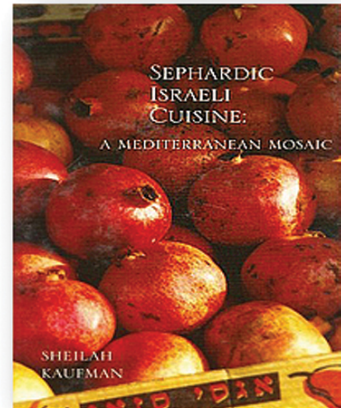


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Sephardic Israeli Cuisine, A Mediterranean Mosaic

by Sheila Kaufman
Hippocrene Books, Inc.
cloth, \$24.95
2002, 261 pages



Jewish cuisine most often brings to mind the inevitable bagels and lox or jokes about mother's weighty matzo balls. But through history, as Jews moved and resettled, their cuisine changed to suit religious strictures to local products. In Israel, this cuisine has become "a mosaic" of settlers' own traditions.

In America, we are most familiar with Ashkenazic Jewish cooking, the sturdy potato and cabbage dishes of northern Europe or German-inspired baked goods. But in Sephardic Israeli cuisine, Sheilah Kaufman traces the Moorish, Spanish, and Persian influences in dishes sparked with spice and perfumed with almond, cinnamon, and sumac. With choices like these, restrictions hardly feel like limits, but like new flavors to be opened and enjoyed.

Kaufman begins the book by recounting the history and culture that created these dishes. From a biblical foundation in Jerusalem, through expulsion and Diaspora across the Mediterranean into Europe, eventually establishing two Jewish centers--the Ashkenazim in the Rhine River Valley and the Sephardim in Iberia. Despite the inevitable differences in language, traditions, and cuisines between these two communities, they both maintained Kashrut, the dietary rules that Kaufman also explains. Finally, before the recipes begin, she explains the holidays around which meal traditions have been established. Sephardic dishes developed from the culinary traditions of Jews who settled in Alexandria, Antioch, and Damascus picking up the warm flavors of the Mediterranean.

Shakshouka, Tomato Spread, cooks tomatoes and peppers into a syrupy dip, but cleverly hidden in the recipe is a delicious lunch or light dinner dish. Crack a few eggs into the pan and simmer them with the lid on to set the yolks and whites. The result is a light and appealing dish, an Israeli variation on Spanish piperade. And Kaufman is right, have plenty of bread to sop up the juices.

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Labaneh, Yogurt Cheese, sounds like a meager diet dish, but is really a fresh and appealing dip, made only tastier when you know it's good for you. The yogurt is drained, and drained again until it is firm, then lightly salted, flavored with mint, and dressed with olive oil. On pita or crackers, or even for breakfast, it's a nice dish to have on hand.

Grilled Fish with Chermoula is another perfumed dish. Chermoula is a blend of saffron, cilantro, parsley, garlic, paprika, cumin, a dash of cayenne, and squeeze of lemon. Just licking the blend off your fingers will make you salivate and long for dinner. The fish is spread with the paste to marinate, then baked or grilled. The only change I would make in Kaufman's recipe is to make more chermoula. It would be wonderful stirred into lentil soup, tossed with chick peas for a salad, or even stirred into Labaneh and spread on pita.

Imam Bayaldi, Eggplants with Tomato Sauce, is a traditional Persian dish, inadvertently created by a bride who used so much of her dowry olive oil that the Imam fainted. But since the original apocryphal story, thrifty housewives have lightened the dish. This version takes its distinct flavor from the mix of sauteed onions, garlic, parsley, a little sugar, and cinnamon that stews with the eggplant, leaving them tender and fragrant.

Sephardic desserts are flavored with almonds, raisins, rosewater, and honey with some familiar dishes like baklava and macaroons, but even those known dishes are given a middle eastern turn. Rice Pudding is not the nursery dish of childhood memories, but a sweet, creamy pudding with cinnamon, cloves, rosewater, and raisins that becomes almost wine-like in its flavor. It's exotic and familiar at the same time.

That familiarity makes the book easy to use and once you've made many of these recipes they will quickly become second nature. By finishing the book with a chapter of Ashkenazic recipes, Kaufman makes the book useful for both Jewish cooks and for all cooks looking for flavor and ease.