

READABLE FEAST



# HOME TO BEIRUT ON BROOKLYN'S R TRAIN

**Salma Abdelnour**

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*Midtown to the Middle East in a matter of minutes*

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On an unseasonably warm afternoon this past spring, I was wandering around Washington Street on Manhattan's southwestern edge, near the Hudson River, trying to imagine what the area looked like in the early twentieth century, when it was known as Little Syria. Nearly every New Yorker can draw up a mental sketch of Chinatown or Little Italy (even as it gets ever littler and less Italian), but hardly anyone has heard of Little Syria. I hadn't paid any attention to it myself, until I returned to New York from Lebanon in the summer of 2011. I'd spent a year in Beirut, my attempt to go back to the city my family fled during the Lebanese Civil War in 1981, when I was

nine, and to reconnect with what I'd been missing about life in the Middle East. I'd longed for my childhood friends and relatives there, for the manic energy and aromatic street foods of Beirut, for the two-hour road trips to Damascus to shop in the souk and visit Syria's beautiful old churches and mosques. Now, after an eventful Beirut year, I was living in Brooklyn, a decision that seemed more tenable than a long-term commitment to that precarious corner of the world—but leaving Lebanon for the second time wasn't easy, and I'm still haunted by it. Sometimes, strolling on a sidewalk in Brooklyn or Manhattan, feeling a breeze blowing off the Hudson or East River, I

flash back to walks along the Mediterranean waterfront near my Beirut apartment.

There isn't much left to see of Little Syria, as I discovered that spring afternoon when I hopped the subway from my Brooklyn apartment to the lower tip of Manhattan to poke around the old Arab quarter. I'd heard that St. George's Syrian Catholic Church at 103 Washington Street, one of the main gathering places for the local Arab community in the early twentieth century, is still standing, so I went searching for it on that walk. I couldn't find any other trace of Little Syria, and I nearly missed the church. The modest five-story building is abandoned and boarded up, but its striking neo-Gothic façade is still visible, an anomaly peeking out from a sea of financial district construction sites.

In New York, it pains me not to smell freshly baked *man'ouche* flatbread smeared with olive oil and *zaatar* when I step out the door every morning. In the thumping Hamra neighborhood of Beirut, where I lived alone last year in the family apartment my parents have kept, *man'ouche* stands are everywhere; so are outdoor rotisseries spinning charbroiled chicken to scoop up with garlic sauce and warm pita or grilling juicy pink lamb to stuff into *shawarma* sandwiches. Every few steps, the scent of Arabic coffee wafts out a doorway. Now that I've left Beirut all over again, my yearning for Lebanon, for Lebanese food, for home, has become even more insistent. It's easier to crave home, and everything that smells and tastes like it, from a distance than it is to go back.

But craving is a form of suffering, too, and needs to be quelled from time to time. So every few weeks, I clear a morning or afternoon and set out looking for a familiar flavor, a glimpse, an exchange to tide me over.

Before my Beirut year, I'd never bothered much with exploring New York City's Arab enclaves. Maybe I figured the local facsimile could never come close to the real thing. But the truth is that I was lazy. I'd been holed up in Manhattan for more than a decade after college, working at magazines, going to downtown restaurants and bars with friends at night, rarely inclined to leave "the city" for a meal in Brooklyn, where the best Middle Eastern food in New York is now. I could cook my favorite dishes at home, after all, or be fed on a regular basis by an aunt who lives on the Upper West Side. But having rekindled my relationship with Beirut, and with childhood friends and family there, and wrestled for an entire year with whether I could stay on forever, I'm less blasé about the proxy Middle Eastern nooks in New York. I'm trying to have it both ways, like so many generations of exiles from all over the world before me. It's an obvious impulse, but I get it now, more viscerally, more hungrily than ever. I have a new appreciation for New York as a place where it's possible to transit from world to world, to play at belonging to one, or all, or none.

