

COOKING

## An Iraqi Meal

FROM FISH AND RICE TO SWEET NOODLES FOR DESSERT (AND WITH A TANGY YOGURT DRINK), A TASTE OF THE MIDDLE EAST. **BY NAWAL NASRALLAH**



**A DISH WITH HISTORY** Sweet vermicelli noodles with walnuts and pistachios is a popular Iraqi dessert with roots in medieval Baghdad.

**I** like fish here in the United States – I can actually get it bone-free. The Tigris fish I grew up on, though delicious, is riddled with fine, prickly bones. There is no way you can watch TV and eat it. I eat mostly salmon, trout, and cod now, and, unlike red meat, it cooks fast. In less than half an hour, you can whip together an elegant and delectable treat of rice and fish with a delicately tangy sauce. Wash it down with a cooling yogurt drink, then finish with sweet noodles.

**YELLOW RICE**

SERVES 4

Rice served with fish is traditionally made yellow in Iraq so that the eater can easily pick out the thorny, fine bones typical of the native fish. Basmati rice cooks better if washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, and drained; with other types, follow package directions.

- 1 **tablespoon vegetable oil**
- ½ **teaspoon turmeric**
- 2 **cups rice**
- 3½ **cups hot water**
- 1½ **teaspoons salt**
- 5 **cardamom pods**
- 1 **cinnamon stick**

In a medium nonstick pot over medium heat, heat the oil until it shimmers. Add the turmeric and stir for a few seconds until fragrant. Stir in the rice, hot water, salt, cardamom, and cinnamon. Raise the heat to high and boil the rice until visible moisture is absorbed, about 5 minutes. Lower heat to low, and simmer rice, covered, for 20 minutes. Turn the rice gently with a wooden spoon 2 to 3 times while simmering to allow it to fluff. Serve with cardamom and cinnamon still in the rice, for garnish.

**BROILED SALMON WITH POMEGRANATE SAUCE**

SERVES 4

**SAUCE**

- 2 **tablespoons vegetable oil**
- 2 **medium onions, chopped**
- 1 **teaspoon curry powder**
- 1 **teaspoon ground coriander**
- 1 **tablespoon pomegranate syrup (available at Middle Eastern groceries)**
- 2 **medium tomatoes, chopped**
- ¼ **cup chopped green bell pepper or chili pepper, such as poblano or banana**
- ½ **cup raisins**
- 2 **cloves garlic, thinly sliced**
- 1 **teaspoon salt**
- ¼ **teaspoon black pepper**
- ¼ **cup water**

**FISH**

- 1 **tablespoon mustard**
- 1 **tablespoon honey**
- 2 **pounds skinless fillet of salmon, divided into 4 portions**
- 1 **tablespoon olive oil**
- Coarse salt, for sprinkling**
- ¼ **cup toasted slivered almonds, for garnish**

In a medium skillet over medium heat, heat the oil and saute onions until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add the curry powder and coriander and stir until fragrant, a few seconds. Add the pomegranate syrup, tomatoes, bell or chili pepper, raisins, garlic, salt, black pepper, and water. Cook gently over medium heat, covered, until sauce thickens, 5 to 7 minutes. Keep warm.

Turn on the broiler. In a small bowl, stir the mustard and honey

to combine. Line a flat baking pan with aluminum foil, and drizzle it with ½ tablespoon of oil. Arrange the fish pieces on the pan, leaving space between them. Brush the fish with the mustard-honey mix, drizzle with the remaining oil, and sprinkle with salt. Broil for 5 minutes, then turn over the pieces and give them a brush of the mustard-honey mix and a sprinkle of salt. Broil until the surface is crisp and golden, 3 to 5 minutes. The fish is done when a knife gently inserted in the thickest part slides all the way through without resistance. Immediately transfer the fish pieces to a platter, and spread the pomegranate sauce around and between them. Sprinkle almonds all over the dish, and serve with the yellow rice.

**SHINEENA**

SERVES 4

This yogurt drink is always made with a pinch of salt – never sweet.

- 1 **cup plain yogurt**
- 3 **cups cold water**
- ¼ **teaspoon salt**

Put the yogurt, water, and salt into a pitcher and whisk until the mixture is foamy. Serve immediately.

**HALAWAT SHA'RIYYA (SWEET AND GOLDEN VERMICELLI)**

SERVES 4

- 1½ **tablespoons salted butter**
- 1 **tablespoon canola oil**
- 4 **ounces (about 6 nests) vermicelli**
- 2 **cups hot water**
- Pinch salt**
- ¾ **cup sugar**
- ¾ **teaspoon ground cardamom**
- 2 **teaspoons rose water**
- ⅓ **cup walnut pieces**
- 1 **tablespoon coarsely ground pistachios, for garnish**

In a heavy pot over medium heat, melt the butter with the oil. Lightly crush the vermicelli nests between your fingers, add pieces to the pot, and cook them, stirring constantly, until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Carefully pour in the hot water and add the salt. Stir, bring the mixture to a boil, then lower the heat and simmer, covered, until the noodles start to soften, 4 to 5 minutes.

Add the sugar, cardamom, rose water, and walnuts. Stir until the sugar crystals dissolve. Let the mixture simmer, covered, on medium-low, gently stirring 2 or 3 times, until moisture is absorbed, noodles look glossy, and the sugar starts to caramelize and stick to the bottom of the pot, 12 to 15 minutes.

Invert the pot over a flat platter and spread the noodles, evening the surface with the back of a spoon. Sprinkle with ground pistachios, divide into portions, and serve warm. Leftovers may be refrigerated and then heated for 1 minute in the microwave.

*Nawal Nasrallah is the author of Delights From the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine (Author House) and Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens (Brill), a translation of a 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook. Before immigrating to the United States in 1990, she taught English language and literature at Baghdad University; she now lives in New Hampshire. Send comments to [cooking@globe.com](mailto:cooking@globe.com).*

**KITCHEN AIDE**

**The Smell of Home**

*In an excerpt from Delights From the Garden of Eden, Nawal Nasrallah recalls growing up in Baghdad.*

It was a middle-class neighborhood, with eucalyptus trees lining both sides of the street, and in the springtime the whole neighborhood would be infused with the intoxicating aroma of the blossoms of citrus trees planted all along the fences. Those shady places were like magnets for the neighborhood kids, where we used to play, fight, reconcile, tell stories, and chatter about everything and anything. As lunchtime approached, the time for the main meal of the day, we started playing our guessing game as the pleasant and most welcome aromas of food sneaked out of the simmering pots, and meandered along our street. We would sniff these floating aromas and guess whose mom was cooking what for that day. Although the dominant aroma would be that of stew and and rice, which were



cooked practically every day, the guessing was still intriguing for there were so many kinds of stews. And almost always there would be a single distinctive aroma of a special dish, and we knew that one of us would soon be called by his or her mom to distribute samplings of that dish to the neighbors. As the custom had always been, it was not fit to return the neighbor's dish empty, so it would be returned with a comparable dish that was equally if not more delicious.