

# review

## *Siren's Feast*, or on the road with Nancy Mehagian

*Siren's Feast: An Edible Odyssey* by Nancy Mehagian. Cielo Press, 2008, 340 pp.

reviewed by Shushan Avagyan

*Siren's Feast: An Edible Odyssey* is a fascinating autobiography, often described as a culinary memoir, by Nancy Mehagian, who has been involved with food and healing since 1969, when she opened the first vegetarian restaurant on the Spanish island of Ibiza.

Set primarily against the backdrop of the 1960s and early 1970s, and highly reminiscent of Jack Kerouac's famous novel about spontaneous road trips across America, *Siren's Feast* weaves stories of Mehagian's spiritual journey

Shushan Avagyan is a doctoral student in English and comparative literature at Illinois State University. She has translated a volume of poetry by Shushanik Kurghinian and a book on plot by Viktor Shklovsky.

from the suburbs of Phoenix, Arizona, to the most remote outposts of the world, with over 40 delicious recipes, including those from her Armenian mother's kitchen.

The book opens with the most amusing lines, "Don't you dare have that baby today, Florence, and ruin our dinner," as the family matriarch issues instructions to Nancy's mother on Christmas Day. Shortly after Nancy's parents return home from the family dinner, Florence goes into labor, giving birth to a daughter, who "having been made to wait developed a certain impulsiveness."

By 14, Nancy starts sneaking out from home to hang out at the ballrooms in South Phoenix, where Ray Charles and James Brown performed. Later, in 1966, when she transfers to the University of Southern California, she persuades her parents to send her to Italy to study at the University of Florence for a semester. By this time, she has already read Dante and Pirandello in the originals, smoked marijuana, and dropped acid with a group of friends.

In January 1968 Nancy flies to Lisbon, from where her incessant travels begin.

She hitchhikes through Spain, boards a ferry to Tangier, and, instead of going to Italy, decides to stay in Morocco, where she meets her first love, a Spaniard named Alejandro. Her parents manage to coax her to come back to Phoenix for a short period. Here Nancy meets Taj Mahal, who later comes to visit her in Ibiza.

The sun-drenched island of Ibiza, like a magnet attracting colonies of American and European hippies, artists, and musicians, soon becomes Nancy's second home, where she opens a vegetarian restaurant called Double Duck, welcoming everyone from her multifarious "Ibiza family" of expatriates. But the road keeps calling her, and after staying in Ibiza for a year, Nancy sets out for Kathmandu and from there to New Delhi, where she meets up with friends from Ibiza.

The next voyage takes Nancy to Beirut, from where, after a series of dangerous affairs, she ends up in Syria with a troupe of cabaret dancers. In her typically impulsive way, Nancy falls in love with a Bedouin fiddler and at 24 becomes pregnant with his child. Un-

fortunately this moment of joy is short-lived as Nancy gets herself in serious trouble and ends up in the infamous London prison. After a 16-month incarceration and giving birth to a lovely daughter named Vedra, Nancy's journey comes full circle when she returns home and finds her true purpose and meaningful work through Mary Burmeister, an enigmatic teacher of the ancient Japanese healing art of jin shin jyutsu.

Mehagian begins each chapter with an epigraph from various adored authors and poets such as James Baldwin, Cervantes, William Blake, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Oscar Wilde, Zora Neale Hurston, and many others. And to offer food for thought, literally, the book's 36 chapters are interspersed with most delectable recipes from all over the globe – as Quincy Jones puts it, "I don't know whether to eat this book, smoke it, or make love to it."

*Siren's Feast* is full of vitality as well as profundity, resonating with meditations and memoirs that grip you with sensual impressions and storytelling that's captivating, engaging, and fresh. 