Digging around in old newspapers, trying to find out what had become of Little Syria, I came across an August 28, 1898, article in the *New York Times*, headlined "Foreign Types of

New York Life.” It was filled with pronouncements on the city’s ethnic communities—the “Chinamen,” the “sons of Caesar,” the “Hebrews”—and illustrated with black-and-white photos offering a kind of field guide to immigrants: “A Type of the Educated Chinaman, Occasionally Seen in Mott Street”; “A Russian Type Seen on the East Side”; “An Italian of the Better Class in Mulberry Street.” A photo of a smoky-eyed “Arabian Young Woman, A Type Frequently Seen in Lower Washington Street” represented Little Syria. The area at the time was populated with immigrants from Greater Syria, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire and included Lebanon and Palestine. Browsing through more archives, I learned that Little Syria and its businesses—textile and jewelry shops, rug merchants, restaurants, newspapers, food shops, and cafés—had prospered along Washington Street since the 1880s but, like Greater Syria itself, the neighborhood eventually unraveled. Construction of the Brooklyn-Battery tunnel in the 1940s helped destroy what Levantine village life the immigrants had been able to build near the banks of the Hudson, and the Arab colony never recovered.

Luckily for those immigrants—and for today’s fans of Middle Eastern food—New York City’s other coastlines beckoned. The opening of the Brooklyn Bridge in 1883 led to an ongoing boom in the borough across

the East River, and much of the Little Syria community ended up there, joined by throngs of newer Arab immigrants. (Most were Christians; immigration quotas back then largely excluded Muslims.) The émigrés had flocked to America to escape famine or religious persecution back home or had been seduced by American missionaries’ tales of a life of ease and plenty. They mostly settled around Atlantic Avenue, from its western tip near Brooklyn Heights and east toward Boerum Hill and, eventually, farther south to Bay Ridge. The Arab immigrants in New York comported themselves much as they did back home: they stuck together in family and religious clans, they drank copious amounts of coffee, and they made a living working in manufacturing, running dry-goods stores and restaurants, publishing newspapers, baking Arabic bread, or assembling confections made of phyllo dough, nuts, sugar, honey, and more sugar to sell in fragrant pastry shops. Many of them still do these things.

Over the years, the Arab-owned businesses on Atlantic Avenue and in Bay Ridge have thrived and multiplied. Now that I live in Brooklyn, they’re easier to get to. On days when I must have a man’ouche, or when I’m feeling like a foreign type of New York life, I get on the R train. After a half hour or so on the subway, I can find Beirut again, or a substitute that works

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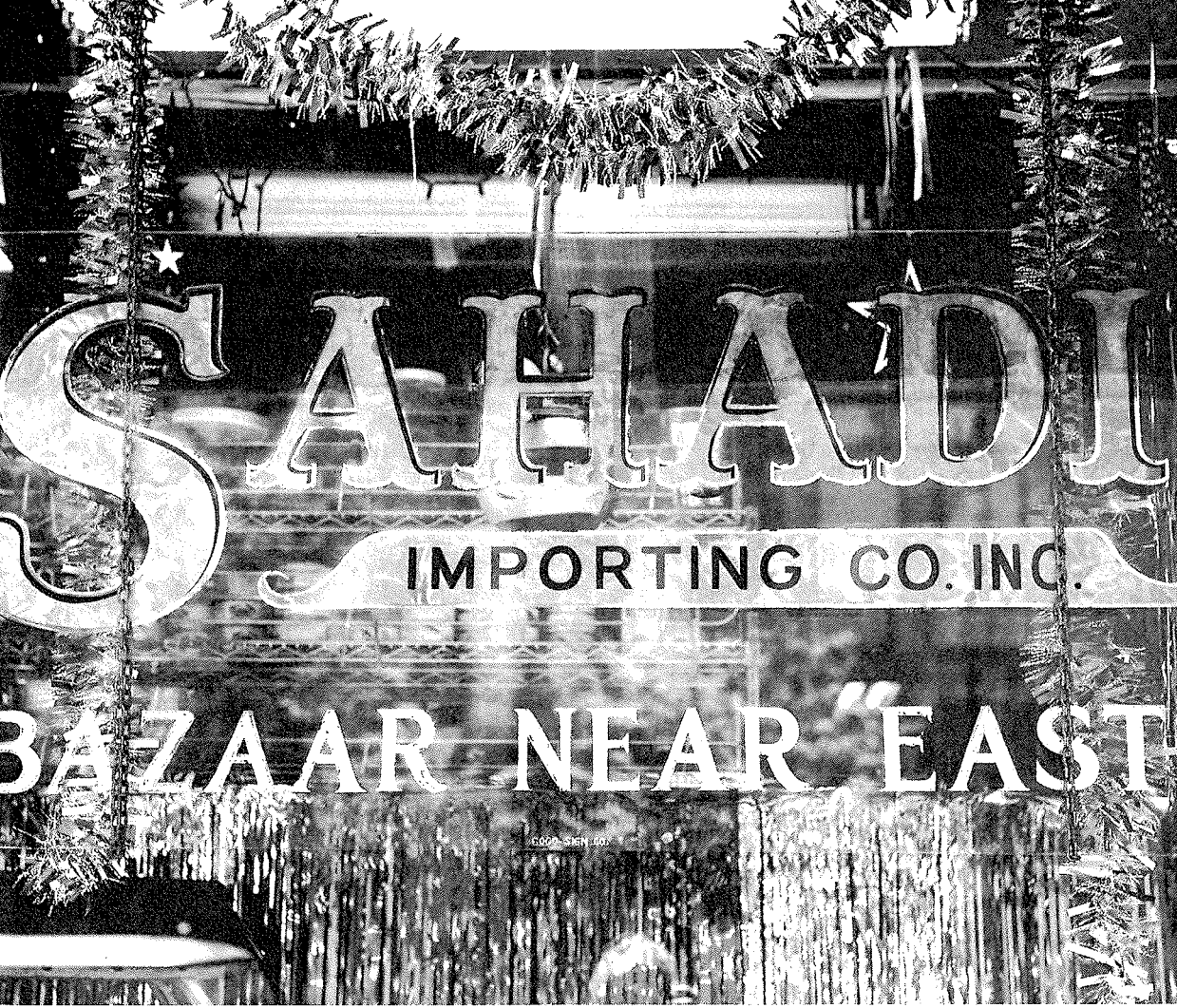


