1 heaped teaspoon cumin seeds
Salt	2 generous pinches turmeric
6 garlic cloves, roughly chopped	½ teaspoon chili flakes
1 heaped tablespoon freshly grated fresh ginger	Finely chopped fresh cilantro (coriander leaves)
3 tablespoons sunflower or canola oil	

Scrub the potatoes but do not peel. Put in a pot, cover with water and bring to a boil over high heat. Add a generous pinch of salt, and reduce the heat to medium low. Partly cover the pot, and gently boil until tender and the tip of a knife penetrates with little resistance, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain. Once the potatoes are cool enough to handle, peel and cut into pieces just bigger than bite-size.

Meanwhile, mash the garlic to a paste in a mortar with the ginger.

In a large sauté pan, skillet or wok, heat the oil over medium heat and add the cumin seeds. When they begin to jump, stir in the garlic-ginger paste. Cook until aromatic, about 30 seconds. Stir in the turmeric and chili flakes, season with salt and immediately add the potatoes. Add 2 or 3 tablespoons of water and turn to coat the potatoes with the sauce well. Reduce the heat to low, loosely cover the pan and cook for 3 to 5 minutes until hot and cooked through. Garnish with cilantro and serve.

prescribed concoction calls for “frankincense 1; cumin 1; yellow ochre 1; goose fat 1; honey 1; water 1; to be chewed and spat out.”

In pharaonic Egypt, Nasrallah explains, cumin seeds coated bread dough before baking. “They would be ‘shaken around the greased mold before the dough was added,’” she says, quoting British Egyptologist Hilary Wilson’s study on the food of early pharaonic Egypt,

Egyptian Food and Drink.

Archeologists even found

a basket full of cumin

seeds in the tomb

at Thebes of 14th-

century-BCE

royal architect

Kha. Cumin

also appeared

amid offerings

presented by Ram-

seses III (1217–1155

BCE) to the temple of

Ra at Heliopolis. And still

today, Nasrallah says, cumin is an

essential ingredient in the popular Egyptian

spice blend dukkah, which mixes toasted nuts, sesame seeds,

coriander and cumin.

From the Mediterranean basin, cumin spread widely. Arabs

sailed boatloads of it to the Indian subcontinent, and from there

it became popular throughout South Asia. Phoenicians took it

across North Africa and to Ibe-

ria. From there the Spanish took it

to the Americas.

Today in cuisines across

North Africa, cumin is a defin-

ing flavor. In Morocco, ground

cumin often appears on the table,

in a small dish alongside the

saltshaker—a practice with roots

in the Roman Empire. In Libya,

cumin is most associated with

fish, says Ahmed Gatnash, cofounder of Oea, which sells Libyan

spices and blends in Wales, UK. “While other key spices such as

turmeric and ginger are used as part of a blend, cumin can stand

alone,” says Gatnash. “It is a main flavor.”

In Mexico, Spanish colonists and traders brought cumin, and

it took root in both the soil and the spice box. “Across Mexico

the use of cumin is quite common for moles, pipianes, adobos

and other sauces [with nuts and seeds], such as almendrados,

encacahuatados and nogadas,” says popular Mexican chef, TV

host and restaurateur Margarita Carrillo. “But always in small

quantities that don’t dominate the final flavor of the dish.”

It is more prominent in foods from northern Mexico due to

both population and climate, she adds. That is where, especially

in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, more than 100,000

Lebanese settled, and others from throughout the eastern Med-

iterranean, Iraq and Egypt followed. Among the most famous

culinary influences of this migration are tacos al pastor, whose

filling is based on spit-grilled meat, much like Middle Eastern

shawarma, seasoned with local and Middle Eastern spices,

including cumin. The drier climate of Mexico’s north, with its hot summers, also favors cumin that, because of its volatile antimicrobial and antioxidant properties, came to be used “to help keep vegetables over the winter months, when you can hardly grow any,” she explains.

