

## ‘IDEOLOGY NEVER COOKED A DUCK’

### A Recipe for Roast Duck, Egyptian Style

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**This recipe is a microcosm of Egyptian food history.** It’s seasoned with cardamom and mastic gum, a combination that many Egyptian women I’ve met identify as characteristic of their grandmother’s cooking. The bird is cooked with citrus – which, according to researcher and cookbook writer Nawal Nasrallah, was a common practice in medieval Egypt. Nasrallah also notes that mastic gum has long been used in Egyptian cooking to offset the strong odors of meat and poultry. This particular use of mastic is a uniquely Egyptian phenomenon in a region where the spice is typically used to flavor sweets and confections.



There’s so much a cookbook can’t quite communicate about technique, judgment, flavoring, and taste, when to stick to a tradition or pattern, and when to innovate – all sorts of contingencies that are better communicated

in person or in conversation, or learned through trial and error. The first time I made this recipe I used a ready-made marinade in the form of tomato paste, woefully unaware of the range of approaches that Egyptian women use to concoct their own, fresher, better version. My appetite for the recipe was piqued by experiences eating duck in Egypt, from a family-owned restaurant in Luxor to the home of a friend, and my understanding of it is made up of dozens of phrases of advice offered to me by Egyptian home cooks.

I tried this recipe numerous times in attempts to reconcile all those experiences with my own practical culinary sense, adjusting the boiling time and embellishing the roasting technique with tips picked up from culinary authorities in my own culture, like Ina Garten. This process is a remarkable contrast to the form of cookbooks written in mid-century Egypt. Those books were essentially an attempt to translate a particular ideology that dictated norms of rationalization, refinement, and nutrition, into recipes, and yet their practical function seems to have been much more along the lines of establishing forms of social distinction than preserving or transmitting culinary knowledge.

That’s not to say that all cookbooks work in the same way, of course. But it does draw attention to limitations that written recipes entail. In so many ways written recipes are like placeholders or signposts: the tip of the iceberg in terms of what it really takes to produce a meal. This is what I mean when I say that ideology never cooked a duck. For every duck recipe printed in a cookbook, surely there are thousands of ducks like the one in this recipe, simmering away in kitchens and off the page. As scholars, conscientious cooks, or simply people who care about food, it’s up to us to seek them out and celebrate them. 🌿

## the RECIPE

### INGREDIENTS:

1 tablespoon cardamom  
5 pieces mastic gum  
5 onion, thinly sliced  
1 duck

### For the marinade:

3 tomatoes, skinned and grated  
1 tablespoon tomato paste  
1 tablespoon clarified butter, plus more as needed for basting  
1 tablespoon honey  
1 cup orange juice  
Salt and pepper, to taste

### METHOD:

Place the duck, cardamom, mastic gum, and onions in a large pot, cover with water and simmer gently for 45 minutes. Add water as needed to keep the duck immersed as it cooks.

While the duck is cooking, combine the grated tomatoes, tomato paste, clarified butter, honey, orange juice, and salt and pepper in a saucepan. Bring to a boil and then lower the heat to a simmer until the marinade reduces to a paste consistency.

Preheat the oven to 425° F.

Place the boiled duck in a broiler pan or baking dish and prick it in several places with a knife. Secure the neck to the body of the duck using a toothpick.

Rub the marinade all over the duck and then place in the oven for 15 minutes.

Baste with the remaining clarified butter, then roast for another 5 minutes.

Remove the duck, allow it to rest for 10 minutes, then carve and enjoy!