



SIROCCO

FABULOUS FLAVORS
FROM THE MIDDLE EAST



sabrina ghayour



SIROCCO

Fabulous Flavors

from the Middle East

Sabrina Ghayour

Photography by Haarala Hamilton

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Dedicated to two very special sisters

My beloved late grandmother, "Maman" Malek...an incredible woman to whom I was very close and loved so much. Miss you and think of you every single day.

My late great-aunt "Mama" Gohar—the best cook in the family. How I wish I'd spent more time in your kitchen learning from you and not just eating.

They just don't make women like you anymore. Hope I've done you both proud.

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INTRODUCTION

Sirocco noun / si-roc-co /

Origin: Early 17th century; from Italian *scirocco*, based on Spanish Arabic *sharq*, “east wind”

A hot, dry wind blowing from east to west—sometimes described as warm, spicy and sultry.

My heritage has given me great insight into understanding the favorite ingredients and flavors of Eastern cuisine, which gives me confidence when using Eastern ingredients. I am never afraid to be bold with my use of spices or flavorings, and I don’t hold back when it comes to combining flavors and ingredients. But, in stark contrast to my heritage, I was raised in England and have the advantages of growing up with entirely different produce, ingredients, recipes and cooking techniques to those of my heritage. The result of this culinary cultural blending is that I have gained an understanding of how to combine the beautiful produce I’ve grown up knowing with Eastern flavors to achieve perfectly balanced flavor combinations that—whether subtle and aromatic or bold and punchy—often improve on the natural flavor of an ingredient.

These recipes are all inspired by flavors of the East but use the fresh produce, techniques and cooking styles of the West; hence the name *Sirocco*. None of these recipes are authentically Middle Eastern—instead, I wanted to share my own style of uncomplicated, full-flavored recipes that reflect the kind of cooking I do the most.

I learned so much from the comments and wonderful feedback I had from my last book, *Persiana*, which prompted me to continue writing recipes that were straightforward and didn’t rely on any particular ingredient to make them successful. I realized that many people feel the pressure to follow recipes to the letter, but Middle Eastern cooking just isn’t rigid in that way. In fact, most home-style cooking isn’t that way and the best recipes, the ones we keep making time and again, are those in which we can easily substitute an ingredient or two if needed, because in today’s world, convenience and time are key factors.

Not everything has to be aggressively spiced or full of chile heat. Sometimes, a wonderful balance and delicate contrast of flavor can deliver a refined subtlety that initially you wouldn’t have thought possible. It frustrates me when Middle Eastern food is summed up using the word “spice” or “spicy” because this isn’t always the case and, often, it is about aromatics, citrus, the fragrance of herbs or even the way in which something is cooked and served. Other times, it can be incredibly simple and pared right down to a key ingredient—an eggplant, simply grilled and served with yogurt, for example. Often, the simplicity of Eastern cuisine is overlooked when, in most cases, the real food of the East is humble, uncomplicated and simple.

I use many of the same spices and pantry ingredients from summer into winter. They see

me right through the year, from creating the much-needed comfort of wintry, warming stews to the light and refreshing dishes we crave during the warmer months, when fresh produce is green and abundant. *Sirocco* contains bold, vibrant flavor combinations that are great for everyday cooking or for more elaborate get-togethers, in recipes that are still very much steeped in the roots of Middle Eastern cooking, but with a fresher, lighter approach that's more conducive to everyday cooking and enjoyment.

Whether you are looking to prepare several dishes for a family meal or for just a single simple recipe, you can take what you want from this book. If you need a little useful inspiration for breakfast, lunch or dinner, or simply ideas for something to snack on alongside drinks with friends, there is something for everyone. The recipes use accessible ingredients to create unique but familiar dishes that are perfect for any occasion. If you are missing an ingredient, don't stress—just leave it out.

Hopefully, in your kitchen this book will get covered in oil spatter and food stains and remain close at hand (rather than buried under a pile of other books), full of recipes you turn to, time and time again, change and make your own...food that is simply delicious, not Eastern or Western, just straightforward and satisfying.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sabina Ghayour". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of both names being capitalized and prominent.





