

books

A delectable odyssey

Nancy Mehagian, author of *Siren's Feast*, on the joys of food, spirituality, and adventure



by Shahan Sanossian

LOS ANGELES – People whose lives are as fully lived as Nancy Mehagian's serve as a spiritual and intellectual feast for the rest of us.

We may never sneak out of our teenage bedrooms and cross the railroad tracks to see Ray Charles and James Brown perform. We may never find ourselves in the back room of a gift shop in Tangier with a group of stoned hippies, eating spicy tagines, drinking mint tea, and using a jeweled kif pipe to smoke Morocco's finest hashish. We may never attend a party on Ibiza with blues singer Taj Mahal and folk singer Joni Mitchell. But through Mehagian's glittering culinary memoir, *Siren's Feast: An Edible Odyssey*, we can live her experiences vicariously.

"I don't regret anything," Mehagian says about her life, even her time in prison. "Every life has its ups and downs. I was young. I didn't have the greatest judgment all the time. But having a good heart can go a long way and can protect you in difficult circumstances."

Escape from home

Mehagian grew up in Phoenix, Arizona, in a fairly conservative Armenian-American family. Her maternal grandfather had escaped from Hadjin, Turkey, during the Genocide. Soon after, Mehagian's father also fled the city. Mehagian is the granddaughter of Samuel Mardian, who was part of one of the first three Armenian families to settle in Pasadena, California.

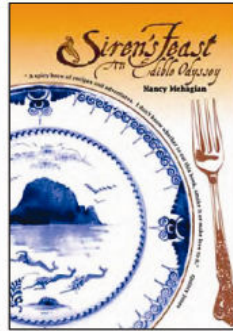
"It seemed that every Armenian family that wanted to come to America [was] told to go find Samuel Mardian," Mehagian says. "My mother said she grew up with 40 people sleeping in her home." According to Mehagian, her grandfather, who built the first Armenian church in Pasadena, gave jobs to newly arriving immigrants and helped them settle in their new country.

Mehagian describes the Phoenix of her youth as segregated and Republican. As a young girl, Mehagian was "animated, curious, naughty," she writes in her memoir. She was the family's "wild child." By 14, Mehagian and her friends had fake IDs that they used to get into jazz clubs. They considered themselves beatniks, foregoing beer and football games to smoke peyote.

"My experience with peyote marked my initiation into the world of spirit," Mehagian writes in her book. As high school graduation neared, she was more than ready to leave Phoenix.



Nancy Mehagian, author of *Siren's Feast*.



Siren's Feast: An Edible Odyssey.



Mehagian at the UCLA Festival of Books.

Sex, drugs, and couscous

Mehagian traveled extensively over the next few years, visiting London and Portugal, hitchhiking through Spain, and ending up in Morocco. She recounts these adventures vividly in her memoir, taking the reader along on her sometimes dangerous exploits, which included drugs, romance, and Eastern spirituality. But Mehagian's greatest love affair appears to have been with food.

"Food represented love in our family," she says. "It's a way of sharing." As a child, she loved the Armenian dishes her mother made at home and the Mexican food native to the American Southwest. But her palate quickly evolved.

After she moved to the island of Ibiza, Mehagian began to notice that her life was filled with Jungian synchronicity. Time and again, when Mehagian found herself in need of help or an escape, it would present itself.

Mehagian believes it was synchronicity – or perhaps the power of intention and focused thought – that allowed her, a nearly penniless young woman from America, to go into business in a foreign country.

awareness of healthy eating, society still has it wrong.

"Nobody wants to do that work anymore," Mehagian says. "They just want to take a pill that's going to make them feel better, make the pain go away, instead of looking at where [the pain] comes from. That's why I've always been attracted to ancient wisdom."

Insatiable wanderlust

Despite having her own restaurant to run, or perhaps because of its daily burden, Mehagian continued to feel the urge to travel. She left Ibiza and flew to Kathmandu to reconnect with a lover, sure that they were meant to be together. Instead, he was cold and more interested in smoking hashish than spending time with her. Mehagian found herself horribly sick with amoebic dysentery and alone in a foreign land, losing weight at an alarming rate.