Nowhere though is cumin embraced as

fully as it is in India. In addition to

growing most of the world’s

cumin, Indians also

consume almost two-

thirds of the world

total. Cumin is

known as *jeera*

in Hindi, which

comes from the

Sanskrit root

jri, meaning

“digestion.” Often

added first to a

hot pan, cumin gets a

starring—rather than sec-

ondary—role in flavoring. For this

reason, Reshii includes cumin among “The

Big Four” of Indian spices, alongside chili, turmeric and corian-

der. “In Indian cooking, it is inconceivable to proceed without

these four spices,” she says. In much of Indian cuisine, she adds,

cumin is “about as important as air is to breathing.”

In her book research, Reshii found that cumin grows best

in soil that is nutrient-poor.

“Desert soil makes the plant

work hard to extract every par-

ticle of flavor from the earth,”

she says. “Once the seed has

formed, the weather needs to

be dry for the last month. If it

rains, the plant bends to the wet

ground and the precious crop

becomes dark and flavorless.”

And the best cumin? Among

her global samples, Reshii says, the most intensely flavored come

from western Rajasthan’s Thar Desert. “My Rajasthani stash had

the strongest scent and flavor. Almost as it had entrapped the

Thar desert in its tiny body.” 🌍



Cumin is known in Hindi as *jeera*, which comes from the Sanskrit root *jri*, meaning “digestion.”



Jeff Koehler is a James Beard and two-time IACP award-winning author based in Barcelona. His books include *Where the Wild Coffee Grows* (Bloomsbury, 2017), a *New York Times Book Review* “Editor’s Choice,” and *Darjeeling: A History of the World’s Greatest Tea* (Bloomsbury, 2015), a *Guardian* paperback of the week. His writing has appeared in *The Washington Post*, *NPR*, *Saveur*, *Food & Wine*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *South China Morning Post*, and many other publications. Follow him on Instagram @jeff_koehler.

Linda Dalal Sawaya (lindasawaya.com; @lindasawayaART) is a Lebanese American artist, illustrator, ceramicist, writer, teacher, gardener and cook in Portland, Oregon. Her 1997 cover story, “Memories of a Lebanese Garden,” highlighted her illustrated cookbook tribute to her mother, *Alice’s Kitchen: Traditional Lebanese Cooking*. She exhibits regularly throughout the US, and she is listed in the *Encyclopedia of Arab American Artists*.



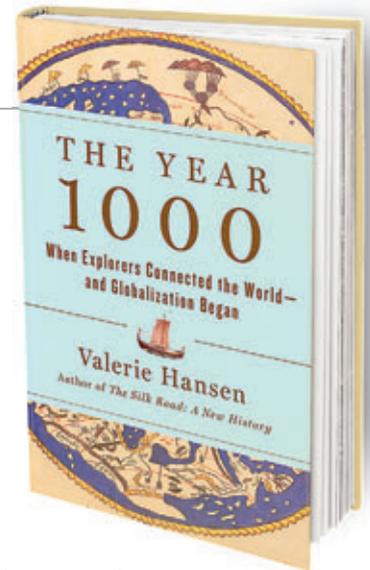


REVIEWS

Without endorsing the views of authors, the editors encourage reading as a path to greater understanding.

“The ‘routes and realms’ writings describe peoples living in different parts of the world and consistently say more about the peoples of Afro-Eurasia than any other source from the year 1000.”

—VALERIE HANSEN

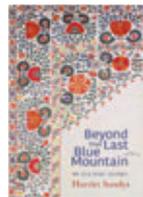


The Year 1000: When Explorers Connected the World—and Globalism Began

Valerie Hansen. 2020, Scribner.

Yale historian Valerie Hansen pinpoints the origin of globalism, as a cultural and economic phenomenon, to around the year 1000 CE, when trade routes carrying goods, technologies, people and ideas developed, “For the first time in world history, an object or a message could travel all the way around the world.” Chinese artisans, merchants and bureaucrats, roving Viking explorers as well as Arab traders and chroniclers all played pivotal roles in this long historic shift. It was the latter who, like Abbasid-era court official Ibn Khurradadhbib (820 CE–911 CE) and Córdoba-based al-Bakri (1040–1094 CE), compiled extensive details about “the residents, trade goods, routes and customs of many preliterate societies in Afro-Eurasia.” With the expansion of world travel, cities such as Baghdad and Cairo rose to prominence along new trade routes, while the movements of peoples along them contributed to globalism’s dynamic emergence. A thought-provoking read for lovers of history who especially enjoy connecting the dots across far-flung cultures and centuries.

