


*The fruits of the  
olive harvest at the  
author's ancestral  
home in the village of  
Ain el Deib, Lebanon.*





**I**n the early 1900s, my paternal grandfather, Maroun Kassab, planted close to 200 olive saplings in the southern Lebanese village of Ain el Delb, just east of the biblical city of Sidon. His home sat among the young trees, and every day he would wake up before dawn and carry buckets of water from his well, tending to them one by one. This backbreaking work lasted years before the roots were strong enough to sustain the plants. From then on, the trees depended on Baal, the ancient deity of fertility, rain, and dew once worshipped by the region's indigenous inhabitants, the Canaanites. But although the trees were watered by the heavens, Jiddi, or Grandfather, still pampered them, trimming off the dead wood, pulling out weeds, and nurturing the soil.

Jiddi taught my father, his eldest son, how to care for the trees as lovingly as if they were family. During the October harvests, the two picked olives together. They referred to the groves as the *rizzi*, a Lebanese word that roughly translates as "blessing." Jiddi passed away before

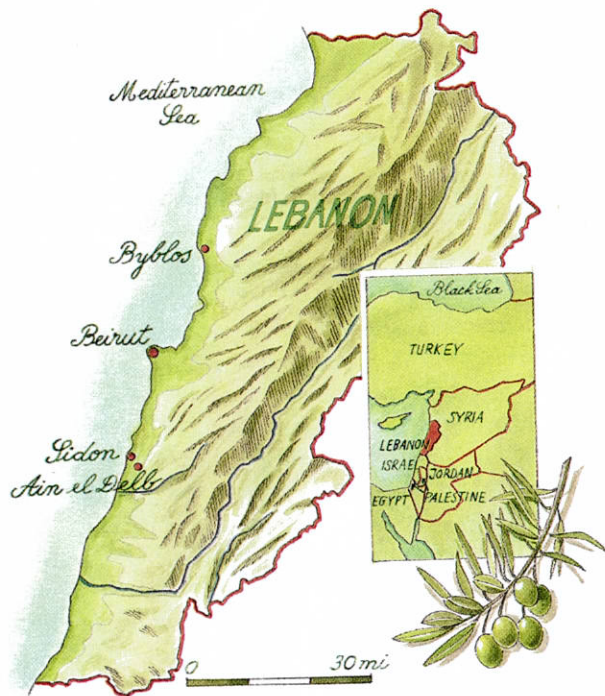


# HOME FOR THE HARVEST

*Lebanon* A NATIVE SON RETURNS TO  
AND HIS FAMILY'S OLIVE GROVE FOR  
A BITTERSWEET FEAST

BY FOUAD KASSAB ✱ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES OSELAND





I was born, but the trees were handed down to my father and his siblings. The brilliant oil from their fruit was our inheritance, coursing through almost every meal.

I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD when war came to our village, upending our lives. We left the conflict and moved to Byblos, a coastal city north of Beirut. Our family of six exchanged trees and white soil for the safety of a two-bedroom apartment in a concrete building block. I grew up with fragmented memories of my heritage, pieced together from histories yearningly recounted by my parents.

*I would*  
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dandelion,  
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the seeds I  
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back home

\* \* \*

Each birthday, my secret wish was the return to our rightful lives. For years, I would determinedly blow on every dandelion I encountered, hoping that one of the thousands of seeds I scattered would carry my wish back home. A decade later, in 1994, we returned, but to a bombed-out house and a grove overgrown with thorn bushes. Before we began repairing our damaged home, my father took up Jiddi's work again. He cut through underbrush; he spoke to the trees. The earth, it seemed, recognized his sweat. In just one year, the trees became rejuvenated, their regrowth robust, and come October, branches were weighed down by an abundance of fruit so heavy the leaves brushed the ground.

That year was the first olive harvest I'd ever worked. My father, my two brothers, and I (continued on page 73)

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Top row, from left: The author picks table grapes at his parents' home; the author's sister, Mary, holds a bottle of unfiltered olive oil; the hills surrounding the olive grove; just-picked pomegranates.