After she recovered from her illness, she did not rush back home, as most would have done. Instead, she stayed in Kathmandu and eventually made a pilgrimage to the holy cave of Amarnath, in India. She was ill-equipped for the journey, wearing light clothing in the inhospitable mountains and a pair of cheap shoes for the hike. She passed by the corpse of an old woman who had died while on the same pilgrimage.

Mehagian endured days of walking on bruised and swollen feet, crass come-ons from local men, fear, and hunger, but she made it. Again luck, or synchronicity, was on her side.

Out of luck

Mehagian returned to Ibiza to run her restaurant but was again filled with wanderlust. She needed to return to India because she had seen very little of that country's treasures. But she didn't have enough money for to travel. Again, an opportunity presented itself at the right moment, but this time synchronicity would lead to disaster.

Mehagian ventured to Beirut with her friend Linda. They worked in a sleazy nightclub called the Kit Kat, which was filled with Japanese businessmen, Middle Eastern men smoking in red vinyl booths, and beautiful women from all over the world who, like Mehagian, were employed to help those men spend as much money on alcohol as possible.

But the young women couldn't stand their new jobs. They traveled to Aleppo to take part in a cabaret show at a nightclub. On her first night in the club, Mehagian fell deeply in love with a Bedouin fiddler – who would become the father of Mehagian's only child.

Their ill-fated stints in Beirut and Aleppo led Mehagian and Linda to search for an escape. They were presented with the opportunity to make quick money simply by flying to London. Though Mehagian's instincts told her there was something wrong in the assignment, she was desperate to leave Beirut.

Her luck had run out. In London, now months pregnant, Mehagian was sentenced to two years in prison for unwittingly smuggling hashish into the

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country. Despite her lawyer's best efforts to get her acquitted, she served her sentence in a low-security women's prison, along with her newborn baby.

Even in the misery of prison, Mehagian was able to grow. She made the best of the situation, securing a job babysitting the other inmates' children so that she could protect her own baby. As prison food was almost inedible, Mehagian planted a vegetable garden so that she and her daughter could eat healthily.

Life's work

Immediately after her release from prison, Mehagian returned to her family in Arizona. She was greeted with love, as was her daughter, Vedra.

Now a photographer and film producer, Vedra, too, has felt Mehagian's wanderlust.

"My daughter read an early version of my book, and then she

proceeded to relive my life in fast-forward," Mehagian says. "She's been to Ibiza. She's been to Morocco. She's been to Kathmandu and India." Large, vivid photos taken by her daughter now decorate the walls of Mehagian's living room, as do dozens of smaller framed pictures of family and friends.

While back in Phoenix with her family and a baby, synchronicity struck again. Mehagian finally found her calling.

"I traveled around the world only to meet my teacher in the place where I grew up," she says. She began to study the art of jin shin jitsu with a woman named Mary Burmeister. According to Mehagian, after just a few lessons, she began to successfully treat friends who had headaches and yeast infections by using ancient acupressure techniques.

Healing Hollywood

"When I started my practice," Mehagian says, "it was a little slow-

going. This was at a time that, if you talked to people about balancing your energy flow, they looked at you like you were a little crazy." Having moved to Los Angeles with her young daughter, Mehagian urgently needed to find more clients, so she learned massage.

"Once I added massage to the acupressure," Mehagian says, "my career kind of took off. People were willing to have a massage, and then I could, over time, explain to them about the acupressure and its benefits."

"Within three years of living in L.A., I had a clientele that was like a who's who of Hollywood. That was all because of the jin shin. It really is powerful." Her business expanded through word of mouth to include members of the rock band The Eagles and legendary music producer Quincy Jones.

Mehagian began writing her memoir more than a decade ago, after constantly being told by friends to put her experiences

down on paper and repeatedly being asked for her recipes. She joined writing classes, including one with Aram Saroyan, who she cites as immensely influential.

During the writing of her memoir, it was never painful for Mehagian to think back to the past. "I'm more forward-looking," she says. When a publisher that had agreed to print her book presented delay after delay, Mehagian started her own press, learning the process along the way and making her book a reality.

When asked about her career in Los Angeles and her many entertainment-industry clients, Mehagian won't reveal much. But she's at work on another memoir. We'll just have to wait until it's finished to live those stories vicariously. 📖

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