



New Albanian Cuisine

Mediterranean, Modern, *Mullixhiu*

Bledar Kola's Best Recipes

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»You only love Albania if you've been away.
I went away to come back.«

Bledar Kola

The Story of Bledar Kola

A summer Sunday afternoon in the park, families strolling, lots of children. Pink candy floss, popcorn and crêpes spread with chocolate. A beergarden by an artificial lake. The houses pre- and postmodern, without any obvious masterplan. And amidst all of this, completely unexpected, in the basement of a red-clad 1970s highrise: Restaurant Mullixhiu. Just a glass door removed from the postcommunist consumption binge of the capital (as Billy Wagner of Berlin's Nobelhart & Schmutzig likes to put it), wheat is trickling onto three steadily rattling, clicking stone mills, and the smell of fresh flour and dark, heavy bread is beguiling. Mullixhiu means »miller,« and stepping through this door is in fact a trip through space and time into a simple wooden hut high up in the mountains of Albania's north. The tables scrubbed clean, the floor covered in wide, well-worn boards, in one corner an open oven with a blazing fire.



But Bledar Kola, who opened Mullixhiu in February 2016, is no miller. He is a chef. Behind glass-clad shelves at the back of the supposedly wooden hut hides a narrow modern professional kitchen – this is the nucleus of a new Albania.

Albania. What do we know about this country? Not enough. A protracted communist dictatorship, complete isolation. At the same time, it is a country in the very centre of Europe, bordering Greece and ruled by the Turks for more than 500 years, surrounded by many other Balkan cultures, neighbouring Italy on the Adriatic and the Ionic Sea. Former pawn of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire and western great powers, small and yet so complex and multifaceted from sea shore to snow-covered Alpine peaks. Greek orthodox, catholics and muslims coexisting peacefully for the most part, powerful clans and families ruling alongside the central government. A cultural identity based above all on a common language, reaching beyond national borders. Albanian, as distinctive as only Basque and a few other languages, is Indogermanic with many borrowings from other Balkan languages as well as Turkish and Italian, and in spite of the Romans' historic presence it has never been romanised. Mooleedjoo.

This very unusual situation is best grasped, in fact tasted, on the plate (and in the glass!). Pasta encounters byrek and polenta meets biryani, with an abundance of Mediterranean fruit and vegetables along with the products of mountain pastures and a long sea coast.

Do you know the land where the lemon trees grow, in darkened leaves the gold-oranges glow, a soft wind blows from the pure blue sky, the myrtle stands mute, and the bay-tree high? Perhaps – and it's tempting to imagine – Goethe travelled beyond Italy and found himself on the shores of an unknown land, equally blessed by nature, with the same heartfelt hospitality and Mediterranean zest for life. Bledar Kola intends to put Albania on to the regional culi-



nary map, just as René Redzepi achieved for Nordic cuisine with Noma in Copenhagen 15 years ago.

Bledar Kola is born in Mabë, a small village 20 kilometers north of Lezha, in 1984. »I was very lucky not to grow up under the communist regime,« he says – with quiet, dark eyes and wearing a long apron and white blouse instead of a regular chef's jacket. »Every dictatorship is terrible, but ours also destroyed history, culture, religion and traditions.« His father is the village's schoolteacher, his mother looks after the household. Like his three siblings Bledar experiences the aftermath of an absurd and brutal dictatorship that scars the country and its inhabitants to this day. But life on the small subsistence farms goes on, people are closely connected to the land and the animals: »Just like all our neighbours we had a cow, a few pigs that were slaughtered in the winter, chickens and one or two goats. I know exactly how long it takes for a hen to lay an egg, how much labour it takes to grow corn and wheat.«

»Every dictatorship is terrible, but ours also destroyed history, culture, religion and traditions.«

At school Bledar learns Italian, at home his father teaches the children English. Like his brother and sisters, Bledar doesn't see any prospects for himself in Albania. At only 15 years of age, he moves first to Turin and lives with one of his sisters: »I didn't do anything, I was just glad to be away.« Three months later, he moves on to London, joining his brother who finds him a job as a plongeur, before his uncle gets him a slightly better job at the Buckinghamshire Golf



Club. There he is allowed to help in the kitchen, showing so much skill that the Austrian souschef registers him for two culinary courses at Thames Valley University: This is the moment that Bledar Kola becomes a trained, professional chef.

