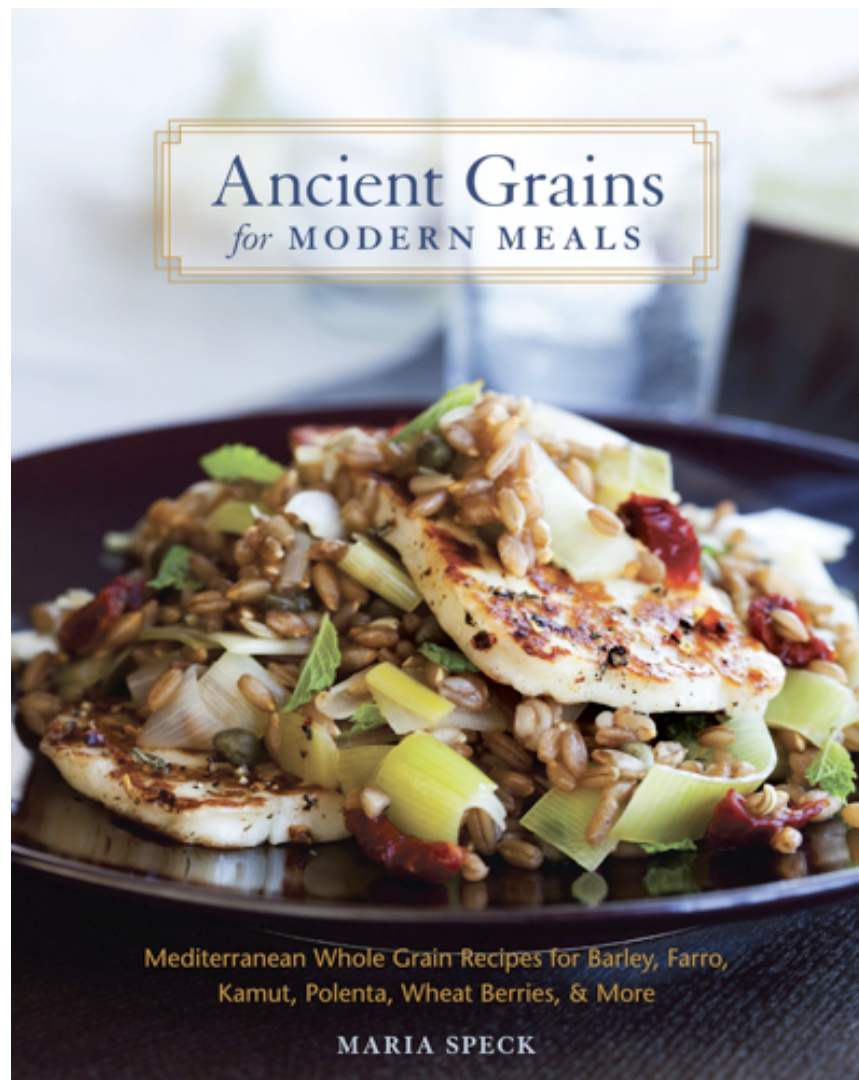


Suvir

Thursday, June 09, 2011

Maria Speck Gives Me Ancient Bittersweet Koliva to Sweeten My Days of Mourning



I am 38, five years older than my father was when his father passed. My father, all of 67, was robbed from our midst on June 1st. A sad passing. But all passings bring in the void of loss and sadness. Loss like what we face, leaves us that are left bereft with a greater urging to life life fully - every breath we take. I am grateful to Ancient Grains for Modern Meals by Maria Speck to have given me some hope for cooking and eating happily upon my return to the US, my adopted home. I may employ a stealth approach to the use of certain grains (like millet) and do what I have done before and luckily Maria does as well. Allow the taste to speak and charm before announcing the ingredient list. Less is more, especially when advertizing a dish. Let it speak for itself. Maria Speck speaks/writes not merely about whole grains, but about a lifestyle that celebrates them and can enrich us in ways we need to be spoiled today.



