



KEEPERS OF THE FLAME

AROUND THE WORLD, CHEFS TURN TO MONASTERIES, TEMPLES,
AND MOSQUES FOR LESSONS IN HOW TO COOK AND HOW TO LIVE.

BY JODY EDDY

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Preparing yak butter tea for the morning prayer ceremony at the Thikse monastery in Ladakh, India.

OPPOSITE: Novice monks at the Thikse monastery bringing tsamba (roasted barley) to the morning puja, or prayer ceremony, where it will be mixed with yak butter tea.



FATHER JAD MEETS ME AT A PASTRY SHOP IN BYBLOS,

a storied city on the Lebanese Mediterranean coast that's one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the world. The ancient Greeks imported papyrus through the region, inspiring the word *Bible*, a fact the enthusiastic Maronite Catholic monk proudly shares with me while we wait for our order of maamoul, tiny shortbread cookies stuffed with walnuts and dates. After our pastries, we hop into his station wagon to ascend the Lebanon Mountains through an ancient cedar forest, from which King Solomon purportedly sourced the trees for his temple. As we round a hairpin turn cutting through a fig tree orchard, I catch my first glimpse of the Monastery of Saint Anthony Abbot of Qozhaya, an ancient stone structure clinging to the side of a cliff.

The moment we step into the thousand-year-old greeting room, a monk named Father Fadi greets us with a cooling glass of rose water flavored with fresh mint leaves. "Roses are a symbol of resiliency in Lebanon. May you carry this resiliency with you wherever you go," he says with a warm smile. We tour the sprawling grounds of the monastery, passing dented copper stills used to distill arak, the anise-flavored Levantine spirit.

We gather for a meze-style meal at a banquet table that stretches from one end of the monastery's vaulted stone dining hall to the other. There's labneh bi toum, tangy whipped yogurt drizzled with olive oil and topped with sumac; hummus; baba ghanoush; triangles of kibbeh; fatayers, flaky dumplings stuffed with spinach and onions; and plates piled high with charred pita bread. Along the table, the light glances off translucent glass *ibriks*, drinking vessels similar to the Spanish *porrones*, all filled with white wine produced at the monastery. Just after everyone settles into their chairs, an elderly monk with a flowing silver beard emerges in the doorway. The other monks stand to greet him, bowing their heads in respect. Father Jad tells me, "This is Father Youhanna. He lived in isolation in a hermitage in the mountains for over 20 years. He returned to the communal life only a few months ago."

"Why did you decide to rejoin your community?" I ask Father Youhanna.

Father Jad translates, and after several moments of closed-eye contemplation, Father Youhanna responds, "Because I missed sharing meals with my friends."

Monasteries throughout the world have long safeguarded the world's culinary traditions, not only ensuring that a region's gastronomic heritage endures, but also, in many instances, defining it and facilitating its evolution. Religious leaders forged some of the earliest trade routes, carrying with them as they traveled from monastery to monastery seeds, ingredients, tools, and kitchen wisdom gleaned over centuries. I have spent the past three years documenting those traditions for my forthcoming cookbook, *The Elysian Kitchen*. In the course of that research, I've learned that, as much as monastic cooking is steeped in history, it is much more than a relic of the past. Monks and nuns relish their roles as modern cooks, farmers, and food and beverage producers. The making and sharing of food plays a central role in the communal life of these spiritual centers, and the men and women who work and live in them take immense pride in paying homage to their forebears even as they move forward into a dynamic future.

I've also learned that their influence doesn't stop at the front gates of their monasteries; these cooks have also influenced some of the world's most prominent chefs, many of whom have spent time cooking in monasteries, mosques, and synagogues. Chef Ana Sortun, of the acclaimed restaurants Oleana, Sofra, and Sarma in and around Cambridge, Massachusetts, also found her way to Qozhaya, where she was struck by the beauty of the monks' meze-style meals, just as I was. "There was a beautiful delicacy, finesse, and subtlety to the food," she reflects. At her restaurants, she prepares Kibbeh Bil Sanieh (recipe p. 83), a decadent, special-occasion vegetarian dish that she learned from the monks.

At the 60-year-old Benedictine monastery Keur Moussa, located 30 miles east of the Senegalese capital of Dakar, chef Pierre Thiam found himself so inspired by the work of the monks that he nearly changed his career trajectory. "I've been visiting that monastery for quite some time, and I even considered becoming a monk myself," he says from his home in New York City. "The monks at Keur Moussa incorporate the principles of *teranga* into everything they do from a culinary and hospitality perspective. *Teranga* is the most important value in Senegal. It translates as 'hospitality' in the indigenous Wolof language. Its emphasis is on the way you treat others and how you should always offer the best of what you have." The philosophy of *teranga* has become so important to Thiam that it's the namesake of his West African fast-casual restaurant in Harlem.