Center row: lamb-stuffed eggplant and zucchini; harvesting olives; olives are pressed; the author's mother, Isabelle, stuffs eggplants. Bottom row: cured olives; making pistachio-filled cookies at a bakery in Sidon; preparing tabbouleh. Recipes start on page 76.



*This page: Lebanese tabbouleh, finely chopped fresh parsley and mint bathed in olive oil and lemon juice (see page 78 for recipe).  
Facing page: kefta bil sayniyeh, spiced lamb patties with tomato and onion (see page 76 for recipe).*



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*The author's sister, Mary (standing, far left), mother, Isabelle, (seated, in blue shirt, bottom left), and other family and friends share a harvest lunch of raw lamb kibbeh, tabbouleh, hummus, and more at the Kassab family home in Ain el Delb, Lebanon.*





*My father*  
folded the just-baked sheets, dipping the shards into fresh olive oil and handing them to me. We ate together in silent bliss

\* \* \*

(continued from page 68) picked alongside a group of Palestinian men and women who had been living in a refugee camp near our land. A 15-year-old who had never done manual labor before, I was complaining of dehydration within an hour of arriving. I laugh now at how spoiled I must have seemed to our workers, my soft hands almost exfoliated by their sand-papery palms after a handshake.

We woke early in the morning and set up large rugs and plastic sheets under the trees. Our work was slower than that of our neighbors; we picked each olive by hand while they would use bamboo sticks to strike the branches. This practice was banned in our grove. My father would repeat Jiddi's words: "Would you hit someone who feeds you?"

As the days went by, I began to toughen and complain less. Harvest became a peaceful experience, one I looked forward to every year. I especially loved sifting through thousands of green olives to find the plumpest and prettiest ones to give to my mother to brine for the year's supply. The rest would be taken to a nearby village to be pressed into oil. It became a ritual for my siblings and me to go to the press with our father on the first day of the harvest. Our fruit would be washed and crushed, then out would gush the olive oil in a cloudy brilliance of golden green, opaque and unfiltered.

As I grew older, in search of opportunity, I went abroad. At 20, I left Lebanon for Sydney, Australia, with my brother Fady. My older brother, Maroun, departed, too, for the United States. My memory of the harvest before we dispersed is most vivid. My father and I took the olives from the first day of picking to press them. Right beside the oil spout of the press sat an old woman baking paper-thin bread on a searingly hot metal grill. My father folded the crackling just-baked sheets, dipping the hot shards into the olive oil and handing them to me. We ate together in silent bliss.

The next October, and the many that followed, I







would call my parents from Australia, wanting to hear every little detail: “Which part of the izzi’ is being harvested first? Is the fruit nice and plump?” I craved being there. I missed my home, and I missed the trees. When other people I knew tasted olive oil, they savored only the flavor, but my entire being would be transported. I would smell the stone my mother used to crush the olives for brining, and I would see her face; I would recall my father’s suntanned skin and his car filled with hessian bags bursting with olives. I would remember my sister’s smile as the two of us ate a breakfast of labneh, thick strained yogurt, drowned in olive oil. Finally, I could stand it no longer. I had to be there.

“WHAT SHALL I COOK FOR YOU?” That was my mother’s first question when I told her she should expect me there for my first harvest in 13 years. When words fail, my mother cooks.

“Anything with olive oil, Immi!” I replied.

“I’ll make you some kibbeh. And tabbouleh, too. The romano beans will still be around when you come, so we can make loubieh bil zeit. Of course there’ll be stuffed grape leaves and—”

“Immi,” I stopped her. “You’re going to need more than that.” Behind her back, I had planned a reunion with my siblings. We were all heading home.

I was the first to arrive in Lebanon. I landed at night, and my father drove me home. To our left the hills shimmered with electric lights from Beirut’s ever-expanding urban sprawl, and to our right the Mediterranean Sea bubbled and flowed under a moonlit sky dotted with familiar stars.

