

Claudia Roden was a name well known to anyone who worked in food. Then the new wave of culinary stars arrived, and only in the past few years has there been a return to the grand writers who laid the foundations of contemporary food writing. Roden symbolises a rare period in history. Her two major books, *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* and *The Book of Jewish Food*, are both widely celebrated in the Jewish and Arab worlds, two spheres that overlap in so many aspects and are part of her identity but which today are in deep conflict. Roden grew up in Zamalek, Cairo. Her parents came from grand Aleppo families, the Sassoons and the Doueks, who followed regional commerce to Cairo after the opening of the Suez Canal and the end of the caravanserai, the camel routes that travelled via Aleppo. Young Claudia was national swimming champion for backstroke, then later moved to boarding school in Paris. Then, in an attempt to gain personal freedom, she went to Saint Martin's School of Art in London, the only education she could pur-

# CLAUDIA RODEN

INTERVIEW BY RAFRAM CHADDAD  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE HAWKESWORTH

sue as a woman coming from an old-school family. When the Jews were forced to leave Egypt in 1956 she started collecting recipes from her extended family and friends, and in the '60s, when she couldn't find any food books about Egypt or Syria, she decided to write them. She went to the embassies in London, and when they asked if she wanted a visa, she replied with a smile, 'I came for the recipes'. Although her books are studied in universities and she's president of the Oxford Food Symposium, she doesn't see herself as a food anthropologist but simply as a food writer—a recipe collector who loves food and uses it to discover people and their worlds. Claudia sees herself as Mediterranean, having grown up when French was the lingua franca of Cairo, with Italian, Arabic, and Judaeo-Spanish (Ladino) in the house as well. Her books are based on intensive research, recording recipes, understanding cultural and sociological parameters, and all this in a world that saw food as something that only women should learn and cook for their families.





So the first question I wanted to ask is something I've been thinking about a lot in the context of myself. Basically you have two books that for everyone are the shining lights, the Jewish and the Middle Eastern books, which is very interesting because it almost doesn't exist, to be an authority on both. How do you see this role?

I feel very happy about it.

Do you feel that it's rare? Or it's a division that can change?

Jews and Arabs lived together for centuries. They could do so again. Something that touched me a lot was when I was at a conference on Palestine in London very early on, and a Palestinian man said as a joke after the conference, 'There's somebody here who's done more for us than anybody; I'm cooking from Claudia's book all the time'. I couldn't believe that anyone was cooking from my book, let alone a Palestinian. I have felt a closeness and appreciation, and never antagonism. Jews used to be specialists in Arab things, although Edward Said, the Palestinian writer, complained that Jews should not be the voice of the Arab world. I've only found people objecting once or twice, and it was in New York. A Palestinian woman at a radio station where I was being interviewed said that Jews had stolen everything from them, even their food. I was asked by a rabbi also in New York, 'How come Jews ate Arab food?' It was our food too.

The two worlds exist in you. Maybe it's rare because of your biography; you were born in Egypt, into the old world where everything was much more mixed. When my family arrived in Israel in the '70s, they were told they should choose between being Jewish or Arab. They didn't have the option of being both. But this is the worst question to ask somebody who has different identities inside his body. And you have different identities in yours.

Yes, it was not such a rare thing, and now it's vanishing. But I have to say we were Europeanised. I'm not an Arab speaker; we were French speakers at home in Egypt.

I remember the time I invited you to speak back in 2014 at the Salone del Gusto in Turin and we arrived at the Egyptian stand. There was a tall young man behind the stand and you were commenting about the cheese. He looked at you and politely said, 'And who are you?' You

replied, 'Claudia Roden'. It took him a second and then he rushed out and said loudly, 'I can't believe it! I learnt everything from you'.

