

# A TASTE OF THE MIDDLE EAST IN HAMPSTEAD GARDEN SUBURB

For most of us who pay any attention to food and to the wide selection of recipe books available, the name of Claudia Roden means Middle Eastern cookery.

Her *Book of Middle Eastern Food*, first published in 1968, has been acclaimed worldwide and has rightly earned an honoured place in thousands of kitchens. It is also, in a sense,



very much a 'Suburb' book — conceived and planned in the quiet peace of Hampstead Garden Suburb where Claudia has lived for 23 years.

Born in Cairo and educated in Paris, Claudia left Egypt after Suez and came to London. She studied at St. Martin's School of Art, married and had three children while pursuing the career of painter. But very shortly something she describes as a 'desire to recreate a lost world' overtook her: her family and friends, far away from their Middle Eastern roots, and now safely settled in a new environment, suffered pangs of nostalgia for the culture of their past. They sought a means of recreating it in their cookery since food had, traditionally, provided a focus of interest in their circles but no book existed to help those who now wished to prepare the dishes of their ancestors, and it occurred to Claudia that a collection of the recipes, half-remembered and still passed on from mother to daughter in many varying versions would be a very worthwhile task.

The cookery of the Egyptian Jewish community, to which her family had belonged, had been influenced by that of the neighbouring Middle Eastern countries following travel and trading links over the centuries. Thus Claudia's research resulted in a compendium of recipes which represented a record of a tradition and not just a national cuisine. For years she contacted likely people, filling her pockets with recipes scribbled down on scraps of paper, and she spent hours in the British Museum, leafing through ancient manuscripts in search of age-old recipes from the region.

The book was so successful that she was launched into her current career as cookery expert with a special interest in the historical and social background to recipes, methods and ingredients. In 1977 she published *Coffee*, a book described as 'the romantic and adventurous story of coffee and coffee drinking', with recipes for laced coffee drinks, coffee ices, desserts and cakes; and in 1981, *Picnic: The Complete Guide to Outdoor Food* which explores the different national styles of outdoor eating with, of course, a feast of different recipes.

Claudia is currently working on a new edition of *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (to include many more recipes, as well as a book on Jewish food which will deal with international Jewish cuisine from a social and historical

point of view, thereby telling the story of a people through what it eats.

The scholarly approach to food evident in all Claudia's writing has been partly responsible for a new attitude towards the subject which culminated in the establishment of an annual symposium at Oxford University on its cultural aspects!

At home Claudia enjoys cooking — in what can only be described as an Arab 'nouvelle cuisine' — and for about two years ran highly successful cookery classes from the Suburb. She encouraged students to analyse traditional methods and themselves suggest improvements and short cuts, thus acting on her firm belief that the sophisticated and delicately flavoured dishes of the Middle East need never be a closed book to anyone.

Her recipes bear this out, and also show her concern for time and energy saving. 'Egyptian Labaneya,'\* or spinach soup with yoghurt, can be made just as authentically with frozen spinach instead of fresh beet or spinach — with the added advantage of making it an all-year-round dish. It is a spinach soup with a subtle difference: a pinch of turmeric gives it a pale yellow hue and an Oriental flavour.

*½ lb frozen leaf spinach*  
*1 onion*  
*About 2 tbsp oil*  
*3-4 spring onions, finely chopped*  
*½ lb rice*  
*Salt and black pepper*  
*¼ pt yoghurt*  
*1 clove garlic, or more, crushed*  
*½ tsp turmeric*

Chop the onion and sauté in oil in a large saucepan until faintly coloured and soft. Add the defrosted spinach, stir and sauté gently. A few spring onions will add a delicate flavour to the soup. Add them to the saucepan together with the washed and drained rice. Cover with 2 pints water, season with salt and pepper, bring to the boil and simmer gently until the rice and spinach are cooked. This will take about 15 minutes, and the rice should not be allowed to get too soft or mushy. Add the turmeric to the spinach and rice while cooking.

In the meantime, beat the yoghurt with one or more crushed cloves of garlic. When the rice and spinach are ready, add the yoghurt mixture to the soup and beat well. Heat but do not let the soup boil again, or it will curdle. EE

\* Taken from *A Book of Middle Eastern Food*, Penguin, p. 133.

## LIKE A DINNER FOR TWO AT THE SAVOY FOR £10?

Then go along to the Family Holiday Association Hill Close fete on May 12th (2 p.m.) and select an envelope on the 'Dinner for Two' stall.

Some sixty envelopes all containing dinner for two vouchers for at least £10 and many such as the Savoy for very much more will be on

sale. The F.H.A. fete with its numerous stalls of first class goods, its side shows and Punch & Judy and magic for the kids has become a regular outing for Suburb residents.

Offers of food and goods for sale (not jumble) will be welcome (tel 455-1777).

PKL

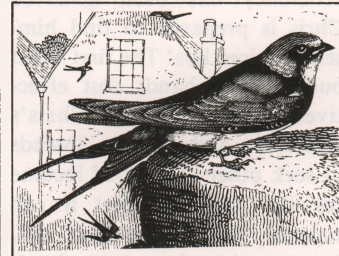
## ONE SWALLOW...

Gilbert White was a great admirer of the swallow tribe, the hirundines as he enjoyed calling them. He carefully noted the date of their first arrival each year, generally on or about the 13th April in Selbourne. The average date nowadays is a week earlier in London. White identified many virtues in the swallow: industry, affection, sagacity, alertness, boldness, delicacy and, of course, punctuality.

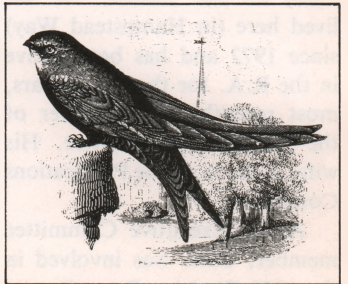
Our swallows, martins and swifts winter in Africa, south of The Sahara, and it has been estimated that more than 200 million swallows alone set out across the desert to breed in Europe and Asia each year. This migration is accomplished in short flights, feeding and resting where possible though no food or rest is available over the 1500 kilometres of the Sahara.



The swift's migration is very different being merely an extension of the great continuous flight between one breeding season and the next. This bird is more commonly seen over the Suburb than the swallow and its scream is a familiar summer sound above the lazy murmur of the North Circular.



I do not think that any of these birds breed in this area; a swallow nested in a deer shed at Golders Hill Park in 1952, and there are many fairly recent records of swifts breeding in Hampstead and Highgate. It would be very interesting to hear of any current 'suburban hirundine nidification' as old G.W. would have put it. CG



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