

A New Cookbook - NYTimes.com

By MONIQUE TRUONG



Damijan Saccio

A couple of weeks ago, a friend sent me [Yotam Ottolenghi's latest cookbook, "Plenty,"](#) as a gift. It's a vegetarian cookbook, and I'm decidedly not a vegetarian. I don't read cookbooks only for the recipes, though. I read them for the cooks and their particular passions. I've found that the best cookbooks are also memoirs, diaries or confessionals in disguise.

A barley and pomegranate salad.

I'm giddy whenever I open up a new cookbook. I rarely start reading on Page 1. I prefer to begin somewhere closer to its heart. Then I skip around, skimming the lists of ingredients. I note the herbs and spices that make reoccurring or unexpected appearances, as they are often the stand-ins for the letters from home or for postcards from travels, near and far. [Ottolenghi's](#) recipes are lit up with pomegranate seeds, threaded with saffron and fresh dill and mint, and get their depth from preserved lemons and dried Persian limes.

I linger at the headnotes for the recipes, since this is where the cookbook author's personality will reveal itself like an impish wink or a nervous tic. In "Plenty," the text above the recipes is where Ottolenghi professes his unabashedly emotional relationship with food. Before the mushroom ragout with poached duck egg recipe, he writes, "Here is my ideal solace for a gloomy winter night." Without such testimonies, I just wouldn't trust him as a cookbook author. I wouldn't want to recreate his recipes in my own kitchen. Trust can be established via an author's years of professional training or by the Michelin stars awarded to his or her restaurant, but for me trust begins with telltale words like "solace."

Ottolenghi's headnotes are also the repositories for his family's history. Before the globe artichokes with crushed fava beans recipe, he shares that his grandmother's maiden name was Luciana Cohen and that she was born to a Jewish family from Rome. He adds, "I pay homage to the way Roman Jews cook their artichokes, deep-frying them in olive oil, although I take it in a totally different direction." The recipe, as promised or forewarned, calls for coating artichoke hearts with egg and then panko — Japanese bread crumbs that would have horrified or, perhaps, delighted



Luciana.

By now, not only do I want to eat at Yotam Ottolenghi's table, I want to be seated next to him as well. I want to ask him about his penchant for maple syrup, to suggest that he write an entire book devoted to eggplant, to inquire about his other grandmother, and then, after a couple of drinks, ask him why "Plenty" has a puffy cover (very handy for hugging should you fall asleep while reading it).

Bereft of these possibilities, I turn to Ottolenghi's introduction instead. He professes that he is, in fact, not a vegetarian. He credits his love of vegetables and grains to his Israeli roots and to the Palestinian roots of Sami Tamimi, his culinary, creative and business partner since 2002. Their collaboration in London has resulted in four successful "haute-couture to-go food shops," a restaurant and a cookbook "Ottolenghi: The Cookbook."

My friend who gave me the gift knows me too well. "Plenty" is a cookbook with a fascinating, complex story to tell. Yes, about vegetables and how to delight in them, but also about the shared land from which they spring.

For my first foray into the world of "Plenty," I chose a barley and pomegranate salad because this ruby-filled fruit is about to disappear from my local markets. Also, I had never tasted pomegranates in combination with dill and allspice. I couldn't quite imagine these flavors together, but then with the everyday alchemy of cooking I didn't have to imagine. I could taste them.

Barley and Pomegranate Salad

Serves 4

1 cup pearl barley
6 celery stalks (leaves picked and reserved), cut into small dice
¼ cup olive oil
3 tablespoons sherry vinegar
2 small garlic cloves, crushed
⅔ teaspoon ground allspice
salt and black pepper
3 tablespoons chopped dill
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
seeds from 2 large pomegranates.

1. Rinse the barley with cold water, then place in a medium saucepan and cover with plenty of fresh water. Simmer for 30 to 35 minutes, or until tender but still with a bite.
2. Drain the barley and transfer to a mixing bowl. While it is still hot, add the celery, olive oil, vinegar, garlic, allspice and some salt and pepper. Stir, then leave to cool down completely.
3. Once cool, add the herbs, celery leaves and pomegranate seeds and mix in. Taste and adjust the seasoning to your liking; then serve.

Adapted from ["Plenty" by Yotam Ottolenghi](#) (\$35, Chronicle Books).