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# Home cooking, Moroccan-style

BY SHIVANI VORA  
Special to *The Wall Street Journal*  
Marrakech, Morocco

IT'S A SUNDAY afternoon in Marrakech, and my husband Mahir and I are sitting down to lunch. Our meal includes chicken tagine with preserved lemons, a large sea bass coated with herbs and stuffed with vermicelli, and a half-dozen salads, including carrots with parsley and pureed eggplant with tomatoes. We're not at a restaurant but in a home kitchen in the city's Laksour neighborhood, and we've spent the last four hours preparing this spread alongside Amal Kaf, a Moroccan housewife who cooks such meals for her family every day.

Our experience is just one example of the city's growing number of cooking classes for tourists, who are taken to vast indoor markets to buy fresh ingredients and then return to hotel or restaurant kitchens or to private homes to learn traditional Moroccan cooking methods. Marrakech now has about a dozen options for tourists who want to learn about local gastronomy, with choices running the gamut from an hour-long introduction to an intense week of classes. Most are group sessions held at riads—old homes and palaces converted into small hotels.

On a recent trip I was looking for an authentic and unusual experience. Through a travel agent, I arranged to learn about Moroccan food by spending a half-day cooking at a private house.

"Home cooking is at the heart of our culture," says Choumicha Acharki, the host of "Ch'hiwate Choumicha," a popular daily Moroccan cooking show. "Spending time with family and socializing with friends all happen over a home-cooked meal."

Such "everyday" food consists of assorted salads and tagines—dishes named after the earthenware vessels in which they're stewed—made with chicken, vegetables, seafood, lamb or beef. There are several dozen varieties of this most significant Moroccan dish, but chicken with olives and preserved lemons and lamb with prunes are the most common.

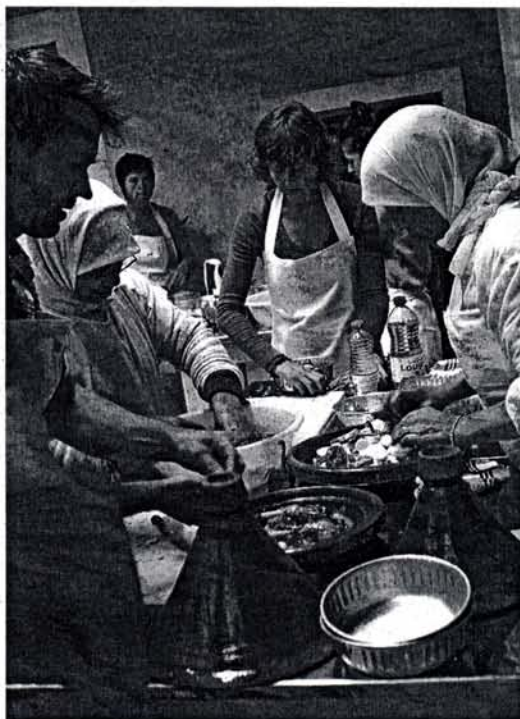
Ms. Kaf, 38 years old and married to Aziz, an import-business owner and tour guide, wants to teach us the two tagines she makes most frequently: a variation of the popular chicken version that's stuffed with rice; and a whole sea bass filled with noodles and on a bed of vegetables with a light gravy.

The day starts with a visit to the lively neighborhood market. Two rows of about two dozen stalls in a piazza-like square make up the space. The area is minuscule compared with the markets in the city center, but it has a more intimate, personal feel. The vendors and shoppers know each other well and ask after one another's families.

"In Morocco, it's common to shop everyday for our meals," Ms. Kaf says. "The concept of storing ingredients for multiple days doesn't exist." She selects a fish after a rapid exchange in Arabic with the fishmonger on which is the best quality sea bass. We then make our way to the poultry stand two doors down where she picks a live chicken that's quickly killed with a dunk in scalding water. Then we stop at her regular produce man's stall, where she stocks up on vegetables includ-



Clockwise from above, Amal Kaf prepares fish in her home kitchen; a class at Souk Cuisine; a chef at Dar Les Cigognes; a class at Dar Liqama; M'hancha pastry at Souk Cuisine. Top right, a Marrakech spice market.



ing four mini-eggplants, two bunches of carrots and several bunches of coriander and parsley.

When we return to the Kafs' spacious kitchen on the basement level of their three-story home and lineup what we'll be using, I'm surprised to learn that the majority of the dishes are built around the same few ingredients. Garlic and olive oil form the base of most recipes; cumin, paprika and *ras al hanout*, a blend of several dozen spices such as nutmeg and peppercorn, take center stage when it comes to spices. Every dish is also punctuated with a touch of saffron, while coriander and parsley are the dominant herbs. "These are blended together in various ways to create different flavors," says Ms. Acharki. "Ideally, Moroccan food should be subtly flavored and never too spicy."

