

FOOD & WINE

February 2004

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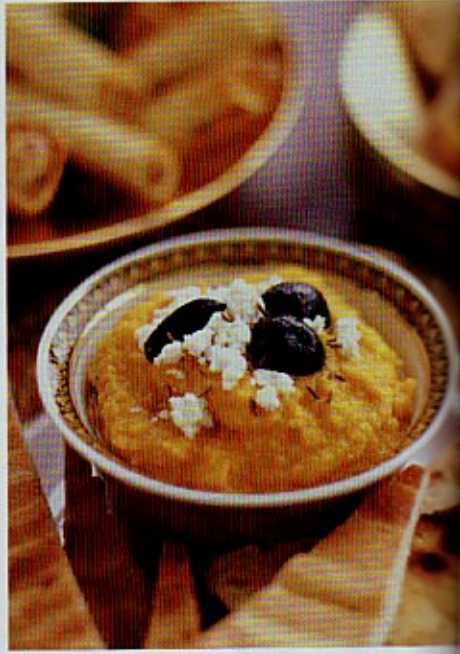


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party by the pyramids

With handmade fans painted to look like lotus leaves and martini glasses encircled by papier-mâché serpents, artist Nadia Roden creates an Egyptian fantasy to fête her mother, legendary cookbook author Claudia Roden.

by brett martin photographs by quentin bacon



Births, graduations and weddings are all important in the life of a family, but there are other moments that are less obviously but equally significant. One is the day a child begins giving birthday parties for a parent. Nadia Roden recently reached this turning point when she set out to commemorate her mother's 67th birthday.

Anyone would be humbled by the challenge, but think about how much more pressure there'd be if your mother was legendary author Claudia Roden. With her *Book of Middle Eastern Food*, first published in the United States in 1972, Claudia popularized Middle Eastern cuisine in

the West in much the same way that Julia Child got all of America simmering French stocks. Where do you even start preparing a feast for such a woman?

An accomplished artist, Nadia has created textile designs for the Metropolitan Opera and Guggenheim Museum in New York City and has done animation for *Sesame Street*; she also recently took up the family business, writing and illustrating the cookbook *Granita Magic*. "People sometimes ask, 'Are you intimidated to be cooking for your mum?'" says Nadia, who lives in a loft on the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown. "But funnily enough, it's the

OPPOSITE: Nadia and Claudia Roden welcome guests to a night on the Nile. ABOVE: Pomegranate margaritas in William Yeoward Crystal "Alexis" glasses (with beaded swizzle sticks that Nadia made) and a fiery carrot dip get the party started.



To commemorate a family tradition, Nadia serves Turkish phyllo cigars stuffed with feta.

opposite. She's given me enormous confidence. She's never, ever said, 'Get out of the kitchen.'"

"Nadia has tremendous taste," Claudia says. "I always ask her to try whatever I'm cooking." This was true whether Claudia was teaching her famous London classes, for which Nadia and her siblings were put to work as kitchen assistants;

perfecting recipes for one of her eight books; or preparing for the parties the Rodens constantly threw.

"We've always loved festivities," Claudia says, "and we take advantage of any opportunity—Jewish holidays, Christian holidays, Nadia coming to visit. I came from a large family in Egypt and grew up with the idea that staying together meant eating

together." Given how often Claudia moved, those meals were critical. The child of a prosperous Jewish family with roots in the Syrian culinary capital of Aleppo, Claudia grew up in Cairo, was educated in Paris, then moved to London, where she raised her three children. She and Nadia's father, Paul Roden, were divorced when Nadia was 11. For parties at the Rodens', Nadia and her siblings were conscripted to make dozens of lamb meatballs to be fried with sour cherries for a dish from Aleppo called *lahma bel karaz*, or to roll phyllo dough into Turkish cigars stuffed with meat or cheese.