(Maria Speck, Photo Credit: Nika Boyce Studios)

Maria Speck is on a noble mission of reeducating our palates. In doing so she makes our plates the marvelous and magical bearers of ancient ingredients prepared for modern lives. Maria says it best and I share her quote here. "Instead of writing another "healthy whole grain cookbook", I want to showcase whole grains for what they bring to our table: amazing flavors, rich textures, and stunning colors." Need I say more?

In ***Ancient Grains for Modern Meals***, Maria draws on her Greek mother's cooking and the foods of her European upbringing to offer 100 recipes that fuse tradition with flavors for the modern palate.

Maria Speck loves whole grains such as farro, barley, quinoa, and spelt, not only because they are healthy and nutritious, but also because they are versatile ingredients for delicious and satisfying breakfasts, breads, salads, soups, main dishes, and desserts.

She describes easy ways to utilize quick-cooking grains like polenta, buckwheat, couscous, and millet as well as how to prepare "slower" whole grain berries in advance for a busy work week. Maria offers many short cuts as well as practical advice for the experienced and novice home cook alike, allowing these inexpensive staples to shine—inspired by the bounty of the Mediterranean, spices from the East and the savvy she has garnered living in Cambridge, MA and juggling life as a writer, journalist, and a welcoming generous host.

Maria has four principles to eating well:

- 1) Cook as often as you can.
- 2) Eat everything, with pleasure and not in a rush.
- 3) Buy whole ingredients, close to home
- 4) Strive for imperfection; no need to be a four-star chef.

Reading Maria Speck's book is like being in an Indian home, or one in the Mediterranean. It is from the Mediterranean tables of Greece, Turkey, Tunisia, Israel, Spain, France and beyond that she draws her inspiration. It is India that I connect with her celebrating what she shares. You will find resonance in your own unique way with the writings of this very gifted cook and writer. Such is the power of food and a well spoken/written sentence or set of words. These are universal and inclusive in ways even the most secular amongst us cannot be. Maria has shared that brilliance of the kitchen, table and food for all of us to embrace and now make our calling of the moment. She has made us bereft of excuses to not do what is at once tasty and also correct. Her books leaves us without excuse and if followed with care can make us foot soldiers of the change we each need to become part of. The only kind of eating that will ensure we live a future that shall be as rich as the world of the ancients that gave us the grains we can call upon for our own longevity. If that is something we cherish for ourselves, our children and theirs.

Eat like Maria or how she clearly and passionately instructs us to do so through her great book and you will not only eat better, but also surely become a better human being. This is not the food of isolationists or absolutists if you will. This is the food of people that have lived on the crossroads of cultures and civilizations. This is food that gives universal joy and pleasure. Food that comes without high prices, frivolous and unnecessary ceremony or expense that culls more from showmanship than any artistry or sense of reality.

If you are worried about sourcing grains or shopping for them or handling them, be rest assured. Maria has given you all you need to know and ensured you are given a K-12 education around everything grain related. You will pass out of this grain class knowing any and everything you ought to know to cook with careless abandon. You will master the ancient grains in your modern context. This is cooking people anywhere and of any background can embrace and call their own. Amaranth, a prized grain of the Aztecs will bring magic to your table just as millet, often confused as bird-food, but used happily in India and Africa, will entertain your senses and your guests in ways you never expected.

Buy this book and allow your life to go back in history to ensure your tomorrow and the future of your family and friends is never robbed by the absence of magical grains that have stood the test of time. Maria's are sensible recipes for sensible citizens of the 21st century. Allow her some room in your bookshelves, but most importantly allow her plenty of room at your table, and a large chunk of the real-estate on your plates. Doing so will ensure you eat well, with flavor at helm and are only healthier for it.