—TOM VERDE



Beyond That Last Blue Mountain: My Silk Road Journey

Harriet Sandys. 2019, Medina Publishing.

This evocative and colorful

account of the author’s travels in the 1980s and early ‘90s throughout Pakistan and Afghanistan, then Iraq, the Balkans and Syria, begins in the world of Asia- and Mideast-focused antiques traders in England, for whom Sandys sets out searching for high-quality carpets and artifacts. Along the way she becomes interested both in ikat silk weaving and assisting to Afghan refugees. Sandys journeyed through conflict areas to set up a silk-weaving project for UNESCO, and her book describes her meetings with locals and expatriate Europeans, as well as her experiences teaching Afghan women about the resist-dyeing *ikat* techniques, which she describes with expertise and empathy. While Sandys relates her experiences as a woman, traveling on dusty and hazardous roads, she also sheds light on the generosity, hospitality and warmth of people she encountered.

—SOPHIE KAZAN



Daily Life in Ancient Egyptian Personal Correspondence

Susan Thorpe. 2021, Archaeopress.

Although pyramids evoke the

grandeur of Pharaonic Egypt, they don’t reveal much about day-to-day society. Luckily, early Egyptians wrote plenty of letters and notes, some of which archeologist Susan Thorpe, a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Auckland, has compiled and analyzed in this book of daily exchanges from the Old Kingdom era, c. 2686–2181 BCE, when the great pyramids, including those of Giza, were being constructed through the rule of Ramses III and the 21st Dynasty (1069–945 BCE). It’s shocking how, well, normal it all is. In one letter a man demands his maidservant be returned, while in another a brother complains that his sister doesn’t write to him. Each provide a unique snapshot of what it was to live in the shadow of the pyramids. This work yields a fascinating glimpse of what it was to be a part of this long-vanished world.

—DIANNA WRAY



Thirteen Ways to Make A Plural: Preparing to Learn Arabic

Jacob Halpin. 2020, AUC Press.

If you’re contemplating learning Arabic, this gem,

written by a British diplomat, is a must. It’s not a textbook but a roadmap for the Arabic learning process. Drawing on his experiences and those of teachers and fellow students, Halpin helps readers determine their goals and chart their route. Arabic’s vast vocabulary and complex grammar render it an arduous undertaking. *Thirteen Ways* doesn’t teach either, but it identifies deceptively simple but crucial rules and pitfalls to avoid. It discusses choosing between Arabic forms, enhancing immersion experiences and study techniques for optimal learning. Halpin warns Arabic is hard but reassures readers it’s not unusual to feel overwhelmed and confused. And, amazingly, he pinpoints when those feelings will arise. Halpin is engaging and delivers with clarity. *Thirteen Ways* won’t make Arabic easy, but it will clear a path and bring the objective into view.

—MAE GALHWASH

AUTHOR'S CORNER



Culture, People and Land: A Conversation with Matthew Teller

by J. TREVOR WILLIAMS

International travel in 2020 went from a luxury enjoyed by some to an impossibility endured by all. British travel writer and journalist Matthew Teller witnessed his livelihood become grounded more abruptly than most. After averaging two cross-border trips per month for 20 years, mostly to the Middle East, he found himself marooned in the UK. Confinement, however, offered him a silver lining: Just before the lockdown, the accomplished guide-book writer had finished researching his next work, on Jerusalem. For once he could reflect on the cumulative impact of his travels before jetting off on the next assignment. The result is *Quite Alone*, an anthology of travel writing, journalism and essays previously published between 2008 and 2019, whose title suggests a lamentation on our shared isolation. But these richly reported stories from 13 Middle Eastern countries provide something else: a meditation on the enduring value of meeting people where they are.



Matthew Teller

How much was publishing this book in 2020 meant to sate your own wanderlust?

You nailed it: This book was all about reminding myself of travel and remembering places I've loved. Eighteen months of lockdown is quite a change, but I'm loving staying still. I am missing friends and places, of course, but I don't miss the pace of travel at all.

Why has the Middle East so captivated you?