PHOTO: © JANE KRATOCHVIL

well enough. I walk into Middle Eastern grocery stores and chat up the owners and clerks in Arabic, acting more sociable than I ever do during shopping transactions anywhere else, my hermit tendencies evaporating for a minute. In Lebanon, nearly every store employee is pathologically chatty, and that usually makes me squirm, clam up, and shimmy out the door. But not in Brooklyn, where I welcome and even initiate idle chitchat. I'll even chat

with shop owners I don't like much. It's occasional, temporary, nonbinding, and it rounds out my daydream more convincingly than a brisk ringing up of pomegranate molasses or *labneh*, the creamy, tangy yogurt cheese I love. It soothes me to walk into a pastry shop like Bay Ridge's Sweet Arayssi for the first time to buy a cup of sweet milky pudding called *mhallabiya* and be greeted instantly with "Marhaba," "hello" in Arabic. The staff can just tell. In

other parts of the city or the planet, I might feel a twinge of discomfort at being sized up and tagged in a field guide; I may fantasize, in weaker moments, about blending in or disappearing. But in these fleeting Bay Ridge moments there's a quiet, easy acceptance. There's also, if I'm honest about it, something more impersonal than that: these fragments of conversation, these mostly anonymous faces, act as stand-ins for the world we all left behind, and sometimes the smallest transaction is enough to bring it back for a moment.

Some days, when I get off the subway at the Atlantic Avenue stop, I'll stroll a half hour west toward the Brooklyn Heights edge of Atlantic. On the first three-block stretch, I pass Middle Eastern grocery stores, their shelves stacked precariously with cans of chickpeas, bags of soft, Frisbee-sized Arabic bread, jars of sumac and zaatar, slender bottles of orange-blossom nectar; I pass shops selling hookahs, backgammon boards, and cheap nostalgic knickknacks like miniature cedar trees made of bronze. Sometimes, if I'm not in the mood to cook, I pick up cans of Lebanese-made baba ghanoush and hummus—yes, the canned stuff: it's tastier and more natural than it sounds, with minimal preservatives and handy to stock in the pantry for emergency cravings. I find them at two stores that sit

side by side. At one of the shops, the Lebanese owner always seems to be yelling at someone on the phone, but when I say, "Marhaba," he says, "Ahla w sahla" ("welcome"). I don't go there often enough that I need to introduce myself more elaborately than that, but saying marhaba and squeezing through the narrow, cluttered aisles of his shop gives me a quick Beirut fix.

