

Build, Restore, Save
SPOTLIGHT ON NAIRY HAMPIKIAN

A Lifeline to the Necropolis
JOB CREATION IN LUXOR

Digital Archaeology
GIZA BOTANICAL DATABASE

SCRIBE

THE MAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN RESEARCH CENTER IN EGYPT



from TRADE
to TOURISM
THE RESURRECTION OF
QUSEIR FORT

FALL 2019 | ISSUE 4



Conversations with ARCE fellows past and present



Food For Thought

A Discussion with Former ARCE Fellow Anny Gaul

BY SALLY EL SABBAHY PHOTOS BY ANNY GAUL

In September 2016 Anny Gaul arrived in Cairo as a pre-dissertation travel grant recipient with ARCE. Her research for her (now completed as of May 2019) dissertation, titled ‘Kitchen Effects in Modern Northern Africa,’ was still underway, and Egypt was the last stop in a laundry list of countries that she had lived in across North Africa and the Middle East in the three years prior. “Directly after I finished my undergraduate degree, I joined the Peace

Corps and was living in a small village in Morocco for two years,” Gaul recalled, “And part of the idea for my dissertation came from the fact that I had a food blog.”

Gaul had always enjoyed cooking for friends and family, but something about the rural dishes that she ate on a daily basis in the southern Moroccan village where she lived – and how much they differed from the food she would find in commercial outlets across the country – sparked her interest in understanding the sometimes-conflicting ways in which a culture chooses to present its food. “The food that you get in southern Moroccan villages is very different than what you get in restaurants and often hard to find in restaurants at all, and so I think that food became this really important way that I related to the place,” she explained.

“When I got back to the States I started a food blog to recreate some of the things I had eaten and share them with others. It was a way to stay connected to where I had lived...It was really just a hobby at first, but I had a couple of professors who knew that I had this food blog and that I was interested in gender and culture, and so they encouraged me to start thinking about food studies to see where I would be able to contribute.”

The field of food studies is a relatively young one in the broader research environment of Middle East Studies, but Gaul was convinced to dive in headfirst following a two-year hiatus between her M.A. and Ph.D. programs, where she spent a summer in Lebanon followed by nine months in Jordan and a full year in Egypt. In Cairo, her dissertation research led her to the crammed stalls of used book markets in search of Egyptian cookbooks from the early to mid-20th century. One day, a shopkeeper matter-of-factly told Gaul that Abla Nazira (“Auntie Nazira”) was the first – and perhaps last – Egyptian cookbook author she should be hunting for. But who was this Abla Nazira?

“I hadn’t heard of her before, and then I started investigating and realized that nobody had written a full scholarly study about who she was and her significance to Egyptian culture,” Gaul explained of the woman more formally known as Chef Nazira Nicola. “Everyone I spoke to knew who she was but there wasn’t a book written about her, which is exactly what you want when you’re looking for a dissertation topic! So, I started exploring her, how she fits into cookbooks in Egypt, looking at how her cookbooks were actually used, asking what is the relationship between her cookbooks and the way that Egyptians actually cook – and how that has changed over the past century.”

To round out her dissertation topic, Gaul decided to make a comparative project between Egyptian and Moroccan food, given her close relationship to both countries and familiarity with their cuisines, cultures, and dialects. Her period of research focused on cookbooks produced between the 1930s and 1970s and primarily covered the language used in the explanation of recipes, the types of recipes that were presented, and the preparation or awareness of those recipes in actual households. An interesting twist that Gaul observed in the Egyptian cookbooks she collected and studied was specifically related to the language utilized in them – which in this case was Modern Standard Arabic, or *fuṣḥá*.



Top: Tasting koshari in Port Said



Left: Research in Cairo's used book markets
PHOTO: JONATHAN GUYER

“That is something I tried to figure out in my dissertation, because no one talks about cooking so formally like that. So why were the authors writing that way? The easy answer is that they were really deliberately written in formal language, and in the case of Abla Nazira and her coauthors they actually specifically thank a male scholar in the introduction, probably a member of the Academy of Arabic Language, who checked their language. It was very specific and clear that this was a state sanctioned publication, and so it was very important to their authority and the way they framed their book that it be in ‘real’ proper Arabic.”