MY KITCHEN PANTRY

The contents of your kitchen pantry say a lot about the kind of cook you are. Mine are so messy and crammed full of every little ingredient possible that I shudder to think what they say about me. There is no order, just chaos: my own kind of comfortable, organized chaos. If there is an inch of unused space, I will find a way of stuffing something into it—but I can live with myself because I always have something in there to transform simple ingredients into something a little more special.

I am the kind of cook who relies on ingredients from the pantry to help give a simple dish a little extra flavor. Whether that comes from a single spice or spice mix, a flavored oil, preserve or unique ingredient, I find great comfort in knowing that I can always combine fresh produce with a little something from the pantry to make a simple meal a little more interesting.

The truth of the matter is that we all have tons of ingredients and spices, both familiar and unfamiliar, in our pantries, a few purchased for a single recipe where you use a teaspoon of it, then you are stuck with the rest and don't know what else to do with it. My ethos is very much based on getting the best out of your purchased ingredients—knowing how to use them time and again in different recipes and a myriad of different guises to achieve varied and delicious results every time.

Understanding an individual ingredient and how best to use it is key to ensuring you use up what you've purchased and none goes to waste. I think people can become nervous with an unfamiliar product and use it just once, and might never learn how to utilize it to its full potential. My recipes are simple and flavorful, and almost all ingredients can be substituted, and most can be left out entirely. Trusting your own instinct, as to what you do and don't like and what you can and can't live without in a dish, is still the secret to making anyone a more competent (and confident) cook.

I am often asked about what my must-have pantry ingredients are, and while some of them are perfectly familiar and well-known items, such as dry spices like cinnamon, cumin, coriander and turmeric, others are lesser known. Here's how to get the best out of them.

*

Aleppo pepper

A Turkish staple ingredient, these wonderful chile flakes deliver a gentler chile kick than the usual red chile flakes we more commonly use. They can be sprinkled on salads or bruschetta, used in pastas, rice dishes and stews and are great on potatoes and root vegetables. Their less aggressive heat means that you can use them more abundantly, yet still taste the core ingredients of a dish—albeit with a pleasing chile heat.

*

Za'atar

Essentially an herb mix rather than a spice mix, za'atar is a staple ingredient in much of the Middle East. It is made with wild thyme and toasted sesame seeds. Variations now include sumac, oregano, marjoram and cumin. It is incredibly versatile and can be sprinkled onto salads, sandwiches and cheese or made into a paste with oil and used to marinate meat, poultry, seafood and vegetables. It also bakes beautifully into breads and, with some olive oil, can be used for dipping bread into.

*

Sumac

A common ingredient in Iran and the Middle East, sumac is a red berry that is dried and ground into a powder for use as a seasoning. Iranians use it very simply to season grilled meat (usually lamb) because the aromatic, citric flavor of the granules cuts through fat beautifully. It's great with fish instead of lemon juice, but especially in salads, on vegetable dishes, mixed with cold butter to make a butter compound, in breads and as part of spice blends for all kinds of meat and poultry. Nowadays I use it in everything.

*

Pomegranate Molasses

A wonderful staple of any nation that cultivates pomegranates, the molasses (or syrup) is simply a concentrated reduction of raw pomegranate juice. It is sweet with a wickedly sour aftertaste that, when paired with the right ingredients, can be marvelous. I use it as a salad dressing on tomatoes or any mixed-leaf salad, especially when there is a sweet ingredient added to it. It is also a great dressing for grain salads featuring freekeh, brown rice and bulgur wheat and makes a wonderful sauce for game and red meat.



*

Harissa

A blend of different chile peppers and spices, harissa is sold in abundance in markets and is a staple in every home, playing a key role in North African cuisine. I use it in salad dressings, yogurt sauces, mayonnaise, stews, soups, pasta sauces and stir-fries. I fry it with rice and noodles and even mix a little into couscous, bulgur wheat or rice salads to give them some pep. It also makes a great marinade for meat, poultry and chicken destined for the grill, but beware—a little goes a long way.

