A google search on the term “Middle Eastern Food” will yield around 1,030,000 results in the English language. Entries on cookbooks, recipes, restaurants, on-line grocery stores, and resources ranging from personal “Tips for eating Greek and Middle Eastern food” to “Atkins friendly Middle Eastern foods” promise the beginnings of a serious rivalry with “French food” (5,830,000 hits) or “Chinese food” (4,710,000 hits).

In the extravirtual world the numerous “Middle Eastern” restaurants across the United States afford the American consumer many possibilities for exploration. Add to that the growth of the Middle Eastern diaspora in the United States, which has led to numerous intercultural marriages and friendships, and you have increasing exposure to the cuisines of the region known as the Middle East. Cookbooks have not fallen behind, with titles ranging from the more general Middle Eastern, including recipes from various countries, to books focusing on a specific country or two.

These resources present an exciting picture to the American cook. However, for actual citizens of the Middle East, or for anyone with a specialized interest in the region, there is a problem of terminology. The term “Middle Eastern” unfairly erases a much-needed specificity. At worst it has uncomfortable Orientalist implications; at best it creates confusion because of its elusive geopolitical and cultural definition. In this reviewer’s experience citizens of Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and the Arab gulf countries generally specify the national and regional boundaries of their gastronomy in painstaking detail and are adamant about precise locations. Perhaps they are not to be accused of excessive nationalism in the specific case of cuisine. Climates, agricultural products, tastes, languages, histories, and socioeconomic standings differ enough across these countries (and within their regions) to warrant a critique of the very term “Middle Eastern cuisine.”

With that debate in the background, to consider the interaction of “Middle Eastern” cuisine (pace terminology problems) with the West is to take part in a much larger historical exploration: the question of modernity and the Middle East. In a cookbook that presents a specific cuisine to English speakers, a generally curious American will see intriguing spices and cooking techniques, but it is likely that an Iranian, Turkish, or Tajik reader will see a process of cultural translation that is at once exhilarating and frustrating. Questions of terminology, “authenticity,” and “respect to tradition” appear alongside the adaptability of recipes and their appeal in the West. Thus, cookbooks represent a potent metaphor for the region’s overall complex engagement with modernity and Westernization. For at least the past few decades, Arab, Iranian, Turkish, and Central Asian intellectuals have been asking: “What does it mean to be Modern? How do we legitimize ourselves globally without sacrificing our national identity? What is our place in this predominantly Western-identified world?” Cookbooks written in English by citizens of a Middle Eastern country and aimed primarily at an American audience enact these very questions, albeit unconsciously.

To see one’s cuisine exposed to the West is to realize that one is not just a political being but also a social being. The logic of reading these cookbooks, like the logic of engaging with modernity, is internally divided: On the one hand, both sides (the American and the “Middle Easterner”) can rejoice that for once they are exchanging life-affirming and enjoyable facts aimed at coexistence in a global community. On the other hand, recipes have to be Americanized to work, and cultural information is needed to illuminate the rituals associated with food. In a microcosm of the “Dialogue of the Civilizations,” in which a less powerful nation attempts dialogue with a superpower, these choices have to be made carefully. Two recent cookbooks confront this dualistic approach in fascinating ways.
The first is clearly a labor of love, centered upon the cuisine of one country: *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of Iraqi Cuisine*, by Nawal Nasrallah. It comes as a huge compendium of recipes, with no glossy photographs but numerous historical tidbits, amateur visual motifs, and personal recollections that appear alongside the impressive number of recipes. The other is by the leading authority on Iranian cuisine, Najmieh Batmanglij, whose *New Food of Life* (Mage, 1993) is still the best Persian cookbook available today to English and French speakers. As a production Batmanglij’s new book, *Silk Road Cooking: A Vegetarian Journey*, stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Nasrallah’s project. It spans cuisines from Italy to Japan, with alluring photographs and a highly professional presentation. It does not make any claims to presenting only Middle Eastern recipes, though the countries of the region are at its crux.

The books introduce their contents with an air of nostalgia and a subtle lament of separation from a happier origin. This atmosphere, which invites the reader to be seduced by a glorious East full of wonder and beauty, is conveyed in openly personal tones. Batmanglij balances facts on food with classical poetry, wistful references to a happy, lyrical childhood in Iran filled with the rituals of food preparation, and historical particulars on the Silk Road presented with a mythical aura.

Likewise, Nasrallah starts with deeply personal recollections framed within the insistence that Iraq is at the crossroads of many important civilizations and thereby particularly rich in its culinary traditions. She also begins the book—movingly—with a reference to the hardships experienced today in Iraq. She follows this with a broad historical survey of Mesopotamian, Babylonian, and Baghdadí traditions, offering the reader a sometimes overwhelming array of facts and citations, punctuated with paragraphs that stand alone in boxes giving us glimpses into historical specifics.

