

A COOKBOOK

FALASTIN



Foreword by Yotam Ottolenghi

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Cooking in Aida refugee camp, Bethlehem

Islam Abu Aouda lives in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. Her firstborn is severely disabled, and her home is humble. The needs of her husband and six children come before her own. Frankly, it would be easy to feel sorry for Islam. Spending time with her, though, you don't feel sorry. You feel inspired, energized, and happy. This is a lady with the best hug in town who sure knows how to giggle.

To make ends meet, Islam, along with five other ladies in Aida Camp, gives cooking lessons and hosts home-stays once or twice a month to interested visitors. Their group, formed in 2010, is called the Noor Women's Empowerment Group. The money they make from these lessons and home-stays goes toward making life better for the disabled kids in the camp. They might buy some equipment a child needs to get around, or use the money to give a group of kids an experience they've never had. The visitors, in return, get a slice of Palestinian kitchen life and a good meal to boot. Women rule the roost, stockpots are enormous, and, regardless of how many guests are expected, enough food is made to feed a small wedding. In time-honored fashion, the world is set right over a chopping board.

Going to Aida Camp for the first time, a visitor can be struck by how normal it all feels. The very foundations of the camp are abnormal, clearly—refugee camps only exist for those who've been uprooted from their home—but, with everyone going about their business, it all feels strangely everyday. Socioeconomic conditions are poor, population density is high, basic infrastructure is insufficient, and the smell of tear gas is familiar but, still, kids go to school, parents do what work they can, babies are born, the elderly are cared for, plays are put on, pictures are painted, meals are cooked. Just like every other teenager in the world, the older kids hang around on street corners, hankering after cool sneakers and mobile phones.

It is this apparent ordinariness that results in the incredulity frequently voiced by visitors when they see a refugee doing something as "everyday" as pulling out their mobile phone. "Yes, I'm a refugee," they find themselves having to explain, "and yes, I have a mobile. Yes, I am on Instagram." Their circumstances may be irregular and not normal but refugee camps are full of regular people doing normal things. To an outsider, it's what makes people such as Islam seem so extraordinary.

When we spent the morning with Islam, we prepared shush barak, little lamb-filled dumplings that Sami had been craving. Dough was made, rolled, shaped, filled, and then cooked in a yogurt sauce made from kishek (see page 337), a sharp-tasting fermented yogurt. It's a Marmite ingredient—people either love



it or hate it. For Tara, the jury is still out. For Sami, it's the Proustian "madeleine moment" that takes him straight back home.

Islam's husband, Ahmed, was with us in the kitchen, not necessarily getting his hands covered in flour but obviously supportive of his wife. He gave Sami a semi-jovial hard time, undermining Sami's great success as a chef and traveler by saying that none of it meant anything unless a man had "a wife and lots of kids." As Sami and Ahmed discussed the respective paths of "tradition" versus "passion," Tara and Islam looked on smiling, as they rolled and shaped and filled their dumplings, entertained by two grown men having the conversation about whether one can truly "have it all"—a conversation women are themselves so well versed in.

In terms of having it all—or just getting to dream a little—a visitor might expect Islam to voice the dream of all refugees: "the right to return" to the place they call home. For today, though, Islam's bucket list is more the kind you take to the beach. Her dream is to make a trip to the sea, to watch the sun set over the horizon. She may live just a two- or three-hour drive from the coastal town of Haifa but, in her mid-thirties, an ocean is still something Islam has never actually seen with her own eyes. Freedom to travel from A to B (quite literally, in the case of the region's division into Areas A, B, and C—see "The Tent of Nations" on page 130, which goes into more detail on this) is limited for people such as Islam. Getting in the way is the paperwork needed, the visa often denied, the checkpoint lines so long and humiliating, the regular and real demands of her family. For now, then, the horizon that Islam is focused on is closer to home: feeding visitors to make money to provide for her extended family in the camp.

This is just a snapshot of Islam's story. She is just one of about 3,000 refugees living in Aida Camp. Aida is just one of the three camps in Bethlehem. These camps are themselves just three of the fifty-eight recognized refugee camps throughout the region of Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. These camps are home to about 5 million refugees, and 5 million different life stories.