And as such he moves on, aged 19, to a German café and bakery in London: »A posh area. Ozzie Osbourne used to drop in.« He goes back home to see his parents once, but otherwise keeps away from his compatriots and carefully avoids confronting his roots, which are associated with so many negative connotations. »Albanian was a word that made everybody immediately think you were a criminal and drugdealer. I thought long and hard about how to reply when being asked where I came from. With Albania and Kosovo you immediately lost all credit. Turkey or Greece wasn't possible as I didn't speak those languages. In the end I decided to say I came from Montenegro. Nobody knew where and what that was anyhow, it sounded Italian, was only a few kilometers from my real home and like our region it was Roman Catholic, so I felt it wasn't really a lie.«

He works hard, is hired as chef de partie at the St James's, a traditional gentleman's private club in Mayfair. From there he moves on to Michelin-starred Pied à Terre and is sent for a stage to Le Gavroche. But then he's had enough: In 2007 he decides to go back home, to finally confront his roots and accept his identity. »I had no idea who I was. My mates in London thought I was crazy – I had made it! – and back in Albania everybody was still trying to get out. Whereas I wanted to go back and do something with Albanian cuisine...«

His parents, however, are happy to see their son. For six months he just hangs about in the village and tries to reinvent himself as Albanian. Not an easy feat. In the end he accepts a job at a restaurant near Tirana – but still feels profoundly disorientated. The capital wants international cuisine, without providing the necessary ingredients; they tell him he can't cook, to return to London.

Finally, after three long and frustrating, even desperate years, he is offered a job at La Bohème, a hotel restaurant in the centre of Tirana whose owner allows to create a high quality, modern Albanian fusion cuisine. He also encourages him to go away again during the summer when the whole of Tirana moves to the sea and its beaches. And at that point, in 2010, Bledar Kola knows exactly where he wants to go: to Copenhagen, to Noma, to work under René Redzepi. Sure, Redzepi so far had carefully avoided any mentioning of his own Albanian roots, instead referring to his father as Macedonian. »But I knew he was Albanian,« says Bledar Kola. Redxhepi is a common Albanian surname. »And so I just sent him an email.« To which he got a prompt and positive reply: pack your

»Noma helped me find myself, gave me self-confidence. If the nordic countries could reinvent themselves, the same had to be possible in Albania.«

things and come to Copenhagen.

»Soon after that I was standing, together with 16 other stagiaires from all over the world, on the second floor above the restaurant, cleaning wood sorrel. I felt extremely shy and nervous and thought I looked horribly Albanian. René made his round as he does every morning and talked to everybody. I tried to be invisible, as I knew that here Montenegro wouldn't be an option. But there he was: »And where are you from?« I tried to cower even more and mumbled »from Albania...« There was no escape. »What are you saying? I can't hear you.« He forced me to say it loud and clear, because he knew what it meant for both of us: »I'm from Albania.« At that he put his arm around my shoulder and said to the group: »Did you hear that, you know my father also comes from Albania, so take good care of this guy!« The next day I was done with herb-cleaning, and for the following six weeks worked in the pastry section with the formidable Rosio Sanchez.«

The following year Bledar Kola is back at Noma and in the summer of 2012 he goes to the north of Sweden for a few weeks to work at Fäviken with Magnus Nilsson, equally renowned, and an equally defining experience: »They worked so hard to make things so simple,« he recalls, still in amazement.

»We had to find ourselves, and that's what we are doing up to this day.«

Gradually he begins to see things more clearly. The time in London was fantastic and a great success, but at the end of the day had been all about classic French haute cuisine – something he does not want and cannot do in Albania. »Noma helped me find myself out, gave me self-confidence. I started to treat people differently. René knew what it meant to be different. He'd found the courage to do without foie gras and camembert. If the nordic countries could reinvent their culinary identity, the same had to be possible in Albania.«

That still leaves the question of what exactly he was supposed to do next. It takes a few other jobs in and around Tirana until the knot unravels, thanks to a project started by two brothers in a neighbouring village. Of the same age as Bledar Kola, they had returned from Italy to open an agriturismo, a restaurant using the produce of local farmers. Which resulted in Mrizi a Zanave, inspired by the Slow Food Association's principles, which turned out rather stylish for a rural setting, and up to this day focusses on luring well-heeled Tiranians to take the 80km drive north from the capital.

