

Regions

Chapter 2

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Introduction

Cooking more than all else

We live essentially in regions. But how to see them or make them appear?

We begin with the arts of the kitchen because food more than all else evokes regions, being the stuff of life, as regions are about life, essentially human life.

Of course the three essentials of life are food, clothing and shelter.

People often recall with fondness their old house, their cooking, their customs of dress. They have good memories free from the fearsome contingencies of states.

But forms of dress fade away, while old houses are eventually forgotten as people move away, leaving them behind forever.

But cooking more than all else endures. It can be carried anywhere and recreated in cities far away from

its sources, in the tiny kitchens of apartment towers.

New cuisines are always arising in cities. Yet cities are good places to explore regions because in cities the gastronomies of many lands exist close together. They come together in the tall towers of Dubai, in thousands of little kitchens, and in a thousand little restaurants.

Someone of the place

To begin to discover the cooking of regions we can look at cookbooks. Every chef has his cookbook, and there's a cookbook for every chef.

But as regionalists, we like to find what is interesting by following a path back to the sources, to get to some basic cooking.

It's what a dish leaves in the mouth which reveals a region. This means getting to the elemental flavors, the lingering flavors that convey the very elements of a dish.

So a regionalist will write a cookbook of sorts, a cookbook in reverse, going from *haute cuisine* to the very basic, then to the region.

To begin, we should ask someone who is of the place, who really knows the cooking as a native of the place, not an expert, not a cookbook author. Just someone who has the cooking in her blood, so to speak.

All that's needed is a few brief conversations, in someone's home or restaurant, with one who knows the cooking, the cuisine, the products of a country and its regions. This will be a person of the place.

And we will ask her to tell us about her cooking,

everything she knows, and taste the dishes and begin to gain some perspective on the life of a place.

Seeking subtle flavors

A region can leap out of a jar of premade simmering sauce sitting on a grocery store shelf.

As Fernand Braudel famously wrote, ‘the mere smell of cooking can evoke a whole civilization’.

But we need to know how the flavors exist in the dish, to begin to get to the cuisine of regions. This requires traditional foods prepared in customary ways, made by a person of the region, the foods prepared for generations in old historic regions.

Of course every cook in her kitchen makes the dishes in her own way. But she will know well the very basic flavors and tell us how she likes to make them.

In restaurants, we should begin with the simple dishes on the menu, the lower-cost ones. These are often the meatless stews and sauces that carry the flavors of legumes and vegetables to the tongue, inflected by seasonings that serve to elicit or heighten the flavor of the stuff.

Then we get to the essential parts of the cooking, the pulses, the grains, the greens, the seasonings and how they are blended; the foodstuffs which are the sources of cuisines and their adaptations in Dubai.

It’s what a dish leaves in the mouth that can subtly convey of what it is composed, all the very basic components of a cuisine coming from a land.

Entering regions

Making these explorations, one notices how folks in one kitchen will make something marvelously different from the folks next door or across the hall. Then, in a tall apartment tower in Dubai, one gets a good sense of why food from one part of the world is basically different from that of another.

What is remarkable to realize is that these home kitchens, these little restaurants, produce the foods that come of great regions, where a long reign of balance with nature has been.

We find them in the very elements of a dish, the elemental flavors in foods which can convey the elements or basic components of regions. And eating this we are entering a region, the people, the land, their produce, their crops, their arrangement of nature in the great historic regions.

The foods bring us at least a little closer to the region while they become the base on which great urban cooking can arise, eclectic cuisines, fusions, 'third culture' cuisines in fancy new restaurants or the small restaurants of immigrants. The dishes will reach highly elaborate adaptations in a great city such as Dubai.

Before the chefs elaborate them, before the critics celebrate the latest innovations, the regionalist goes looking for them. Where the chefs and critics come in, the regionalist comes in before, seeking the elemental flavors.

Moroccan kitchen

Asma and Houssam, a young couple from Morocco living and working in Dubai, have a small apartment with window views of the Marina.

Asma cooks daily in the little kitchen, in the tall, cone-shaped orange clay pot called *tagine*. She makes tagine with vegetable, tagine with chicken, with fish, with lamb.

She makes kofta, ground meat with spices, with tomato and vegetables in the tagine. In a large pan she makes cous-cous, steaming over a boiling pot of vegetable broth. She cooks up red lentils in a big pot. She makes the zesty tomato soup *harira*. She makes a thick, round flat bread to eat with everything.

