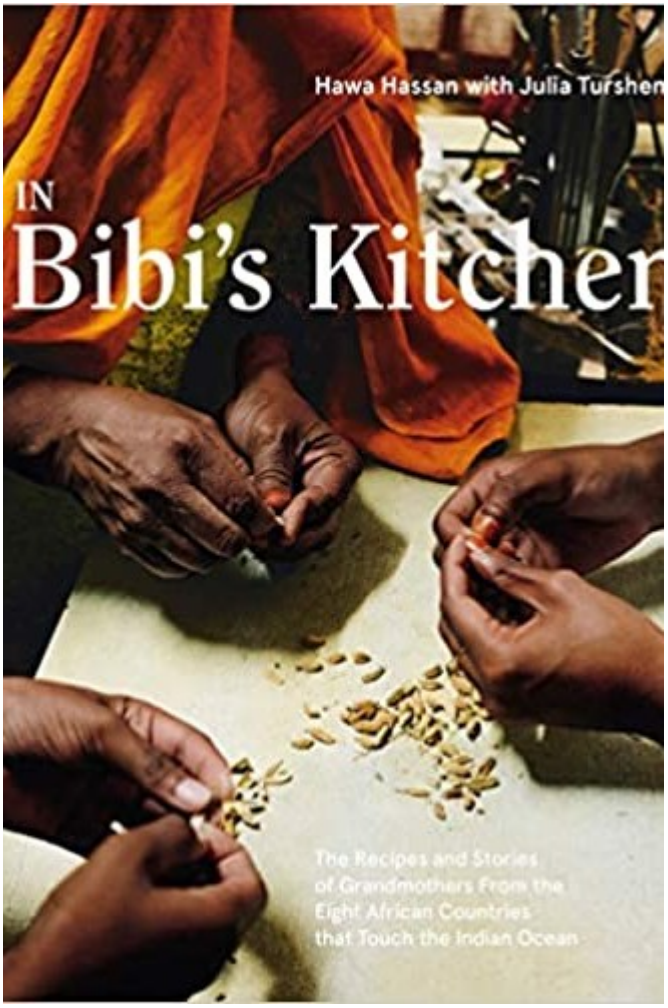
Cooking my way through Africa’s east coast

Hawa Hassan and Julia Turshen offer a rare thing: an English-language cookbook of African food that isn’t from Ethiopia.

by Anna Broadway in the October 20, 2021 issue

In Review



In Bibi’s Kitchen

The Recipes and Stories of Grandmothers from the Eight African Countries That Touch the Indian Ocean

By Hawa Hassan with Julia Turshen
Ten Speed Press
Buy from Bookshop.org ›

The US dining scene boasts hundreds of culturally specific restaurants, but when it comes to African food, we seem to have little beyond Ethiopian. Why don't we have a better selection of that continent's cuisines?

In Bibi's Kitchen doesn't answer that question, but it does help address the dearth of English-language cookbooks featuring African food.

Hawa Hassan and Julia Turshen offer a fresh and accessible set of recipes, more than half of which are vegetarian or vegan. The book sold out shortly after its publication last fall, prompting a reprinting and a spate of publicity.

Because a cookbook is the kind of rare text that we're invited to take into our lives and even our bodies, it has taken me some time to ingest *In Bibi's Kitchen* and assess the results. Fortunately, the recipes—which come from eight African countries—remain timely and fresh for any season. Want some extra zing on your holiday barbecues? Make one of its delicious hot sauce recipes. Plan to go fishing? Try one of the many seafood entrees. Best of all, because the recipes come from home cooks—16 different ones—all of the dishes are fairly easy and quick to make.

Hassan and Turshen structure the book around the "eight African countries that touch the Indian ocean," and it provides a wonderful exploration of the spices that region contributes to the kitchens of the world. While the geographic organization makes navigating the book different from other cookbooks, it invites readers to page through more slowly, drinking in the vivid photography and the stories of the cooks themselves (*Bibi* means "grandmother" in Swahili).

For each country except South Africa, Hassan and Turshen feature at least two cooks. This coverage yields a complex picture of each country's food. In some cases, the cooks have immigrated to the United States, allowing the authors to interview them in person. For the rest, Hassan and Turshen used a combination of video calls, texts, and extensive on-the-ground work by East African photographer Khadija M.

Farah. Considering how much of the fieldwork Farah did, I'm surprised that she doesn't share author credits with Hassan and Turshen.

In order to get a good sampling of the book's 75 recipes, I cooked 20 of them, including condiments, entrees, beverages, breads, desserts, soups, and sides. Having spent several months traveling in Africa during a research trip of my own, I found the book a delightful way to reconnect with some of the countries I'd visited.

One thing I really like about this cookbook—something it shares with collections like Yohanis Gebreyesus's *Ethiopia* and Marcus Samuelsson's *The Soul of a New Cuisine*—is its spice blends. *In Bibi's Kitchen* has two: the Somalian *xawaash* that Hassan herself contributes and an Eritrean *berbere*. I find the latter strangely bitter in the *shiro* (soup), compared to two other *berbere* blends I've made, but both of the hot sauces I've tried are fast becoming staples in my kitchen.

The book also includes several excellent drinks, hot and cold. The ginger spritz is delicious with either sparkling water or wine, the latter version of which would be great with brunch. When I shared the Somalian version of chai with my five-year-old housemate, he declared it "better than ice cream," although he had to add more milk on subsequent tastes.

Perhaps my favorite recipe is the one that changed my relationship to coffee. Despite a decade working in one of the premier cities for coffee snobs, I never tried roasting my own beans until *In Bibi's Kitchen* introduced me to the Eritrean method. Reader: it yielded some of the most delicious cups I've had.

My breads and desserts, on the other hand, came out a bit less successful. I struggled to have the *canjeero* pancakes turn out as described—and the batch makes a lot! Fortunately, the leftovers work pretty well in the delicious Eritrean *firfir*. The *bolo polana* cake from Mozambique has a lovely flavor but a somewhat dense texture. It's better the first day, so consider making it when you're feeding a crowd. I found the Tanzanian *ajemi* bread a bit dry, but it proved a great base to thaw for quick personal pizzas.

The vegetable dishes are hit and miss. I loved the spicy pea soup from Comoros but wanted more heat in the curried pigeon peas. A simple Kenyan recipe for cabbage has joined my regular rotation, but I confess I skipped the bland-looking *mukimo* recipes. (I was relieved that Samuelsson takes a similar view of East African staples like *ugali*; his version in *New Cuisine* adds lots of extra flavor.)

And that brings us to the question of how a Euro-American eater like me should approach *In Bibi's Kitchen*. Over the past year, racism and debates over cultural appropriation have roiled the food world, with one writer even asking, "Who gets to use the global pantry?"

Interestingly, how we eat other people's food plays a central role in the New Testament. As Willie Jennings notes in his Acts commentary, God's command that Peter "take and eat" is meant to stir up humility, not exploitation: "Peter is not being asked to possess as much as he is being asked to enter in." In Acts 10, Jennings says, "God is calling you too to join others, enter into their language and their life, become one with them, become lovers of those outside yourself."

If we let them, the recipes and stories of *In Bibi's Kitchen* might help us become better lovers of the people and cultures they represent.