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wine cellar
hors d'oeuvres

Exploring the World through Cookbooks

JANET MENDELSON **writer**



COURTESY OF VOLANTE FARMS

you might not think of cookbooks as travel guides, but they can be. Great ones, in fact. And not just because recipes give you a taste of a location's distinctive cuisine. When cookbook authors know a particular place inside and out, having lived there or having explored the territory in depth, they can whet our appetites for travel. Beyond standard introductions, these cookbook authors describe the history and culture of a place, taking us into the lives of people they meet. We sample the experience. We want more than recipes for signature dishes, local comfort foods, spice blends, or sauces. Suddenly we're thinking about flights and hotels, making vacation plans.

Looking for that kind of inspiration, I stop into Wellesley Books where I learn my quest is atypical.



COURTESY OF VOLANTE FARMS

“People sometimes go on a trip to France, for instance, and when they return, they want to learn French cooking,” says Marilyn Lustig, a longtime bookseller at the store. “They come in to see us specifically looking for French cookbooks. Other people will buy cookbooks with no intention of preparing recipes. They are drawn by the visual appeal of really good photography and design.” But for travel ideas, she says, not so much. Pointing out their large food literature section . . . memoirs, essays, histories, kitchen confidentials by chefs, farmers and foodies . . . and shelves of useful travel guides, she told me, both are popular, although neither is quite what I mean.

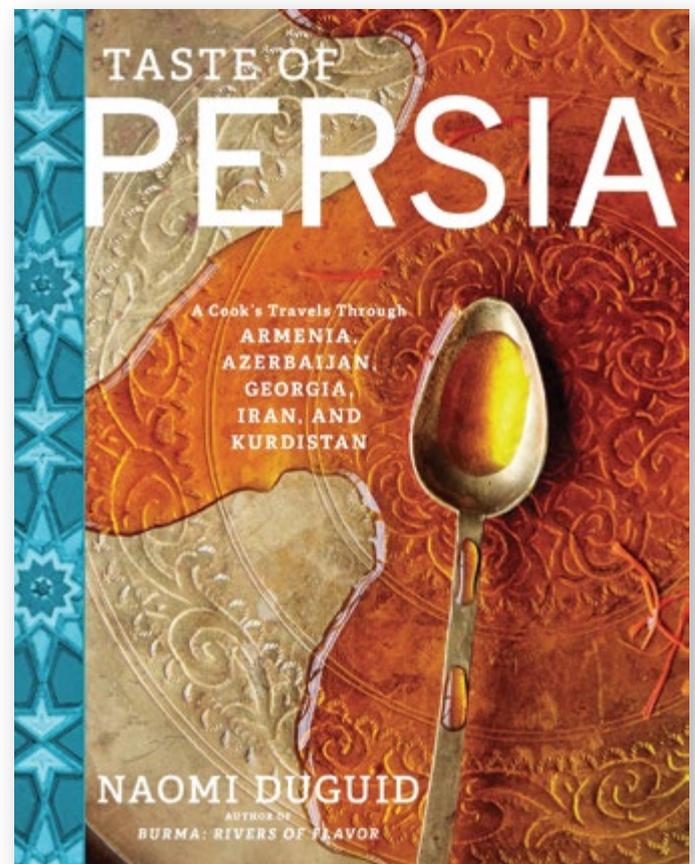
But then Lustig remembers a gem, *Deep Run Roots: Recipes and Stories from My Corner of the South* (Little, Brown and Company, 2016) by Vivian Howard. The book is closely connected to Howard’s growing up on the coastal plains of Deep Run, North Carolina, where she returned as an adult, after working in New York, with renewed apprecia-

food & wine “cuisine with abundant variations”

tion for its simple food traditions. You might know Howard from her Emmy- and James Beard Award-winning PBS series *A Chef’s Life* where she celebrates this style of Southern cooking. Her book is “not one that treats the South like one big region where everybody eats the same fried chicken, ribs, shrimp and grits, collard greens, and gumbo,” she writes. “I interpret Southern cooking the way we understand French, Italian, and Chinese food: as a complex cuisine with abundant variations shaped by terrain, climate, and people.”

Chapters are organized not by courses but by 24 ingredients that are mainstays of the region. Ground corn. Oysters. Sweet potatoes. Peanuts. Pecans. Turnips—meaning the entire family of bitter greens. And watermelon: Bacon-Wrapped Watermelon-Rind Pickles, and Pork Shoulder Steaks in Red Curry-Braised Watermelon.