She brings in all the spices for her cooking from her country, brings them in a suitcase, keeps them in plastic containers in a cabinet above the stove.

The apartment fills with nice aromas of all this cooking.

Tasty tagine

The tagine's large round base rests on a metal heat pad on the electric stove. Then everything slow cooks nicely under the orange cone.

Whatever's on hand goes into the vegetable tagine, onions, potatoes, carrots, green squash, courgette, aubergine.

The black pepper she brings from Morocco has a remarkable freshness and bite. She mixes with turmeric and ginger. She tosses on olive and vegetable

oils and big clump of fresh coriander.

This cooks together in the tall cone on the stovetop, cooking to softness in a rich yellow broth mottled with coriander.

The vegetables come out cooked evenly through, filled with steaming warmth, the courgette's soft flesh tasting of green vegetable and a hint of black pepper. The potato is touched with yellow oil, slightly soft, full of its flavor.

Little other cooking could be more fulfilling than this savory warm vegetable stew.

Cooking in the tagine, meats and fish

The orange tagine is happily bubbling on the stove-top, a wooden spoon wedged beneath the tall cone. Chunks of white chicken cook in the deep yellow tumeric-tinged broth and there is something in the black pepper from her country that imbues the dish with rich piquant flavors.

For lamb, she starts with tomato, onion, and garlic, adding the lamb pieces and fresh coriander. These cook first in oil. The spice mix she makes has the black pepper, sweet red pepper, ginger, turmeric.

Last go in sweet potatoes, white potatoes, and whatever vegetables on hand; she might toss in frozen peas. All gains the color of the turmeric.

For fish tagine the spice mix is different: cumin, spicy red pepper, sweet red pepper, and garlic. The fatty fish cooking in the mix on the hot tagine's floor gets delightfully rich, blackened crust.

At the table

Intense heat holds in the orange cone. Lifting it lets rise the soft fragrance of steaming meats and vegetables on the round platter carried to the table.

The Moroccans grab these foods with the bread til what's left in the bottom is a smear of spicey oil and bits of coriander.

They eat quickly, drink the fermented laban, then linger over sweets and light, lemon-mint tea.

Asma loves her country's cooking, she's quite proud of it and insists upon only the spices she brings from her country. Although she says, as must women everywhere, nothing she makes in Dubai can compare to the cooking of her mother, from whom she learned.

Cooking cous-cous

She cooks cous-cous in a perforated pan over a tall pot of carrots, cabbage, potatoes and sweet potatoes boiling in a yellow broth.

She melds the damp grains artfully on a large platter to hold the soft, steaming vegetables piled atop. Soft flavors of cooked carrot and potato and sweet potato hold in the white grains. But the soft grain of the cous-cous is very important.

She buys a Moroccan brand called Dalia. She tried a brand she bought at Carrefour but the Dalia is much better.

"It is very soft, the one I always make it," she says.
"The Moroccan brand, because I am Moroccan, it is

better, cooks faster and softer.”

She describes how her mother makes cous-cous by hand working the flour for three hours.

Lentils in the pot

A half-kilo of whole red lentils gets mixed with peeled tomatoes, red onion and garlic in the pot. Then she adds the salt and spices: black pepper, sweet red pepper, cumin, turmeric, a little bit of ginger, a clump of coriander, oil. These cook together in a liter of water happily bubbling on the stovetop.

The final touch: three long green peppers set atop the stew.

The peculiar strength of the black pepper, and the sweet red pepper in the spice mix, make a rich aroma rise from this simple dish. The lentil beans release their soft, earthy flavor in the spice. The pepper is hidden, then comes forth strongly in the mouth.

Curries and kaprao

Thai cooking creates a dynamic balance. Its rich red and green sauces, so redolent of coconut and lingering heat, still hold fresh garden flavors.

Maya was delivering these dishes from her home kitchen for years. Then she and her husband Nook took a small kitchen space in Go Kitchen, which leases to 40 food producers in the base of Marina View towers. Go Kitchen sets out a few tables along the busy Marina walk, but most of the business is delivery.

Maya makes a green curry that holds, in its thick liquid, more greenness: a small, light green eggplant, so delicate, and dark green basil leaves.

