Food has seldom occupied the attention of scholars working on the modern Middle East, despite the voluminous literature about the region. That neglect has been especially pronounced for the Levant. This primarily Arabic-speaking region in the Eastern Mediterranean is home to some of the world’s most storied cuisines, from the refined culinary traditions of the city of Aleppo to the chickpea-based favorites falafel and hummus. While the classical and medieval history of the region’s foodways are relatively well documented, the historical record is silent on the transformations wrought by the introduction of New World foods, industrialization, colonization, and other modern phenomena—sweeping changes that created the Levantine foods of today.

We began work on this book with a simple question: what is the history of the Levant’s cuisine? The silence we encountered in trying to answer the first question led us to another: why have scholars not paid the topic much attention?

Restaurants serving Lebanese and Palestinian food can be found across the globe, from West Africa to Europe to the Americas—although in North America they are more likely to be advertised under the vague label “Mediterranean.” The outflux of Syrian refugees since 2011 has placed even more of the world’s population in contact with Levantine culture. Yet, despite its fame, the region’s recent culinary history remains unwritten.

*Making Levantine Cuisine* is the first book-length scholarly work devoted to the topic. This is not merely an academic book, however: alongside scholarly chapters, readers will find personal essays and recipes that reflect their authors’ firsthand culinary experience. This blend of genres stems from our conviction that, as scholars, we should not only address wider audiences but learn from specialists and authorities beyond the academy as well.

It is worth pausing to address how the three of us came to be the editors of
this book and how it came to be published in the United States. Concern over appropriation and ownership—who lays claim to what dishes and how they are labeled, marketed, and understood—looms large in discussions about food in the Levant. So it is important to point out that we did not grow up eating Levantine food in our childhood homes. It is not “our” food.

At the same time, the globalization of Levantine food means that it is very much a part of the culture of the southeastern United States, where the three of us were raised (in Charlotte and Greensboro, North Carolina, and Nashville, Tennessee). In our lifetimes, conversations about “American” food culture have increasingly acknowledged and celebrated Arab American and other immigrant cuisines as a part of our collective public culture. We have also gained much-needed clarity about the contributions of Black and Indigenous food cultures to cuisines historically appropriated and claimed by white settlers, particularly in the South, thanks to the work of writers like Michael Twitty and Toni Tipton-Martin and scholars like Psyche Williams-Forson, alongside many others. Both of these shifts signal food history’s potential as a means to counter nativist and nationalist cultural logics in the United States and elsewhere.

And yet it is not enough simply to diversify our understanding of food and its history. As bell hooks warns, the commodification and uncritical enjoyment of “Otherness” can lead to a self-satisfied, reductive form of consumption devoid of context or politics. Embracing intercultural exchanges does not erase the structures of domination that frame them.1 In our case, those structures range from US foreign policy to the formations of ethnonationalism and capitalism.

Our response is to acknowledge the political conditions that shape our encounters with the foods of others—and to provide an accounting of the histories of inequality and struggle that produced them. For us, this means including chapters that historicize the appropriation and expropriation of Palestinian and Armenian foodways and document the resistance embodied in Palestinian olive cultivation. It also means drawing connections between the trajectories of Levantine dishes and vital contemporary conversations taking place about food politics. The following chapters trace the circulation of falafel and *shakshūka* within what Harry Eli Kashdan calls “a denatured global food culture that lacks reference to the histories and contexts of particular recipes” and describe the chasm between those who claim and profit from various food cultures and those whose labor produces, reproduces, innovates, and preserves them.

In striving to offer an account of modern Levantine food history and culture that is both critical and contextualized, this volume reflects a number of commitments.
First is a commitment to taking Levantine cuisine seriously as a subject of scholarly inquiry. We assembled a group of scholars from a range of fields and career stages, from full professors to graduate students and postdoctoral scholars. We sought scholarship that engages rigorously with a wide range of sources in Levantine languages. As a result, this volume reflects a variety of methods used to interpret materials in formal and vernacular registers of Arabic, including Judeo-Arabic, as well as Turkish and Armenian. References also include English, French, and Hebrew sources, reflecting the colonial legacies that lie at the heart of the region's modern cuisines and continue to drive many of its political conflicts. Although linguistic ability should never be confused with an understanding of complex social realities, it is nevertheless an essential foundation for the study of a culture and its history and is especially important given the industries of US “expertise” about the Arab world that engage with non-English sources superficially or not at all.