Mediterranean Mussels with Farro and White Wine

Serves 3 or 4 as a light main course, or 4 to 6 as a starter

to get a head start: Make the farro, as in step 1, ahead. The stew, as in step 3, can be prepared up to 3 days ahead. Reheat before adding the mussels and farro, as in step 4. The mussels should be bought the day they are cooked. For a speedy, light dish, omit the farro altogether, and do not add the water to the stew.

to vary it: Easily available and affordable pearl barley plumps up nicely to compete with farro in this dish, or simply use leftover brown rice. You will need about 2 cups cooked grain (for cooking instructions, buy the book).

farro

1 1/2 cups water

3/4 cup farro

1 small bay leaf

2 whole peppercorns

Pinch of fine sea salt

stew

2 pounds fresh mussels in their shells

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 cup finely chopped yellow onion (about 1 small)

1 cup thinly sliced carrots (about 2 small)

1 cup thinly sliced celery stalks (1 to 2 pieces)

2 to 3 cloves garlic, lightly crushed

2 teaspoons minced fresh rosemary

2 bay leaves

1 dried red chile

1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

1 1/2 cups dry white wine

1 1/2 cups chopped fresh or diced canned tomatoes with their juices, (one 14-ounce can)

1 1/2 cups water

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon sugar

to finish

2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice, plus lemon wedges to serve

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1/4 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1) To prepare the farro, bring the water, farro, bay leaf, peppercorns, and salt to a boil in a 2-quart saucepan. Decrease the heat to maintain a simmer, cover, and cook until the grain is tender but still slightly chewy, 20 to 25 minutes. Remove the bay leaf, drain any remaining liquid, and set aside.

2) While the farro simmers, rinse the mussels under cold running water, brushing to remove sand and residue on the shells. Remove the beards (hairy clumps around the shell) with tweezers or a sharp knife. Discard chipped mussels. Tap any open mussels and discard if they don't close. Set the cleaned mussels aside.

3) To make the stew, heat the olive oil in a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat until shimmering. Add the onion, carrots, celery, garlic, 1 teaspoon of the rosemary, the bay leaves, chile, and 1/4 teaspoon of the salt. Cook, stirring frequently, until the vegetables soften, 3 to 5 minutes. Increase the heat to medium-high, add 1/4 cup of the white wine, and cook until syrupy and the liquid is almost gone, about 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes, the water, the remaining 1 1/4 cups white wine, the pepper, and the remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt; bring to a boil. Cook, uncovered, at a lively simmer until the carrots are crisp-tender, about 5 minutes. Stir in the sugar.

4) Add the mussels and the farro together with the remaining 1 teaspoon rosemary to the pot and bring to a boil. Cover and steam over medium to medium-high heat, shaking the pot once or twice in between, until the mussels open, 2 to 3 minutes. Remove from the heat, and discard any unopened mussels.

5) To finish, add the lemon juice. Taste for salt and pepper and adjust. Drizzle the mussels with the olive oil and serve right away in deep plates, garnished with parsley and with lemon wedges on the side.

As you can see Maria has a way of making the familiar deeper in mystery. She could have just as well kept the ingredient

list shorter (read simplistic) but she did not. In the additions of the rosemary, bay leaves and chiles into the hot oil and then cooking them for 3-5 minutes, Maria does what Indians have done forever, she coaxes out the flavors of the aromatics and ensures a deep pleasurable enjoyment of these ingredients. The chiles are an American ingredient that the Mediterranean kitchen and of course us Indians all enjoyed using in moderation. Of course sometimes without moderation too. The chiles used can as much sweeten and soften the overall pleasure of a dish as they can make maddeningly spicy a dish made with reckless use of them (sometimes on purpose). The olive oil added before serving as well as the lemon wedge given with each serving ensure a wonderful fruity and grassy front flavor that tells you the author is not robbing you of those extra ingredients that many writers forget to mention. Some keep such little details fugitive and it is this that makes their work good but far from magical. Maria shares willingly and wholly, and that she is using whole grains for the most part or always, only makes the pleasure of using her recipe a whole we may not always find everywhere.

