Marginally included in the Ottoman synthesis. But even so, if we look at the recipes of modern North Africa included in Zaouali’s book, we see that they are pale versions of their supposed ancestors in terms of the number and variety of spices and the quantity of vinegar advised.

Another interesting consideration is the continuity or extinction of vocabularies and terms, which are highlighted in the book by two genres of dishes: sikbaj and tharid, both prominent in medieval cookery. Sikbaj, a Persian word, designated meats cooked in vinegar and sugar or honey, with many variations on the theme. Tharid, said to have been the favorite of the Prophet Muhammad, was the quintessentially Arabian dish, consisting of a meat broth poured over crumbled bread. Again, these dishes had many sophisticated variations in courtly cooking, with fine meats, spices, fats, nuts, cheese, and so on. The term sikbaj is long extinct in Arabic and Persian, perhaps reflecting the abandonment of the harsh tastes of the past. Escabeche and variants in Spanish and Italian, as well as in the New World, are thought to be derivations from sikbaj, and typically indicate variants of pickled or marinated fish eaten cold (also olives and, rarely, partridge). Tharid, being simple and generic, persists, but in many forms and under different names. I found it called terit in provincial Turkey, as lamb broth over crumbled pide bread. It is common in the Arab world, but generally under different names: fette, also indicating breadcrumbs, is the most common in Egypt and the Levant and typically calls for meat broth, often trotters of sheep or cattle, or tripe. Often, layers of rice and yogurt are added to the bread, and sometimes vinegar. In Iraq a similar dish, but without rice and yogurt, is called tashrib, indicating the soaking of the bread. Words and things evolve, converge, and diverge in mysterious ways.

The historical narratives, the anecdotes, the re-creations of past beliefs and mentalities, as well as the annotated recipes, are all presented in a lucid and attractive style in Medieval Cuisine of the Islamic World. It is a valuable addition to the literature on medieval Arab cuisine.

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Persia in Peckham: Recipes from Persepolis
Sally Butcher
Totnes, Devon: Prospect Books, 2007
300 pp. Illustrations. $36.00 (paper)

London is a familiar city to many Iranians. Like Los Angeles, it has become a home away from home in substantial ways for Iranians of all backgrounds. The Persian restaurants and businesses of London are among the oldest Iranian establishments in Europe, and the city’s neighborhoods have known generations of Iranian residents.

Sally Butcher’s Persia in Peckham offers a lively and fresh look at Iranian culture and cuisine in London. Butcher, an Englishwoman married to an Iranian, owns a shop called “Persepolis” in Peckham—a neighborhood in South East London—where she and her husband sell a variety of ethnic (mostly Iranian) products to the vastly diverse population that gives Peckham its unique character. Persia in Peckham provides a wide range of recipes centered on Persian cuisine, enriched with regular asides on Iranian history, culture, and customs, all served with a refreshing dose of affectionate humor.

The well-known stews, kebabs, rice dishes, and pickles are all here, their preparation explained with clarity and made easy to follow. But Persia in Peckham is at its best when Butcher offers creative twists on Persian fundamentals. Drawing on her own British heritage as well as the rich supplies of London markets, Butcher playfully brings fusion into Persian cuisine and explores the ways in which traditional recipes can open up to change. Tuna steaks (unheard of in much of Iran) are barbecued with a pomegranate sauce; chiles (hardly ever used in Persian cuisine) are added to the plum stew. Haddock is battered in doogh, the fermented yogurt drink that, to the best of this reviewer’s knowledge, has never been used as batter before. The results are very good. Old and familiar tastes are made new with these surprising additions. In Butcher’s own words, the book “takes Iran as the center of its culinary universe and then roves freely around the Middle East, as well as visiting the shop’s own neighbours in Peckham just for fun. These are full of wonderful African and Caribbean spices and vegetables and inevitably these foods have crept into our food” (pp.10–11).

Butcher introduces amusing categories with entertaining titles: “Lorry food” (pp.62–67) gives a glimpse into her dealings with truck drivers who bring her goods from Iran, and provides two delicious suggestions for picnic and travel food using Persian and Western staples: rice, dried salami, tuna, lavash bread, and herbs. “Big Barberi burgers” (pp.115–116) are a successful marriage between the well-known Iranian kebab-and-bread meal and the Western burger. The section on pickles and jams teaches the reader to make the traditional Hafte-Bijar and eggplant torshi but also invites experimentation with hot tomato sauces and barberry jelly, both of which turn out delicious.

