

Queen of de-Nile

Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Cairo

FROM THE DAY I ARRIVED IN CAIRO for twelve months of intensive Arabic study, I was sick. The city—smoggy and mobbed with nineteen million fruit vendors, knife sharpeners, cab drivers, and sidewalk lechers, all trumpeting their trades at top volume—made an immediate physical assault on my body. Always a little susceptible to stress, my stomach went into high rejection mode—every tomato slice and stray parsley leaf did me in.

After a month or so, my colleagues were practically eating raw chicken off the sidewalk, but my GI tract just grew more sensitive. The only way I could stay healthy was to cook in my amoeba-free kitchen, but soon I was going stir-crazy, and my repertoire of meticulously sanitized cucumber salads was wearing thin. When I saw the announcement for free cooking classes at the Indian Cultural Center, I thought they were the perfect solution: I'd pick up some new recipes, get myself out of my usual schedule of class-cook-collapse, and pretend, for a couple of hours each Wednesday, that I wasn't in Cairo.

Once a week for six weeks, a different Indian woman addressed a crowd of fifteen or twenty people, mostly Egyptian women in their thirties, along with a few Europeans I recognized from the bars around town and a smattering of desperate-looking men of all backgrounds—whether they were there to meet women or just to cadge a hot meal, I never knew. The presenters, most of them wives of consulate employees, ranged from charismatic dynamos with nimble assistants and Food Network–ready patter to peevish frumps contemptuous of shortcuts. I still have the recipes the women handed out each week: Mutton Curry, Potato Cutlet, Gooz Hindi. Each ingredient prompted discussion: What's condensed milk called in Arabic? Which brand is the best? Could you substitute something else? Isn't *vermicelli payasam* just like *mahalabiya*?

Until these classes, my experience in Egypt had been limited to situations in which I was an American and they were Egyptian: I was buying fruit, so I had to beware I didn't get stuck with the squishy pieces; I was the only

woman sitting in a coffee house, and men were raising their eyebrows at me. I was constantly aware of my foreignness, rating my interactions and experiences and comparing myself to everyone else I met—dark skin, light skin, good Arabic, bad. It was an endless, pointless process. The Foreign–Native continuum was entirely in my head, and I always came out on the wrong end, loud, clumsy, and pale.

But here at the Indian Cultural Center I saw Egyptians as confused as I was, for a change (my notes don't say what the heck *sooji* was anyway). And the Indian women were not just cooking—they were putting their own homesickness on display, mixing, tasting, reminiscing, rarely admitting to a Cairene adaptation or innovation.

But perhaps most important, I could finally be a spectator, rather than a performer. In the late 1990s, only a handful of white Americans studied Arabic. It was a novelty language, often taught with more concern for grammatical intrigue than actual communication, and after six years of trying to master it, I had become chronically self-conscious when I spoke. It didn't help that Egyptians thought me equally novel: if just walking down the street in Cairo made me the star of the show, when I opened my mouth I was a stand-up comic, a dancing bear, alone in the spotlight.

I wish I could say I made a great friend for life at these classes, or that I had an epiphany one day and walked out into the street relaxed and healthy, but the reality was a more gradual shift in my attitude. The classes gave me a mission. I started looking around Cairo for Indian ingredients and found lots of other things: the gleaming milk store, an oasis of air-conditioned clean; infinite varieties of dates and mangoes; and the labyrinthine produce and spice markets where heaps of glossy black eggplants and sweet red tomatoes evoked the richness of the Nile valley.

And when I went out with a shopping list and an eye for spotless guavas, I fit in better. The Egyptian men who'd kiss-kissed and whistled at me as a gawking tourist didn't look twice as I schlepped down dusty alleys carrying plastic bags stuffed with spinach. I eventually came to see myself



not as less foreign or more native, but as one of nineteen million people in a wild, weird city. By the time I left, I was beginning to feel as though I was settling in properly. In the cab on the way to the airport, I was even seized with intense, revisionist nostalgia—I'd completely forgotten having been sick.

After Egypt, I moved to New York City, which was more jarring than I'd thought it would be. Compared with Cairo, the streets were practically empty, and in the first weeks I walked around in a haze of alienation, as everyone looked glossy and privileged and like they'd never had dysentery in their life. The survival skills I'd honed in Egypt were irrelevant in this place, where kitchens were the size of shower stalls, wan tomatoes were sold in shrink-wrapped packets by the cigarette vendor, and everyone dined solely in golden-lit bistros on fake home-style food.

In Week Three of an increasingly dispiriting apartment hunt, I took the train to the neighborhood of Astoria, in Queens, which I knew only as affordable, deeply unfashionable, and largely Greek. When I stepped onto the crowded sidewalk and saw people of every color chattering together

Above: Hands-on culinary instruction at the Egyptian Agricultural Museum, Cairo, May 2007.

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and picking through a mountain of eggplants at the corner greengrocer, I was immediately reminded of Cairo. It wasn't because people were speaking Arabic, though a few of them were; it was because there, in the midst of this diverse mob, in front of the vegetables, I finally felt at ease.

I signed a lease a week later and promptly hit the streets with a shopping list. Not only was the produce nearly as bountiful as what I'd found along the Nile, but Bangladeshis, Italians, Czechs, Moroccans, Croatians, Brazilians, even Egyptians also lived in the neighborhood—no problem finding asafetida, curry leaves, or anything else I needed for my sheaf of Indian-via-Cairo recipes. Now, ten years since I first laid eyes on that glorious eggplant pile, I am still delighted to live and shop in Astoria. It just took a little gastrointestinal distress to lead me here. ☺