

'A Taste of Paradise'

A fundraiser for Sunnyside Child Care showcases Lebanese home cooking

By Sarah Werthan Buttenwieser

Suleiman Ali Mourad teaches in the religion department at Smith College, focusing on Islamic and Middle Eastern studies. He is also a native of Lebanon. And on Sunday, he's putting down his professor's pen and picking up a chef's knife for A Taste of Paradise, which will feature some of the Lebanese dishes he grew up with.

The event, a fundraiser luncheon for Sunnyside Child Care Center at Smith, will be held at Sierra Grille in Northampton.

Mourad and his wife, Rana Knio, are Sunnyside parents: Their children, Jude, 5, and Alya, nearly 3, both attend the preschool. The Taste of Paradise fundraiser was Knio's idea, and it's now in its third year.

Among the dishes Mourad is preparing are Shish Kafta, Shish Taouk and Fatayir Jibne. Roughly translated, those mean grilled chicken kabob rich in garlic, oregano and lemon juice; grilled ground beef kabob with parsley and onions; and oven-baked mini calzones filled with cheeses, thyme and parsley.

Mourad will be relying on an array of ingredients that are staples in his home cooking, including pine nuts (a crop his family's village in southern Lebanon is known for); edible sumac; zaatar, a thyme mix; and kibbe, a spice mix.

Mourad says he was fortunate to be the eldest in a household with four kids. "My mother taught me to cook, because she needed my help," he says. "Learning to cook as a child, it's really like learning a language. When you're young, you are more able to acquire fluency with ease."

Although Mourad's family lived in Beirut, he had relatives in a rural village and spent childhood summers there. "We helped grow the vegetables and fruit.



Suleiman Ali Mourad making Lebanese bread and lahm-b-Ajin, a meat and vegetable pizza. This Sunday Mourad will be cooking for a luncheon to benefit Sunnyside Child Care Center.

"We'd eat what was in season," he recalls. "If fava beans were in season, they were always on the table. This sense that food was grown, collected and then used — all of it — was a luxury lost to times that are faster and more removed from farming.

"It's so important to respect farmers," he adds. "I was so fortunate to learn that through my family."

Even though Mourad didn't cook often during his early adulthood, when he returned to the kitchen he instantly felt at home. To this day, he says, he calls his mother in Lebanon if he has a question about something he's cooking.

Mourad says he follows four rules in the kitchen: see, smell, touch and taste. He says, "The thing that I learned from my mom is that good cooks do not follow measurements. When I cook, my fingers approximate on the basis of the quantity of food and major ingre-

dients that I am cooking what I need of salt, spices, lemon juice, etc., and whether the dish requires anything else. It becomes a habit, and I am rarely off the mark. In dishes that involve meat, poultry or seafood ... I just trust my guts."

WHILE MOURAD DOES not teach about food, he has made meals for his Smith classes on several occasions and says, "Students love it when I cook."

He says there are similarities in how people think about food and how they think about issues of religion and culture. "With Middle Eastern cuisine, you do not pile every dish on your plate at once. Not everything goes well together. You want to appreciate the different tastes rather than confuse them. You want to note the distinct ingredients."

Mourad and his wife share lessons about how food

Chef's Best continued

travels from garden to table with their children. They grow basil, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and herbs like parsley and mint. They also take their children on berry-picking excursions, making jam afterward. "I think it's so important that they also understand food has a history, something we can remember as we eat that jam throughout the year," Mourad says.

He involves his older child, Jude, in everyday kitchen routines. The 5-year-old adores "Lebanese-style pizza," Mourad says — essentially dough covered with a combination of thyme and olive oils — so he makes sure Jude helps with kneading. He also helps stir soups and mix ingredients. "I find that his participation makes him want to taste things that otherwise he'd refuse to try," Mourad says.

Helping out is something the children's school weaves into its curriculum, too, Mourad notes. "At Sunnyside, you, the parents, are also there, making that community stronger," he says of the school, which is a cooperative. "The community has all kinds of diversity and celebrates this in many ways." The Taste of Paradise event raises money for financial aid. "Yet it also celebrates the way food and culture are intertwined," he says. Last year's Taste of Paradise featured a French meal; the year before, there was a brunch.

This year Sierra Grille owner O'Brien Tomalin offered to host the event, and Mourad is looking forward to the restaurant setting. It will mean that the food can be served soon after it's prepared, he says, and will also allow for an especially attractive presentation.

A Taste of Paradise begins at 11:45 a.m. this Sunday. Tickets are \$35. For more information or to make reservations, call 584-0131.