There are regular breaks from recipes, during which Butcher briefly explains some aspect of Persian culture:
language, history, film, religion, and fasting. Her forays into these realms, while for the most part informative, are above all entertaining. At times these asides generalize too broadly and even contain some mistakes: the section on Iranian film has factual errors, and the single page on a topic as massive as “Iranians and Islam” (pp.116–117) or the very few words on women, gender roles, and the veil (p.213) create so many generalizations that they invite dispute. But these are not serious problems, for the book above all is a subjective, warm, and humorous look at Iran from one Englishwoman’s point of view. Information on history and culture is filtered through the best tradition of British humor—1066 and all that British humor—comes to mind, as does good-humoredly sarcastic tone of British comedians such as Victoria Wood. Butcher’s quick cultural tours are truly funny, filled with her own loving reactions to Persian foibles as well as a clear fascination with the culture. “[The Iranians] aren’t half full of themselves,” she is happy to report (p.8), and Alexander the Great is “Alexander the same-say Great” (p.11). Beginning the section on the in-cursion of Islam into Iran in 637 A.D., she comments: “Ah, well, the Arabs. Gosh, did they bring a lot of luggage with them” (p.12). Butcher is also quick to poke fun at herself as the Englishwoman who not only observes the culture but also has become a part of it. There are, in addition, touching and compassionate glimpses into the hard lives of frightened Iranian immigrants when they first arrive in London (“Every customer tells a story,” she notes on page 193).

Today it is perhaps no longer easy to offer fresh and humorous takes on the most famous culinary traditions: accounts of adventures in Italian, French, Indian, and Japanese cuisines command the market, every nuance explored in every possible tone. It is, after all, easy to travel to such countries, and access to ingredients and methods becomes simpler every day. But for many Westerners Iran is not easy to visit. Nor is Persian cuisine particularly well known in the West. Finally, humor and Iran are not two words one often puts in the same sentence, especially in the United States. Persia in Peckham demonstrates that Iran is open to funny, loving, and personal reflection, and that traditional Persian recipes can easily handle a lively overhaul with help from other cultures.

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Kinship and Food in South East Asia
Edited by Monica Janowski and Fiona Kerlogue
Copenhagen: Niels Press, 2007
vii + 292 pp. Illustrations. $50.00 (paper)

In South East Asia, as elsewhere, food is nourishment, giver of pleasure, and topic of conversation. The contributors to this volume address themselves to its other, less visible role in the region: a medium through which kinship and social ties are constructed, cemented, and expressed.

Taken together, these essays argue for the expansion of kinship definitions beyond those based on biological or affinal ties. At first glance the inclusion in a single volume devoted to such diverse societies with distinct kinship structures appears problematic (seven authors focus on Austronesian-language-speaking groups in Malaysia and Indonesia, and one each on Northeastern Thais, the majority population of Vietnam, and the Inanwatan of Papua). One wonders on what basis, for instance, the matrilineal Minangkabau of central Sumatra (Indonesia) can usefully be compared with the patrilineal Viet. The answer is that these societies share a common cosmology, one marked by “a concern with the continued, and correct, channeling of life from one generation to the next, both between the living” and the dead (p.21). In all of the cases presented here life is channeled, at least in part, via feeding and/or the sharing of food.

All but two of the essays focus on rice-eating communities. Rice is so central to the diets of the Viet, the Isan of Northeastern Thailand, the Kelabit of Sarawak, and Malay/Indonesian-speaking societies that the terms for “eating” and “eating rice” are identical. For the Southern Lio of Flores, the residents of a Malay village on central Sumatra, and the Minangkabau of West Sumatra, rice is an important feature of life-cycle rituals and gift exchange. The same can be said for the focal starchy of the Inanwatan of Papua (sago) and the residents of an East Indonesian village (embel, dried biscuits made from cassava).

The members of many of these communities believe rice to be possessed of a human-like spirit which, according to both the Viet and the Isan, resides inside the rice barn, where the family’s harvest is stored (pp.247, 270). One month after the rice has been harvested and placed in the barn, the Isan stage a ritual to thank the spirit and to bring good luck and contentment to the family (p.231). The Southern Lio also recognize the existence of a rice-goddess but, unlike the Isan, do not include her in agricultural rituals. This may express the ambivalent relations between [the people] and [the goddess] as the embodiment of an important, but scarce, food crop” (p.208).