As I mourn the loss of my young father, I am excited to hope for that moment sometime soon, when I am at our farm kitchen, making one of Maria's recipes. Whole grains cast a spell on Maria from when she first chewed a sweet wheat berry concoction during her grandfathers funeral. That pleasure still consumes her with similiary power each time her Greek mother makes her corn polenta. She says, "I crave the tender chewiness of brown rice, the soft, translucent pears of quinoa, and the warming lightness of millet. I love the subtle sweetness of whole oats, the slight sourness of rye, and the pleasing nuttiness of wheat berries."

Reading her words is like being given a class in all things tasty and savory. How I hope that someday every child in America can come to the table with a hunger to enjoy all the many notes of taste that make flavor a magical occurence. Growing up I wanted to taste in each morsel of food a little hot, sour, salty, sweet and bitter. As Maria describes her love of these grains, your palate begins feeling their notes on your tongue. Such is the power of great food, and so it is the gift of Maria Speck's writing, recipes and honesty.

That this book takes you on a journey across the globe (almost!) is an added gift the author gives us. Maria's family reflected two contrasting cultures. Raised by a Greek mother who effortlessly prepared a tomato omelet with feta cheese and served it with huge slices of whole grain bread borrowed from her husband's (Maria's father) German heritage. She combines her mom's Mediterranean cuisine - its simplicity, its rich aromas and flavors, the use of fresh ingredients at their ripest - with the centuries-old traditions of whole grain foods from Northern Europe. But she does not stop there. This book takes you on a journey from Greece to Turkey, from the South of France to Italy, and to Lebanon, adding temptingly delicious meals to your table and taking your world into places your heart may never have desired but now shall forever lust after. Read the book and you will discover countries like India and their riches, and also the joys of innovative tastes that entertain more than just your stomach. In the exchange you will surely get to savor some new textures. Some tender and some toothsome.



Leek Salad with Grilled Haloumi Cheese and Rye Berries

Serves 4 to 6

to get a head start: Make the rye berries, as in step 1, ahead (see page 23). The salad (without the haloumi) can be prepared 4 to 6 hours ahead. Chill, covered. Bring to room temperature before serving.

to vary it: A great stand-in for the rye in this dish would be about 2 cups cooked whole oat berries (for cooking instructions, see page 25).

rye

1 1/2 cups water

3/4 cup rye berries, soaked overnight and drained

salad

2 medium leeks, cleaned and cut into 3/4-inch segments (about 4 cups)

1/2 cup low-sodium chicken broth or vegetable broth

1 (2- by 1-inch) strip orange zest, white pith removed (optional)

1/4 cup chopped oil-packed sun-dried tomatoes, drained, 2 teaspoons oil reserved (see page 138)

1/4 cup chopped fresh mint, plus 2 tablespoons for garnish

2 tablespoons nonpareil capers

3/4 teaspoon fennel seeds

1/4 teaspoon fine sea salt

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

to finish

1/4 pound haloumi cheese

1 1/2 teaspoons dried crumbled oregano or thyme

1/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1/8 teaspoon dried red pepper flakes (optional)

1) To prepare the rye, bring the water and the rye berries to a boil in a small heavy-bottomed saucepan. Decrease the heat to maintain a simmer, cover, and cook until the berries are tender but still slightly chewy, 50 to 60 minutes. Remove from the heat, cover, and steam for 10 to

15 minutes if you have time. Drain any remaining liquid and transfer to a large serving bowl to cool.

2) While the rye cools, prepare the salad. Bring the leeks, chicken broth, and orange zest to a boil in a large saucepan. Decrease the heat to maintain a simmer, cover, and cook until the leeks are soft, 5 to 7 minutes. Drain the leeks, and add them to the serving bowl with the rye berries. Add the sun-dried tomatoes, 1/4 cup of the mint, and the capers, fennel seeds, salt, and pepper. Taste and adjust the seasoning, keeping in mind that capers and haloumi are quite salty.

