



PROFILE

Teacher, Writer, Thinker, Chef

Trained at Chez Panisse and endorsed by Michael Pollan, Samin Nosrat is synonymous with the Bay Area food scene. Now, with the publication of her first cookbook, she's about to go national.

BY REBECCA FLINT MARX

SAMIN NOSRAT knows she's living in a bubble, and by that she doesn't mean North Berkeley. On a sodden afternoon in late February, she's sitting on the couch in her snug but homey apartment, biding time until the April 25 publication of her first cookbook, *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*. "Pretty much only friends have seen it," she says. "It's a nice imaginary world where the book is beloved, so I feel like my main job is to go to therapy and separate the book from my ego."

A chef, cooking teacher, and writer, Nosrat is a bit like the porridge bread at Tartine: beloved among the Bay Area's food-obsessed, but largely unknown elsewhere. That began to change last year when she appeared in an episode of *Cooked*, Michael Pollan's Netflix series. Pollan wrote the foreword to *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*, which also bears a cover blurb from Alice Waters, Nosrat's boss during the three years she worked at Chez Panisse. "Samin," the blurb proclaims, "is one of the great teachers I know."

Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat takes its title from a system Nosrat devised for understanding the basic principles of cooking when she started as an intern at Chez Panisse. Although the book contains plenty of recipes, its larger purpose is to help readers learn how to improvise. For this reason, there are no photographs (although there are illustrations from Wendy MacNaughton): A styled photo of a dish, Nosrat explains, is "disingenuous" to the message that you, the home cook, can make anything, even if you don't have the "right" ingredients.

"Her point is it's not how it looks, it's how it tastes, and the kinds of occasions it makes possible," Pollan says. "It's a very radical cookbook in a lot of ways—it would have been great without a single recipe, because you're learning these great principles."

In person, Nosrat is an exceedingly hospitable host, freely dispensing hugs and tea upon greeting. "You can have some," she says of the platter of Persian rice that rests

Samin Nosrat is a chef, cooking teacher, writer, and now the author of *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat*.

next to her refrigerator, its bottom upturned to reveal a shiny crust the color of burnt caramel. It's a product of the recipe testing Nosrat has been doing for a story she's writing about Persian food for the *New York Times*; the rice is her Iranian mother's recipe. Like many things in Nosrat's life, it's become both source and focal point of the nervous energy that fans around her like the dark curls that crown her head.

"Oh my God, this is so epic," she says when asked about the process of translating such a traditional, highly personal recipe for the average American cook. "It's like a PhD I could write. It's so complicated."

"Complicated" describes a lot about Nosrat's trajectory. The child of Iranian immigrants, she was born and raised in San Diego, where she grew up feeling neither entirely American nor entirely Iranian. Her mother, Nosrat recalls, "would even say to us, 'You go out into the world, that's America. You come home, this is Iran.'" Her career expectations for her daughter were more straightforward: to funnel straight-A report cards into a law, medical, or engineering degree. But thanks to a supportive high school teacher, Nosrat set her sights on writing and attended UC Berkeley as an English major. The Chez Panisse internship, which came about after Nosrat sent Waters a fan letter asking to work there, didn't change that goal. "I never meant to be a cook until I was a cook," she says. "But I've always wanted to be a writer."

In 2006, while she was a sous-chef at Berkeley's now-defunct Eccolo, Nosrat sent a second fateful fan letter, this time to Pollan. "I saw his name in the reservation book," Nosrat recalls. "So I wrote this note for the server to give to him, like, 'Can I audit your class?'" Pollan said yes; a few years later, he encouraged her to turn her four-principles idea into a book. "It was," he recalls, "more original than anything I'd seen."

For all of Nosrat's desire to be a writer, the three-year process it took to finish *Salt, Fat, Acid, Heat* gave her plenty of time to appreciate the relative psychological freedoms of cooking. "The idea that this is the first time I've ever done a book and I'm supposed to do a great job on it, it's such a contrast to the way I was taught to look at cooking," she says. "If you made something good, then good, tomorrow you have to make something else. Whereas this seemed so much more intense because it's been a part of me for so long."

"I'm so glad it's done," she says. "I feel like I did everything I could to make it as good as I could. Hopefully, people will like it." ■