Cooking curries

Thai curry sauces, so colorful, blend herbs and greens of Thailand in coconut milk livened with spice. The rich sauce holds meats or fish, but to taste directly the things, it is best to add simply tofu. Then the sauce's complex flavors flow into the rice, served in a warm white ball on the side.

Red curries require red chili paste. It contains galangal, an aromatic root related to ginger, garlic, shallots, lemongrass, zest of the kaffir lime, Thai dry red chili to give color, and perhaps a little black pepper.

Maya adds soy sauce, salt, sugar, brown sugar, fish sauce (or leaves it out to make vegan); she adds fresh red chili pepper, the highly spicy bird's eye chili, for heat.

Green curries require green chili paste composed of the galangal, herbs, basil and coriander that give the green color. Maya adds sweet basil, lemon leaves and the bird's eye green chili for a milder spice.

All this is cooked in coconut milk.

A baby eggplant

In the curries red and green are wedges of the tiny Thai eggplant, its delicate skin light green. Maya gets them delivered fresh from a farm tended by a Thai woman, not far away in Ras al Khaima.

The eggplant, so delicate and small, is harvested small when it is crisp, before the skin gets thick.

In the rich spicey sauce they are a delight. The fresh green flavor of the skin of the squash, its bland white inner flesh with tiny seeds, hold nicely in the spice, conveying just a touch of green crispness that absorbs and balances.

Four big regions

A bowl of this curry fills the mouth for minutes with the minty anise of basil, lemongrass and green eggplant. A fine spice coats the tongue. The red curry carries a strong spice, the green curry a fading spice.

Nook says cooks in Bangkok and the center of Thailand normally use coconut milk in curries. But not in the northeast where they make a clear soup.

He describes four large regions of cuisine in Thailand: the northwest centered on Chiang Mai with its unique traditions; the northeast, Khon Kaen and other places,

which gave the beloved papaya salad; the center around Bangkok reaching south to Pattaya; and the southern region of the most spicy dishes, where they make a chili paste of very strong heat.

Maya's cooking in Go Kitchen is mostly of the central and northeast regions, as is much of Thai cooking known worldwide. But she keeps very close to the true ingredients of these regions.

"We have an importer for the curry paste from Thailand, and the sweet basil, and the hot / holy basil we use in stir fry," says Nook. "We go to a supply warehouse in the Dubai Industrial Park, and a big Thai store in International City."

Meanwhile the Thai farmer lady in Ras al Khaima sends her eggplant, basil, hot peppers and other herbs and greens.

Kaprao

Going down the menu, from curries to stir-fry dishes, goes from rice to noodles. And opens another realm of ingredients from the garden of Thailand.

Here the hot Holy Basil known in Thai as *bai kaphrao* is stir-fried with noodles. This makes the famous dish 'phat khi mao', in which 'phat' means 'to stir-fry' and 'khi mao' means 'drunk' because this spicy dish goes down well with cold beer.

Maya is very pleased with the noodles she gets from Thailand, egg noodles and the long, light glass noodles.

She makes the dish with lime leaves, finger root of the ginger family, Thai long beans, sweet basil (not hot but

very strong basil flavor). She leaves out the hot basil; she adds green pepper and a bit of red chili pepper.

This all mixes in a heap of oil-cloaked noodles, the thin, stringy egg noodles they get from Thailand for this dish. It makes a peppery mix. The basil dominates, not hot but a powerful *mélange* of pepper, anise and mint, with green garden flavors and a dash of chili pepper spice.

The counterpart to this spicy dish is the sweeter ‘*phat si-lo*’, a stir-fry of flat rice noodles cooked in soy sauce (light and dark), vegetables and herbs, which Maya makes nicely.

Al Habasha

Meatless dishes are proper in ancient Christian lands with many days of fasting. This leads to Ethiopia where the lentil is cultivated for 3000 years.

Chef Sara, proprietress of Al Habasha, is proud of her tasty dishes and very clean kitchen. She's worked her restaurant in the Abu Hail section, in Deira near the airport, for 30 years. Large, white walled, well lit, with colorful woven baskets on plain tables, and a high pile of fruits on one center table, the restaurant is otherwise little adorned.