The brothers try to hire Bledar Kola as their chef de cuisine. But he categorically refuses to live and work in the countryside. If he's to work in Albania, it must be in the city, in Tirana. This indecisiveness continues for some time, until at Christmas 2015, the brothers and Bledar find themselves sitting together once more, celebrating, eating, drinking – and suddenly they have an idea. Why not join forces and open a second restaurant, the very opposite of Mrizi a Zanave: a rural oasis in the centre of Tirana, linking countryside and city. Ten tables, the kitchen entirely based on what the local farmers around Lezha produce – and as is the custom in rural areas, mill stones to grind the corn as needed. Bledar Kola instantly loves the simplicity of the idea. And Mullixhiu is born.

It's a characteristic of life in Albania that for a long time nothing seems to happen and then change comes suddenly, with amazing speed. Within a month Bledar Kola finds a suitable location. Working as a private chef for an international group of diplomats, he is well connected. Another month and the walls are covered in recycled wood, three millstones installed, ovenbricks laid. A walk-in fridge awaits deliveries from Lezha and the kitchen is ready. »I really put my back into this idea: what does it mean, being a miller? They were always poor, so we strived to make this come alive, what it means to live in the countryside and grind wheat, rye, oat, barley and maize for your bread and pasta. The napkins in the tables' drawers are mended, everybody grabs their own fork and knife, and with our tasting menu we try to reinterpret traditional elements.« In the beginning the restaurant had no music, just the mill stones' rhythmic noise. »But we found that a bit too monotonous after all!«

From the start it is a daring balancing-act, and the reaction in Tirana is little more than tepid. For this is neither glamorous food served in sophisticated surroundings designed to attract a star-sprinkled clientele and impress a potential business partner. Nor is it the solid and affordable fare most Albanians eat everyday. »We only hired people who we knew and trusted to stick with us. We had to find ourselves, and that's what we are doing up to this day,« says Bledar Kola, nowadays constantly busy between his smartphone, the stove, side projects like a foodtruck and press interviews from all over the world, and yet completely focussed on every table. »In the beginning it was more than tough, and without that article in The Independent that summer, which featured us and Albanian cuisine, who knows if Mullixhiu would still be around.«

Establishing your own identity and gaining self-confidence is what René Redzepi succeeded in doing for northern Europe and it is what Bledar Kola is offering us for Albania. The new Albanian cuisine isn't complicated – on the contrary. And coming from this particular chef it isn't overly rich or heavy on spices either: he wants the ingredients to receive all the attention. It's a cuisine that wherever it finds itself – on a distant mountainside or the center of a city – brings us back to the wheatfield and the cooking fire. Albania's culinary love-affair is with both olive oil and butter, especially the taste of brown butter, but at the same time with the freshness of yogurt and salads. It is a cuisine based on the best possible ingredients – which is not only absolutely modern but also refers (in one of life's ironic twists) back to France: *Faites simple, keep it simple*, was Auguste Escoffier's well-worn mantra. For Bledar Kola, however, this doesn't mean truffles and jus de viande, but the time it



»That traditional cooking survived at all is thanks to the grandmothers, they safeguarded it during communism, they are the heroes.«



takes to knead and roll your pasta by hand: »Everything needs time, and not just time to grow.«

Bledar Kola knows from his own experience that present and future grow from the past. »That traditional cooking survived at all is thanks to the grandmothers,« he says, »they safeguarded it during communism, they are the heroes.« With that in mind, he started an initiative, the food festival Rrno, in September 2017. The idea behind the festival is to connect the old ladies not only with successful chefs of Albanian diaspora, who live and work in Milan, Copenhagen and New York and who did not return home as he did, but also the new generation of young chef apprentices. Perhaps they will leave their native land one day, but he wants them to return and he is very aware of the need for positive role-models. Because, for sure, not all is going well in Albania – »in the last few years we have made many mistakes – it is difficult for those who have always lived in a cage to get used to freedom.«

At Mullixhiu he makes an effort to keep the prices low, in spite of the growing international attention, and the atmosphere informal. Most dishes are served in communal bowls, children often play among the tables. Connecting with farmers and shepherds, building networks to help local products, securing incomes, safeguarding the future and raising awareness and pride in national identity are equally as important.