Sausage gets a chapter. On the coastal plain it is preferred over country ham. They use every part of the pig. Howard describes the annual



COURTESY OF ARTISAN AND NAOMI DUGUID

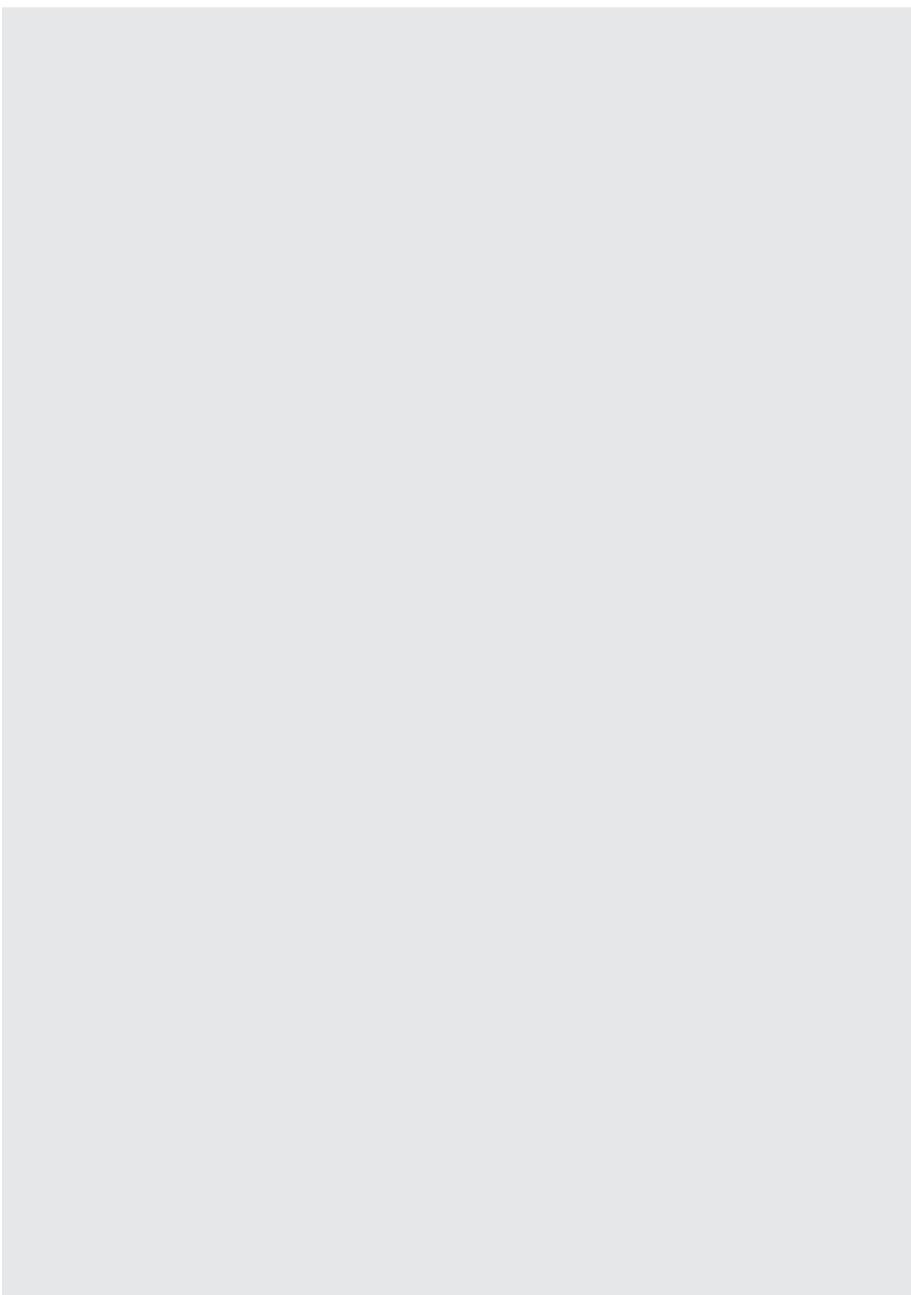
ritual of putting up meat for winter, part of hog-killing day. But being frugal, most local cooks use it more for seasoning, a condiment to round out meals based on vegetables and grains. Traditionally meat of any kind is eaten just once or twice a week, she says. Another chapter, “Sweet Potatoes,” begins like the others with a story. “Everything about Grandma’s candied yams personified the woman who made them,” Howard writes. “Grandma’s version of the classic reflected the degree to which she was a realist, a truth talker, and a pragmatic farmer’s wife. Too much sugar was a bad thing, and she warned me on many occasions with a stern look and a swat to the hand that I was ‘plump enough.’”