3) To finish, position a rack about 6 inches below the heat source and preheat the broiler. Cut the haloumi cheese into thin slices, about 1/4 inch thick, and put them on a plate. Sprinkle with the oregano, pepper, pepper flakes, and reserved 2 teaspoons of tomato oil; rub the oil and spices all over to coat the slices on both sides (work gently, as haloumi breaks easily). Transfer the cheese to a medium cast-iron skillet or a broiler pan.

4) Broil the haloumi until the slices just start to brown at the edges, about 5 minutes, turning once with a spatula. (Watch closely as you don't want the cheese to dry out.)

5) Top the salad with the haloumi. Sprinkle with the remaining 2 tablespoons mint, and serve right away.

This recipe brings Lebanon and the neighboring countries onto your table. Citrus, fennel, the assertive taste and flavor of sun-dried tomatoes and mint sing and dance on your taste-buds taking you to places not easily discovered without having to fly to another country. Maria has written this book with a unique passionate sensibility that is engaging in its tone and easily comforting in its voice. Many recipes can be at the dinner table quite fast; others require some time and more importantly the willingness to learn about new ingredients and approach to cooking. None are difficult, and if they seem so, be happy, you will find detailed instructions to guide you along. When she shares a recipe for a slow-rise bread, she also gives us all the tips necessary to make it doable within our schedules.

If you want to learn how to use your nose in addition or to replace your taste buds - read the essay titled "Smelling Cows and Cutlets" and you will find out what I am speaking about. Hindus do not taste food prepared for a meal as they cook. It is believed that tasting defiles the food we are cooking first for the Gods and secondly for us. So instead our sight, our sense of smell and our experience are called upon. Think of this as the utmost exercise in mindful living. And so, cooks allow their experience and their sense of smell to guide them to cooking perfectly. It should be no surprise to us that Maria has done this without this knowledge. Of course that she is married to an Indian and has traveled to India has given her a heightened understanding of this way of cooking. Now we can all get more mindful in our kitchens and shall have Maria Speck to thank us for another awakening.

Maria shows her openness and practical way of thinking by including recipes without whole grains. Recipes that pair beautifully with dishes that engage whole grains. She has also shared some lusciously decadent desserts into the book. A treat for all of us that come to the table for a new journey led by the wise and honest Maria Speck.

Maria has an infectious passion that is contagious beyond measure. That she shares the names and stories of those that infected her with her own passion, makes this book both a wonderful read and a tome to learn cooking from. Teaching us

to use the best ingredients and whole grains is not an easy task, but Maria does so with elegance and grace. Maria teaches us about pairing unique flavors of grains with fish, cheese, fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices. She makes these pairings become marriages that are happy and stand the test of time. One could call her a "locavore" but that is hardly who Maria Speck is and who she wants us to be. She is just another person, but one that wants to eat well and does all it takes to get there. She will open up a culinary universe for you that will be easy, doable, inexpensive if you shop wisely and always inspiring. Bring Maria Speck into your world and at your table, and you very well will start living a new life.



The picture above shows Bittersweet Koliva. The recipe shares her memories of her Greek grandfather and German father. It also takes Maria back to what she calls one of the saddest days of her life. She was all of six years old when her family gathered together at a cemetery in Thessaloniki to commemorate the passing of her Greek grandfather, Papous. Everyone attending was given a little white paper bag containing a traditional wheat berry concoction called Koliva. This is when Maria discovered that concoction of sweet wheat berries I mention above. Her discovery, has given me a sweet moment - an aside, as I deal with some tough times in my own life. Thanks Maria!