I remember. I do feel there's a kind of nostalgia now in Egypt and in some Arab countries for the time when the Jews were there. I felt it when I went back to write about the food. I have Egyptian friends, younger ones—at least they're young to me—who want to involve me in things in Egypt. But what surprised me was somebody who did his PhD on the Jews of Arab lands. He's Muslim—I think of Pakistani origin—and keeps going to Syria where they've given him a job to try and get the Jews to come back. Of course they won't, not with this regime. He came once with an Egyptian friend whose mother went to school with me back then, to interview me about my Syrian ancestors. He was fascinated to hear that my great-grandfather was in Aleppo. He asked, 'What do you feel about Syria?' And I said, 'For us, Syria was heaven. We weren't thrown out'. My family left because they were all merchants and the construction of the Suez Canal meant they didn't have the caravanserai trade anymore. So a lot of them went to Egypt. He asked, 'Would you come to Syria now as a guest?' I said I always dreamt of going but would never go now, because I don't accept Assad.

Do you have Syrian refugees here in London? There are many. I was once invited to a synagogue where Syrian refugees hosted a lunch. They brought their foods, played music, and sang. It was to thank the people who helped them. Refugees go to that synagogue every week for food and clothes, and to see lawyers and doctors. Churches and mosques also invite and help refugees.

So it's very developed, this kind of helping. It's surprising because usually Jews in London are more right-wing, more closed.

Not every synagogue does it, but quite a lot do. There's a woman who's a rabbi and a member of the House of Lords, Baroness Julia Neuberger. Once a week homeless people come to sleep in her synagogue and get every kind of help. Many of them are asylum seekers who are not allowed to work and who also don't want to reveal too much. So you don't ask them, but you help them.

That's usually the biggest tragedy when refugees are assessed by where they're from rath-



er than who they are. That's the place that dumped them but will also shape the criteria for their future life. How do you think about it all as an immigrant yourself, and now watching another wave of people arriving?

I feel for them. They saw Jews as their enemies during the war with Israel, but before that they were our friends, our neighbours. It's very emotional.

Maybe your grandfather passed by their grandfather in Halab [Aleppo] in the market. I know. I met a Turkish woman from Gaziantep, on the border with Syria. It was once part of Syria and is near Aleppo. The house her family had for many generations was opposite the synagogue. They could see into the building and so she guessed that her great-grandfather must have known Haham Abraham, my great-grandfather who had been a young rabbi there before he became chief rabbi of Aleppo. So we really got very close about that.

You went on to write about the Mediterranean. For you, what kind of food connects these countries? If you talk about the spirit of the Mediterranean, what would you talk about? It's olive oil, garlic, lemon. Wherever I went, I'd go to the markets. My dream place is always the market. I'd see the same vegetables, fresh fruit, dried fruit, chickpeas, lentils. They all have a grain of some kind, whether it's couscous or bulgur. In my books I talk very much about people, places, and history, but I also love to eat, and when I was traveling for research I'd indulge because I knew however much I ate, I could say it was for my job: I'm learning something. In Italy I would ask to have a quarter portion of everything. The restaurant owner would come and talk to me because people were asking. I'd say, 'I'm an English journalist, writing about your food'. They never believed I was English, but they believed I really was writing about food. I found similar dishes. There's chicken with grapes in Spain and chicken with grapes in Tuscany. There are the same kinds of dishes but with a difference in flavour. In the north of the Mediterranean they use herbs and alcohol—cognac, Marsala, sherry, depending on the country. In the south they use spices, molasses, flower waters. I'd go somewhere and think, 'Where have I encountered this?' So in the end I did feel there was something we can say is Mediterranean.





I'm interested in knowing if there's a recipe or something that is very emblematic for you. For example, Ella Almagor, the Arabic language scholar, she always made rice with tomato sauce, spinach, and chickpeas, and she'd say, 'This is very Claudia', because of the colours—white, red, and green. It's so simple. She used to fry tiny meatballs in olive oil, take them out, put in some diced tomato and fry them until soft, then add spinach. Of course the hummus was already ready. I can't remember the particular dish. I think she added the spinach.