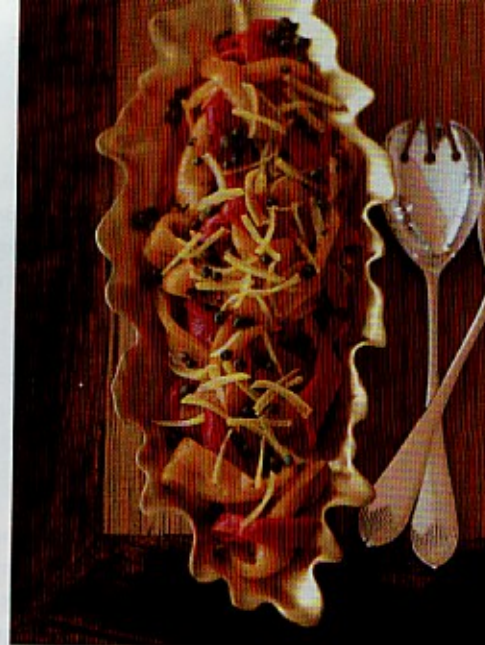
The Rodens' home was one in which the culinary and visual arts were intertwined. Claudia originally moved to London to study art. (One of her canvases hangs over Nadia's kitchen sink.) But as Nadia developed her own interest in art, Claudia ceded authority to her on all visual matters. "I never move even a single vase while she's away," Claudia says. "Last time she was in London, she completely redecorated our house." Nadia rolls her eyes. "The walls were so bare," she teases.

"We once threw Nadia a surprise party," Claudia says. "I've never seen her sadder, because she didn't get to decorate."

For Nadia, cooking and art tap into the same kind of creativity. Take the fiery carrot dip, a Tunisian dish that was served at the party. "It's an excuse to throw in as many spices as I can. It's like mixing colors—I see how many I can add without it all exploding." She feels the same about her Spanish mackerel in *charmoula*, a blend of garlic, cilantro and cumin.

"I act on hunches," Nadia says. "My mother is more focused. She plans everything out in advance."

OPPOSITE: An Egyptian hibiscus drink with a bird-topped balsa wood stirrer designed by Nadia; roasted peppers with preserved lemon in a "Gold Oak Leaf" dish from William Yeoward Crystal; lamb meatballs in a sour-cherry sauce; fragrant herbed rice; and eggplant salad on a "La Mer" platter by Versace from Rosenthal. Nadia's paper fans shaped like lotus leaves and a pewter tub filled with tiny boats resembling traditional Egyptian feluccas complete the fantasy.





Nadia encircled the martini glasses holding her grapefruit granita with handmade papier-mâché serpents and served them on a tray she painted.

Claudia laughs. "Nadia's just undaunted," she says.

Nadia's party plan was typically ambitious. While the menu evoked the foods of her childhood in London, the decorations were inspired by Claudia's life in Egypt. On a huge canvas backdrop, Nadia painted a fantasy of cobalt blue skies and golden light over the Nile, with ancient statuary reminiscent of the Temple of Luxor and traditional boats called feluccas—just like the ones her mother used to see from her balcony.

"Remember the puppet theater with the changing backdrops that you made me as a child?" Nadia asks Claudia. "I realized that that's where I got the inspiration to make murals—I discovered that you can transform an entire space with a backdrop."

Once the guests gather, carrying the fans Nadia made in the shape of lotus leaves, they take seats on cushions around a low table next to which Nadia has set a pewter basin with a flotilla of mini feluccas. Then comes the meal, which includes the meatballs in sour-cherry sauce and the mackerel in *charmoula*; a robust eggplant salad with parsley, cilantro and garlic; chicken cooked with honey and almonds; and grapefruit-and-star-anise granita in martini glasses decorated with papier-mâché serpents that Nadia designed. Afterward, there's one more surprise: a *diplomat*, a confection of mocha cream, ladyfingers and pralines that was Claudia's father's favorite cake.

The dinner is a triumph. Claudia is delighted. The dishes, she allows, are not precise re-creations of her own. "But I've always encouraged Nadia to invent," she says—proud that the party has not only celebrated her own life, but also the life she shares with her daughter.