The cinnamon and cumin scented grains helped Maria forget the seriousness of the occasion and get blissfully lost in the world of sweet-chewy berries. Of course the berries got help from roasted walnuts and sugar coated almonds. The starchy and succulent centers of the chewy grains making for an addictive contrast to the nutty-crunch of the nuts. It was the wailing of her grandmother and mom that reminded Maria not to show too much exuberance over her discovery of this amazing confection/concoction in her hands. The aching sadness of the occasion made the berries seem that much sweeter. That Maria made the recipe shared in the book years later at the demise of her father, makes my own mourning for my father seem so very special and now connected. I am looking forward to being back home at the farm. Finding

finally the opportunity to try out the Koliva recipe. A very American homage to my young father who lived a very full and secular life. Maria Speck has given me many reasons to be proud of her writing and this book. Her recipes, her philosophy around cooking and dining are exactly in sync with my own beliefs. Something tells me my father would be very proud of me taking this time away from the family to work on the blog post on Maria and her book whilst the rest of my family celebrates his life and person. Whilst Maria ate Koliva and found some solace, I find solace in sharing her life and work with all that come into my world and visit the blog. I feel my father will live in the lives and tables of all that will cook as Maria urges us to. Enriched with the ancient whole grains that are so comforting if discovered and also endlessly live-giving.

Join Maria on [Facebook](#)

Follow Maria on Twitter [@MariaSpeck](#)

About Maria

Maria Speck grew up in Greece and Germany before moving to the United States as a young adult. She is a writer and journalist, and has contributed to *Gourmet*, *Saveur*, and *Gastronomica*, as well as *Marie Claire* and *Elle*. Her popular cooking classes in Cambridge, Massachusetts, focus on the flavors and cooking styles of the Mediterranean and on creating meals with whole grains.

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Photo credit: Sara Remington © 2011

PS: If you watched Top Chef Masters, Season 3, you know burgers, especially the burgers made without beef seemed to have caused quite some noise. Luckily for me, Maria Speck is one of those exceptions to mindful eating that does not make much noise about eating well. She just does it. She has no agenda around how one eats. She has come to cooking in a manner that is intrinsically healthful and delicious at the same time. Her burger hints will ensure you eat burgers, but of the kind that sate your hunger without killing your insides. Of course neither Maria nor I will ever push vegetarianism on anyone. A good cook or chef cooks all ingredients so well and flavorfully that you do not crave just animal protein. They celebrate foods of all kinds and through the cookery are able to give the person cooking from their recipe a dish that will not rob them of joy, but instead even offer new discoveries even as you feed your stomach.

A smart cook does not come to mindful living, or diet by thinking that just portion reduction can change their life. Maria Speck speaks also about dieting in the books pages. In fact she shares quickly articulately how diets have failed her. She lives mindfully today, she has guiding principles that shape her choices and form her lifestyle. We have much to learn from this author. I hope you have already placed an order for her book. If you have, and want yet another few hints for a better life - read further and you shall also learn some tips about making burgers using whole grains.

Grain Burger Basics (page 133, Ancient Grains for Modern Meals)

Nothing beats grain cakes and burgers when you have leftover grain from last night's dinner. Instead of reheating the grain, which can be oh-so-boring, use it to create a flavorful new centerpiece of a meal, or make it into an innovative side—this is how grain cakes were invented in the first place. The recipes in this chapter are meant to inspire you and generally work best when you use leftover grain, or cook the grain the night before. Before long, you will come up with your own creations.

If you are not familiar with making whole grain cakes and burgers, give yourself a break if they don't turn out perfect the first time around. As with all cooking, it does take a bit of practice to form a grain burger so that it retains its shape and doesn't fall apart when cooked or flipped. Here are some tricks to help you along:

- if you have time, make your grains the night before (when not using leftover grains). Chilling hardens the starch in grains—it's called retrogradation—which makes it easier to shape them into burgers or cakes. The starches will soften again when heated.
- Don't shape grain burgers into roundish mounds. They will hold up better if they are formed instead into flat cakes shaped like a car tire, an even thickness all around.
- Most grain cakes hold up better when chilled for 30 minutes, which also means you can make them ahead, often up to 6 hours. So don't skip this step, especially when you are still practicing the shaping. Plus, start with a smaller size, by making, for example, twelve smaller 2-inch burgers instead of eight larger ones.
- Chopping add-ins such as onions and sun-dried tomatoes finely (about 1/8 inch dice) also helps the mixture to come and stay together.
- And last but not least, always use a gentle hand when turning the burgers in the pan or on the baking sheet.