She said it was 'very Claudia' because it's very Sephardic, classic.

I've made hundreds of meatballs, mostly Middle Eastern, with every different kind of flavouring and every kind of sauce, but I don't remember putting in spinach. Maybe they were meatballs with spinach inside, rather than in the sauce. It would've been Turkish-Jewish or something. Sometimes I go to see friends and they make a dish and say, 'Well, this is from your book'. But to me it seems completely different or new, because of course it's always different when other people make it. Even when I make it, it's different every time.

It's very hard. When we talk about authentic recipes, my mother and her sister cook the same dish in a different way, because one likes more carrot, and the other's daughters don't like meat, so there are always changes.

When I was first researching I didn't know whether it was just one family making the recipe, because I was researching people who'd never had a cookbook. All the recipes were passed down in the family. They were giving me those recipes and I would think, 'I have to find out if this is just them'. So I would ask another family from the same background if they did it the same way, and they would always say, 'We do it very special!' Maybe they fried the onion a bit more, cooked something a bit longer or a bit less, but what I really understood was the strength of tradition; even if nobody looked at a recipe, they did the same thing and didn't want to do it any other way. Nobody wanted to experiment. I feel it's strange now that people feel they have to experiment all the time, and young people want to do something new all the time, even when they entertain each other.

They want to invent something.

They want to invent, and now they want to cook like a chef. Before, chefs only learnt French cuisine. In the Middle East there were the street vendors who cooked kebabs and there were artisan specialists. You didn't do what the specialists did; you'd buy it from them. Now in the West there's the dream of being an inventor.

It's interesting to talk with you about this culinary epiphany. All the young fashionable kids today, decorated with tattoos, sophisticated, they used to pursue jobs in medicine, finance. Now they all want to be chefs. Do you think these food trends are good or just very celebrity-based? Is it going to help or it's just a commodity?

I'm so glad that people care about food and are excited about it. It's made people want to cook and that's good.

Thankfully you're becoming more a part of it as well; chefs are coming back to talk to you, they're looking for a base.

Yes, they need to be inspired by something.

I think your books are on the side of help, more than being a commodity. They're helping humanity, let's say, because they connect two big worlds that used to be connected and are separated so much today.

For me traditions are precious. I don't want them to be lost. It's good to have something—not necessarily flags—that is different and special. The pleasure and the joy of meeting the other is that they have something new to offer. But then it's also good when we eat the same things and listen to the same music, because it brings us closer. Parts of globalisation are good. Before, it took the movement of populations over 100 years for a new recipe to be adopted somewhere. Now with Instagram it can take a few seconds.

Food also used to be more of a servitude thing. You cooked to feed people, and then it became a luxury, more fashionable.

I remember Alice Waters came to London once and we met by chance. I was with my grandson Cesar, and she said to him, 'You must learn to cook because it attracts young women'. For a man to be a good cook now is very popular. Cesar already knew how to cook and was glad to hear that.







**Instead it used to be a woman's thing.** When I started writing about food, nobody talked about food. To imagine that people would study food academically was laughable. The only university departments where they talked about it was women's studies or feminism, and they talked about how terrible it was that women were chained to the kitchen. Now it's the opposite. When I went to Yale as a visiting fellow, all the professors wanted to talk about food.

**I wanted to ask about this. I did some artworks about how women were told to stay in the kitchen all day basically to keep them away from thinking they could do anything creative. As a result, many dishes in our cuisine require hours of cooking. Now we understand that we want women to be liberated from these kinds of hours, and at the same time we want to keep traditions. How do we find this balance? Like, once a month we make traditional food, and the rest of the time we just fry some shrimp in butter?**

Yeah. I remember when not that long ago nobody wanted to cook here in Britain, and they would spend a whole day at the gym, with a hobby, and I was just thinking, 'Well, why not cook?' But it was just not the thing. Now it's fashionable and people want to cook like a chef. I have to say that I didn't ever want to cook like a chef and my research has always been on home cooking. But I did go to restaurants. In Spain I wanted to see what Ferran Adrià and other innovative chefs were doing. I would eat there and think, 'This is wonderful', and then I would take out my pen and paper and the chef would come and sit down.