POULET MAFÉ is a thick peanut sauce with chicken, root vegetables, and cabbage served over rice, fonio, or millet couscous (recipe p. 84). At Keur Moussa in Senegal, monks load it up with root vegetables grown at the monastery. For chef Pierre Thiam, poulet mafé is the ultimate comfort food. His advice: "Be patient when cooking mafé. Let the stew simmer slowly until the oil rises to the surface."



Poulet Mafé, a rich, comforting peanut-and-chicken stew from the Keur Moussa monastery in Senegal (recipe p. 84)



Split chickpeas and bulgur stand in for meat in this Kibbeh Bil Sanieh (recipe p. 83).

KIBBEH BIL SANIEH, a flat, spiced bulgur-based main course, is a decadent dish and is only enjoyed by the monks at the Monastery of Saint Anthony Abbot of Qozhaya on special occasions. This version is one of their favorites. It's one of Ana Sortun's favorites, too. She offers this advice: "The most important part is to knead the bulgur in the same fashion as though it were meat, until it holds together and becomes creamy—usually a minute, sometimes a bit more. You can use your hands or a KitchenAid with a paddle attachment. If you don't knead the bulgur enough, it will stay crumbly." See p. 83 for the recipe.



The Monastery of Saint Anthony Abbot of Qozhaya in Lebanon

The Japanese chef Shinobu Namae, of the two-Michelin-starred Tokyo restaurant L'Effervescence, regularly visits the 13th-century Soto Zen Buddhist monastery Eihei-ji, situated on a mountaintop in the Fukui prefecture in west-central Japan. He says, "I learned from the monastery's master chef, or *tenzo*, Mr. Miyoshi, how to make people feel more peaceful through food." Many of the world's fine-dining restaurants—including his, he notes—offer an experience that amounts to overfeeding. From the monks, he learned a more restrained approach, one where guests are "eating just enough and making sure the food is nutritionally balanced, in order to help the mind and body feel more peaceful, positive, and less aggressive." One recipe at L'Effervescence that reflects the simplicity, balance, and less-is-more philosophy that he learned about at Eihei-ji is his signature turnip course, which has been on the menu since opening day. An organic turnip is gently cooked for four hours, and the only thing that ever changes is the way its flavor shifts from season to season. Its humble, understated nature embodies the principles that the chef admires so much.

"It's like a mirage looming in the landscape." That's how chef Cortney Burns describes the 12-story Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Thikse, located at a dizzying altitude of 11,800 feet. It was established in the 15th century in the Indian Himalayan region of Ladakh, where the winters are so cold that water freezes in the pipes and the monks rely on dishes like *khichdi*, a comforting, fortifying spiced rice and mung bean dish (recipe p. 84), to survive the season.

For Burns, who spent three and a half weeks in Ladakh at Thikse, the most lasting lessons have been what the monks there shared with her about their broader attitudes toward the preparing and sharing of food. "There's a reverence for sharing time and space," she says, "and there were always stories surrounding the dishes, ingredients, flavors, and techniques. The experience really made me start to think about the importance of dining rituals and about how food becomes more meaningful when you weave a narrative into your recipes. I incorporate all of the lessons I learned there into the way I prepare and serve food to this day."



Yuzu and rice wine vinegar season and soften the daikon and carrot in Namasu (recipe at right).

NAMASU, delicately sliced vegetables that are pickled with rice vinegar, is served with virtually every meal at the Eiheiji monastery in Japan (pictured at right), where the monks partake in a dining ritual that is both ceremonial and meditative. The original recipe can be traced back to China, where it typically contained either meat or fish. This meatless version of the dish reflects the principles of *shojin ryori*, the vegetarian cuisine adhered to by Buddhist monks in Japan.



Namasu

ACTIVE 25 MIN; TOTAL 1 HR
SERVES 4 TO 6

Yuzu juice brings mildly floral, sweet acidity that lightens the namasu, a traditional Japanese pickle, without being overly tart.

- 1 (14- to 16-inch-long) daikon, cut into $\frac{1}{8}$ - x $\frac{1}{8}$ - x 2-inch strips (about 4 cups)
- 2 large carrots, cut into $\frac{1}{8}$ - x $\frac{1}{8}$ - x 2-inch strips (about 2 cups)
- 2 tsp. kosher salt
- 3 Tbsp. rice vinegar
- 1 Tbsp. granulated sugar
- 1 Tbsp. bottled yuzu juice
- 1 Tbsp. water
- Toasted sesame seeds (optional)

1. Toss together daikon and carrots in a colander set over a large bowl. Sprinkle salt over daikon mixture; gently toss to coat. Let stand at room temperature until mixture begins to soften, about 25 minutes.
 2. Meanwhile, whisk together vinegar, sugar, yuzu juice, and 1 tablespoon water in a medium bowl until sugar is dissolved.
 3. Using your hands, gently squeeze liquid from daikon mixture, being careful not to disfigure the daikon and carrots. Add to vinegar mixture; toss to coat. Let stand 15 minutes.
 4. Divide mixture evenly among bowls; garnish with toasted sesame seeds, if desired. Serve at room temperature or chilled. —SHINOBU NAMAÉ
- MAKE AHEAD** Namasu may be stored in an airtight container in refrigerator up to 3 days.
- NOTE** Find bottled yuzu juice at Asian grocery stores or online.