The North Carolina coast has jumped higher in my must-see list.

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Naomi Duguid’s *Taste of Persia: A Cook’s Travels Through Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, and Kurdistan* (Artisan, 2016) might be the pinnacle of cookbook travel. Tucked among soup recipes is an essay on women in Iran. In the middle of great photographs and detailed recipes, Duguid tells us how she felt when, like the Iranian women, she began covering her head and body and what that experience taught her. Sandwiched between colorful photographs and recipes for Onion Salad with Barberries and Spinach Borani, a dish of thick yogurt and cooked vegetables topped with fried onions and walnuts, are these observations:

“Unlike in Burma, where totalitarian rule left people frightened, in Iran I felt that people refused to be afraid, and instead tried to figure out ways of living their lives as fully and freely as possible. I walked around with my camera, knowing I was very obviously a foreigner, and felt no sense that people were eyeing me to take advantage. I walked on my own all over, and only at dusk in the rather deserted covered alleys of Yazd, ill-lit and buzzed by the occasional speeding motorcycle, did I ever feel uneasy... [On public transportation] women were very welcoming and



food & wine “delicious and easy to prepare”

generous to me. We shared sunflowers seeds and raisins, smiles and gestural conversations that felt relaxed and intimate.”

Duguid includes more than 125 recipes in *Taste of Persia*, which received a James Beard Foundation Award for Best Book of the Year 2017, International. Among her other award-winning cookbooks is *Burma: Rivers of Flavor* (Artisan, 2012) in which she takes readers on boat trips and into a temple in Rangoon. Then she discusses Buddhism’s central role in Burmese life.

Will I travel in Duguid’s footsteps? Certainly not soon. But, like her, I relish a chance to expand my world through travel, food, and personal connections. So, maybe someday.

POTATO AND PUMPKIN SOUP

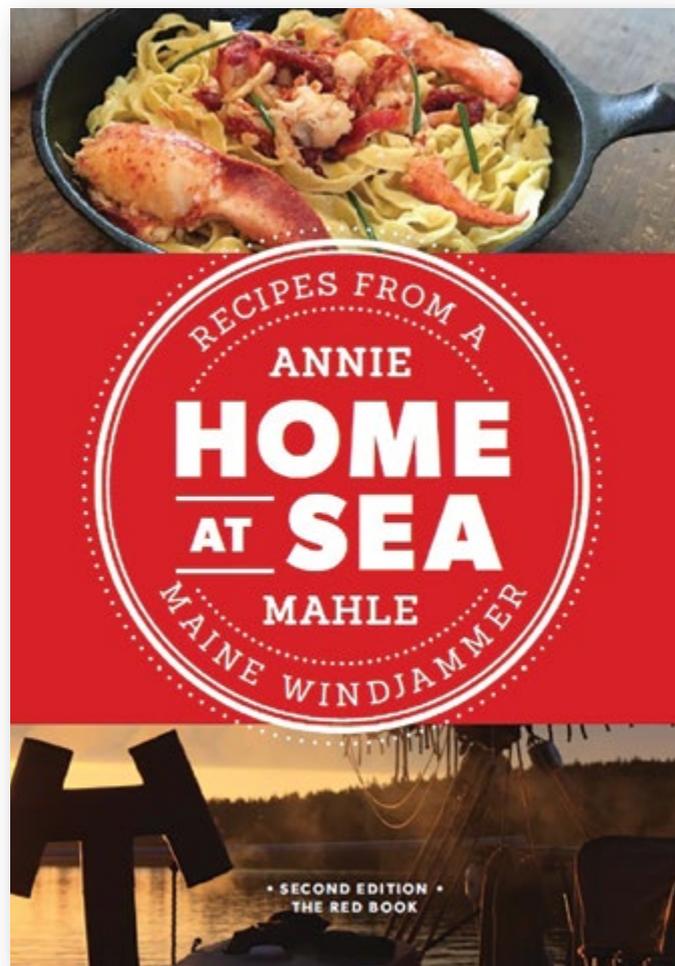
A simple country version of Jajuk—the Armenian name for yogurt soup. From *Taste of Persia: A Cook’s Travels Through Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Iran, and Kurdistan* by Naomi Duguid

