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02 AUGUST 2012 | ESSAYS & MEMOIR | ANNIA CIEZADLO

Bread of Beirut

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To mark the publication today of Anthony Shadid's memoir House of Stone *– which is full of the tastes and smells of traditional Lebanese cooking – Annia Ciezadlo takes us to her bustling local bakery in Beirut; reveals the mysteries of their best recipes and explains why they can also be places of refuge during times of war.*

Photo by Julien Harneis.

Most neighbourhoods in Beirut have a *furn*, a communal bread oven where men and women gather in the mornings and early afternoons to get *mana'eesh*. These are crisp, oily little pizza-like pies topped with *zaatar* and olive oil, cheese, ground lamb, or Armenian sausage scented with cinnamon and fenugreek. You get your *man'oushi* hot from the *furn*, slice it

or fold it, lavish it with yogurt or lemon juice or hot pepper paste, and stuff it into your mouth, preferably while standing on the sidewalk outside the bakery. It's the perfect portable street food – especially during a social or political crisis – and so one day in December 2007, when Parliament postponed the presidential election for the ninth time, I went to get a *man'oushi* from my neighborhood baker, Abu Shadi.

Abu Shadi's *furn* is in a tiny storefront, open directly to the sidewalk, so there is nothing but a counter between you and the oven and the area where he holds court. He's a big football-playing bruiser with a meaty nose and a mane of shoulder length brown hair. Sometimes he streaks his locks with blond highlights and wears a double-breasted Black Panther-style leather jacket: the neighbourhood baker as gentleman gangster.

Abu Shadi has been feeding this block *mana'eesh* since 1988. In those days, the Lebanese civil war still had two years to go, and militias ran the streets. This makes him something of an *éminence grise*, and, along with bread and meat, he serves up news and commentary on the day's events.

Six men stood in a reverent semicircle around the bakery counter, as if at an altar, chewing simultaneously. 'Is there a president?' asked a neighbour from our block, his mouth full of bread and cheese.

This was the question on everyone's mind. The former president's term had expired a month earlier. Food prices were spiraling upward. Bread and gasoline riots were breaking out. Rumours were spreading: Hezbollah would block the streets with burning cars and tires. Rival factions would form two governments, and plunge the country back into civil war. But instead of two governments, the country barely had one, and since Beirut seemed to be keeping up its usual level of exuberant dysfunction, you couldn't help but wonder what, exactly, the government was ever for.

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Abu Shadi laughed. 'President or no president, what's the difference?' he said, shrugging his shoulders as he slid a long wooden paddleful of *zaatar* and cheese *mana'eesh* into the oven. 'Okay, fine, bring him on, but it's not like he's going to change our everyday life. Will he redecorate my bedroom? No he won't. Will he bring me a new car? No he won't.'

'May God guide them on the right path,' intoned one of the men.

'God can't guide these people,' said Abu Shadi, rolling his eyes and tipping his shaggy head back in disgust. 'Look, it doesn't matter who rules. Whether he's Maronite, Shia, or Sunni, all these ones meeting today, they're garbage.' He grabbed a soft white circle of dough with his massive hands and started knuckling it into submission.

Relationships are fragile in Beirut. Instability at the top filters down into your intimate life. Neighbours, brothers, sisters, lovers – they can all turn on you overnight. Governments collapse. Friends emigrate. Houses that survived the Ottoman Empire disappear in a week, killed off by sky-high real estate values. Trust is essential; trust is impossible. That's one legacy of the long, lingering civil war, which officially ran from 1975 to 1990 but never really ended.

But the *furn* is another legacy. During the war, cooking gas would periodically run out. When that happened, Beirutis returned to a tradition as old as the city itself, the habit of the communal oven.

The practice of sharing an oven goes back to the ancients, when Babylonian temples fed their subjects on the leftovers from the feasts of the gods. But the urban public oven came into its own in the medieval Mediterranean. In cities all around the Middle Sea, Christians and Muslims, Arabs and Armenians alike brought bread and other foods to the oven at the *pandocheion*, a Greek word for inn that means 'accepting all comers'. For a small fee, the public baker would cook your food, saving scarce heat and fuel for all to share – a kind of culinary carpool. Private ovens encouraged segregation; public ovens led to mixing, cross-pollination, and negotiation – in a word, relationships. And probably, I imagine, a fair amount of food and recipe sharing across religious and ethnic lines.