An excellent example for this is mishavinë, the traditional cheese of the Albanian Alps. It represents an exception in a country where usually the only differentiation is between djathë, cheese stored in brine called feta in Greece, and kaçkavall, dry-ripened wheels. The small, pale yellow chunks of mishavinë smell of mountain-goats and wild-pastured sheep; on the palate it feels first crumbly, then powdery and finally creamy, transporting us into warm winter stables, is an invitation to join the shepherds at table. Its acidity is evocative of another traditional cheese-family, Anatolian bag-ripened tulum. In fact, for mishavinë, salted, dried curd is broken up and pressed into small wooden barrels which are then sealed with drawn butter and left to ripen for two or three months. Mishavinë had almost disappeared – just three families were still making it – when the Slow Food Association took it under its wing, providing support. With the help of government money, a road to that remote area in the north has now been built. Meanwhile, training and language courses have been organised. As a result, the women of Lepushë and Vermosh have embraced cheesemaking as a means





to an independent life – while Bledar Kola makes sure there is a sustainable market for their cheese.

There are many products like mishavinë, not to mention the wine that has excellent indigenous varieties such as kallmet and shesh to offer. If language is an indication of how a nation thinks and lives, you'll be obliged to wrap your mind and tongue around the basics of Albanian, taking note that ›ë‹ sounds like ›uh‹, ›q‹ is more like ›ch‹, that ›dh‹ resembles the English ›th‹ and that ›j‹ is pronounced, appropriately enough, as in charming and jolly.

And once you understand that this is a land and people like no other, Albania will feel as familiar as the land where lemon trees grow. A land where an unquenchable zest for life can be read on faces and minds and people's hearts. A land where, in spite of all of history's burdens, you can eat and drink contentedly and well in the company of those who appreciate, as well as any nation on earth, the importance of the good things of life.





Zucchini and plum salad

Sallatë me lule kungulli dhe kumbulla

A very refreshing, savoury salad with a lovely fruity touch. Don't worry if you can't find zucchini flowers, just combine oil and vinegar into a dressing and use this instead.

FOR THE DRESSING:

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|---------------------------|---|
| 15 zucchini flowers | Thinly slice the zucchini flowers, reserving some as garnish, and blend in a mixer for a few minutes, |
| 5 tbs olive oil | |
| 1 tbs apple cider vinegar | slowly adding the olive oil, the vinegar, and finally the ice. Let the |
| 5 ice cubes | machine run until the ice has been fully incorporated as this will |
| | help the sauce to thicken. |
| salt | Season with salt |

FOR THE SALAD:

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|----------------------------------|---|
| 4 medium zucchini (100 g each) | With a very sharp knife slice the zucchini as thinly as possible. |
| 3 large red plums (100 g each).. | Halve and stone the plums and olives (if desired) and slice them |
| 100 g black olives | equally thinly. Mix zucchini, plums and olives in a salad bowl, |
| (optional) | pour the zucchini flower dressing over the salad and garnish with |
| | the reserved flowers |

Pumpkin and persimmon salad

Kungull dimëror, hurmë dhe domate e tharë

A very beautiful salad, a real feast for the eyes in bright orange. Again, a savoury salad with a refreshing fruity touch. Stoneless varieties of persimmon are best suited, as they have more acidity.

400 g butternut pumpkin/
squash, deseeded and peeled
(about 500g to start with)..... Slice the pumpkin very thinly using a peeler or a mandolin.

1 persimmon fruit (about 250 g) Halve the persimmons and cut into equally thin slices.

100 g sundried tomatoes Cut the tomatoes in slices.

2 tbs olive oil

1 tbs apple cider vinegar

salt

pepper Combine all three in a salad bowl with the oil and vinegar, seasoning with salt and pepper – that's it!





Cold yogurt soup with cucumber, garlic and mint

Tarator

Yes, this reminds us of Greek tzatziki and Turkish cacık, but here it takes the form of a cold soup, very light and wonderfully refreshing. Bledar Kola serves two versions: a drink made with the cucumber skins and a soup using the pulp.

