

For the love of Lebanon





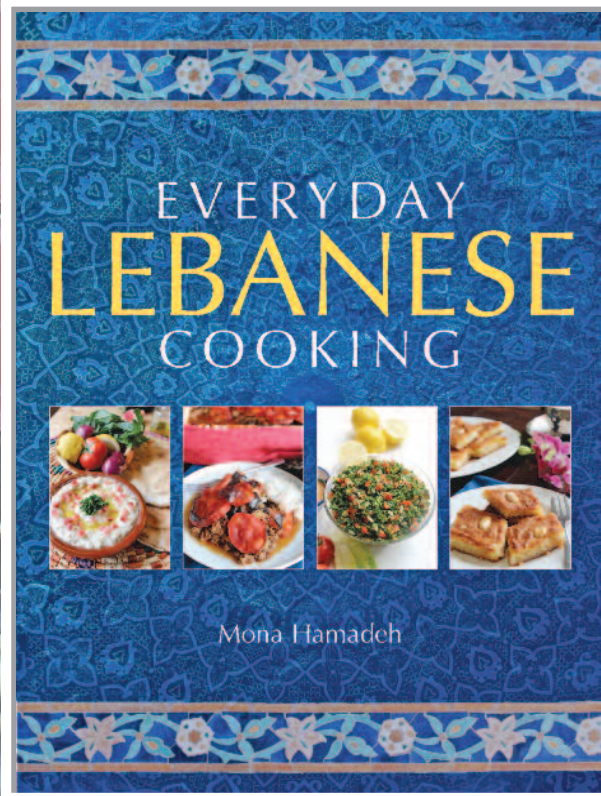
Mona Hamadeh is not a chef, nor does she work in a Michelin starred eaterie - in fact, she has never worked in a restaurant. Her efforts in the kitchen are a labour of love; love for her family, love of entertaining, and a love of Lebanese food, as Giselle Whiteaker discovers.

Mona Hamadeh was born in the Chouf Mountains, Lebanon, in a village called Gharifeh. These spectacular mountains south east of Beirut, are dotted with small villages and are terraced for easy cultivation.

Families in the villages grow their own vegetables, collect olives, and make their own bread. In the introduction to her recently released book *Everyday Lebanese Cooking*, Mona says: "Walking around the village, apart from all the greetings and hugs along the way, you smell the aroma of fig jam and quince, used for sweets, or of tomatoes being cooked outdoors in the courtyards over wood fires for tomato puree. This is the Lebanon of my childhood. Where my love of food began."

and often invites family and friends into her home to eat, a cultural tradition that springs directly from her Lebanese background. Lebanese people are extremely hospitable and share a focus on food regardless of the occasion. Guests are fed to overflowing and even at the end of a meal an empty plate is still a rare thing. In fact Mona explains that an empty plate is a cause for alarm for a host, as it indicates that guests may not have had enough to eat.

As she explains this phenomenon I look around and notice the volume of dishes Mona has prepared for our lunch. Unless an army marches through the front door before we eat, I will need to be rolled home post meal.



As she welcomes me into her home, Mona draws me into the kitchen, clearly the heart and soul of the house. Delicious food aromas compete for attention as several pots bubble gently on the stove top. Her love of cooking is immediately apparent. "The book is not about me," says Mona. "It is about the food, the Lebanese food. I am so passionate about Lebanese food."

Mona's enthusiasm is infectious. She has long been a keen entertainer

The book began as a small project when Mona decided to put together her favourite recipes for her children and grandchildren so that the tradition of Lebanese food would live on within the family. One thing led to another and now *Everyday Lebanese Cooking* has morphed into a 240-page, step-by-step guide to some of the best food Lebanon has to offer.

Along the way Mona honed her natural flair for food photography, taking shots of the dishes she cooked as she ensured each recipe contained just the right amount of detail in a simple enough format for anyone to follow.

Everyday Lebanese Cooking by Mona Hamadeh is available from Amazon. See www.amazon.co.uk



The book starts with the popular maza, more commonly translated as meze or mezze. Maza is thought of as starters, but in reality it is all about sharing small quantities of a large number of dishes, both hot and cold. As with a traditional meal, this section of the book is followed by main dishes, both carnivorous and vegetarian.

In the villages, often there would only be one butcher whom everyone depended on, so when the meat was finished there was often a gap in supply. "People go for vegetarian food then. They use a lot of pulses, things with cracked wheat, loads of different dishes," explains Mona. After these main dishes, a traditional meal would usually finish with fresh fruit and coffee. Lebanese people do indulge in sweets, but usually not after a main

meal. Mona determined the recipes by choosing the popular dishes, those that suit the Western palate, and importantly, those that use widely available ingredients. "I have included a lot of peasant dishes from the mountains, so people who were brought up in Beirut have not always had these dishes, or have had them but don't know how to make them," explains Mona. She suggests that aside from the health benefits of Lebanese food, the dishes are also economical. "If I say you need parsley or you need coriander, you buy a bunch and you are going to use all of it," she says. "We never use slight hints of flavour. Everything is used in large quantities so you get value out of everything you buy."

