

What if you gave a dinner party and the Axis of Evil came?

By Jayne Clark, USA TODAY

Self-described "think-tanker chick" Chris Fair, 39, has whipped up a creative cookbook concept in *Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States: A Dinner Party Approach to International Relations* (Lyons Press, \$24.95). Borrowing the phrase first used by President Bush in 2002, Fair's book flits all over the map. She shares some food for thought with USA TODAY.

Q: It's probably a safe bet that few hosts derive dinner party inspiration by examining the world's more politically irksome spots. How did you come up with the notion of throwing "axis of evil" dinner parties? **A:** I love to cook, and I tend to cook my way out of depression. So when my brothers, who were in the Indiana National Guard, were called up in September of 2002, the whole "axis of evil" premise (for going to war with Iraq) seemed so unconscionable. The dinner parties were a way to bring people together to commiserate.

Q: What can a nation's eating habits tell you about it? **A:** What a country declares to be its national food tells us how they want to be perceived. For instance, Israel has falafel as its national food. That's Israel saying, "We have a national claim to an Arab dish." In some other places — France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom — popular ethnic foods represent a colonial past. In France, it's North African. In the Netherlands, it's Indonesian. In the U.K., it's Indian food. Food tells us a lot about where these countries have been.

Q: Iraq, Iran, Israel, Afghanistan — there's a lot of the Middle East in this book. Isn't Middle Eastern food all alike? **A:** Myth, myth, myth. For instance, Iranian food is not like Arab food. They use a lot of fruits and really good grilled meats and a lot of meat stews that incorporate fresh or dried fruit.

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stew.

Q: It sounds complicated — as do a number of other recipes in the book. Is the degree of difficulty a metaphor for international relations? A: Some of these cuisines are time-intensive and that goes back to the politics of production. (I know this as an Indian housewife boot-camp attendee.) These ladies spend most of their time in food production. And the only way they get freed up is if they have servants or a lot of daughters-in-law. Also, many of these foods are foods you'd eat on a special occasion.

Q: Which of your axis of evil dinner parties has gone over best? A: Iran did well. Pakistan also has done well. North Korea had a rough start. Koreans eat a cold beef soup with buckwheat noodles. Everyone was queuing up at the microwave. I never cooked it again. But then, what we think is edible is not shared by everyone.

Q: Like dog or snake, which you write that you refused to eat in your far-flung travels. Anything you took a pass on that you regret not trying? A: I regret not eating rat in Burma. In point of fact, rat is probably no different than chicken. It's a seasonal dish there — you'll see rat shacks on the side of the road. Later we had frog curry, and how different from rat is that?

Q: Speaking of Burma, what are your thoughts on the ethics of making tourist visits to countries with long, dark records of human-rights abuses? A: I went to Burma because of work. But you cannot go there without subsidizing the military junta. I don't know how comfortable I would feel going there for vacation. There's an alternative view that if you can put money into the local economy, it's OK. And I'm not a lawbreaker, so I wouldn't be able to go to Cuba.

Q: How many of the 10 countries featured in your book have you actually been to? A: I've visited them all but Iraq, North Korea and Cuba.

Q: Do you have a favorite? A: Pakistan. I'm in love with the country. It's a geopolitical jalopy careening down the highway of politics with its wheels flying off — yet it manages to survive. Another country I'm smitten with is Iran. I spent a couple of months there. I found an immediate rapport with Iranians. They kind of see the world the same way we do. And they were incredibly hospitable to Americans.

Q: You included the USA in your round-up of annoying states and note that a lot of the world doesn't like Americans. Should we take that personally? A: I think we should. We need to understand how we interact with the world. We don't travel much — (close to) 80% of us don't have passports — and who can afford to travel these days, anyway? But if we're going to get our image in the world right, we're going to have to listen to why they say they don't like us. In the end, maybe it's not in our national interest to do things differently. But I find



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