**And talk about his mother.**

Yes. So then I'd ask, 'How did she do it?'

**Speaking of Adrià, you wrote a book about Spain in 2011. You felt a connection because of the Sephardic cuisine?**

Yes, I did. I felt local, but I felt at home everywhere in the Mediterranean. I found something of a culture or spirit, something of a way of being that was familiar. But in Spain the recognition was special. The first time I went, I think it was 35 years ago, we were going to film with a BBC TV team. We were in Andalusia and there was a banquet with lots of dishes on the table. I remember sitting there, eating, and there was a fritter. I just said,



'Bimuelos'; in Spanish it's buñuelos. Someone there said 'Sefardita?' I was thrilled. My grandmother was a Judaeo-Spanish speaker from Istanbul, and all her friends were too. So I knew all their sayings; a lot were about food and cooking. They thought their dishes had been brought from Spain.

There were a lot of proverbs.

And songs and lullabies. Many times I'd see a little way of doing something and just think, 'Oh, this reminds me of another thing'. A word, a taste, a smell triggered memories. It was very emotional.

Your role is important because we usually don't write about ourselves like Westerners do. Western people write about themselves to death, about everything. They write 20 recipes for a boring sausage. We have such a rich cuisine, but we don't write because we aren't used to talking about ourselves.

Certainly, at the time in Egypt there were no cookbooks. No one ever even saw a printed recipe. When my family first settled in Britain we wrote to friends in Egypt to ask if they could send us any cookbooks. The only one we received was an Arabic translation of a cookbook of the British Army catering corps, from when it was stationed in Egypt during World War II. It had things like macaroni cheese, cauliflower cheese, and roly-poly alla castarda. My father read it out loud and we fell about laughing.

Ful medames but with cheese.

They didn't even mention ful medames. It was all English things, but in Arabic.

The index of all the fish in Tunisia, all the names and such, was written by a British diplomat. By Alan Davidson, who was my friend.

Ah, you knew him. Of course. So how did you become interested in the history and culture of food at that time?

I went to the British Library to look for Arab cookbooks. The library's supposed to have almost all the books that have ever been printed in English and also many in other languages. They had nothing on Arab food in English or Arabic except for 13th-century manuscripts found in Baghdad and Damascus and a Maghrebi-Andalusian one. I was fascinated to find translations and academic

studies of these. The dishes, especially in the manuscript found in Damascus, were so like my own family recipes that they confirmed to me who we were.

And the al-Baghdadi manuscript? There's the Charles Perry translation of that as well.

Yes, Charles Perry came to see me years ago. He said he was inspired by what I wrote about Professor John Arberry's translation of al-Baghdadi's manuscript and Maxime Rodinson's sociological analysis of the Damascus one. Charles went on to become the great scholar of medieval Arab gastronomy, doing his own brilliant translations of the two manuscripts. When I was doing my research, I was fascinated not just by the recipes, but also the poems, songs—anything I could find about food. When I asked people for recipes, men usually didn't have any. The women all had recipes, but the men, like my uncle Moussa Douek, gave me riddles, proverbs, jokes, stories. Also, at that time I felt I had to show there was a beautiful culture behind the recipes, because everybody in England hated the Arab world. There had been the Suez War, they were calling Nasser a tinpot dictator, and soon after there was the oil embargo. But that changed.

You think so?

There is Islamophobia now. But it's different.

Because of food or?

