

Q &amp; A

## Dishing Up Foreign Policy With 'Evil' on the Table

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Wednesday, August 27, 2008

Digesting the sum total of Chris Fair's new "Cuisines of the Axis of Evil and Other Irritating States" (Lyons Press, 2008, \$24.95) is a bit like buying a sales pitch from that classic "Saturday Night Live" sketch: It's a dessert topping *and* a floor wax, which is to say that it involves an improbable duality.

In this case, her book attempts to be a sassy primer on the strategic international relations of 10 countries *and* a dinner-party recipe collection.

"Cuisines" has its good points, such as the tale of an East German rabbit breeder's scheme to supply starving North Koreans with his 24-pound Monster Bunnies, and some doable ethnic dishes, such as Burma's Ohn-no Kaukswe, a chicken-coconut soup with egg noodles.



(From The Author)

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Unfortunately, it also includes some arguable interpretations of history with a cumbersome bibliography, and wordy yet imprecise recipes with no index, presented in a format that won't lie flat on a kitchen countertop.

Fair, 39, of Alexandria, describes the effort as a cookbook first and foremost and calls herself an empiricist, a quintessential nerd and a South Asianist, with a special concentration in Pakistani affairs. An interviewer would add good-natured to a list of her personal descriptors. Although she likes to dodge questions about her political leanings, Fair's stints at the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Rand Corp. can pinpoint her coordinates for those who are versed in the ways of think tank by association.

Her cooking chops come from her extensive travels abroad, during which she gathered inspiration for this grouping of more than 40 recipes, all suitable for a party of eight. Readers who skip the introductory rationale may be surprised to find an American menu (another sign of where Fair is coming from), which consists of chickens roasted over beer cans, mashed potatoes with mustard and buttermilk, roasted corn, Hoosier salad and an apple-pear crumble with a lightened vanilla ice cream of Mexican descent, oddly enough.

But the author explains in the book that those dishes speak to her Indiana upbringing and "foreign policies driven by the Bible-thumpers in the 'heartland.'" But seriously, folks . . . is Fair a funny analyst, or what? I spoke with her recently about the book; excerpts follow.

**What kind of reaction has your hybrid experiment received? Some language in it is pretty erudite. I admit I had to look up the word "esurient."**

That means "famished." Review-wise, so far, so good. The book's meant to be highfalutin and lowbrow, but no one has seemed to pick up on that.

It's a smart-ass book. I had fun on both ends of the spectrum.

**What do you hope readers would do with this book?**

I hope they would use it as a cookbook. It's been hard to place, to be honest. Too much politics for a cookbook, too much food for a policy book. Although for me, the mix is organic. When I travel, I'm eating, and I see that there is so much to be shared and understood about a culture through its food.

**How did you choose the recipes?**

It's a mishmash. Some come from cookbooks I like. Some are from waiters at ethnic restaurants. In some recipes, I offer alternatives for ingredients that I hate, such as rose water. Keep in mind that I have no culinary training whatsoever. I tested the dishes on my friends, neighbors and colleagues.

**Would it be fair to say you cook in a left-leaning kitchen?**

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I'm a Libra. I have a justice fetish. Obviously, I have been critical of [President] Bush and how he started the Iraq war. I actually have serious qualms about how we do foreign policy. I think it has undermined our position in the world. I was also critical of [President] Clinton's foreign policies.

However, I'm not opposed to the war in Afghanistan. We went in with a light footprint where there should have been a big footprint.

**In the book, you discuss similarities between "bellicose leaders" Bush and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, characterizing the American president as a dodger of military service, while Ahmadinejad "actually fought while his country was at war." But wasn't the latter a member of the Pasdaran, the fundamentalist, terrorist-supporting revolutionary guard corps?**

Oh, there's no question that Ahmadinejad was a bad guy.

**I see that Libya did not make the cut, but Israel did.**

Libya had cleaned up its act by the time I got to writing. It was going to be included.

Israel has pursued nukes beyond the scope of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and, like India and Pakistan, is a hideous violator of human rights.

**I'll bite. The media kit accompanying your book suggests we ask: Why include a Palestinian casserole in the menu for an Israeli dinner party?**

It's in keeping with the tone of the book. To me, it's an interesting symbol that they hoist up Arab food as a national food of Israel. I like that particular dish a lot; it's the Arab version of shepherd's pie.