Our next commitment was to a diversity of perspectives, including writing by those who grew up cooking and eating Levantine foods at home. Beyond personal experience, we sought to recognize culinary expertise as a significant form of knowledge in its own right. Each of the book's three thematic sections includes a chapter that reflects firsthand culinary knowledge, from running a restaurant to developing recipes for popular audiences and home cooks. This in turn speaks to our final commitment: to make this volume's collective insights accessible to as broad an audience as possible in both its style and its content.

These commitments, and our individual intellectual pursuits, partly explain how we came to coordinate this effort as coeditors. Working on a book about famine in Mount Lebanon, Graham Pitts discovered that his project required more knowledge about Levantine foodways than was available. Anny Gaul offered her background studying the cuisines of the Arabic-speaking world as well as an interest in reframing the study of foodways beyond national categories. Vicki Valosik lent her skills as an editor specialized in translating scholarly writing (particularly on topics related to the Arab world) into accessible prose. Each of us is also invested in collaborative approaches to scholarly work.

There are also structural reasons that explain why this volume came to be. This work was produced from within the North American academy because of the financial resources of institutions like Georgetown University and the historical privileging of Euro-American academic knowledge production about the Arab world. These chapters are attuned to the way that social and political inequalities have contributed to the making of Levantine cuisine, so we would be remiss not to acknowledge that inequalities within systems of higher education and knowledge production on a global scale have also determined the conditions that produced this book. Proceeds from the sale of this book will
Anny Gaul, Graham Auman Pitts & Vicki Valosik

be donated to fund scholarships at Georgetown University’s Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (CCAS).

Fifteen authors share their work here, but the network that made this work possible is much broader. Institutional support from Georgetown’s CCAS was essential in bringing this project to fruition. The center hosted a day-long workshop for the volume’s contributors, followed by a collaborative cooking demonstration and dinner. CCAS also cosponsored a public event hosted at the Freer and Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Asian Art, featuring talks by several of the chapter authors. The CCAS drew on an endowment provided by the American Druze Foundation and funding from a Department of Education Title VI Grant designating CCAS as a National Resource Center on the Middle East and North Africa (NRC-MENA).

Crucially, this support allowed us to create an environment for collectively workshopping these essays in a manner that paralleled our approach to scholarship beyond the academic realm: cooking and eating together enriched our work as much as sitting around the seminar table, papers in hand.

We would like to thank several individuals who made this unique collaborative environment possible. Dana Al Dairani, CCAS associate director, has been tireless in her support of this project since its inception. Maddie Fisher, CCAS events coordinator, was a diligent collaborator helping to ensure that the workshop, dinner, and public talks were successful. We would also like to thank the management of the Leo J. O’Donovan Dining Hall at Georgetown University, particularly Joelle Valbrun-Bailey and her team, for graciously opening their kitchen and beautiful dining space to us and providing staff support for our communal dinner. We thank Antonio Tahhan and Laila El-Haddad for leading interactive cooking demonstrations focused on Aleppan and Gazan cuisines, respectively. The contributions of Annia Ciezadlo and Adel Iskander to our workshop enriched and enlivened the discussions. We are grateful to Grace Murray from the Smithsonian’s Freer and Sackler Galleries for hosting a day of public events featuring the book’s contributors and to Majd AlGhatrif, Syrian restaurateur and cardiologist, who served attendees a meal catered by his restaurant, Syriana, which is located in Ellicott City, Maryland.

Jim Burr and Sarah McGavick of the University of Texas Press have been patient and encouraging throughout the publication process. Kathy Lewis’s editorial acumen greatly improved the manuscript. We were lucky to have partners willing to take a chance on the mix of personal essays, recipes, and academic essays included in this volume. We thank them for sharing our vision and working to make it a reality.

Professor Rochelle Davis, a mentor to each of us, believed in this project
from the beginning and gave her time and the center’s resources to make it possible. She also came up with the title of the book. During her three years as CCAS director, she established a collaborative atmosphere that served as the context for this project. We dedicate this volume to her.

ANNY GAUL, GRAHAM AUMAN PITTS, AND VICKI VALOSIK

Note

The Levant & Egypt