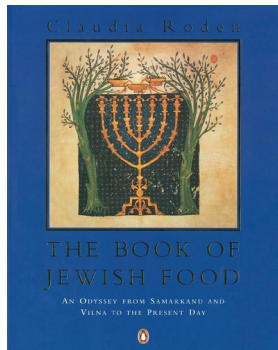
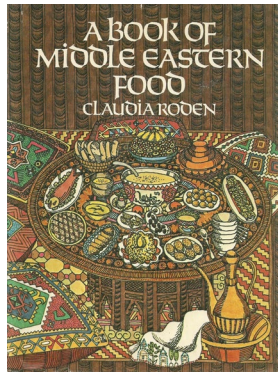
Food has helped. But it took time. When I told people I was collecting recipes, they'd say, 'Why don't you paint instead?' because I'd been to art school and food was not then a hot subject. And when I said it was Middle Eastern food, they would say, 'Is it going to be sheep's eyes and testicles?' Those were the tales of English travellers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. There was 'the sheep sitting on a mountain of rice in a sea of fat' and there were the *Arabian Nights*. Also, much of the Middle East had been part of the British Empire, and the British looked down on the cultures of their colonies.

It was very shallow. It was Orientalists, like the French in Tunis and Algiers. For art collectors from Europe, they don't want to see critical or reflective art. They want to see the beautiful blue doors of Sidi Bou Said. So in the '60s, '70s, '80s, '90s, all this time, in your own way, you were working day by day to create



more books. People today are making books in two weeks. Somebody writes the book for them even, whereas you're research-based. And, finally, it's coming back to you, the recognition. I remember a few years ago, it was not the case.

It wasn't. It started with Yotam Ottolenghi. He came to London to study French patisserie and then worked at Baker & Spice. He was asked, 'Can you do food from your country?' Yotam said he copied recipes from my book by hand and that's what he gave them. At that time he didn't tell them it was from my book; now he tells everyone. Once he was asked if there were a fire in his house and everything was going to burn, what would he keep? He said, 'Claudia Roden's two books'. It's very generous of him. He's created a Middle Eastern nouvelle cuisine. And now other chefs say I'm their guide.



*A Book of Middle Eastern Food, first published in 1968, and The Book of Jewish Food, first published in 1997.*

Fun. Another question: how would you describe yourself?

Or how would you want to be remembered? I feel it's tied to what my parents wanted me to be, in that my father would say a daughter has a place, a woman's place: 'the sunshine of the family'. He thought the daughter should be a nurturer, and so I wanted to be a nurturer for my family. But I also used my skills to nurture others by writing, by giving food and transmitting food. I had wanted to study science or film. They didn't allow me to study except for art. I went to school in Paris for three years and to Saint Martin's School of Art in London for two. I was a dutiful daughter, which was a mistake. When I did art, I thought I'd make political murals.

Like Diego Rivera. But how was it in London in the '50s when you were studying? Was it wild or pretty mainstream?

It was pretty mainstream, in sculpture also. I was a 'social realist', and the abstract people were just beginning. After I left they started working with metal girders and construction materials. There's no more figurative painting.

Because when you're a figurative painter, you're seen as the good kids.

Yes, we just painted. I loved learning new things.

People always ask me if the food I'm making or writing about is connected to art, and I always say no. For me, art is connected to something very individual. With food I follow instructions, recipes. It's much more practical.

I was doing art because that's what I had come to London for. I loved it, but I became disillusioned by politics, by Russia. When we heard what was going on—the repression of the Hungarian Revolution, Stalin's Gulag—I just felt my whole world wasn't worth it. I also loved cooking. When you give food to people they respond and you can see that they like something and that they're happy. I kept thinking, 'Why should I go on painting? For what? Nobody cares'. I turned to food. It enabled me to earn a

living and support my family. I became a single mother of three at 37 and didn't receive any financial help. I already had a book out at 30, but then I started giving cooking classes in my house and went to every magazine and said, 'Do you want me to write?' Researching food allowed me to travel and discover the world.

We believe that art will change the world. When something isn't definitive, people think about it more.