All sorts of reasons: the landscapes, the desert, the cultures. Wherever I've gone, whatever I've done, the ways people have welcomed me and sought to help have always inspired me. People's hospitality and care are never less than humbling. The other thing is what used to be called "bottom" — a hard-to-define sense of solidity, even dependability and steadfastness, running through the cultures of the region and evoked in a thousand ways in everyday life and encounters that I find deeply fascinating and hugely attractive.

It seems that you counter journalistic coverage of the region that focuses on oil and conflict. How much are you

driven by letting people and places speak for themselves?

That was a core motivation. I have been fortunate to build a platform for myself, and I wanted to use that to amplify the voices, outlooks and preoccupations of people I encountered. Having said that, I don't kid myself that my own filters and projections don't also overlay everything; they do.

What is the line between travel writing and journalism—or is there one?

If I were to boil it down to a one-liner, I might say this: A journalist should never be their own story; a travel writer sometimes must be.

The region has changed dramatically since 2008. Could this book be done in the same way now?

Some of the material would be impossible or very different. I'm thinking of the pieces on food in Syria or cultural heritage in Bahrain or artistic endeavor in Lebanon. Other pieces—climbing Jabal Harun in [Petra,] Jordan, walking in Palestine, researching heritage in Iraqi Kurdistan or Christianity in Dubai—may not be so different.

A few pieces focus on conservation, and you vividly describe oasis towns, wadis and landscapes. Is it important to you to portray natural beauty in a region stereotyped as forbidding and bleak?

It is. Part of that is unconscious—there is real beauty in landscapes across the region—but part is a conscious reaction to the tide of negative stereotypes embedded in Western responses to the desert in particular. There's only so much I can take of descriptions like "barren", "wasteland" and the like before I start to question the assumptions underpinning them.

When we do start traveling again, where will you go first? How do you go about uncovering new destinations?

I hope to get back to Jerusalem by March 2022, the publication date for my new book. As for finding new destinations, people are where the stories are, and listening is always the best way to travel.

Quite Alone: Journalism From the Middle East 2008–2019

Matthew Teller. 2020, independently published.



Find these and more reviews at aramcoworld.com



Amarna: A Guide to the Ancient City of Akhetaten

Anna Stevens. 2021, AUC Press.



The Sultan's Feast: A Fifteenth-Century Egyptian Cookbook

Ibn Mubārak Shāh. Daniel L. Newman ed., tr. 2020, Saqi Books.



EVENTS

Highlights from aramcoworld.com

Please verify a venue's
schedule before visiting.

CURRENT / SEPTEMBER

Murals of History brings together 15 UAE-based artists who have created murals inspired by Arab art history, delivered with their own unique artistic interpretation. The exhibition represents an homage to and a continuation of the Arab art movement, featuring colorful wall murals that integrate Arab and Islamic art elements into contemporary creative styles. **Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation**, through September 20.

Borrowed Faces: Future Recall looks at the Cold War and its effect on cultural practices in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, which generated one of the most fertile periods in the history of Arab culture and publishing. The works, by Berlin-based art collective Fehras Publishing Practices, explore significant cultural moments in the history of Arab publishing in the 1960s through performance, installation and publications. The Mosaic Rooms, **London**, through September 26.

CURRENT / OCTOBER

One Piece, Two Lives: Uses and Reuses in the Hispanic Middle Ages demonstrates that like people objects too can be sums of diverse experiences. This exhibit tells the story behind the reasons that led to the transformations and adaptations of objects in new contexts, often driven by the constant traffic of goods that flowed, despite conflicts, among Muslim and Christian realms of Iberia. El Museo Arqueológico Nacional, **Madrid**, through October 17.

CURRENT / DECEMBER

Drop by Drop Life Falls From the Sky: Water, Islam and Art represents an intellectual journey marked by four main subjects: the blessings of water and Islam, and daily life, traditional hammams (bath houses) and gardens. These subjects collectively illustrate the historical development of the numerous roles played by water in daily life and represent the artistic embodiment of this element in the shapes and purposes of the Arabic and Islamic arts and artifacts. **Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization**, through December 11.

It Comes in Many Forms presents textiles, decorative arts and works on paper that attest to the pluralism of Islam and its expressions. From an Egyptian textile fragment dating to the 1100s to a contemporary woman's top by the Paris-based designer Azzedine Alaïa, 30 objects offer explorations into migration, diasporas and exchange and suggest the difficulty of defining arts from a transnational religious viewpoint. RISD Museum, **Providence**, through December 18.