Kibbeh Bil Sanieh

PHOTO P. 80

ACTIVE 50 MIN; TOTAL 2 HR 40 MIN, PLUS 12 HR SOAKING; SERVES 6 TO 8

Creamy chickpeas and bulgur add nutty flavor to this meatless, pizza-shaped kibbeh flecked with parsley and lemon zest.

- 1 cup dried split chickpeas (chana dal)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup olive oil, divided
- $1\frac{2}{3}$ cups uncooked fine bulgur
- 1 small yellow onion, chopped
- 3 medium garlic cloves, smashed
- 2 tsp. grated lemon zest
- 2 tsp. ground allspice
- 2 tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. black pepper
- $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. cayenne pepper
- 1 cup finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 Tbsp. plus $1\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. kosher salt

1. Place chickpeas in a colander; rinse under cold water, stirring chickpeas with your fingers, until water runs clear, about 2 minutes. Transfer chickpeas to a large bowl or container; add water to cover by 4 inches. Cover and refrigerate 12 hours. Drain and set aside.
2. Pour 3 tablespoons oil into a 12-inch round cake pan; swirl and tilt pan to coat in oil. Set aside.
3. Line a colander with a double layer of cheesecloth or a clean cotton or linen kitchen towel. Add bulgur; rinse under cold water, stirring bulgur with your fingers, until it begins to soften slightly, about 4 minutes. Transfer bulgur to a large bowl; add lukewarm water to cover by 2 inches. Let stand at room temperature 30 minutes.

4. Preheat oven to 350°F. Line colander with a fresh double layer of cheesecloth. Add bulgur and soaking water; drain. Gather cheesecloth up around bulgur; twist and squeeze to wring out water.

5. Combine onion, garlic, lemon zest, allspice, cumin, black pepper, cayenne pepper, and drained bulgur in a food processor. Pulse until bulgur is tinted brown and mixture is thoroughly combined, about 10 pulses, stopping to scrape down sides as needed. Transfer mixture to a large bowl. Add parsley, salt, and drained chickpeas; stir until thoroughly combined.

6. Transfer mixture to a clean work surface. Using both hands, fold mixture over itself, firmly pressing down while mashing mixture together with your hands, until mixture is the consistency of a sticky dough, 7 to 9 minutes. (The mixture should come together in a single tacky mass; no need to be gentle here.)

7. Place kibbeh in prepared cake pan; press firmly into pan to create a compact, even layer. Drizzle with $\frac{1}{2}$ cup oil. Using a sharp paring knife, slice kibbeh into 18 wedges in pan. Working from outer edge toward center of kibbeh, cut 2 ($\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-deep) diagonal slits spaced 1 inch apart into each wedge. Brush remaining 1 tablespoon oil over kibbeh.

8. Bake in preheated oven until outer edges of kibbeh are brown and mixture is set, 55 minutes to 1 hour and 10 minutes. Let cool 10 minutes. —ANA SORTUN

MAKE AHEAD Kibbeh may be refrigerated in an airtight container up to 2 days.

WINE Light-bodied, red-fruited Gamay: 2018 Louis Jadot Beaujolais-Villages

NOTE Find bulgur and split chickpeas at Middle Eastern and Indian grocery stores.

Poulet Mafé

PHOTO P. 79

ACTIVE 50 MIN; TOTAL 2 HR, PLUS 3 HR
MARINATION; SERVES 4 TO 6

Creamy peanut butter adds body and nuttiness to this savory chicken dish, balancing the aromatic ginger, garlic, and tomato paste. The fish sauce brings a subtle umami that adds complexity to the stew.