FOR THE SOUP:

- 1 large English cucumber
(about 600 g) Peel the cucumber, reserving the skin for the drink, and coarsely grate it.
- ½ TL Salz
2 cloves garlic Squeeze the garlic to a pulp with the back of a large knife, adding a bit of salt.
- ½ bunch fresh mint, leaves
only Finely chop the mint and dill.
- 1 tbs fresh dill
4 tbs olive oil
700 g yogurt..... Combine everything in a large bowl with the yogurt, and season with the oil, salt and pepper. Refrigerate for two hours before serving.
salt
pepper

FOR THE DRINK:

- 1 clove garlic Halve the garlic clove and rub the inside of a blender with it (alternatively you can use a handheld blender, then rub the inside of the bowl you're using).
- skins of a large English
cucumber..... Blend the cucumber skins, mint, dill, oil and yogurt to a smooth green drink, season with salt and pepper, and refrigerate for two hours before serving.
- ½ bunch fresh mint leaves 1 tbs
fresh dill
450 g yogurt
1,5 tbs olive oil
salt
pepper

Bittersweet pumpkin with flatbread

Kungull dimëror me petë të pjekur

Bledar Kola says he had the idea for this deconstructed byrek, originally a pie with a pumpkin and egg filling within multilayered phyllo dough, when he tasted the bitter juice of the roasted pumpkin, a stark contrast to the sweet pumpkin flesh. When eating combine all ingredients for the »byrek feeling« of this very elegant dish.

FOR THE BREAD:

60 g phyllo or strudel dough ... Preheat the oven to 180°C. Spread the dough on a sheet and bake (or you could use your own flatbread from the »byrek« bruschetta recipe) to a golden brown – this takes only a few minutes! Break into large pieces and set aside.

500 g pumpkin, Half and deseed the pumpkin, place in a shallow dish and roast preferably the top of a large butternut, in the very hot oven for about an hour, until soft and burnt on the outside. When cool enough to handle, peel, replace the skins in the roasting dish, cover with cold water and simmer for 30 min to extract all the flavour and dissolve the caramelized roasting juices. or hokkaido Drain, season with a few drops of lemon juice and salt and set aside (you should have about 150 ml).

½ lemon
salt

TO SERVE:

4 tbs smoked ricotta, grated (alternatively: aged pecorino) Cut the pumpkin flesh into eight rectangular pieces, place on a small oven tray and top with the grated cheese. Reheat in the oven until the cheese starts to colour. Place the pumpkin in deep plates, pour the hot bitter juice around it and top with the broken dough. Serve immediately.





Dromësa with olives and ricotta

Dromësa me djathë mishavinë

Obviously dromësa can be served in any kind of ways, depending on season, taste, and availability of ingredients. This is a rather hearty winter version using green olives, which provide umami and depth of flavour. Again, feel free to experiment with your choice of olives and cheese – and flour!

150 g tart green olives Stone and quarter the olives:

2 tbs olive oil Heat the oil and butter in a large frying pan and quickly sauté the
1 tbs butter olives.

ready boiled dromësa prepared from 400 g flour Add the dromësa together with about 100 ml hot water or stock, stirring and heating. The result should be like a rather liquid risotto.

salt Season with salt and serve topped with the shaved or grated
2 tbs smoked ricotta cheesea ... cheese.

Petka with porcini mushrooms and chicken liver

Petka me kërpudhë dhe melçi pule

The Mullixhiu twist of roasting instead boiling the petka adds another flavour dimension (for more on this refer to Jufka below). If you can't find porcini, use any other kind of mushroom, just as you could replace the chicken liver by other kinds.

- 3 tbs olive oil Heat the oil in a large frying pan and sauté the onion and garlic until translucent.
1 large onion, diced (100 g)
1 garlic clove, halved
- 200 g chicken liver, cleaned and in 1 cm cubes Add the liver and mushrooms, stirring, and fry for a minute. Add the butter and the petka, and brown the pasta, still tossing and stirring. Then gradually add the stock or water. Keep tossing so that the petka simultaneously cooks and is glazed. Be patient – this works! You're aiming for pasta with a little bite and some moisture.
200 g porcini, cleaned and cut into similar size
3 tbs butter
petka made from 200 g flour
400 ml light vegetable stock, heated or hot water
- salt Season with salt and serve at once.



Jufka with wild blueberries

Jufka me boronicë

An unusual way to serve pasta. Wild blueberries from northern Albania are small and tart, which is why the resulting dish is not a sweet one. Try to find a dried variety that works (cultivated blueberries are too sweet), or experiment with other kinds of berries, such as fresh cranberries or dried aronia.

2 tbs olive oil Heat the butter and oil in a large frying pan.
2 tbs butter

jufka made from 200 g flour ... Add the jufka and blueberries and, gradually, the water or stock, as
200 g tart, wild blueberries for the petka, cooking and glazing them, tossing all the time.
400 ml light vegetable stock,
heated/hot water

1 tbs crème fraîche When the pasta is to your liking, quickly fold in the cream, season
salt with salt and serve.



