

Understanding Culture

The Art of Food From the *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchens*

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Understanding the art and culture of food of those we seek to help is paramount to being and becoming an astute and learned CNS. And while there are many avenues for this study the truest, to me, seems to be the narratives and fiction of the people themselves and not surprisingly their treasured cookbooks. The reader might be surprised at the introduction of a cookbook of a culture other than their own as essential to the practice of Clinical Nurse Specialists. However, the cookbook in question is out of the ordinary. It is the earliest known culinary document to come to us from medieval times worldwide. In fact, Nawal Nasrallah's* translation of *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook* is a fascinating and instructive window into the life and culture of medieval Islam. What is equally exciting is that this translation reveals the medieval Greek historian Galen's Humoral Theory and the Concept of Remedying Food or healing foods that was prevalent in the 10th-century Baghdad. Thus, we learn more

about the history of medicine and the art of healing from the medieval world and discover some of the roots of natural healing practices that are prevalent today. We are given the exact recipes for these remedies.

In her translation, Nawal Nasrallah has featured exquisite miniatures in full-color plates that portray scenes of people preparing food, dining, culinary utensils, and etiquette practices. Al-Warraq's *The Book of Cookery, Preparing Salubrious Foods and Delectable Dishes Extracted From Medical Books and Told by Proficient Cooks and the Wise* includes anecdotes and poetry with wit and humor

*Nawal Nasrallah was a university professor at Baghdad and Mosul Universities, teaching English and American literature, from 1977–1990. Since arriving in the States, she has been giving lectures, presentations, and demonstrations on Mesopotamian and medieval Baghdadi cuisines as well as modern Iraqi cooking. She is the author of *Delights From the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine* (Indianapolis, Indiana: Authorhouse; 2003); short stories of fiction, *Beginner's Iraqi Arabic*, with 2 audio CDs (with Nadia Hussani); and a television program entitled "Baking With the Ancient Mesopotamians and Much More." In April 2008, Nasrallah's translation of *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchen* received the Gourmand World Cookbook Award first prize for the best translation in the world with competition from 23 countries. (See author/translator's Web site: www.iraqicookbook.com.)

that bring to life the Baghdad of a thousand years ago.

"The book of cookery is divided into 132 abwab 'chapters.' It begins with the basics of kitchen utensils and ingredients, the humoral properties of foods, advice on how to avoid any harm that food may cause, and the benefits of exercise before the meal. Al-Warraq then glides through the categories of snack foods and cold dishes, usually served before the hot meal or with it, prepared with red meat, poultry, fish, and vegetables. Next, he embarks on preparations of stove dishes cooked in pots and served hot with bread, beginning with the basic *ma wa milh* (literally 'water and salt,' dishes of meat simmered in broth) and porridges and bean dishes. He then proceeds to varieties of meat stews, braised and fried dishes, and omelets. From the stove, he switches to outdoor cooking using the *tammur*, grill, and the rotating spit, *kardabaj*. Dessert comes next followed by dishes for the sick. Drinks, some of which are alcoholic, cover a number of chapters that include recipes for digestives. Because eating necessitates washing the hands before and after the meal and cleaning the teeth, there are recipes for hand-washing compounds and recommended varieties of *khilal* 'toothpicks.' Because eating was a social activity, literally, as diners share not just a table but also communal dishes, knowledge of specific etiquettes of dining with friends and dignitaries is necessary. The book duly

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closes with a chapter on the benefits of having a nap after a meal.”¹

In 1987, my husband and I were invited to attend the Al-Mirbad Poetry Festival in Baghdad. My invitation included a talk at the Baghdad University School of Nursing, which was followed by a reception with luscious food prepared by the School of Nursing faculty. Now, reading this book of cookery from the 10th century, many of the dishes served that day come to life once again for me. And I am reminded of the incredible hospitality of the Iraqi people. Invited into their homes, we saw fresh foods prepared in the manner described in this book with special pots and utensils, with careful attention paid to the unique qualities and tastes of each morsel. The art of bread baking is symbolic of the vibrancy of Islam’s ancient cuisine because the flat bread *Tannur* cooked by the Mesopotamians

more than 5,000 years ago is still being made today.

In another, her first book, *Delights From the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*, Nasrallah offered a historical overview of Iraqi cuisine and recipes from ancient, medieval, and modern times with numerous folkloric stories, anecdotes, songs, and cultural explications of customs. She has prepared and shared these delightful dishes with friends and family and interviewing reporters.

In an interview for the *New York Times* (April 3, 2003), she described her life in Iraq and the nightmarish time when she fled the country with 2 of her 3 children. In the front piece of that first book, she offered what she called an “apology.”

“Considering the hardships that Iraq and the Iraqi people have been going through since 1990, some might

think that this was not the right time to write about food. But as a wife, a mother, a woman, and a human being, I find in food and in memories of food my refuge, my comfort, and consolation when things are not looking good, as they say here.”

Sit
at dinner tables
as long as you can
and converse to your hearts’ desire
for these are the bonus times of
your lives.

Al-Hasan bin Ali-Talib
A grandson of the Prophet
Muhammad^{1(p5)}

Reference

1. Nasrallah N. *Annals of the Caliph’s Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq’s Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook (Islamic History and Civilization)*. Boston and Leiden: Brill; 2007. Studies and texts.



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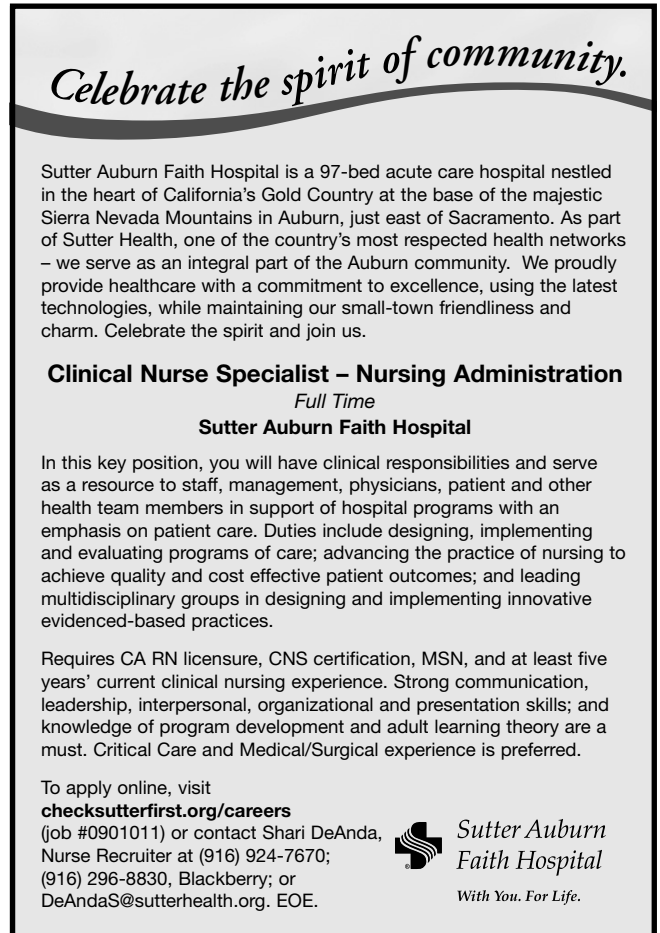
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