Atlantic Avenue doesn't look at all like Beirut. The street is too wide, the traffic too orderly compared to Lebanon's chaotic streets. The architecture is not nearly eclectic enough, mostly squat buildings and town-

houses instead of Beirut's wild juxtapositions of decrepit civil-war ruins, gorgeous old stone houses draped in jasmine bushes, and luxury condo monstrosities. But the avenue does sound a lot like Beirut: Arabic spilling out of storefronts, car horns honking obnoxiously, a muezzin singing through a loudspeaker atop the Atlantic Avenue mosque. His lilting voice in my ear, I walk a dozen or so blocks to the Lebanese-owned Damascus Bakery for a man'ouche or some *fatayer*—finger-size triangular pies stuffed with sumac-spiced spinach and onions—to take home. A few storefronts away, I stop in at Sahadi's Specialty and Fine Foods, another Middle Eastern shop, where I pick up a pound or two of soft white *halloumi* cheese and a bag

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of roasted chickpeas called *'adame*, one of my all-time favorite snacks. The few Lebanese or Syrian restaurants along Atlantic these days, some of them once renowned, don't do it for me, their food tasting lackluster, the service phoned in. But it's still worth the walk for Sahadi's and Damascus Bakery.

In Bay Ridge, where the Arab community is much bigger and more diverse—with North Africans, Yemenis, Palestinians, and others—and the Middle Eastern restaurants and shops more plentiful, I tend to linger and stall. Sometimes I'll call ahead to put in an order to Hayat Caterers, whose Lebanese owner, Hayat Hayek, makes hors d'oeuvres for my aunt's parties in Manhattan and is one of the best cooks I've ever met. I'll pick up a couple dozen of her luscious vegetarian kibbeh balls, made of pumpkin and bulgur, which she stuffs with spinach, onions, almonds, and chickpeas, then fries until they're browned and crisp; and I'll grab a pint of her *muhammara*, an inordinately addictive red pepper, pomegranate, and walnut dip. While I'm in Bay Ridge I'll eat what amounts to four meals in one day, or I'll end up hauling home so much food I nearly throw my back out. I hobble onto the subway, the New York equivalent of the hunchbacked elderly women I used to see walking slowly, grocery baskets perched on their heads, in my grandparents' village in the Lebanese mountains.

The Bay Ridge streets of red and brown brick townhouses are much too uniform and low-key to resemble Beirut, but on a recent morning there I did witness one

very Beirut sight: a blue delivery truck driving *en arrière*, Franco-Lebanese for "in reverse," along a busy pedestrian sidewalk—just as cars in Beirut feel entitled to ride up on the sidewalk, going forward or backward, anytime of day or night. More often, parts of Bay Ridge smell and taste like Lebanon. One spot in particular, a tiny restaurant called Karam, nails it more than any other. A crowded counter and display case run along one side of its narrow space, a handful of tables is pushed up against the other wall, and that's it. I usually order that day's lunch special—maybe *koussa mehshi*, zucchini stuffed with rice and ground beef and drenched in a garlicky tomato sauce, or *kibbeh bi labniyeh*, meatballs made of ground beef and bulgur, stuffed with onions and pine nuts and floating in a mint-spiked yogurt sauce—and squeeze in a side order of *hindbeh*, sautéed dandelion greens topped with strips of sweet fried onion, or *arnabeet*, cauliflower fried until it's soft and caramelized. I like to chat with the Lebanese owner, Khaled Ibrahim, when he's not slammed with customers, but he often is: not just homesick Middle Easterners but all of Bay Ridge, loyal locals, be they Italian, Irish, Asian, or of other descent. His non-Arab customers, he tells me, are willing to try everything on his menu, not just the falafel or tabbouleh or hummus.

So many customers pack Karam during prime mealtimes that the small space can feel like picnicking on the interstate. For quieter and more languid meals, I'll go elsewhere. Another small but usually

calmer spot called Man'ouChe serves the namesake flatbread sliced up like a pizza—man'ouche is usually folded in half or rolled into a tight cylinder, in a wrapper that can barely contain the oozing olive oil and zaatar. But eating it this way, slice by slice, without having to hold the whole thing in my hand, I can linger at the table, read a book, and sit for as long as they'll have me.