Beef with tomatoes and raw okra

Tavë me mish dhe bamje

Instead of braising or stewing the okra with tomatoes the traditional way, Bledar Kola adds them raw to quickly sautéed, barely cooked beef filet lightened with tomatoes. The raw okra's taste resembles that of green beans, adding freshness to the dish and avoiding the slimy texture this ancient vegetable develops when cooked. A very elegant summer dish.

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| 4 large tomatoes..... | Quickly blanch the tomatoes in hot water, refresh, peel, deseed and dice. Heat 2 tbs of the oil in a pan, add the onion and garlic and sauté until translucent. Add the tomatoes and simmer for 10 min, stirring occasionally. Remove the garlic. |
| 2 tbs olive oil | |
| 1 large onion, diced (80 g) | |
| 1 garlic clove, halved | |
| 200 g okra, stalks removed | Thinly slice the okra and marinate with 1 tbs olive oil, the vinegar and salt, set aside. |
| 1 tbs olive oil | |
| ½ tsp cider vinegar | |
| salt | |
| 1 tbs olive oil | Heat the remaining oil and the butter in a pan and quickly sauté the meat. Turn off the heat, add the tomatoes, season with salt and pepper, and serve topped with the okra. |
| 1 tbs butter | |
| 400 g beef filet, diced | |
| salt | |
| pepper | |





Beef cheek with polenta and apple

Faqe viçi me polentë

The polenta provides a perfect pedestal for the rich meat and the apple cuts through all the richness and luxury – an ideal winter warmer. At Mullixhiu the beef cheeks are slowly braised overnight in the vegsh, the black clay pots, with onion, carrot, thyme and red wine. At home, use a cast-iron pan with a lid, brown the well-pared meat and the vegetables, adding a little wine, and cover with a light stock or water. Close and braise in a slow oven (150°C) for about 4 hours, until the meat is tender. This can be done in advance.

1.2 kg beef cheek
(net weight)..... This can be prepared ahead as explained above.

1 firm, tart apple (250 g)
2 onions (100 g) Thinly slice the apple and onions, quickly sauté in 1 tbs oil, deglaze with the vinegar, season with salt and set aside.

1 tbs olive oil
1 tbs cider vinegar
salt

700 ml light vegetable stock
or whey (which you might have
left over from draining yogurt) In a heavy pan, heat the remaining oil with the stock or whey, then pour in the cornmeal, stirring continuously, to obtain a rather liquid polenta. Season with salt.

2 tbs olive oil
200 g wholemeal polenta
salt

TO SERVE: Cut the meat into appropriate pieces, heat with some of its own stock and serve on the polenta, topped with the apple and onion.



Mullet with onion jam and cornbread

Qefull

A very unusual way and elegant to serve this lean, firm fish, the onion jam providing richness, the roasted bread texture. »We are chefs, not fishermen,« is how Bledar Kola puts it, meaning: I don't want to cook each and every fish with lots of garlic and tomatoes. Do make your own (wholemeal!) cornbread if you have time, you'll love its dense, grainy texture.

FOR THE CORNBREAD:

1 egg Whisk all the ingredients together, except the cornmeal, which you work in at the end, to obtain a very soft dough. Pour into a round tin lined with baking parchment (Ø 24 cm), leave to rest for 2-3 hours and bake for 40 min at 170°C. Leave to cool.

250 g yogurt
1 ½ tbs olive oil
½ tsp salt
1 tsp sugar
225 g wholemeal cornmeal (same as for polenta)

FOR THE ONION JAM:

4 large onions (100 g each), sliced Sauté the onion in the olive oil and transfer to a hot oven to slowly melt and caramelize. Season with salt.

4 tbs olive oil
salt

FOR THE BREAD TOPPING:

2 tbs olive oil Heat the olive oil and garlic in a pan and toast the bread, tossing. Season and mix in the parsley. Set aside.

1 garlic clove, halved
1 large piece of the cornbread in large crumbs
salt
pepper
2 tbs flat parsley leaves, thinly sliced

FOR THE FISH:

4 mullets (250 g each), filleted . Bledar Kola uses a torch to make the filets curl up, but this does not affect the taste. Bring the wine to the boil with the bay leaves and a little salt in a flat pan. Reduce the heat and poach the fish for 10-15 min. Serve with the onions and bread.