The tremendous passion and deference shown in both books toward their subject matter engages with at least two levels of experience. Both authors write from a position of insiders looking out, adamant at once to recover and communicate a unique and exotic experience. As for the sometimes expressive tone with which the introductory or historical material is presented, it cannot be denied that citizens of Iran and Iraq have a particular right to this tone of voice, given the extraordinary changes and disruptions they have known for the past twenty-five years. But far from perpetuating the usual dark and painful images to which many Americans are subject, the books counter with an aura of splendor and joy.

Batmanglij’s book—exquisite to behold and very easy to handle—provides coherently written and exciting recipes,
adapted to suit the vegetarian and American consumer. One expects no less of the writer of New Food of Life, whose recipes were also especially user-friendly and attractive. The flair for experimentation and innovation glimpsed in New Food of Life comes to full fruition here: after all, it is hard to conceive of some of the cuisines tackled by Batmanglij as meat free, yet she provides good vegetarian recipes such as the Uzbek carrot palov or the Delhi curried potato and egg patties. She adapts and innovates on a substantial scale. Any readers anxious about “authenticity” may have a question or two about the presentation of some dishes in common households, since the photos will not be immediately recognizable by those who cook and present along more traditional lines (for example, the Caspian fresh herb kuku rolled in lavash bread). But the author is aware of this and informs the reader of the areas in which she has made a specific change (for example, tofu fillings for the Afghan Ashak, which is traditionally served with ground meat).

Those who know a part of the region and its corresponding cuisine will delight in seeing the similarities and variants in etymology and preparation, aware that these are framed in Batmanglij’s directive for masterly adaptation to a vegetarian, supermarket-friendly cuisine. The many preparations of rice or bread across the region, for example, will be exciting to try—even if California and Minnesota wild rice, by no stretch of the imagination a part of the Silk Road, appear in the cast of characters. For the reader who neither hails from nor has traveled extensively in any of the areas explored, the book is exciting because it conveys not only the richness of the region’s traditions but also its openness to adaptation and change.

Batmanglij’s recipes are therefore consciously aimed at upper-middle-class Western consumers. But they are also deferential to a sense of mythical origin, as though speaking to those non-Westerners who, at home or in exile, might yearn to recover ritual and original identity while remaining concerned about the possibilities of cultural adaptation to a Westernized world.

Nasrallah’s cookbook has a vast scope that attempts to convey as much information as possible about Iraq’s culinary history and culture. It seeks urgently to multiply our perspective on Iraq. By its sheer size it manages to do so, even if at first sight several factors militate against its success. The book is hard to handle physically because of its large paperback dimensions. Its convoluted presentation can be confusing. The photographs and artwork affect the quality of the book somewhat negatively. The black-and-white reprints do not do justice to the beauty of the objects. (The back of the jacket boasts that these “add to the pictorial appeal” of the book. Alas, this is not the case, for the quality is not up to standard.)

To its credit, at over six hundred pages Nasrallah’s book takes the reader on a dizzying journey across stews, grains, fish, savory pastries, cookies, desserts, and beverages (to name a few chapter headings), interspersing the recipes with historical anecdotes, calligraphy samples, poems, and brief facts about ingredients. This is visibly reminiscent of medieval Arabic prose writings on biography or history: shifting between poetry and prose, offering independent tidbits inside the main narrative, and presenting a wide array of names, places, anecdotes, and examples halfway between digression and main narrative. Most importantly, the passion that has gone into this production is evident, and the recipes are usually easy to follow. The eggplant dishes and the stews are especially enticing, as are the many rice dishes. The glossary and bibliography are very useful in helping the reader identify origins and usage.

Food—like cinema, music, literature, political discourse, and art—is undergoing furious transformations in many Middle Eastern countries. From touristy restaurants with waiters in folkloric costumes to original preparations of pizza and lasagna, and from traditional restaurants to cooking shows on state-run television featuring veiled women who introduce broccoli to audiences, the food industry aims to cater to the increasingly young and restless urban populations of Teheran, Amman, Beirut, and Istanbul. The cookbooks considered here contribute to this massive though rhizomic revolution, for they invite the reader to reflect upon the inextricable interplay of innovation and tradition.

NOTES
1. In February 2004.
3. In 2003 Mr. Khattani, president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, proposed a “Dialogue among Civilizations” in an effort to initiate friendly relations, initially between the United States and Iran, after years of hostility.