New York City—all five boroughs, Brooklyn included—has little to offer in the way of classic Lebanese-style dining, where restaurant meals go on for hours and hours, plates fighting for space on the table, guests freely pouring the anise liqueur called arak, no one in a rush to get anywhere else. When my family lived in Beirut, we'd often eat this way on Sundays, relatives and friends crowding into a long table on the terrace of a restaurant overlooking the mountains or the Mediterranean, lunch stretching on into dinner-time. Sadly, the expats living in the States don't tend to work these kinds of endless, sprawling meals into their lives.

I did come close once, albeit by myself and by accident, on an early spring day at Bay Ridge's Le Sajj restaurant. I walked in at the tail end of lunchtime with a book in hand and grabbed a table near glass doors that open onto the sidewalk. The only other guests were two Italian American women from the neighborhood who were also there for the first time and who were also sitting near the breezy doorway. They seemed unhurried and game for a relaxed, Mediterranean-style lunch, and started off

with a bottle of white wine from the Lebanese winery Ksara. It was nearly 3:00 PM and I hadn't eaten yet, so I ordered a platter with skewers of the char-grilled lamb called *kafta*. I discovered Le Sajj's *kafta* has a little more spice than I'm used to, a wonderful added kick. I dipped thin, papery Arabic bread, freshly baked on the kitchen's drum-shaped *sajj* oven, into the house-special labneh mixed with crushed walnuts and garlic. The fresh-squeezed lemonade was flavored with orange-blossom nectar and mint leaves, the same way I drank it on hot summer days in Beirut.

As I lingered over my lunch, reading and taking in the spring air, the owner stopped by my table to say welcome and introduce himself. We chatted for a few minutes, and I learned he'd moved to New York from Beirut in the mid-1980s; he'd grown up there just a short walk from my family's place. Since business was slow that day, he asked me to try a couple of extra things his chef had just finished making and was hankering, in typical Lebanese style, to feed to someone: small open-faced pies topped with a spiced salty white cheese, and a pitch-perfect tabbouleh, bright green with fresh parsley, hit with only a small amount of bulgur—the way it's made in Lebanon—and seasoned with loads of lemon juice.

Two hours later, the two women at the next table were full and drunk. It was almost 5:00 PM, and they'd just finished lunch. I was feeling as stuffed and dazed as I used to get after those endless Beirut meals. Nothing to do but walk it off. I said good-

bye and continued along the mellow Bay Ridge streets, the sun starting to sink slowly.

As I headed toward the subway station, I passed a Lebanese pastry shop called Cedars that serves a Middle Eastern pistachio ice cream with an elastic texture. It's made with an orchid-root ingredient called *sahlab*, and I'd only ever had this style of ice cream in Lebanon and Turkey. I smiled at one of the

women who works there and walked in to say hi. I decided I was too full to have ice cream, but we talked about missing Beirut, its intimacy and noise, its restless streets, the crazy rhythms we can't shake. She said to me, in Arabic, "You move on." I said, "Ya reit [I wish] it were easier to live there." She answered me with a shrug: "If we could all stop saying ya reit." 🍷

### Muhammara Dip

Recipe adapted from the muhammara served by Bay Ridge's Hayat Caterers

- 4 red bell peppers, seeded and stemmed, coarsely chopped
- 1/4 cup plain breadcrumbs (homemade or store-bought)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon sugar
- 3 teaspoons pomegranate molasses
- 1/2 cup finely chopped walnuts
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- a squeeze of fresh lemon
- pita bread

Grind the red peppers in a food processor, in two or three batches, until you get a slightly chunky (and not too liquid) puree.

Add all remaining ingredients except for the pita bread to the pepper puree and grind in the food processor again. The result should have a consistency similar to baba ghanoush: creamy and thick, but with a slightly coarse texture. Mix in extra breadcrumbs if needed to thicken.

Transfer to a bowl and serve at room temperature with pita bread on the side. (It's best to toast the bread and break it into nacho-size chips, for easier scooping.)

Serves 4 as an appetizer.