But what do cookbooks have to do with state interests? Gaul made an interesting connection. These cookbook authors – especially in the 1930s and 1940s – were trying to accomplish a number of things through the production of cookbooks, chief among them being the simultaneous preservation and modernization of these recipes and dishes that were thought of as national heritage. “The authors,” she continued, “were envisioning a new middle-class woman who would be educated and able to read and understand *fuṣḥá* and they also assumed that she



Top: A wabūr being repaired in Sayyeda Zaynab

Right: A used bookstall in Marrakesh



beyond written sources and engaging with actual people and families, to observe how they eat and what they cook. “Since food is tangible and intangible you can’t just look at objects or texts, you have to talk to people. I would be doing these interviews and I was less interested in defining what food is ‘truly Egyptian’ and more interested in what stories people told about their food and how it made them Egyptian or experience life as an Egyptian.”

In most cases, Gaul found that the most commonly used recipes were passed on through verbal exchanges between neighbors, parents and children, friends and coworkers, but rarely followed from cookbooks. One such example of this is a recipe for duck roasted in a tomato-based glaze (see page 64 for the recipe!) that Gaul developed after multiple conversations with Egyptian friends and their families, and by watching them cook at home. She didn’t come across a similar version in any local cookbook, however.

“I find the way that certain dishes get preserved and passed on really interesting,” she reflected. “Cookbooks can preserve the name of a dish and the way of making it, but in terms of what you learn when you actually learn to prepare a dish from another person it’s very hard to replicate that in a cookbook.”

would cook for her family and not have servants to do it – so it’s trying to preserve these recipes for the sake of Egyptian culture and society.”

Here, Gaul paused to chuckle: “But then during my research, people I spoke to would actually laugh at the notion that you can really effectively preserve those things in fuṣḥá because food exists in gesture and colloquial Arabic and learned behaviors. So much of culinary knowledge can’t be learned from a book, so things do inevitably get lost. In my Egyptian material, there are women who remember Abla Nazira as a figure and who had her cookbook, but never centered her as being the reason they actually learned to cook.”

This observation reflects a vital part of Gaul’s research methodology. Namely, the value of going



The natural question then is whether these cookbooks actually accomplished their goal to preserve Egyptian national dishes? “I don’t think they did,” Gaul laughed. “Abla Nazira as a cultural figure is significant, but her cookbooks did not have the impact that her and her coauthors intended on Egyptian society. Cookbooks were used as gifts, they were doing other things. They were status objects – owning a book means something in any culture. A lot of cookbooks today in America, for example, function as coffee table objects, and the ones in Egypt present a lot of information but not necessarily how Egyptians

relate to their cuisine.”

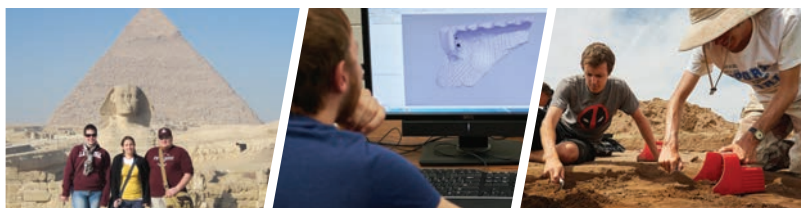
So, is a cookbook of her own in the works for Gaul? Not for the time being at least, if her busy schedule is any indication. Following the successful defense of her dissertation this last May, she co-organized a conference from June 7-8, titled ‘Making Levantine Cuisine: A Critical Food Studies Symposium’ at her alma mater, Georgetown University. Aside from her current teaching commitments, she is also planning to turn her dissertation into a book proposal, and possibly add an additional chapter to indulge her fascination with a somewhat enigmatic fruit that has risen to a staple status in the Egyptian diet.

“I’m hoping to expand my research earlier in time, specifically to the introduction of the tomato because it completely revolutionized North African food. I think it was introduced to Egypt in the 19th century at some point – so relatively late. Tomatoes appeared in Morocco much earlier, so I need to chase down the sources on that...but what were everyday Egyptians cooking with before the tomato?!” 🍷

For more recipes and information on Amny’s work, visit her websites: <https://cookingwithgaul.com> and <http://annygaul.com>

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-LA CROSSE

EXPLORE
the PAST



ARCHAEOLOGICAL STUDIES MAJOR

Explore the rise of past civilizations guided by faculty with expertise in Egypt, Europe, Asia, North America, South America, Mesoamerica, and the Caribbean. Unique, hands-on opportunities abound in both field and laboratory projects, where students have unmatched access to ongoing real-world research and cutting-edge technologies.

Don't just study the past ... explore it firsthand!

UW-LA CROSSE ARCHAEOLOGY & ANTHROPOLOGY DEPARTMENT
608.785.8457 | tmcandrews@uwlax.edu

uwlax.edu/archaeology