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By the late twentieth century, this tradition was beginning to wane. But during the civil war, the shortages revived it. For my friends who grew up here, standing in line at the bakery is one of the most enduring memories of the conflict. War being a matter of narratives, however, they all remember it differently.

My friend Barbara remembers the *furn* as an oasis of peace: when she was a child, her family would go every day to meet their neighbours, to share information and gossip. People would read the newspaper, passing one communal paper down the line. 'You often had brothers in the same family in

different militias, fighting each other,' she says. 'But when they were in the *furn*, they were neutral. There was no fighting there.'

Others remember the bakery ritual in more Darwinian terms. My friend Samar would stand in line for hours, only to see militiamen come swaggering in and take the entire neighbourhood's bread without paying. Malek, another friend who was a child during the war, has the same memories. 'I would wait in line for bread, and then the grown-ups would come and take it, and I would cry,' he says.

Twenty-two years after the war ended, electricity still goes out for hours every day in Beirut. Political stalemates still end in bloodshed; minor street fights always hold the threat of escalating into a larger conflict. But to this day, whenever there's the threat of violence, people rush to the bakery for bread, of course, but also, I suspect, for reassurance.

To appreciate the importance of street food in Beirut, you have to begin in the streets. When I first moved here, in 2003, I assumed I would get a map, learn the street names, and figure out how to get around. I didn't realize that there are hardly any street signs here, and that nobody knows the names of the streets – at least, not the names that are written on maps.

Instead, Beirutis go by landmarks of memory or desire: a narcissist may tell you to go down the alley where she got her first kiss. An old-timer will direct you to a movie theatre that closed in 1982. Hypochondriacs deliver directions by pharmacy. The pious use churches and mosques; the profane, cafés and nightclubs. The mercenary types, alas, inhabit a city of banks. All of these different Beiruts, imaginary contradictory maps, all layered on top of each other, make a city as baffling to navigate as your dreams.

And so I learned to negotiate the city through food: the baker, the butcher, the greengrocer. In the Middle Ages, the public bakeries were built next to other essential urban spaces, like churches, gardens and public baths. These days, the bakery is often at the centre of an ecosystem that ideally includes the holy trinity of Beirut street food: the *farran*, or baker; the *lahham*, or butcher; and the *fawwal*, or maker of *foul*, which is stewed chickpeas and fava beans. The butcher uses bread from the baker, the baker gets meat from the butcher, and the *fawwal* sends his prep cook to get meat or bread from both of them.

Foul is one of those confusing Arabic words that denotes both a dish and its key ingredient. Technically, it means fava beans. But when people say 'I want *foul*,' they usually mean *foul mdamas*, a stew of fava beans and chickpeas that

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workingman's breakfast, one that will keep you going all day, whether you're burning tires in front of a ministry or toiling in the bowels of a bank.

have been simmering for hours, perhaps overnight, over a low flame. Literally, *mdamas* means buried, because in the past people buried a clay pot of beans overnight in the dying coals of the day's fire – another example of conserving common resources, in this case by squeezing the last ounce of heat out of the daily fuel. These days, of course, people just use propane tanks.

When I go to my favourite *fawwal* and ask for *foul*, the first thing he does is smile. He's a thin, careful man, with large kind eyes and a permanent benevolent frown. Then he takes a battered metal bowl and a clove or two of garlic, sprinkles some salt into the bowl, and pounds the garlic and salt into a paste. With a large metal spoon, perforated with small holes, he reaches into the tall brass amphora full of gently steaming fava beans. In one continuous sequence of movements, he scoops out a spoonful of beans and their juices, ladles them into the bowl, and whisks them into the garlic and salt. Then the same series of motions, this time with warm chickpeas. Then another layer of chickpeas, then olive oil, and cumin, and salt and he's done. Like all the best street foods, you get extras: a basket of mint, bread, tomatoes, onions, pink pickled turnips and olives to eat with your *foul*. It's a classic workingman's breakfast, one that will keep you going all day, whether you're burning tires in front of a ministry or toiling in the bowels of a bank. You can take it to go, but the best way to eat it is sitting at Abu Hadi's tiny countertop, listening to people speculate about what the day will bring.

This part of the street is where working class people, students, and small trades people get good, fresh quick food. It also becomes a centre of gossip and information – the urban version of the village well. In some neighbourhoods, people still lower a basket down from their balconies on a rope, with money inside, and pull it back up with *mana'eesh*. Beirutis will ask their baker to hold packages, send messages, lend out his phone. They trust him with keys to their apartments. But the ultimate act of trust is to go to your baker and order a *man'oushi 'ala zow'ak*, 'to your taste,' meaning: surprise me. Make me what you would make yourself.