Over the years, i have tried many different cooking methods to coax the most flavor out of whole grain cakes and fritters. i believe nothing beats pan-frying in a bit of olive oil in a cast-iron skillet. This browning in a little fat unlocks their flavors beautifully, and it's also what my Greek grandmother always did, albeit using olive oil by the truckload. One more plus for the diet-conscious: i have noticed that i actually eat less of pan-fried cakes compared to baked ones—i find them more satisfying.

However, if you wish, by all means bake your grain patties in a preheated 425°F oven. Place them on a well-oiled baking sheet, brush the tops with olive oil or spray with cooking spray, and bake for 10 to 14 minutes on each side or until they are nicely browned, turning them carefully once and brushing or spraying with oil again.

All grain cakes, including the buckwheat-feta burgers and the quinoa cakes, are perfect for a party buffet, as they can be prepared ahead and served at room temperature. When serving them this way, i like to shrink them for bite-size appeal.

Instead of 8 large burgers or cakes, you can prepare 16 smaller cakes about 2 inches in diameter, or 32 for the zucchini-dill bites (page 141). Once you have divided the grain mixture inside the bowl into eight equal portions, form 2 cakes (instead of 1) out of each portion. Pan-fry, as directed, about 3 minutes on each side. Or bake as described above, 7 to 10 minutes on each side, or until golden brown.

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Dear Suvir,

As you mourn your loss, it is heartwarming to witness how the power of wholesome and delicious food and of Maria's beautiful words can bring comfort in moments like these, for food is sustenance not only for the body but also for our hearts. Wishing that you continue to heal and that memories dear, held closely in your heart, continue to fill the void left by such a monumental loss. Having Maria's book by your side will undoubtedly make the journey a bit sweeter. Best wishes for you and yours.

Posted by: Sandra Gutierrez | [Thursday, June 09, 2011 at 10:29 PM](#)



Dearest Suvir-

I just recently learned about your papa--so sorry you and your family are dealing with this loss. Thoughts and prayers being send to you from Minnesota... blessings to you. xo CC

Posted by: Carolyn C. | [Sunday, June 12, 2011 at 08:54 AM](#)



Suvir - So sorry to hear about your dad. Such a young age! I hope you will find some peace in his memories and legacies.

May his soul rest in peace and tranquility!

Warmest regards,

Hafiz

Posted by: [weekendfarmer](#) | [Monday, June 13, 2011 at 11:00 AM](#)



Dear Suvir -

Just found out yesterday about your Father's passing. I'm so sorry to hear it. My condolences to you and your family. I'll bet he was an amazing man.

Another absorbing blog - with gorgeous recipes and food philosophies. I do resonate with Maria's way.

May you continue to be nurtured with good food and people during your mourning.

Much Love

Stacey

Posted by: [Stacey](#) | [Monday, June 13, 2011 at 10:02 PM](#)



Suvir my dear,

I am so happy you are back blogging. Following you on Twitter is not my thing. I will be most happy when you return to the States and I can see you again. You certainly make whole grains sound wonderful and appealing....Oh Dr. Atkins what should I do?

Safe travels.

Betty

Posted by: Elizabeth Osborne | [Wednesday, June 15, 2011 at 06:27 AM](#)



Dear Suvir,

I'm so sorry to hear about the loss of your father. It gets easier but you never get over it - he's with you always. May you remember the sweet times.

Wishing you peace,
Lisa

Posted by: Lisa Malmarowski | [Wednesday, June 15, 2011 at 02:22 PM](#)



suvir, very sorry to hear about your father- i have been a huge fan of yours since the late 90s- it's so inspiring to see how and where you are now. x shayma

Posted by: [shayma](#) | [Tuesday, June 28, 2011 at 10:47 PM](#)



Lisa and Shayma - Thanks for your kind words. Mean a lot to me.
Hope you are well and enjoying the summer.

Posted by: [Suvir Saran](#) | [Friday, July 01, 2011 at 08:55 AM](#)

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