- 3 medium garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 Tbsp. peeled and finely chopped fresh ginger
- Pinch of kosher salt, plus more to taste
- Pinch of black pepper
- 1 lb. bone-in chicken thighs, skin removed
- 1 lb. chicken drumsticks, skin removed
- 3 Tbsp. vegetable oil
- 1 small yellow onion, chopped
- 1 (6-oz.) can tomato paste
- ¼ cup fish sauce (such as Red Boat)
- 7 cups water
- 1 cup unsweetened creamy peanut butter (such as Smucker's Natural Creamy Peanut Butter), well stirred
- 8 oz. green cabbage, cored and cut into 2-inch wedges
- 3 medium carrots, cut into 2-inch-long pieces
- 2 medium Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 1½-inch pieces
- 1 medium-size sweet potato, peeled and cut into 1½-inch pieces
- Sliced fresh Scotch bonnet chiles, to taste (optional)
- Cooked white rice, for serving

1. Stir together garlic, ginger, salt, and black pepper in a large bowl. Add chicken; press garlic mixture into chicken pieces. Cover with plastic wrap; refrigerate at least 3 hours or up to 12 hours.

2. Heat oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high until oil shimmers. Add onion; cook, stirring often, until onion starts to become translucent, about 3 minutes. Stir in tomato paste and fish sauce. Cook, stirring constantly, until combined and tomato paste caramelizes and turns a few shades darker, 6 to 8 minutes. Add 7 cups water, scraping up any browned bits from bottom of Dutch oven. Add chicken and any remaining garlic mixture in bowl to Dutch oven. Bring to a boil over high. Reduce heat to medium-low.

3. Place peanut butter in a medium-size heatproof bowl; stir in ½ cups liquid from Dutch oven, ¼ cup at a time, until peanut butter is thinned out and mixture is creamy. Add to mixture in Dutch oven;

bring to a vigorous simmer over medium-low. Simmer, undisturbed, 20 minutes.

4. Stir cabbage and carrots into mixture in Dutch oven; return to a vigorous simmer over medium-low. Simmer, undisturbed, 10 minutes.

5. Stir potato and sweet potato pieces into mixture in Dutch oven; return to a vigorous simmer over medium-low. Simmer, undisturbed, until chicken and vegetables are tender and oil has separated from thickened sauce, 30 to 35 minutes. Remove from heat; stir in Scotch bonnet chiles, if using, and season with salt to taste. Serve over rice. —PIERRE THIAM

MAKE AHEAD Poulet mafé can be made up to 3 days ahead and stored in an airtight container in refrigerator. Reheat gently before serving.

WINE Generous, spicy red: 2017 Bila-Haut Côtes du Roussillon Rouge

Khichdi

ACTIVE 30 MIN; TOTAL 40 MIN
SERVES 6 TO 8

A warming spice mixture including fenugreek, turmeric, cumin, and ginger perfumes this soothing, comforting rice-and-lentil porridge.

- 1¼ cups dried split yellow mung beans (such as Pride of India)
- ¾ cup uncooked white basmati rice
- ½ cinnamon stick (about 1½ inch)
- 6 whole cloves
- 1½ tsp. ground cumin
- 1 tsp. ground coriander
- 1 tsp. brown mustard seeds
- 1 tsp. ground turmeric
- ½ tsp. fennel seeds
- ½ tsp. ground fenugreek seeds

Generous pinch of cayenne pepper

- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 2 tsp. finely chopped peeled fresh ginger
- 6½ cups water
- 2 fresh bay leaves
- Pinch of kosher salt, plus more to taste
- Whole-milk yogurt and fresh cilantro leaves, for serving

1. Place mung beans and rice in a fine wire-mesh strainer; rinse under cold water, stirring with your hands, until water runs clear, about 3 minutes.

2. Place cinnamon stick, whole cloves, cumin, coriander, mustard seeds, turmeric, fennel seeds, fenugreek, and cayenne in a large heavy-bottomed pot or a medium Dutch oven. Heat over medium, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until very fragrant, about 3 minutes. Add garlic and ginger; cook, stirring constantly, 1 minute. Add mung bean mixture; stir to coat in spices. Add 6½ cups water, bay leaves, and salt.

3. Bring mixture to a vigorous simmer over medium-high, stirring occasionally. Cover and reduce heat to low; simmer, stirring and running spoon along bottom of pot occasionally, until mung bean mixture is tender but rice still holds its shape, 12 to 15 minutes. (Mixture will be slightly runny, but it will thicken as it sits.) Remove from heat. Remove and discard cinnamon, whole cloves, and bay leaves. Gently stir in salt to taste. Divide evenly among bowls; dollop with yogurt, and sprinkle with cilantro. —CORTNEY BURNS

MAKE AHEAD Khichdi can be made up to 1 day ahead.

NOTE Find split yellow mung beans at Indian grocery stores or online.

KHICHDI is a fortifying, easily digestible dish made from mung beans, rice, and a wide variety of spices. It reflects the Thikse monks' belief that food should be consumed not only to quell hunger but also to contribute to optimal health. One of the ways in which the monks increase the nutritional value of their ingredients is to sprout their legumes before cooking them, which helps release more nutrients that are then available for absorption into the body.