A really good baker, like Abu Shadi, will introduce you to something you didn't know you would like. Abu Shadi always has something new: his signature sandwich is his *kafta* man'oushi, topped with beef that he has the butcher grind together with hot green peppers, tomatoes, onions, cilantro, and spices – 'a special mix, my own invention!' he says. He customizes it with chopped tomatoes, yoghurt, hot red pepper paste and quartered lemons.

According to Abu Shadi, the Arabs invented hamburgers, which are but a poor and flavourless version of *kafta*. Eating one of his *kafta man'oushi* straight from the oven, the warm and supple dough soaking up the juices from the meat and tomatoes, tangy with allspice and sumac, I'm inclined to agree. 'The hamburger? Our invention!' he roars.

But the hamburger may yet have its revenge. Every time I go back to my old neighbourhood, there's a new restaurant specializing in hot dogs or hamburgers. There's even an Applebees now.

On special occasions, like the visit of a prodigal diasporan son, my mother-in-law will take an onion and a tomato to the *lahham*, who will grind it with lamb. Then he will take the mixture to the baker, who will spread it on the dough – *ajin* – and turn it into *lahme bi ajin*, or *lahmajin*: several dozen little four-inch pizzas topped with the mixture of meat, lamb, and tomatoes.

When the *lahmajin* are done, the baker sends them back up to her apartment in an empty box lined with newspaper. We eat them with yogurt and lemon juice, maybe red pepper paste, and put the leftovers in the fridge, where they become an indispensable tool for moral blackmail: 'You didn't eat enough! What am I going to do with all of these? A whole kilo and a half of meat! Just one more!'

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All of these relationships depend on trust – does the butcher use the full kilo? Does the baker steal an ounce or two? This is all to the common good, as witnessed by the old Arabic proverb: 'Let the baker bake your bread, even if he steals half of it.'

A few years ago, I took Abu Shadi a Tupperware container of filling and asked him to make it into *fatayer*, which are little triangular pastries usually stuffed with cheese or greens.

He was appalled. 'You can have spinach, or cheese,' he said, as if to a slow child, looking at my Greek grandmother's traditional mixture of spinach and feta cheese with nutmeg. 'But not spinach and cheese together. This does not work. The dough will fall apart. The dough will not close. The cheese will prevent it.'

I insisted he try it anyway. A few hours later, I returned. Frowning, he handed me a box filled with two dozen toasted golden triangles of perfection. I tried

one. It was still hot. The bread was crisp and flaky on the outside, but warm and wet on the inside, and the salty cheese and bitter greens nestled into the soft inner lining of the dough like a baby in the womb.

He shrugged, opening both hands to the heavens, and screwed up his chin and lower lip, as if to say this was beginner's luck, and no fault of his own. I insisted he try one, just to rub it in. But I knew he had to have eaten one already, if not several. I wouldn't have trusted him otherwise.

Several years passed. My husband and I moved to a different neighbourhood, where the bakery was inside a building, and the baker skulked in the back and didn't talk much to customers. We missed Abu Shadi, and his *kafta*, so we went back for a visit.

He greeted us like returning royalty. He asked where we were living, and how much we were paying, and immediately updated us on the neighbourhood rents, which had skyrocketed.

'How's business by you?' we asked.

'Well –' he did the chin maneuver again, 'not bad. The situation, it's very difficult. But my work is good. Really, very good, thanks to this new *man'oushe* I invented: cheese with spinach.'

He pulled out a white plastic bucket full of spinach and purslane mixed with shredded halloumi, studded with little fragments of chopped tomato and onion. 'It's my own invention,' he said, scooping out a handful for us to admire. '*Wallah*, you have to try it. It's very popular – people like it, because it's healthy. Here, let me make you one!'

The spinach had wilted in the hot oven, melting into the salty cheese, and the tomatoes gave it just the occasional bite of sweetness. We ate it with our fingers, standing on the sidewalk, listening to Abu Shadi hold forth on the latest electricity crisis and the prospects for another civil war. ■

Annia Ciezadlo's book Day of Honey: A Memoir of Food, Love, and War was published in 2011.

Anthony Shadid's memoir, House of Stone *is published by Granta Books today (2 August).*

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