Here are several of Mourad's Lebanese recipes.

Hummus

Makes about 2 cups

1 pound precooked garbanzo beans
Juice from 1 medium lemon



1½ tablespoons sesame tahini
1 medium clove garlic, crushed
½ teaspoon salt
½ cup warm water
Olive oil

Drain the garbanzo beans and place in a food processor. Add the lemon juice, sesame tahini, crushed garlic, salt and water. Process until the ingredients form a fine paste (2 to 3 minutes).

Transfer the hummus onto a plate. Sprinkle a little olive oil on top and serve with Middle Eastern or pita bread.

(Note: You can adjust the lemon juice, tahini, garlic and salt to your taste. You can also adjust the moistness of the hummus by adding or reducing the amount of water.)

Eggplant Maghmour

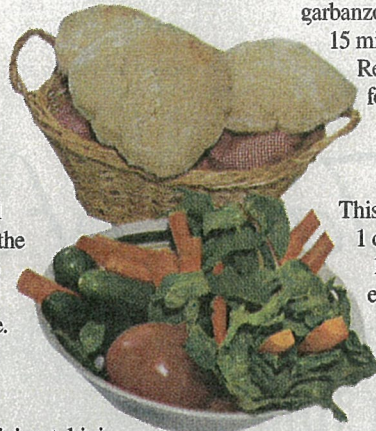
Serves 5 to 6

1 large eggplant
1 medium onion
1 tomato
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 cup tomato sauce (or 1 teaspoon tomato paste added to 1 cup water)
½ teaspoon salt

1 cup precooked garbanzo beans
Wash and peel the eggplant (if you are using organic eggplant, peel it in stripes, so some skin remains). Cut the eggplant in 1-inch wedges, then place on a baking sheet and cook in the oven at 350 degrees until the eggplant is soft, approximately 45 minutes.

Cut the onion and tomato in thin wedges. Place the olive oil in a frying pan and turn to medium-high; add the onions and cook for 2 to 3 minutes. Add the tomato and cook for 2 more minutes. Add the tomato sauce, salt and garbanzo beans, then cover the pan and cook for 3 minutes. Remove from the heat.

Place the baked eggplant in a roasting pan and top with the onion/tomato/



garbanzo bean mix. Bake in the oven for 15 minutes, then broil for 2 minutes. Remove from the oven and let rest for 15 minutes before serving.

Mighle

Serves 8

This is a pudding-style dessert.

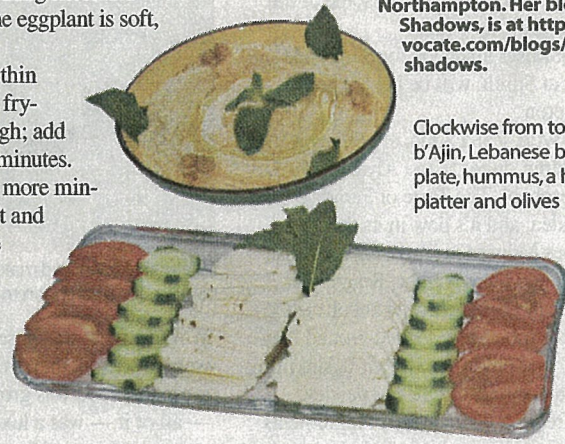
1 cup rice flour
1½ cups unprocessed sugar (or the equivalent in maple syrup)
1 tablespoon cinnamon
1 tablespoon ground caraway
7 cups water

Place the rice flour, sugar, cinnamon and caraway into a large cooking pot and mix well with a large whisk. (If you are using maple syrup instead of sugar, add the syrup after you add the water.) Gradually add the water, 1 to 2 cups at a time, and whisk until the ingredients are completely dissolved.

Place the pot on medium-high heat and stir gently and constantly with the whisk. When the mixture starts bubbling, after 10 to 15 minutes, reduce the heat to medium and continue stirring for another 10 minutes, until the mixture thickens. Remove from the heat and pour immediately into a large bowl or small individual bowls.

Let the mighle rest for several hours or overnight, preferably in a refrigerator or a cool pantry. Serve garnished with coconut flakes and soaked nuts (almonds, pine nuts, walnuts or pistachios). □

Sarah Werthan Buttenwieser lives in Northampton. Her blog, *Standing in the Shadows*, is at <http://www.valleyadvocate.com/blogs/standingintheshadows>.



Clockwise from top left, lahm b'ajin, Lebanese bread, a vegetable plate, hummus, a halloumi cheese platter and olives

Gordon Daniels photos

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