

COVER STORY

A renegade story in more ways

Against all odds, a new book shares the life and recipes of Paula Wolfert

than one

By Sarah Fritsche

"It never happens that you meet your idol and they're even cooler in person than they are in your dreams," says writer Emily Kaiser Thelin.

In 2005, Thelin not only met her culinary idol, legendary cookbook author Paula Wolfert, she planted the seeds of a working relationship that, over the course of the following decade, would grow into so much more. Thelin's biography-meets-cookbook, "Unforgettable: The Bold Flavors of Paula Wolfert's Renegade Life" (Mortar & Pestle; 336 pages; \$35), is the result of that relationship.

"She's such an amazing and rich combination of relentless and exhausting high standards," says Thelin, who spent hundreds of hours interviewing and cooking with Wolfert, now 78.

Decades before Yotam Ottolenghi and Michael Solomonov made their names celebrating the flavors of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle East, Wolfert traveled and wrote about the region, publishing eight seminal cookbooks, including her 1973 landmark debut, "Couscous and Other Good Food from Morocco."

In addition to her prolific public cooking persona, it turns out Wolfert — whom Thelin says possesses "a humility that (doesn't) match the scale of her accomplishments" — has had one hell of an adventurous personal life.

Cookbook legend Paula Wolfert (left) laughs with Emily Kaiser Thelin, the author of "Unforgettable: The Bold Flavors of Paula Wolfert's Renegade Life."



 Wolfert's rise as a culinarian is chronicled in tender, yet warts-and-all, detail. The book details her early efforts to escape her Flatbush upbringing in New York, where, thanks to her mother's propensity to diet, she grew up on melon, iceberg lettuce and cottage cheese. Visits to rural New Jersey to stay with her paternal grandparents introduced her to flavorful Balkan dishes like ajvar.

Despite the lackluster early years, food-wise, Wolfert found her way to the kitchen and began to thrive. The section on her time working under James Beard is a hoot, as is the anecdote about an exchange with Jack Kerouac at a cocktail party.

Wolfert never became as big a household name as, say, Julia Child, who once wrote that she considered Wolfert "one of the few food writers whose recipes I trust." Praised in savvy and professional culinary circles, Wolfert's highly detailed recipes were often considered too challenging by mainstream cooks. And although hosting a television show, like Child, might have seemed a natural next step, Wolfert didn't really want mass fame or to make the concessions necessary to do so.

In recent years, Wolfert — who has lived in Sonoma with her husband, author William Bayer, for nearly 20 years — has been tackling a challenge far more daunting than cooking. In 2013, she was diagnosed with dementia, a devastating blow that has affected her memory and her sense of taste.

However, Wolfert has refused to feel sorry for herself. She's approached the diagnosis much the same way she did her cookbooks: through performing detailed research, keeping a photo archive and diving head-first into a new culinary regimen — all in an effort to stall the inevitable progression of the illness.

Thelin, who lives in Berkeley, began working with Wolfert in 2006 as an editor at Food & Wine magazine, and in 2008, she traveled to Morocco with her for a profile. It was in 2010, prior to Wolfert's diagnosis, that Thelin floated the idea of a biography past the author.

"She thought it was ridiculous. 'Who'd want to read about me?'" Thelin recalls Wolfert saying.

Following the diagnosis, it became all the more pressing for Thelin to bring the author's personal story to life — but Wolfert's skepticism proved correct.

For a cook whom many in the food industry revere on the same scale as



Photo courtesy Paula Wolfert



Photo courtesy Paula Wolfert

From left: Paula Wolfert as a child with her mother; Wolfert at a New York restaurant in the 1980s with Jean-Louis Palladin; Wolfert (second from left) with S.F. friends, including Alice Waters and Peggy Knickerbocker (second and third from right, respectively).



Photo courtesy Paula Wolfert

Marcella Hazan, Diana Kennedy and Madhur Jaffrey, you'd think enticing a publishing house to sign off on a biography would be a cinch. But nearly a dozen publishers passed on the project, implying that although Wolfert's story was interesting, her time had passed.

After Thelin told food photographer Eric Wolfinger about publishers passing on the book proposal, she and Wolfinger decided to take it into

their own hands. "Eric was like, 'Forget about them. We'll do it ourselves,'" Thelin says.

In addition to Wolfinger, Thelin assembled a crack team of cookbook pros, including Andrea Nguyen ("The Pho Cookbook"), who served as the book's editor, and art director Toni Tajima ("Manresa").

In 2015, Thelin and her crew launched a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter. "Our only desire was

to raise the money to do a really beautiful book," Thelin says.

The campaign did more than that, hitting its goal of \$45,000 in just four days. The project raised a total of \$91,465 from 1,112 backers, including local chefs such as Joyce Goldstein, Amaryll Schwertner and Charles Phan. Dozens of other industry luminaries, including Pim Techamuanvith, April Bloomfield and Mario Batali, donated dinners and other special

items as rewards to campaign donors.

"Our jaws were on the floor. The outpouring of support was unbelievable," says Thelin. "All these food heroes of mine, who regard Paula as their food hero — everyone saw merit to it. It was so gratifying and exciting."

In many ways, Thelin and her team's rigorous and market-be-damned approach to getting the book published was much like the subject

herself.