*

Preserved Lemons

These wonderful little lemons are packed in salt or brine and preserved to jelly-like perfection. The fact that they are preserved means they have a long life and you can always turn to them when you need to give a dish a little zing. Ready to use in marinades, stews, salads, sandwiches and wraps, and as garnishes and seasonings, they are incredibly useful and give everything an instant perkiness and sharp-and-salty flavor.

*

Pickled Chiles

One of my all-time favorite pantry ingredients for the sheer convenience factor alone, pickled chiles are used endlessly in my home. Whether in salads, sandwiches, dips, marinades, pastas, rice, noodles, stir-fries and sauces, or served with meat, poultry, fish, vegetables or grilled halloumi, I cannot live without them. They even make the most wonderful addition to a grilled cheese sandwich. They never go bad, unlike fresh chiles.

*

Saffron

Being Iranian, I am fortunate enough to always have access to the best-quality Iranian saffron in abundance. One of my favorite dishes to make is a simple pasta with tinned crab meat, chiles, garlic and saffron, so it's not all Middle Eastern style. Saffron makes mayonnaise, sauces and marinades and gives life and color to rice dishes, both in the water absorption method (as with paellas and risottos) and in the aromatic steaming method (Persian rice dishes and biryanis). It is also great thrown into tomato sauces and used with seafood and poultry.

*

Whole Spices

Some of my favorite whole spices are cumin seeds, coriander seeds, green cardamom and black cardamom. Toasting whole spices in a pan and grinding them down into a powder is the best way to get the most out of their flavor.

*

Spice Blends

Indians call them *masalas*, Lebanese call them *baharat* and Persians say *advieh*. In many homes in the East, a staple and versatile signature spice blend is made and used in various dishes to add flavor and character. The way in which the blend is used can vary greatly and create different dimensions and tastes, despite the same base of spices being used to make the dish. There are some great spice mixes available in supermarkets, and Ras El Hanout (a Moroccan spice blend) and baharat (Lebanese) are two of my favorites. I especially love using them to rub or marinate red meats and sweet vegetables such as carrots, butternut squash, sweet potatoes and pumpkin—all of which can hold spice so well.

*

Garlic Oil

Garlic oil is my secret weapon in the kitchen and I use tons of the stuff. A little drizzle can transform a dish, so I use it in everything, from classic roast potatoes and fried mushrooms,

meat, poultry and fish to rubs, marinades, dips, dressings and sauces. I even drizzle it over toasted or grilled bread when making bruschetta. If you ever run out of garlic or can't be bothered to peel garlic, it is a great substitute.

HARISSA

PRESERVED LEMONS

GREEN VERBENA
HARISSA

SAFFRON

WHOLE
SPICES

PICKLED
CHILES

SPICE BLENDS

GARLIC OIL





brilliant
breakfasts
&
brunches



Butternut Rostis

Bread Boats

Parsee Duck Egg Scramble

Avocado Mash on Griddled Sourdough

Butternut, Sage & Tulum Pan Toasties

Two-Cheese Melts

Bacon Pitas

Cardamom Doughnut Brioche French Toasts

Sour Cherry & Ricotta Pancakes

Pear, Feta & Honey Toasts

Rose & Spice-Infused Berries



From left: STICKY LAMB BUNS, PEAR, FETA & HONEY TOASTS, BUTTERNUT ROSTIS WITH POACHED EGGS, PICKLED CUCUMBER RELISH, BACON PITAS

BUTTERNUT ROSTIS

with Poached Eggs



Traditionally made with potatoes, rosti are a great way to use up spare root vegetables or squashes. I like using butternut squash in mine and adding lots of spices to complement the sweet flavor of the squash. These little rostis make a great breakfast or brunch dish, but also work really well as an accompaniment to a main meal, in which case omit the eggs. *

