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Sally Butcher: *Veggiestan: a vegetable lover's tour of the Middle East*: Anova Books, 2011, 271 pp., hardback, £25.00.

Sally Butcher is married to Jamshid, and has thus become part of a large Iranian family. She and her husband keep the Persepolis Persian shop in Peckham and in her new book *Veggiestan* she specializes in vegetarian dishes of considerable complexity from the Middle East. Iran may be her first love, but *Veggiestan* covers a vast area from Turkey, Kurdistan, and the Lebanon, to Egypt, Tunis and Morocco. It is plain that cooking and meals in Iran are a family affair, meals eaten sitting on the floor with much chat and gossip and the opportunity for the foreign daughter-in-law to learn Persian. In other countries men and women may eat separately, the women sometimes after the men, but even then there is no concept of the isolated supper-on-a-tray syndrome. On the other hand the TV apparently stays on throughout. A grisly thought.

In *Persia in Peckham* the author refers to 'the hypochondria of the Arab male' and this perhaps accounts for the possibly reassuring chapter in *Veggiestan* on herbal remedies, and the ancient principle that most bodily ills are caused by an imbalance in the four bodily humours. Later the author refers to the belief that the balanced diet should be based on *sardi* and *garmi*, hot and cold foods eaten in proportion, but she does not dwell on this, describing the book as being 'a light hearted, fun cookery book' and it is indeed an engaging round-up of the Middle East's vegetarian dishes, written with panache, and a genuine passion sometimes masked by a 'jolly hockey sticks' approach. Expressions or phrases like ' Gosh'; 'O my'; 'But golly was it good'; 'I won't tell if you don't'; 'Girlieness'; 'Right. Rubber gloves on first' do perhaps crop up a bit over-frequently, but they in no way detract from the meticulous presentation of the recipes and the real enthusiasm of the addict. In the background there always looms the formidable, perfectionist figure of the Iranian mother-in law, helpful and loved, but plainly not one to mess about with or to condone short cuts. Similar recipes for the better-known dishes can be found in other books on Mediterranean food, but there is often a slight difference of emphasis, or a variation in the spices used. For example, The Imam Swooned contains *pekmez* (see below for lemon juice as substitute).

One of the pleasures of the book is the opportunity to read of the doings and sayings of the eccentric Mullah Nasruddin. Stale bread for warding off the nonexistent tigers is plainly indispensable. There are anecdotes

about the way the aubergine got its hat, the soup of Ezo the Bride, and how the Nile peasant found out why you should never put all your eggs in one basket. I enjoyed these almost as much as the recipes themselves.

At the outset, I was pretty sceptical about the likelihood of being able to get hold of Middle Eastern ingredients in darkest Sussex or Devon. There are still some that remain (to the ignoramus) incomprehensible or indeed unobtainable (*freekeh* – green wheat? ) but the author is good about explaining obscure names of ingredients, adding enlightening information at the side of the main recipe. I have to admit to having nearly emulated the imam by swooning when to my amazement I found za'atar and sumac in Waitrose, Storrington (a small branch). So it's not only Middle Eastern supermarkets that stock at least some of the ingredients. Where she thinks it unlikely that the provincial will find something, she often gives a prosaic substitute – lemon juice instead of *pekmez*. But as *pekmez* is a syrup made from 'boiled up fruit bits, usually grape or mulberry', I would question whether this reproduces the original taste.

The recipes themselves all seem to have endless lists of fairly similar spices and herbs, plus the exotic ones that you may or may not be able to find. The ones that I've tried all work, and there's only one really daunting one, untried, I fear, which says it takes six days to make (wheat grass mousse). There is an interesting section on rices and grains, complete with possibly enlightening instructions as to how to cook rice, classified by levels of culinary sophistication. Curiously, there is a separate section on vegetables (though this indicates the scope of the rest of the recipes) and, as the author says, 'some lovely recipes for beetroot, turnips, carrots and radish' and, in another section, a delicious recipe for carrot and cardamom soup. In fact all her recipes for soups are alluring. Pickles and preserves form a vital part of *Veggiestan* cooking and the section on them includes pink pickled turnips (with come-hitherish illustration) and onion, chilli and mint marmalade, which might well become a vital larder item. The section I found least enticing was that on desserts, but this is no doubt the fault of personal taste rather than anything wrong with the recipes. Noodley pud contained, amongst other things, butter or ghee, vermicelli, turmeric and cardamom, custard powder, condensed milk, raisins and nuts. This did not induce experimental fervour.

The book encourages you to try new ideas. It is attractively illustrated with enticing matt, colourful but not glorious technicolour, pictures of

What it Ought To Look Like, and I didn't detect any of those irritating extras not mentioned in the recipe that sometimes appear in lavish illustrations. The book does not take itself too seriously, but one is left in no doubt about the integrity of the writing and the dedication of the author. I enjoyed it.

PAT PHILLIPS

Peter Bazalgette, ed.: *Egon Ronay. The Man who Taught Britain how to Eat*: Newbaz Ltd., 2011, 136 pp., hardback, £25.00.

This is a most enjoyable funeral book, in memory of the Hungarian restaurateur and guidebook entrepreneur about whom, when he was in full flow, one may have had very mixed feelings. But this little compilation of affectionate essays works the miracle of the best obituaries: it makes you wonder at the man's determination, good intentions, pleasant nature and all round good-eggness. Most of the contributors are members of Egon's club of gastronomes – another thing about which one has very mixed feelings – and some were employees, colleagues and restaurant inspectors. It is, therefore, very interesting, though not as 'interesting' as it could be, about the compilation and composition of these guides. Quite frankly, the Ronay guides were a curate's egg of an operation (as are most such guidebooks), but that's not to say their influence was bad. I enjoyed particularly the pieces about his Hungarian years, but all of it is a delightful way to spend a couple of hours, glass in hand and memory working overtime.