1 l white wine
5 bay leaves
salt

Milk pie

Qumeshtor

The Albanian version of crème brûlée, this is a blend of egg custard, flan and cake you could also top with all kinds of fruit, such as strawberries, and serve with whipped cream. You can play with spices and flavourings, too. Vanilla? Orange zest? Cinnamon? Lemon? Cardamom? Verbena? However saffron, which is also grown in Albania, adds a particularly enticing, mysterious aroma to the richness of the eggs.

1 pinch saffron threads..... Soak the saffron in 2 tbs of the milk for about 30 min. Preheat the oven to 180°C. In a blender mix sugar, flour and salt, then add the eggs and finally the milk and saffron. Pour the batter into a buttered round tin dusted with flour (Ø 24 cm) and bake for about 30 min, until it is set and of a nice golden brown. Serve slightly warm or leave to cool completely.

60 g sugar
50 g wheat flour
1 pinch of salt
5 eggs
500 ml milk





Corn bread, egg and lemone

Revani me miell misri dhe vezë të rrahur

This is based on one of Bledar Kola's oldest food memories: egg white whisked with sugar and the yolks loosely folded in, a luxurious delight back in the 1980s. Here it is elevated to elegant little bites, lightened and enhanced further by the lemons' tanginess.

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| 1 egg..... | For the cornbread, whisk the egg with yogurt, oil, salt and sugar, then work in the corn flour to obtain a very soft dough. Cover and leave to rest at ambient temperature for a few hours. Preheat the oven to 170°C, pour the batter into a round tin lined with parchment (Ø 24 cm), leave to rest for 2-3 hours and bake for 40 min. |
| 250 g yogurt | |
| 1 ½ tbs olive oil | |
| ½ tsp salt | |
| 1 tsp sugar | |
| 225 g wholemeal cornflour | |
| 125 g sugar..... | For the syrup heat 125 ml water, dissolve 125 g of the sugar in it and add the lemon zest and juice. Boil the lemon slices in the syrup for a minute, take them out with a slotted spoon and cut into wedges. Reserve. Make sure that the bread does not stick to the tin, then pierce it with a thin skewer or fork and spoon as much of the syrup over it as it soaks up. This can be done in advance. |
| 1 lemon, zest and juice | To serve, take the bread out of the tin by turning it upside down on to a plate, and cut it into small squares (you could also leave it whole and serve it like a cake). |
| ½ lemon, very thinly sliced, pips removed | |
| 3 egg whites..... | Whisk the egg whites with the sugar to a soft foam, then gently fold in the yolks. Top each square of bread with a small spoonful of the egg mixture, garnish with a lemon wedge and sprinkle with a few drops of the remaining syrup. Serve immediately. |
| 75 g sugar | |
| 3 egg yolks | |



Fig and walnut tartlets

Biskotë e mbushur me arrë dhe fik

Dried figs and walnuts are a staple of the Albanian diet. For these little cakes the figs are chopped and soaked in a mixture of raki, the ubiquitous Albanian fruit brandy mostly made from plums or grapes, and slightly bitter green walnut liqueur. The cakes are rich bites, which you could serve with a small dollop of thick, sour cream or crème fraîche, and certainly some more raki or liqueur and strong black coffee

FOR THE SHORTBREAD BASE:

160 g wholemeal flour.....	Rub the flour with the cold butter, sugar and salt, then add the egg and quickly work into a dough. Wrap in cling film and leave to rest for at least an hour, refrigerated. Before starting the filling, roll the dough to 3 mm thickness on a dusted surface and line small round tins with it (like a muffin tray, or use one large tin, Ø 26cm), forming a rim. Refrigerate.
70 g butter	
20 g sugar	
1 pinch salt	
1 egg	

FOR THE FILLING:

100 g dried figs, chopped.....	Soak the figs in the spirit for a few hours or overnight. Preheat the oven to 180°C. In a pan, boil the sugar with the water until it starts to caramelize. Add the walnuts, then the figs with all their soaking liquid - the thick mixture will spit and bubble - then finally add the cream and quickly boil down to a thick sauce; leave to cool and spoon into the tins. Bake for 15 min until the shortbread is done and the filling starts to bubble.
40 ml raki	
40 ml walnut liqueur (or use just one kind of spirit, or another similar one)	
125 g sugar	
50 ml water	
100 g walnuts, roughly chopped	
125 g crème fraîche	

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