Arts of Islamic Lands: Selections From the al-Sabah Collection, Kuwait presents an impressive and comprehensive spectrum of Islamic art from the eighth to 18th century—made in North Africa, the Middle East, Anatolia, the Indian subcontinent, the Iberian Peninsula and Central Asia. This exhibit demonstrates the development of techniques, craftsmanship and esthetics in Islamic visual culture.

This expanded installation more than triples the display, increasing the collection to some 250 works. The Museum of Fine Arts, **Houston**, through December 31.

CURRENT / JANUARY

Lights of Lebanon: Modern and Contemporary Art From 1950 to Today pays tribute to the vitality and resilience of the Lebanese artistic scene. This exhibit celebrates the prodigious creativity of modern and contemporary artists from Lebanon and its diasporas, from the day after its independence in 1943 to the present. Arab World Institute, **Paris**, through January 2.

CURRENT / FEBRUARY

14 Dynasties and a Region: The History and Culture of the Muslim World unfolds and recounts the rise and fall of 14 major Muslim dynasties through an assemblage of 205 artifacts, all selected from the collection of the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia. This exhibit aims to introduce Islamic art history to Japan through a rich display of material culture from the Muslim world that spans over 1,000 years. **Tokyo National Museum**, through February 20.

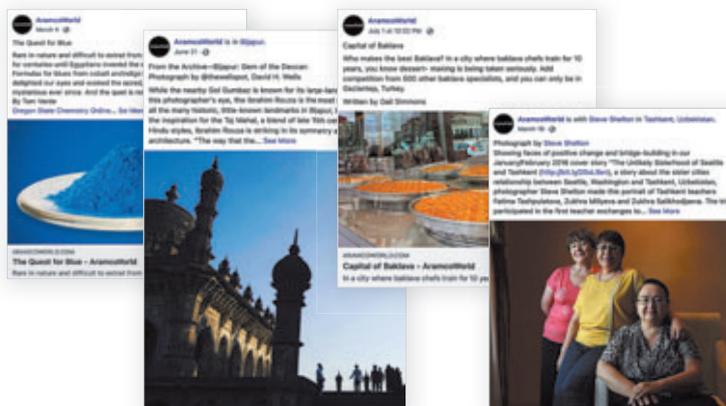
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Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa

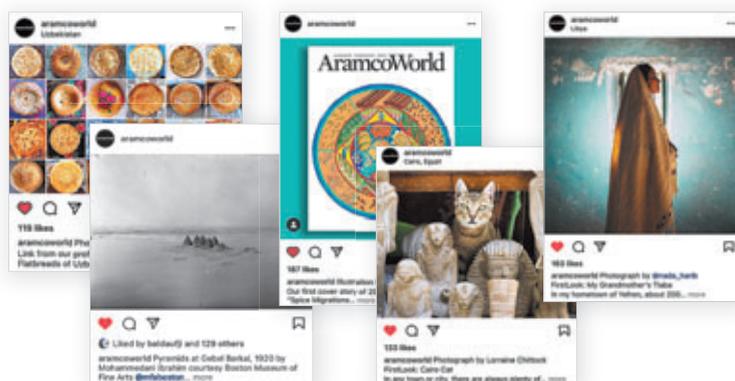
calls on what archeologists have termed "the archeological imagination"—the act of recapturing the past through surviving traces—to present a critical rethinking of the medieval period. The exhibit presents rare and precious archeological fragments side by side, bringing new understanding to complete works of art from the period of medieval Africa, beginning with the spread of Islam in the eighth century CE and receding with the arrival of Europeans along the continent's Atlantic Coast at the end of the 15th century. During this era the Sahara became the center of a global network of exchange. As networks spread, so too did cultural practices, fostering the broad circulation of distinctive Saharan esthetic and intellectual traditions connected to Islam, revealed in the fragments excavated from archeological sites, now uninhabited, that were once vibrant communities. National Museum of Art, **Washington, DC**, through February 27.

Equestrian figure by an anonymous inland Niger Delta artist; Djenné, Mali; 13th–15th century CE; ceramic.



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