

SUNDAY
June 30, 1991

The Philadelphia Inquirer
FOOD

SECTION **L**



The Philadelphia Inquirer / CHARLES FOX

Simone Alia, mother of the bride-to-be, fries Tunisian pastry similar to funnel cakes. Over three days she prepared a meal for 300.

Prenuptial feast a la N. Africa



The Philadelphia Inquirer / REBECCA BARGER

Revi Alia and Gary Roman under a canopy at the "henna."

By Barbara Ann Rosenberg
Special to The Inquirer

Simone Alia was in the kitchen at the White Nights Restaurant, cooking for a party for a few friends — about 300 of them — a task that was entering its second of three days.

Her daughter, Revi, was to marry Gary Roman. But it wasn't the actual wedding feast that Simone was preparing. Alia was making the food for the *henna*, a traditional meal in the Moroccan/Tunisian Jewish community that occurs several days before the wedding. On the menu for the Alia *henna* were appetizers, chickens, brisket and pastries.

Except for the routine chopping and peeling done by a young kitchen helper, the Northeast Philadelphia woman was doing it alone.

The *henna*, adopted from their Arab

neighbors, is a custom that Tunisian and Moroccan Jews have carried with them and preserved. It is a time for mountains of food, spirited music and dancing in celebration of the forthcoming wedding. Even the application of the brick-red henna dye to the bride's hands and the groom's finger is a ritual picked up by the Jews during their centuries in North Africa.

On this June afternoon, Alia was up to her elbows in ingredients for *boulettes*, minced-meat patties wrapped in slices of potato to be deep-fried and roasted along with young chickens as one of the main courses at the *henna*.

Her hair pulled up in a *plume*, cocktail style, Alia wore a professional-size apron for protection against the meat, onions, spices, flour, honey, oil — the ingredients for the feast.

Alia made several varieties of appetizers — including wonderfully spiced

(See WEDDING on 7-L)

A mother prepares a "henna," a tradition adopted by Jews from their Arab neighbors.

A prenuptial feast from North Africa

WEDDING, from 1-L

vegetables served in Moroccan Jewish households before every Sabbath and holiday meal: carrots with cumin, cinnamon and lemon; cooked tomato-and-pepper salad, and eggplant with sesame seeds. She was also rolling cigars by the hundreds — meat in pastry in the shape of — well, cigars. Observing her at work was like watching a robot with arms and hands in constant motion.

Next, Alia went to work on the chickens, rubbing them with spices and setting them aside to be roasted at the last minute.

Meanwhile, her young assistant prepared vegetables for the couscous — carrots, turnips and zucchini scrubbed, peeled and ready for steaming along with saffron and other spices.

Several pastries were already finished. There were ultrasweet funnel cakes soaked in honey. Others were filled with nuts and dried fruits. Others were waiting to be filled with pastry cream just before the party. Alia noted that without a great variety of desserts, it wouldn't be a proper *henna*.

"It's got to be sweet — really sweet to symbolize the sweet life ahead for my daughter," she explained.

On June 12, the night of the *henna*, the restaurant at 8558 Bustleton Ave. in the Northeast, frequently the gathering spot for newly arrived Soviet immigrants looking for Eastern European specialties, took on a decidedly Moroccan flavor. Several guests wore brocade caftans.

Alia is an example of the cross of cultures. She is a French citizen, born of Tunisian parents. She spent several years in Israel (where she met many of the Moroccan Jews who, like her, would migrate to Northeast Philadelphia and become her close friends).

The food was set out for a feast — several small plates of appetizers on each table along with a huge red centerpiece decorated with the names of the bride and groom.

Red and white balloons were everywhere — on the tables, hanging from the ceiling and on dessert tables laden with at least a dozen pastries. In one corner, at the juncture of the two "sweet tables" was a huge



Revi Alia as she greeted the 300 guests at her festive *henna*.

watermelon shell filled with fruit and berries.

In addition to piquant salads, there were cumin- and pepper-scented sautéed chicken livers and a spicy sausage made of beef liver and other innards, and pastries filled with highly seasoned potatoes.

After greetings in Arabic, French, English and Hebrew, the guests were seated. Providing music was a Moroccan group, garbed in *djellabas* — long, hooded robes worn in North Africa. They played the oud, an oversize mandolin, a twin-drum *drumbeke* and other exotic instruments for dancing.

Between dances, the guests ate — the appetizers, from serving plates that were constantly replenished: the glistening brown little chickens, the *boulettes*, and the huge platters of couscous studded with vegetables.

After dessert — and with a major drumroll — the bride was carried aloft on a pallet, and the music and the dancing grew even more excited as she circled the room on the shoulders of the men of her family.

The party went on until early morning — and between dances, guests returned again and again to the pastries. Revi and Gary were off to a sweet start.

On the next day Alia rested.