My mother stood waiting at the door with tears in her eyes. We hugged and laughed as we sat down for a late dinner. *Man’oushé*, a flaky flatbread, was earthy with toasted sesame seeds and *za’atar* and brightened by wedges of ripe tomato flooded with the new-season oil. We shared umac-dusted eggs pan-fried with olive oil and quickured olives my mom had prepared a few days before.

The next morning I woke early. My father was already up, brewing a pot of Lebanese coffee. We drove down to the olive trees. The cool sea air filtered through a large neighboring orange grove between the hillsides.

Within half an hour, the workers began arriving. This fall, they were Syrian refugees. They had fled their war-torn country by the thousands. Those helping us with the harvest were living in an unfinished building close to our home. They worked carefully, picking the fruit as they exchanged stories from the tops of the trees. Their situation was similar to the one that my family had endured almost two decades earlier, but to me, now, their plight seemed worse and their future more uncertain.

Over the next few days both of my brothers, Fady and Maroun, arrived, along with Fady’s German wife and children. My sister, Mary, came from Beirut with her clan.



An influx of aunts, uncles, and cousins from all over the country turned up for a big feast. Their children came, too, some whom I remembered and others who were born while I was away. Each family unloaded *ma’amoul*, shortbread cookies stuffed with dates or pistachios, when they arrived. As lunch drew near, the long table filled up with more dishes than I could count. We helped ourselves to stuffed grape leaves, slow-cooked with lamb on the bone. There were kibbeh, lamb and bulgur wheat croquettes, and *kefta bil sayniyeh*, rich, spiced patties of lamb baked with tomatoes. There were Mom’s stuffed eggplants. And we filled out our plates with tabbouleh and baba ghannouj. We ate, toasting my parents and each other.

The meal extended well into the afternoon, and more food came out. I plucked up *shish barak*, little dumplings simmered in yogurt and bursting with juicy beef, and *fattet hummus*, tender, nutty chickpeas with fried pine nuts in aioli. Only at my mother and father’s house have I seen such abundance. We ate and drank and reminisced loudly. The house overflowed with laughter. But when I examined my parents closely, I could see a familiar look in their eyes. It was the same expression I had seen on all of my previous visits—of happiness burdened by the awareness that this joyful moment would be short-lived.

To my father and mother, their family was a sight as perfect as a fully formed dandelion seed pod. They knew, however, that the wind would eventually blow, and that the seeds would soon scatter again, to strange places as far-flung as Sydney and New Jersey. But their hope, I knew, was that the winds might turn and the seeds come to land in a fertile olive grove right down the road. 🌿

*Man’oushé*,  
flaky flatbreads,  
were topped  
with sesame  
seeds, za’atar  
and ripe tomato,  
and flooded  
with new-  
season olive oil

\* \* \*

Above: Syrian olive pickers enjoy a picnic breakfast in the olive grove. Facing page: flatbread with za’atar (see page 78 for recipe).



## ✦ Baba Ghannouj

(Mashed Eggplant Dip)

MAKES 3 CUPS

Charring the skin of the eggplant for this Levantine dip (pictured below at top left) imbues the pulp with a smoky flavor.

- 2 lb. eggplants, halved lengthwise
- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
- 3 tbsp. tahini
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 cup plain, full-fat yogurt
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1/4 cup pomegranate seeds
- Mint leaves, for garnish

Heat oven broiler. Place eggplant cut side down on a baking sheet; prick all over with a knife. Broil, flipping once, until skin is charred and eggplant is tender, 20–25 minutes. Transfer eggplant to a colander set over a bowl; cover with plastic wrap. Let cool; peel. Place lemon juice, tahini, and garlic in a food processor; let sit 10 minutes. Add reserved eggplant, the yogurt, salt, and pepper; pulse until slightly smooth and transfer to a shallow dish. Using a spoon, make a well on the surface; drizzle with oil. Garnish with pomegranate seeds and mint.