Do you feel that's what artists do now? I went to see a show by Ai Weiwei and saw a video of him being interviewed by Anish Kapoor, who said that it's radical art that makes people think and then they go and sell it for millions of dollars to billionaires.

That's the crisis of every artist. It's like a bipolar thing where you're a rebel and you believe in fixing the world, and in the end the worst people in the world, the oligarchs, buy the work. You did paintings of the rabbis on Djerba as well, the Tunisian island where







I was born and where my family's been for the past 3,000 years. Maybe you painted a member of my family.

Perhaps I did. They reminded me of certain rabbis in Egypt—the way they sat, especially.

I went with a friend, Ezra, who's an Aleppo Jew from Brooklyn, and he took me to Mansoura Bakery, also in Brooklyn. I met this guy called David who works there and whose family opened it, and he showed me these coins from the reign of King Farouk, which are still used to weigh flour, because the recipe specifies the weight in the amount of coins. It's amazing. The Mansouras did a similar route to you: Aleppo, Cairo, and Paris.

A lot of the Jews did the Aleppo and Cairo route. We were a mixed community from all over the old Ottoman Empire. Some were just old families from Egypt. You know, we didn't have horrible hate in Egypt. Our lives had been very good.

Yes, also in Tunis. I think it's actually one of the best Arab countries for Jews to live in. There were riots in 1967, but that's it, basically. People were not deported like in Egypt or Libya or Algeria or everywhere else.

In Egypt it was because they were at war with Israel. There was the Suez War in 1956 and other wars.

There's another thing I find fascinating about you writing the most significant Jewish cookbook, which is because you're not Ashkenazi; up till now Ashkenazi food has predominantly been categorised as Jewish food, while the food you and I grew up with is categorised as Arab.

In Israel it was categorised as 'ethnic'. When my Middle Eastern book came out there in Hebrew the publisher said, 'We'll publish it, but it won't sell because we despise this culture and we want people who come from that world to leave it behind'. That's changed, but I only discovered three years ago as I was giving a talk in Tel Aviv that they didn't call my book 'Middle Eastern', they called it 'Mediterranean'. Then when my Jewish book came out I did a lot of television in Israel. Every day, in a very grand hotel, we served Jewish dishes from a different country. TV crews were filming and asking where was all this Jewish food that they had never tasted or heard of before? Now Israel has started making that food its own.

There's a revival, but they're calling it Israeli food. It's political of course. I don't think they see Arabs as part of a contemporary culture. They see it as the food of their diaspora. They feel entitled to make it their own.

To bring this to a close, I wanted to ask about your last book, Med, because it was a book of recipes and, for me, you're not a recipe person. I am a recipe person. I've collected thousands over the years. I've cooked and recooked all the dishes in my books. I had to find the best versions and make them work. I saw it as my role to pass on traditional recipes faithfully. But with my last book, Med, I felt free to sometimes interpret and innovate. I wanted to find the dishes that gave the most pleasure. It was a way of getting people—family and friends—around my kitchen table. I would call and say, 'I'm testing something. Come!'

I was also annoyed that people saw me as an academic. I remember when the founder of Eataly in New York, Lidia Bastianich, invited me to lunch at her restaurant, and she asked me how I went about my research. I started telling her how I went from town to town, even village to village, meeting people, asking them what their favourite foods were. Then she said, 'I can see that you're a recorder and I'm a cook'. What we ate, nothing would be recognised in Italy as Italian—ravioli with raw egg yolk. Now people call me a cultural anthropologist and a historian, and I just say, 'I didn't even go to university'.

I think they wanted to compliment you. And of course you're the president of the Oxford Food Symposium.

But I didn't take it as a compliment. It belittled my years of cooking, and I knew some academics felt, 'How are you coming into our domain?' We were all amateurs when the Oxford Symposium started. Academics have very much taken it over now. Food studies have become a hot academic subject. It's great!

So was Med your last book?

I thought it was going to be my last, but now I want to do something else. I haven't yet decided what exactly.