Veteran cookbook author Paula Wolfert is one of those gurus whose passion can either daunt or inspire a home cook. Her domain is Mediterranean cooking, and in that vast culinary territory it would be hard to find a region she has not explored. Wolfert has made a special art of writing classic, authoritative books on her subject. In this case, the country is Morocco. She wrote her first book 38 years ago and is now returning to this cuisine decades later to fashion a volume with the benefit of wisdom, hindsight, and insight.

When Wolfert first wrote about Morocco, phyllo dough was still a fussy novelty and you couldn’t buy the earthenware dish called a tagine (if you even knew about it). As you’ll learn in “The Food of Morocco,” Wolfert is opinionated about tagines, as she is about most factors contributing to deliciousness, and does not hesitate to insist that you buy one. But I made these dishes without a tagine (and, indeed, without electricity, for the five days after the freakish Halloween snowstorm), and I can tell you they were toweringly delectable anyway. But not always easy.

Beef and cauliflower tagine will require you to set aside three hours, which is lengthy for
a stew, but fairly normal for short ribs. The flavor of a stew, however, is negligible compared to this dish, with its meaty richness sharply addressed with ginger and paprika and commingled with the deep earthiness of roasted cauliflower.

You might not realize it’s going to be a soup - at least I didn’t - but that’s a happy surprise when you make the lamb, tomato, cinnamon, and steamed pasta chorba. A less happy surprise is finding out that orzo won’t steam to uniform tenderness in the 10 minutes suggested. Not in 20 minutes either. But if you give in and just toss the pasta in the simmering soup, you have rustic, hearty goodness.

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The pastry-wrapped ground-meat dish bastilas is one of Morocco’s more famous feast foods. In a fit of temporary insanity I decided to make the pastry for Wolfert’s chicken bastila myself. “Warqa,” as it is called, is a stronger, more flavorful version of phyllo dough, and if you have 24 hours, a paint brush, a nonstick pan, and a certain level of culinary adventurism, you can make it too. After poring over the two pages of diagrams many times, I still don’t understand how to properly assemble a bastila, but I certainly know how to eat one. With its contrasting layers of sugared cinnamon and ground almonds and saffron-gilded meat, this is fancy food that’s worth the effort.

A bit easier is the chicken tagine with prunes and almonds, an immensely satisfying contrast of textures with its crunchy fried nuts and yielding fruit. If you haven’t got the earthenware vessel, it’ll work well in an enameled cast-iron dish over very low heat. And if you have a high-octane range, as I do, improvise a diffuser or flame-tamer by crumpling up rings of aluminum foil into a sort of silver funnel cake.
Not every last recipe demands such ingenuity or effort. Swift satisfaction comes from sauteed shrimp “pil pil,” warmly but mildly spiced and thick with chopped and simmered tomato. A “marak” (or all-vegetable tagine) of Swiss chard features a surprisingly happy marriage of cilantro and paprika. A scattering of rice steams in the liquid released by the chard and soaks up its soggy excesses, and the upshot is a gentle, ample dish.

I don’t advise you to turn to “The Food of Morocco” for a quick weeknight supper. Even the swiftest dishes require a certain amount of commitment: a one-hour dry rub, mortar-and-pestle grinding, a half-hour of fine chopping or deveining. Yet I found that every layer of complication corresponded to greater depth of flavor, and I finished testing a slightly better and more patient cook.

Buy the book for your most kitcheny friends, particularly if they know the country she is writing about. No one knows or understands its cuisine better than Wolfert.

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