

‘Balaboosta’ needs a little help in the kitchen

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I have rarely wanted a cookbook to succeed as much as I wanted “Balaboosta: Bold Mediterranean Recipes to Feed the People You Love,” the new cookbook from Israeli-born Einat Admony (of Taim, Balaboosta, and Bar Bolonat restaurants in New York), to succeed. Charming designed, full of verve and spunky anecdotes, bursting with flavor, it seemed like it might well be a contender for the year’s top 10. And while the first couple recipes I tried were a bit shaky on the measurements, their vivid spirit was enough to spur me on.

“Balaboosta” is Yiddish for a kind of super-housewife, the grandmotherly woman who keeps a tidy home, cooks all the time, has plenty to eat, wants to feed you. In modern terms, this might be the kind of person who has two kids under 7, runs three restaurants, and entertains at home three times a week. In other words, Admony herself. Amid such hubbub, it would be understandable if something were to slip; and indeed, “Balaboosta” turns out to be full of promise, but inadequately tested.

A family recipe for rice stew nearly reduced me to tears when I tried to make the “pomegranate confiture” that is its signature flavor: The number of pomegranates required is wrong, and the final yield was off. So by the time I’d reduced it down to the stated 2 cups, I had a pomegranate caramel, which cooled into a spoon-bending cement, nearly destroying my pan. Over three days I soaked the mess off, but the rice stew (which cooked to mush in 40, not 60, minutes) was a rather grim reward.

Chicken with pomegranate and walnuts (a variant on the classic Persian fesenjan) calls again for the dreaded confiture; since mine had already bombed I used the suggested substitute of molasses, juice, and honey. It’s an easy weeknight dish, but even at a bare simmer comes out more blackened and sticky-sweet than I prefer.

Red velvet gnocchi are made from beet-colored semolina dough, cheery to look at and pliable on the tongue. To make the stiff dough workable, I had to add extra liquid and reduce the flour. Oven-roasted Brussels sprouts seem like a winner, but there are puzzles here too. The recipe calls for halves while the picture clearly shows quarters. Meanwhile, an overdose of honey pools and sticks in the pan.

When Admony gets the balance of sweet and sour right, it’s unbeatable. Lamb chops with Persian lime sauce are



KATHERINE NEEDLES

Einat Admony’s recipes too often fail to measure up.

brilliant, the gentle acid of dried limes a perfect foil for crisp lamb fat. But 4 cups of chicken stock will give you a thin, runny gruel rather than the thick, drapey, textured sauce like the one in the photo. Turkey meatballs with okra fizz with vibrant notes along the same sweet-and-sour spectrum. They're terrific, as long as you use 3 teaspoons of kosher salt, rather than the called-for 3 tablespoons.

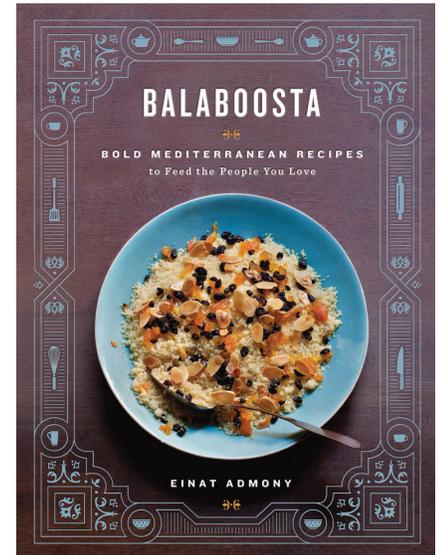
Vegetable sides offer one hit after another. Crispy kale, massaged with tahini and festooned with nigella and sesame seeds, has more character than most kale chips. Moroccan carrots put boring old carrot coins to shame. Here their carrot sweetness is bolstered with sauteed tomato paste and garlic, and cut with cumin and vinegar.

The secret behind a side of green beans is tons of garlic and anchovy, enough to announce the dish from across a room, yet deep, mellow, and savory in the mouth. A cabbage salad is really a slaw, crunchy with crumbled Terra chips, almonds, and scallions, and it goes with just about anything. And how can you go wrong with sweet potato wedges this time of year? Admony's wear a surprisingly harmonious blended coat of honey, rosemary, and mustard seeds.

Rosewater, orange blossom water, and pistachios are the classic combination behind sweet kanafeh, which Admony describes as "Middle Eastern cheesecake." If you can get shredded phyllo dough (called kataif) it's an easy and luscious dessert to pull off. Don't expect the kataif to turn golden as predicted without more time or a higher temperature.

On balance, the finds in "Balaboosta" are good enough to make up for the book's erratic performance. What I'd really like to see would be comprehensive testing for every recipe in the book, and an online list of errata and corrections incorporated in the next printing. In the current publishing climate, such support may not be possible. But beautiful books with this much potential deserve better.

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BALABOOSTA: Bold Mediterranean Recipes to Feed the People You Love

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