We don't work from recipes but instead follow Ms. Kaf's verbal directions. She explains that Moroccan women don't rely on written recipes when cooking. "We grew up learning how to cook from our mothers and grandmothers so the concept of a formal recipe doesn't exist in most families," she says. "We cook by feel."

We spend the next three hours cooking. We start by washing and

chopping produce and herbs and boiling vegetables for the six salads: carrot, eggplant, zucchini, tomato, pepper and potato. The three of us, season them with coriander, parsley and healthy pours of olive oil. Next, we boil noodles and mix them with champagne mushrooms, the juice of one lemon and the staple seasonings and stuff the mixture in the

fish. Ms. Kaf sews the bass together with a needle and thread to make sure the filling doesn't spill out. She then seasons white rice with the herbs and spices and tucks it inside the cavity of the chicken.

It's a relaxed, informal setting. We sip several cups of sweet mint tea that Ms. Kaf prepared early that morning as we work and ask plenty of questions along the way. We also nibble on preserved lemons, which she makes every few months and keeps in a windowsill jar.

When it's time to cook the tagines, she opts for oversized aluminum trays over the heavy clay pot many Moroccans still use. "The trays cook the dishes in the same way but are easier to work with because they are lighter," she says.

With our lunch in the oven for an hour, her husband Aziz takes us on a five-minute drive to the local bakery to buy just-baked *kesra*, a flatbread served as an accompaniment to most meals. We also make a stop at a fruit stand to pick up tangerines for dessert.

Finally, it's time to enjoy the food. The freshness of the ingredients shines through in each bite, and though most of the recipes repeat items, the flavors fuse together uniquely in each dish.

We end our visit by swapping emails and phone numbers. Ms. Kaf insists that I write or call with questions anytime I'm making Moroccan food back in New York City.

A few days later, Mahir and I are walking at the edge of Djemaa el Fna, Marrakech's famously bustling main square. Many of the owners of the restaurants around the square try to lure us in with promises of eating stellar local cuisine. "Come in, come in," one shouts out to us. "We'll show you what real Moroccan food is all about."

We look at each other and smile. Thanks to Ms. Kaf, we already know.



## Marrakech really cooks

THOUGH IT'S POSSIBLE to sign up for one of Marrakech's many cooking classes when you arrive, it's better to book in advance, as they tend to fill up. Here, some of the city's schools.

### Heritage Tours

This travel agency sends clients to private houses in the city for a one-on-one cooking lesson with the person in charge of preparing meals—usually the housewife or, for wealthier families, a hired cook. Rates start at \$250 per person.

[www.heritagetoursonline.com](http://www.heritagetoursonline.com)

### Dar Les Cigognes

This romantic, 11-room riad holds informal, hour-long classes in its intimate kitchen. Preference is given to hotel guests, but classes are open to outsiders based on availability. Rates are 200 dirhams (about €18) per person.

[www.lescigognes.com/en](http://www.lescigognes.com/en)

### La Maison Arabe

Marrakech's best-known cooking school holds classes in a new kitchen at this 26-room riad in the city center. There are two four-hour workshops a day, seven days a week. Rates are 1,600 dirhams per person.

[www.lamaisonarabe.com](http://www.lamaisonarabe.com)

### Riad Merdoudi

Day-long classes are personalized based on interest: They could focus on making everyday food, but more advanced cooks can try more difficult dishes such as a pastilla, a sweet and savory layered pie made with eggs, pigeon and almonds. Rates are €110 per person.

[www.riadmerdoudi.com](http://www.riadmerdoudi.com)

### Dar Liqama

Operated by Rhode School of Cuisine in England, Dar Liqama holds week-long courses at an upscale villa 10 minutes from the city center. The group prepares a three-course meal at each session. Rates start at \$2,395 per person and include accommodation.

[www.rhodeschoolofcuisine.com](http://www.rhodeschoolofcuisine.com)

### Souk Cuisine

Opened in late 2005 by Gemma van de Burt, a Dutch woman who fell in love with Marrakech, this open-air cooking school holds daily six-hour classes, which can accommodate up to 12. The class starts with a shopping trip to Marrakech's central market for ingredients. Rates are 400 dirhams per person.

[www.soukcuisine.com](http://www.soukcuisine.com)

—Shivani Vora