



Damascus: Taste of a City, by Rafik Schami and Marie Fadel, translated by Debra S Marmor and Herbert A Danner (Haus, £7.99)

It is said that “when a man has lived seven years in Damascus, Damascus lives in him”. Novelist Rafik Schami grew up in the city and lived there for 25 years, but is now exiled in Germany, a fact that gives this heartfelt guide to Damascus and its food an added poignancy. Indeed, he couldn’t see how the book could be written, until his sister, Marie Fadel (who still lives in the city), suggested that she would be his eyes and ears. For a year she wandered the city describing what she saw on the telephone while he listened, “almost torn apart by longing”. The result of this unusual collaboration is a wonderfully evocative account of the Old City, the people who live there and the recipes they love, such as kibbeh (a “noble dish” of burghul wheat and beef) and wara einab (vine leaves stuffed with meat) - “the pinnacle of elegance in oriental cuisine”. Damascus is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and as Schami says, “Damascene cooking is a living witness and delicious memorial” to the rich mix of cultures and peoples who have lived here for millennia. Urban history has never been so mouth-watering. **PDS**