Wolfert "published a cookbook on Moroccan cooking when there were not tajines in America," Thelin says. "She wouldn't let anything stop her. I like that we adopted her renegade spirit."

Sarah Fritsche is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: sfritsche@sfchronicle.com Twitter/Instagram: @foodcentric



Eric Wolfinger

Paula Wolfert's Ajvar

Makes 2 to 2½ cups

"Proust had madeleines; Paula Wolfert has eggplants," notes Emily Kaiser Thelin in "Unforgettable" (Mortar & Pestle; 336 pages; \$35). Wolfert's love of nightshades dates back to childhood. Adapted from the book, this is Wolfert's best guess at her grandmother's recipe for the Balkan eggplant spread she grew up eating. It's a great accompaniment for grilled meats as well as thick slices of crusty bread, and its flavor improves as it sits; in fact, Wolfert recommends letting it sit overnight before serving. Refrigerate leftovers for up to one week.

3 or 4 sweet red bell peppers (about 4 ounces each)

1 poblano pepper (about 4 ounces)

2 eggplants (about 12 ounces each)

2 garlic cloves, peeled

½ teaspoon flaky sea salt

¼ cup extra virgin olive oil + more for topping

1 tablespoon unfiltered cider vinegar

Heaping ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

Pinch of mild red pepper flakes, preferably Aleppo or Marash (optional)

Pinch of cayenne pepper (optional)

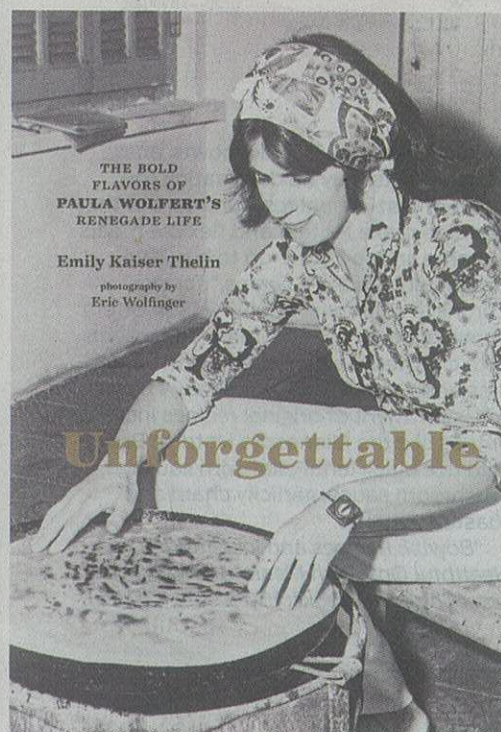
Instructions: Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

Char the red bell peppers and poblano pepper by setting them directly on a gas burner with the flame turned to medium-high and rotating them as they blacken. If the skins are fully charred but the flesh is not yet tender, transfer the peppers to a foil-lined sheet pan and bake until soft to the point of collapsing, 10 to 25 minutes depending on the thickness of the peppers.

Pierce the eggplants a few times with a sharp knife. Set them on a foil-lined sheet pan and bake until soft to the point of collapsing, 30 to 40 minutes.

Transfer the vegetables to a large bowl, cover with a plate or plastic wrap, and let steam and cool.

Using your fingers or a paring knife, peel the eggplants and the peppers. Remove any large seed pockets in the eggplant, and then stem and seed



the peppers. Transfer the vegetables to a large bowl. Using your hands, pull the peppers and eggplant apart into chunks, then massage them between your fingers to form a coarse paste. Set aside.

Using a mortar and pestle, the back of a heavy knife and a cutting board, or a mini food processor, crush together the garlic and salt, forming a paste. Add the garlic paste, olive oil, vinegar, black pepper and the red pepper flakes and cayenne, if using, to the eggplant mixture and mix well. Taste and adjust the seasoning with more vinegar, salt, and black, red and cayenne pepper if needed.

Transfer to a jar and top with ¼-inch layer of olive oil. Cover tightly and refrigerate at least overnight before serving. Season lightly once more before serving.



Eric Wolfinger

Paula Wolfert's Mint & Egg Salad

Serves 4 as a first course or side dish

"This is nothing like your grandmother's egg salad," writes Emily Kaiser Thelin. Rather than a mayonnaise-based salad, this adapted recipe tosses grated eggs with slivered mint leaves and green onion in a light dressing of olive oil and lemon. Grating the eggs results in an ethereally light texture.

- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup slivered mint leaves
- 1 cup thinly sliced green onions, white and green parts
- 2 teaspoons mild red pepper flakes, preferably Marash

- 2 tablespoons fruity extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of ½ lemon
- Flaky sea salt

Instructions: In a small saucepan, combine the eggs with water to cover by 2 inches and bring to a boil over high heat. Lower the heat to medium-high and cook for 6 minutes. Drain and place under cool running water to cool. Peel the eggs.

Using the large holes of a box grater, and working over a large bowl, grate the eggs. Add the mint, green onions and red pepper flakes and mix well. In a small bowl, whisk together the olive oil and lemon juice to taste, then drizzle over the egg mixture and toss to coat lightly and evenly. Season with salt. Serve at room temperature or slightly chilled.