

AUTHENTIC  
LEBANESE CUISINE

Interviewed by  
Erinn Igarashi

COOKING  
with KAMAL

LADERA RANCH RESIDENT KAMAL AL-FAQIH IS BRINGING the cuisine of Lebanon into homes across America with his new cookbook "Classic Lebanese Cuisine." Kamal has spent the last decade perfecting his recipes and putting them onto paper so he can share this rather undiscovered cuisine which epitomizes the best of the Mediterranean diet and is highly regarded for its positive health benefits with the rest of the world.

LRM-CDC sat down with Kamal recently to talk about his new cookbook and what he loves about preparing and sharing the cuisine of his culture.

**Tell us about your family heritage. Who influenced your love of cooking?**

My mother and father were born and raised in Lebanon. They got married in Lebanon in the early 1950s and two weeks later moved to Washington, DC, to start their family. I am the youngest of four boys and was born and raised in Washington, DC.

I was six years old the first time I visited Lebanon. I still remember as if it were yesterday. As we walked off the plane and down the steps we arrived to literally a sea of people—all relatives. They were hugging and kissing us—so much laughter and tears of joy—I had never experienced anything like it before.

My love for cooking began at an early age and over the years eventually blossomed into a career as a professional Lebanese chef. I was very fortunate to have learned how to cook by one of the best natural chefs I have ever met: my mother.

**LRM: You were a professional chef for 20 years. Can you talk about that experience?**

In 1985 I started the first exclusively Mediterranean catering company in the Washington, DC metropolitan area that specialized in Lebanese cuisine. As word of mouth spread, we were lucky enough to build a large clientele and develop a good reputation for authentic Lebanese cuisine.

Over the years our client list grew beyond our residential patrons to include several of the Middle Eastern Embassies in Washington, DC Universities, the Smithsonian Museums, Art Galleries, Synagogues and even the White House.

**LRM: What inspired you to create your own cookbook?**

Part of my inspiration was my desire to share with others what I had learned over the last 30 years. Classic Lebanese Cuisine is the culmination of my experiences and memories. The early trips to Lebanon, cooking with my mother at home, my years at the catering company, as well as the pride I feel as an American-Lebanese, collectively these things make me feel as though I have much to share with others when it comes to our culture and cuisine.

**LRM: How can people incorporate Lebanese cooking methods into their everyday meal preparation?**

I think people will find it easy to incorporate Lebanese cooking into their everyday meals because of all the options it offers.

They can choose to prepare several of the dishes vegetarian style—or take the same dish and prepare it using beef, lamb or chicken. There are side dish recipes like Fordhook Lima Beans with Cilantro in a rich tomato sauce that easily becomes an entrée by adding either lamb, beef or chicken. Another delicious side dish recipe is Spinach with Caramelized Onions, which easily can become an entrée by topping it with minced lamb, beef or chicken and toasted pine nuts. There are so many delicious options—I think people will like the variety of recipes.

**LRM: Do you have a signature dish? Are there certain foods that people always request from you?**

Mezza—"Lebanese style" tapas—were the number one thing that people requested from us. Mezza are sumptuous small finger foods that Lebanese cuisine is famous for. They include interesting textures and robust flavors that would delight even the most discerning palate. From Bulgarian feta cheese crescents (sambousik), vegetable stuffed grape



leaves (warac inab bi zeyt), pomegranate beef and cheese pies (sfiha), pickled turnips (lift)—pick one or two and your family meals will take an excursion to the Middle East.

As for a signature dish, I would have to say there was one in particular that we seemed to prepare all the time: kibbi. Kibbi is a mixture of spiced meat, onion and bulgar wheat, ground together and made into a variety of shapes and sizes.

### LRM: How can people experience your food firsthand?

One way would be to try a recipe in my cookbook, *Classic Lebanese Cuisine—170 Fresh and Healthy Mediterranean Favorites*. The recipes are accompanied by full-color photographs throughout, and with step-by-



I have also been leading cooking demonstrations for groups in their homes over the past year and a half. These have been very successful because people love entertaining in their homes, and these cooking parties are a lot of fun. The difference here is that we do all the shopping and prep work. This is a hands-on demonstration, and we work together preparing the meal. The best part is everyone sits down afterwards to enjoy a meal that they prepared.

### LRM: As a Ladera Ranch resident, what do you like most about living in this area?

All of our neighbors are so friendly. It truly feels like a community of people—we love it. When I walk the dogs, I practically know the names of everyone on our block. We attend neighborhood events like the progressive dinners



step instructions. My cookbook makes Lebanese cuisine accessible to everyone who seeks to prepare it for the first time or reproduce their favorite flavors and dishes.

Another way that people can try my food is a cooking demonstration that they lead with friends and family. The host invites about 6 to 8 friends and family for a cooking demonstration at their home or clubhouse. They decide in advance the dishes they are going to prepare, and everyone is assigned a recipe and items to bring to the demonstration. This event has been popular with cooking clubs who want to try new cuisine.

and neighborhood barbeques—it's really a unique sort of place. Everything is so beautifully maintained and [with] all the landscaping and trees, something is always in bloom. To this day I feel lucky to live in Ladera Ranch. It's a great place to live.

If you would like to learn more about Kamal, purchase a cookbook or schedule a cooking demonstration, visit [cookingwithkamal.com](http://cookingwithkamal.com). Two dollars from each cookbook purchased online from [shopkamal.com](http://shopkamal.com) using the promotion code LRMCDC will be donated to Second Harvest Food Bank, which aims to feed Orange County's hungry.