Some recipes have been handed down but most are classical Lebanese dishes with Mona's instinct for flavour stamped on them. Mona

professes not to know what makes her cooking style special, but she receives accolades from friends, many of whom work within the food industry, and relatives from Lebanon have called asking for her recipes. Her mother was a resourceful cook who focused on the classics, so perhaps it is hereditary. Whatever the source, I am soon to test the recipes and determine the quality for myself.

Mona disappears into the kitchen and returns laden with dishes that she piles on to the table. She lays out warm home-made pita bread to accompany the maza. I am surrounded by enticing bowls of hummus (chickpea and tahini dip), baba ghanoush (aubergine dip), tabouleh (parsley salad), warak inab (stuffed vine leaves), mnazaleh (aubergines and chickpeas in a tomato sauce) and just in case that is not enough, samakeh harrah (baked fish in tahini sauce).

I sample every dish. Then I sample them again to make sure, and one more time for luck. I am starting to taste Mona's influence on each dish. I have tried many of these dishes before, but Mona's stamp is across these. There are little touches that subtly enhance and complement the flavours. The vine leaves are cooked with tomatoes which helps them retain moisture. The baba ghanoush is topped with pomegranate seeds which lend zing, and Mona hands me a lemon to squeeze onto the fish, which perfectly complements the slightly sour flavour of the tahini sauce.

We have barely made a dent in the piles of food, but I know there is more

to come so I force myself to stop. We push the laden plates aside to make way for the main dish, djaj ma rouz. Deliciously tender chunks of chicken sit on top of a mound of rice and crispy mince meat crumbs. The dish is topped with toasted almonds and pine nuts and served with plain yoghurt on the side. I am already full but I cannot resist this delicacy and I eat until I can eat no longer. Then comes sweets – mamool (small cookie-like cakes filled with dates and nuts) and nammoura (semolina and yoghurt slice). I find a tiny space within my stomach and select the smallest portions to try. The mamool is coated with icing sugar and crumbles in my mouth while the sweet, sticky

nammoura melts into syrupy goodness. Mona hands me a bag of these delicacies to take home - should I ever need to eat again.

Before I waddle out the door I ask Mona what her favourite food is. 'My absolute favourite food is cracked wheat with tomatoes', she replies. 'It is poor mans food. My mum and I used to make it for the two of us because the others wouldn't eat it. It was our special dish.' I am curious as to whether Mona branches away from Lebanese food at any point. 'Well, I love curries, I love Indian food. If we go out to eat, Indian food is my first choice', she confesses.



Mona Hamadeh gives private cooking lessons and cooking demonstrations. For more details email Mona on: hamadehmona@ymail.com



Djaj ma rouz

Chicken with rice and nuts

This dish is always served at special occasions or any large gathering. It is simple to prepare and the nuts on the top make it look grand and appetising. Also it is a great dish for the family, as it is simple enough to cook any day.

Cut the chicken into quarters and place in a pan with the cinnamon sticks, pepper, salt and mixed spice. Just cover with boiling water. Return the pan to the boil, then allow to simmer for one hour until the chicken is tender. Uncover the pan and boil to reduce the stock to about one-third.

Meanwhile, soak the rice in cold water. In a frying pan, heat the oil and fry the almonds for a few minutes to brown, then remove from the oil. Add the pine nuts to the same oil and fry until brown, then remove from the oil and mix with the almonds. Next add the minced beef to the pan and fry until crispy and brown, stirring regularly. Add the ground cinnamon and fry for a few seconds, stirring well. Drain the rice and add it to the mince with a little more salt to taste. Add the stock to the rice and mince covering it by 1 cm. Bring to the boil, then reduce the heat to low, cover the pan and cook for about 20 minutes until all the stock is absorbed.

Turn the rice mixture onto a flat serving dish. Bone the chicken and place on top of the rice and sprinkle the nuts over the top. Serve with a mixed salad and plain yoghurt.

Ingredients

- 1 medium to large whole chicken
- 4 x 5cm cinnamon sticks
- 1/2 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp salt
- 1/2 tsp mixed spice
- 500g long-grain rice
- 50ml oil
- 100g split or flaked almonds
- 30g pine nuts
- 100g minced beef
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon

Cooking time: 90 minutes