SERVES 4

- 1 small butternut squash, peeled and coarsely grated
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 3 teaspoons flaky sea salt
- 1 heaping tablespoon all-purpose flour
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 bunch of scallions, thinly sliced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ small package (about $\frac{1}{2}$ ounce) of dill, leaves and fronds finely chopped
- 5 large eggs
- vegetable oil, for frying
- freshly ground black pepper

Put the grated butternut squash and chopped onion in a mixing bowl and add the salt. Using your hands, mix well. The salt will draw out excess moisture from the squash and onion, resulting in crisp rosti. Leave to stand for approximately 30 minutes. Using a sieve or clean cloth, extract as much moisture as you can from the mixture and return it to the mixing bowl.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Bring a large pot of water to a boil for poaching the eggs. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Heat a large skillet over medium heat.

Add the flour, spices, scallions and dill (reserving 1 teaspoon dill for sprinkling) to the squash and onion mixture and mix well with your hands. Once the spices and dill are evenly incorporated, crack in 1 egg and mix again, adding a generous seasoning of black pepper. Shape the mixture into 12 patties, each approximately 4 inches wide and $\frac{1}{2}$ inch thick. Heat a good amount of oil in the hot skillet and fry the patties in batches for 6–8 minutes on one side or until nice and crisp, then flip over and fry on the other side for 5–6 minutes or until deep golden brown. Keep the cooked patties warm in the oven on the prepared sheet while you fry subsequent batches.

To poach your eggs, stir the boiling water to make a well in the center and carefully crack the remaining eggs into the water. Cook for 3 minutes (if you like them runny), then remove the eggs from the water with a slotted spoon and plunge them straight into cold water.

Place 3 rosti on each serving plate, top with a poached egg and a little sprinkling of fresh dill and freshly ground black pepper, then serve immediately.

BREAD BOATS



Much like pizza, a bread boat, popular in Turkey and Georgia, is a complete meal all in one. They are great at any time of day, especially for brunch with the crowning glory of an egg cracked on top. * MAKES 4

For the dough

¼ ounce fast-acting dried yeast
2 cups warm water, plus extra if needed
5½ cups white bread flour, plus extra if needed
2 heaping tablespoons crushed flaky sea salt
½ cup olive oil
¼ cup butter, melted

For the filling

6 large eggs
8 ounces shredded mozzarella cheese (not Buffalo mozzarella)
4 ounces baby spinach leaves, roughly chopped
4 scallions, thinly sliced
1 teaspoon cayenne pepper
pinch of grated nutmeg
finely grated zest of 1 unwaxed lemon
flaky sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Make the dough. Stir the yeast into $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the warm water; allow it to sit until dissolved. In a large bowl, combine the flour and crushed salt, then make a well in the center. Pour in the remaining warm water, $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the olive oil and the yeast mixture and combine using your hands until you have a smooth dough. If the dough is a bit too sticky, just add a little extra flour and, if it is dry, an additional splash of warm water.

On a clean, floured surface, knead the dough for 5 minutes to activate. Allow the dough to rest for 10 minutes before kneading it again for 2 minutes. Repeat this process another 3 times and on the second, incorporate the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoons olive oil. Return the dough to the bowl, cover it with a clean dish towel and leave it to rest for 3 hours until tripled in size.

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper. Divide the dough into 4 equal portions and form each into a "boat" shape and place on the lined sheet. Cover loosely with plastic wrap and leave to rest in a warm place for 45-60 minutes.

Make the filling. In a mixing bowl, beat 1 egg with the mozzarella, spinach, scallions, cayenne, nutmeg and lemon zest and season well with salt and pepper. Divide the mixture into 4 equal portions and place 1 in the center of each bread boat, leaving 1 inch clear at the edges. Pick up the clear edges of dough and tuck them inward to secure the filling. Beat 1 of the remaining

eggs and brush any exposed pastry dough with this egg wash. Bake for 15-17 minutes, remove from oven and carefully crack 1 egg into the center of each boat. Bake for 6-8 minutes more or until the egg whites are opaque.

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