



Northeastern

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Letter in support of an emerging project: "Nawal's Feast"

"Nawal's Feast" is a brilliant project that assembles images of Iraqi culture from components rich and varied enough to reflect the land's deep history. It uses cuisine as a key metaphor for the center at which various races, religions, histories, traditions, landscapes, and languages meet to form the whole country. Thus, the land's food culture reveals a multitude of collective interactions that pay tribute to both—the particular and the common in Iraqi culture. It is certainly a unique and bold venture, imaginative in nature and highly entertaining in execution.

The project's special blend of narrative and historical record will be appealing to those who know little or a good deal about Iraq. Its constituency is thus extensive, covering Iraqi local communities as well as those curious about other cultures. Sustaining such a wide appeal is the various components of the project—contemporary life in Iraq, history, recipes of major Iraqi dishes, memoir, music, and literary anecdotes—and they mesh together in a dazzling feast.

In one of Nasrallah's childhood memories, neighbors send her family dishes that represent their ethnic, national, or religious backgrounds. In return, her family would send a dish of *mutabbag simach*, or slices of fish layered with rice and raisins. It is curious and instructive to see these dishes crossing alleys in Baghdad as the culinary translators of intriguing metaphors of daily and deep interactions between the land's various communities. Metaphors like these populate the project and through them the colorful tapestry of a complex culture is revealed.

Both participants in the project, Nawal Nasrallah and Jean Marie Offenbacher, have the knowledge and energy to turn it into reality. Nasrallah has published award-winning books on food such as *Delights from the Garden of Eden* (2003 and 2011), *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchen* (2008), and *Dates: A Global History* (2011). Equally impressive is Offenbacher's resume, with the award-winning documentary "Tea on the Axis of Evil" leading the list of achievements.

Last summer I accompanied eighteen students from Northeastern University on a cultural visit to Syria for five weeks. One of our activities

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