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|---|--|
| 2 cups large cubes unpeeled pumpkin or winter squash, or substitute 3 cups chopped zucchini | About ¼ tsp. powdered dried red chiles or cayenne |
| 2 medium potatoes, peeled and coarsely chopped (2½ to 3 cups) | ½ cup finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley, dill, or mint, or substitute 2 tsp. dried mint |
| 1 tsp. sea salt, or to taste | 1 cup plain full-fat yogurt, or as needed |

- Place the pumpkin or other squash and the potatoes in a pot, add about an inch of water, cover and bring to a boil. Lower the heat to maintain a medium boil and cook until the vegetables are very soft, about 25 minutes for pumpkin and winter squash, less for zucchini.
- Drain, reserve the liquid, and set aside to cool for 30 minutes.
- Remove and discard the skin from the pumpkin or winter squash. Transfer the pumpkin or squash and potatoes to a food processor and process to a smooth slurry.
- Transfer to a bowl, add the salt, chiles or cayenne, and herbs and stir. Add the yogurt and stir to blend well. The texture will be thick yet pourable; thin it with a little of the cooking liquid or extra yogurt if you wish. Taste and adjust the seasoning if needed. Serve at room temperature.

NOTE: If you are making this in the summer and using zucchini, you might want to serve it chilled: Cover and refrigerate for an hour or so. If any liquid rises to the surface as it chills, just stir it back in before serving.

Serves 4 to 6



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Among my own favorites of the genre is *At Home, At Sea: Recipes from a Maine Windjammer* (Baggywrinkle Press, 2004) by Annie Mahle. If you’ve ever thought about spending a week aboard an old wooden schooner, or wondered what it’s like to live on one all summer, raise children in its confines, share captain’s duties with your spouse, and cook on a wood burning, cast iron stove, three meals a day for guests and crew, this cookbook is for you. Mahle, who trained at the Culinary Institute of America as well as under a Swiss chef, shares recipes and writes about her family’s floating B&B, the J.&E. Riggins. She takes us down into the galley where she lights the antique woodstove at 4:30 a.m. to bake fresh breads and desserts before anyone’s awake on deck. She introduces us to the Riggins, a National

COURTESY OF BAGGYWRINKLE PUBLISHING AND ANNIE MAHLE

food & wine “personal, informative, and chock full of tempting dishes”

RED PEPPER JAM

From *At Home, At Sea: Recipes From a Maine Windjammer* by Annie Mahle

4 large red bell peppers, cored, seeded, and coarsely chopped	¼ tsp. red pepper flakes
1 Tbsp. kosher salt	1 ½ cups apple cider vinegar
	2 ½ cups sugar

- Place the peppers in a food processor and pulse until minced. Sprinkle with the salt and let them sit for 30 minutes.
- Rinse the peppers in cold water and drain the excess water. Transfer the peppers into a wide, heavy saucepan and add the red pepper flakes, vinegar, and sugar.
- Bring the mixture to a boil and stir occasionally for 15 to 20 minutes or until a candy thermometer reads 220°F. Ladle the jam into hot, sterilized jars and seal. Alternatively, store in the refrigerator for up to two weeks.

Makes 2 cups

CHICKEN PAPRIKA

From *At Home, At Sea: Recipes From a Maine Windjammer* by Annie Mahle

NOTE: If you plan to freeze or refrigerate this dish to serve later, set aside the sour cream. When you reheat, add the sour cream just before serving.

2 Tbsps. olive oil	1 Tbsp. minced garlic;
2 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken breasts or thighs, cut into 1-inch pieces	about 3 cloves
1 tsp. kosher salt	1 ½ Tbsps. paprika
Several grinds fresh black pepper	¼ cup tomato paste
2 cups diced onion;	½ cup red wine
about 1 large onion	2 (14-oz.) cans diced tomatoes
1 cup diced green bell pepper;	Several dashes of
about 1 pepper	Worcestershire sauce
	6 oz. button mushrooms, sliced;
	about 2 cups
	½ cup sour cream

- Heat the oil in a large, wide stockpot over medium-high heat. Add the chicken, salt, and pepper and sauté for another 10 minutes or until the onion is translucent.
- Add the tomato paste and stir well for about a minute. Add the wine, tomatoes, and Worcestershire. Reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer for 45 minutes or until the chicken is tender.
- Add the mushrooms and cook another 5 minutes. Stir in the sour cream and serve with noodles, potatoes, or polenta.

Serves 4 to 6

Historic Landmark built in 1927 as an oyster dredger. And she describes a typical week sailing on the windjammer in island-dotted Penobscot Bay so you know what to expect.