## Batenjen Mehchi

(Lebanese Lamb-Stuffed Eggplant)

SERVES 6

Petite eggplants are stuffed with a mixture of spiced lamb and rice for this rustic dish (pictured on page 68). Zucchini may be substituted for the eggplant.

- 1/2 lb. ground lamb
- 3 tbsp. long grain white rice
- 3 tbsp. tomato paste
- 6 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 small white onion, minced
- 1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1/4 tsp. ground allspice
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 24 Japanese or fairy tale eggplants (see page 94)

- 3 tbsp. extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp. dried mint
- 1 16-oz. can whole peeled tomatoes, crushed by hand

1 Mix lamb, rice, half each the tomato paste, garlic, onion, and cinnamon, the allspice, salt, pepper, and 3/4 cup water in a bowl; let sit 30 minutes. Using a paring knife, stem and hollow out eggplants, keeping them whole. Mince flesh and mix with lamb mixture; stuff eggplants.



Clockwise from top left: baba ghannouj (see recipe at left); chickpeas with pita and spiced yogurt (see recipe above); Lebanese date shortbread; braised romano beans (see recipes on page 78).

2 Heat oil in an 8-qt. saucepan over medium-high. Cook remaining garlic and onion until golden, 4–6 minutes. Stir in remaining tomato paste, cinnamon, salt, and pepper; cook 3 minutes. Add mint, tomatoes, and 1 cup water; boil. Reduce heat to medium-low and add stuffed eggplants; cook, covered, until eggplants are tender and the filling is cooked through, 30–35 minutes.

## Fattet Hummus

(Chickpeas with Pita and Spiced Yogurt)

SERVES 4

Brown butter tops this dish of baked pita and chickpeas tossed with spiced yogurt (pictured below).

- 1 1/2 cups dried chickpeas, soaked overnight with 1 tsp. baking powder, then drained, or two 16-oz. cans chickpeas, drained

1 If using dried chickpeas, boil them in water in an 8-qt. saucepan until very tender, about 30 minutes. Drain; transfer to a shallow dish.

2 Heat oven to 400°. Toss pita with 1/3 cup oil, salt, and pepper on a baking sheet; spread into an even layer. Bake until golden and crisp, 8–10 minutes; let cool slightly and toss with chickpeas. Heat remaining oil in an 8" skillet over medium-high. Cook pine nuts until golden, 4–5 minutes; set aside. Stir yogurt, minced paprika, garlic, salt, and pepper in a bowl; drizzle over pita mixture. Top with pine nuts; drizzle with brown butter.

## Kefta bil Sayniyeh

(Spiced Lamb Patties with Tomato and Onion)

SERVES 6–8

Lebanese seven-spice powder—mix of allspice, black pepper, namon, cloves, fenugreek, ginger and nutmeg—flavors the lamb patties as well as the tomato; this dish (pictured on page 7)

- 2 lb. ground lamb
- 1/2 cup minced parsley
- 1/3 cup flour
- 2 tsp. dried mint
- 2 tsp. Lebanese seven-spice powder (see page 94)
- 6 cloves garlic (2 minced, 4 thinly sliced)
- 1 1/2 large white onions (1/2 grated, 1 sliced 1/2" thick)
- 1 egg
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tbsp. tomato paste
- 2 canned whole, peeled tomatoes, crushed by hand
- 1 stick cinnamon
- 2 vine-ripe tomatoes, cut and sliced 1/4" thick

- 2 8" pita breads, torn into 1" pieces
- 1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
- 3/4 cup pine nuts
- 1 cup plain, full-fat yogurt
- 3 tbsp. minced mint
- 1/4 tsp. paprika
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tbsp. unsalted butter, browned

1 Mix lamb, parsley, flour, and 1 tsp. spice powder, the minced garlic, grated onion, egg, salt and pepper in a bowl. Divide into twenty-seven 1 1/2-oz. balls; form into 2" logs. Heat 3 tbsp. oil in an ovenproof 12" skillet over medium-high. Cook logs, 10