menu

cocktails iced hibiscus tea | pomegranate margaritas

wines 2002 domaine hippolyte reverdy sancerre
2002 domaine houchart rosé

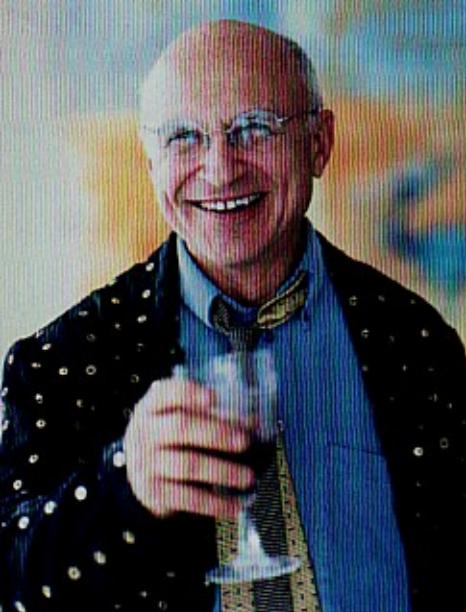
appetizers roasted peppers with preserved lemon and capers
fiery carrot dip | spicy king prawns | okra in tomato sauce
eggplant salad with cumin and fresh herbs | turkish phyllo cigars

interlude white grapefruit and star anise granita

main course roasted fish with *charmoula* | chicken with almonds
lamb meatballs in sour-cherry sauce | rice with fresh herbs

dessert nono's mocha praline cake | oranges in citrus syrup





Only fruity wines can pull together the many flavors in this menu. Choose a well-chilled dry white and a rosé or a light red. For a white, consider a Sancerre, such as the 2002 Domaine Hippolyte Reverdy or the 2001 Domaine Fournier Grande Cuvée. For a rosé, opt for the 2002 Domaine Houchart or the 2002 Château Grande Cassagne, both from Provence. For a red, look for a light, stylish Bourgueil, such as the 2001 Château de Minière from Couly-Dutheil.

Iced Hibiscus Tea

TOTAL: 25 MIN

MAKES 2 QUARTS

Nadia Roden discovered this tangy and sweet beverage in Egypt, where people stop at street vendors to drink and chat all day long.

- 2 quarts plus ½ cup water
- 1½ cups dried hibiscus flowers
(1½ ounces; see Note)
- 1 cup sugar

Ice cubes

In a medium saucepan, combine the water and hibiscus flowers and bring to a boil. Simmer over moderate heat for 5 minutes. Add the sugar and cook, stirring, until dissolved. Pour the drink into a medium bowl. Fill a larger bowl with ice water and set the smaller bowl inside. Stir the drink occasionally until chilled, about 10 minutes. Strain the cooler into a pitcher and serve in tall glasses over ice.

MAKE AHEAD The iced tea can be refrigerated overnight.

NOTE Dried hibiscus flowers can be found at specialty food stores and at Latin and Caribbean markets, where they are called sorrel or *flor de Jamaica*.

Pomegranate Margaritas

TOTAL: 20 MIN

MAKES ABOUT 8 DRINKS

This margarita, Nadia's own concoction, was inspired by the pomegranates her mother and grandmother used to serve at New Year's celebrations.

One 1-liter bottle of tequila

2 cups Cointreau

2 cups unsweetened pomegranate juice

1 cup fresh lime juice

Ice cubes

In a large glass pitcher, combine the tequila, Cointreau, pomegranate juice and lime juice. Fill a cocktail shaker with ice, pour in 1 cup of the margarita mix and shake well. Strain into a cocktail glass and serve. Repeat with the remaining mix.

MAKE AHEAD The margarita mix can be refrigerated overnight.

Roasted Peppers with Preserved Lemon and Capers

TOTAL: 1 HR, PLUS OVERNIGHT

MARINATING

8 SERVINGS

- 4 red bell peppers
- 4 yellow bell peppers
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons
extra-virgin olive oil
- ¼ cup drained small capers
- ½ small preserved lemon
(see Note), flesh discarded,
rind julienned

Salt

1. Preheat the broiler. Roast the bell peppers directly over a gas flame or under the broiler, turning, until charred all over. Transfer the peppers to a large bowl, cover with plastic wrap and let stand for 10 minutes. Peel the peppers, discarding the cores and seeds. Cut the peppers into ½-inch strips.

2. In a large bowl, mix the pepper strips with the olive oil, capers and preserved lemon and season them lightly with salt. Refrigerate the peppers overnight. Serve the roasted peppers lightly chilled or at room temperature.

MAKE AHEAD The prepared peppers can be refrigerated for up to 5 days.

NOTE Preserved lemons are available at specialty food stores and by mail order from Kalustyan's (800-352-3451).

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The birthday cake, a *diploamat*, celebrates the memory of Claudia's father, who loved this layered confection made of mocha cream, praline and ladyfingers.