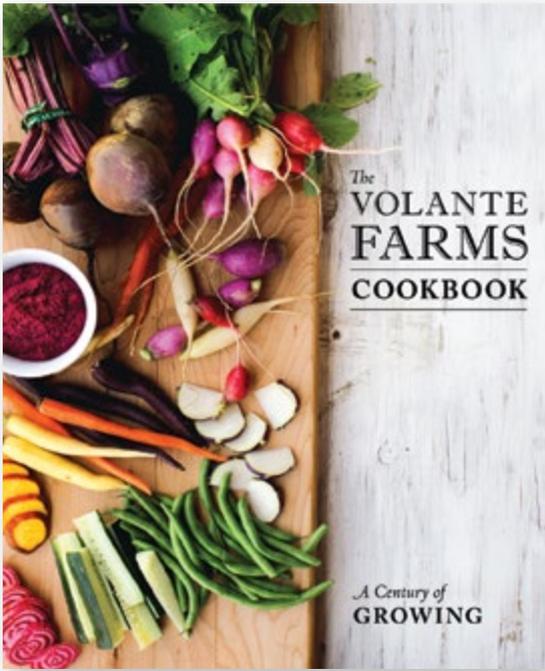
Last summer, I spent four nights aboard the *Riggin* for a knitting cruise, one of several themes scheduled each year including music and storytelling, quilting, and photography. Annie Mahle is an excellent chef. She offers cooking cruises where during part of each day she teaches menu planning and classes in preparing creative comfort foods, like those in her book.

Because she works in the tight quarters of a galley, Mahle thinks about efficiency as well as satisfying guests and crew, and these 260 recipes reflect that. From chicken paprika to lime pie, the dishes I've tried are delicious and easy to prepare in my own kitchen, with minimal pots and pans. Mahle's cookbook is available from Amazon or at www.mainewindjammer.com.

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I wish I'd read *Jerusalem* (Ten Speed Press, 2012) by Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi before traveling to Israel the first time. Discovering it later, I learned more about the country from this cookbook than I did on a very good guided tour. Ottolenghi is Jewish and Tamimi is Palestinian. Both now work in London. They bring differing perspectives to a multicultural cookbook that is personal, informative, and chock full of tempting dishes. And the text provides a terrific introduction to the complicated place where they were born the same year on different sides—the Arab east, the Jewish west—of their native city.

“In the part of the world we are dealing with everybody wants to own everything,” they write. “Existence feels so uncertain and so fragile that people fight fiercely and with great passion to hold onto things: land, culture, religious symbols, food—everything is in danger of being snatched away or of disappearing. The result is fiery arguments about ownership, about provenance, about who and what came first.” They discuss why this is so, and give readers a lengthy, thoughtful history of the region from 332 B.C.E. to the present, all relevant to its food. Wonderful recipes include Roasted Sweet Potatoes and Fresh Figs, and



More Gift-Worthy Cookbooks

- **MY GREEK FAMILY TABLE: FRESH REGIONAL RECIPES** (Countryman Press, 2017) by Maria Benardis. With stories of summers cooking with her grandmother on a Greek island.
- **MY TWO SOUTHS: BLENDING THE FLAVORS OF INDIA INTO A SOUTHERN KITCHEN** (Running Press, 2016) by Asha Gomez. Recipes are rooted in Gomez's love of Deep-South cooking and Southern India flavors.
- **THE VOLANTE FARMS COOKBOOK: A CENTURY OF GROWING** (Union Park Press, 2017) Four generations of the Volante family who have built a thriving farm in Needham. More than 100 seasonal recipes. Available at Volante Farms Stand or online at www.volantefarms.com.
- **IT'S ABOUT TIME: GREAT RECIPES FOR EVERYDAY LIFE** (Steerforth, 2005) by Michael Schlow, executive chef and co-owner of area restaurants including Doretta Taverna & Raw Bar in Boston and Alta Strata in Wellesley.

Mejadra, an ancient dish popular throughout the Arab world and, of course, the popular Israeli breakfast or lunch dish, Shakshuka.

Ottolenghi's cookbook, *Plenty More: Vibrant Vegetable Cooking from London's Ottolenghi* (Ten Speed Press, 2014), was a *New York Times* best-

seller. He owns five restaurants in London, including one that bears his name where Tamimi is head chef. Their new book has 120 recipes from Jerusalem's Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities.

Happy reading and happy eating! 