Misir on the menu

From her country she carries in the spices, the pulses, the teff flour for the bread called *injera*. She cooks the pulses cultivated in Ethiopia for millennia: the one she calls the small red bean, which is the lentil, and the chickpea, and small white beans and yellow split peas.

These are cooked down with garlic, onion, spice, oil or a clarified butter called *niter kibbeh*. They are cooked with *berbere*, a spice mix always with dry red chili pepper, adding paprika, garlic, ginger, fenugreek, coriander and many other things (chefs will prepare it differently). Berberre makes an orange-red color in the legume stews.

On the menu is Misir, the red lentils cooked into a spicy sauce. Shira is chickpeas cooked with berbere spice giving the dish the orange-red color. Alich attar is mild not spicy, without the berbere, based on white beans or the yellow split-peas.

Her favorites

“This dish misir, it’s very delicious, spicy,” says Sara.
“Spicy with chili and we mix it into a nice flavor.”

There’s much meat on the menu but the meatless stews are her favorites.

“So many spices we mix, we bring from Ethiopia.

“Berbere is a chili pepper, it’s not too hot, just little bit hot; the small one is very hot but we are using the bigger one.

“It’s not hot but the color is very red.”

Then she describes the shira.

“Shira is chickpeas, we mix it with a little spice with berbere pepper,” she says. “It is a little bit red color; without berbere will be white color.”

The white beans gain yellow color from the spice, likely turmeric.

The pulses, cooked down and seasoned, are served on the injera bread made of gluten-free teff, a grain cultivated for ages in Ethiopia. The fermented dough makes a thin, spongy, sour-tasting bread, grayish of color, quite nutritious.

A plate of pulses

Yetsom Bainathoo is a mix of materials on a large round *injera*.

There is a scoop of potato and carrot, of cabbage and red cabbage, and four colorful creamy stews spooned onto the bread. They are dense, flavorful, subtle and

savory of lentils, split peas, chickpeas, white beans and mild spices.

Each is a bit different.

There is a dark green misir, earthy, a hint of green pea in the taste. And red misir, perhaps the most flavorful in the mouth, just slightly nutty. The yellow attar of split-peas is more pasty, slightly sweet.

All surround the center where a big dollop of bright orange shira – tegabeno shira (meatless) – is very rich and very spicy. The richness is cut by spice that enlivens the tongue.

As dining proceeds the spicy shira in the center muddles and mixes with the others. The spice remains within, penetrating, mixing with the more bland stews, making a slightly spicy, soft grain mix of things on the sour bread.

And pointing like an arrow to the center of the plate is a long green pepper *chili senig*. It is split, filled with a soft cream of tomato, onion, oil, a little lemon and salt. The green pepper tastes raw, its sharp, peppery veins nicely balanced by the gentle tomato cream.

The meal is finished with a fruit platter: mango, orange, watermelon, ‘zeitun’ or the bland guava whose small seeds give a nice crunch.

Adding meat

The cooked pulses gain even more complexity with a little meat mixed in.

Misir Siga is the lentil stew with meat. Bozena Shira is the stew of chickpeas with beef or lamb.

Sara makes *alicha*, a stew of yellow split peas, onion, garlic, ginger, tumeric, niter kibbeh, chili pepper, meat. The base of the dish, the slight grain of the pulse, becomes a dark yellow sauce sweetened by the onion and butter.

Sitting in this sauce, thick pieces of potato and carrot hold their flavor nicely with small dark chunks of long-cooked meat; dry, slightly flavorful lamb.

Her meats come from Ethiopia in whole. Along one wall of the bright restaurant is a small counter behind glass where a man stands by red slabs of beef.

“He is always there,” says Sara of her butcher. “If somebody orders he cuts it right.”

My cooking is unique

Lentils, chickpeas and other legumes are grown across the cool highlands of Ethiopia. These fulfilling sources of protein are made gently flavorful by seasonings, which act to bring out the subtle flavors of the pulses.

The stews require just about an hour to make, says Sara, to bring the dry grains to life.

She brings the pulses, the spices, the meats from her verdant country to her restaurant in desert Dubai. But when asked about regions, she says her cooking comes from everywhere in the country. And it is unique.

“My food, you will not get it anywhere, even in Ethiopia,” she says. “My restaurant has a unique taste, unique and healthy.”

Yet it subtly evokes the earth, the places, the regions of Ethiopia, according to her taste.

