

Cooking a Middle Eastern Meal



Cooking a new ethnic cuisine means learning about a people; it also means enjoying a meal, which is one of the best ways to promote friendly relations. We hope that your congregation will find some adventurous cooks who would like to cook in this style and who may serve these dishes as part of the Week of Witness with Christians in the Middle East. The recipes are just a small selection from the many and varied dishes known as Middle Eastern. If your congregation is lucky enough to have members who claim Middle Eastern heritage and who can contribute their know-how to the process, so much the better.

The recipes included here are supplied by two American cooks. One is married to a Syrian and learned from family members how to cook Middle Eastern meals. The initial recipes and instructions passed on by her mother-in-law were supplemented in 1963 by the gift from her father-in-law of a Syrian cookbook.* She passed all her cooking tests with flying colors. The recipes for Chicken with Cracked Wheat and for Baklava are from another woman, who received a Lebanese cookbook** from a friend who knew of her interest in the Middle East. Her baklava has received raves from ethnic Middle-Easterners, although a few of them suggested that she decrease the lemon.

Ingredients for preparing these recipes can be found more easily today than in the past. In addition to Middle Eastern specialty stores in cities with Arab, Armenian, Turkish or Greek communities, American supermarkets usually carry some of the basics in their international or gourmet sections. Many health food stores carry items such as pita bread, pistachio nuts, tahini, and garbanzo beans. And. . . if you need to go to a specialty store, you are in for a treat. It will surely be an adventure!

*The Art of Syrian Cookery, by Helen Corey
Doubleday & Co., Inc. Garden City, New York Copyright 1962

** Alice's Kitchen, by Linda Dala Sawaya; available from Linda Sawaya Design, PO 91192, Portland, OR 97291

MIDDLE EASTERN RECIPES



MEZZE (APPETIZERS):

Chickpea Dip (Hummus bi tahini)

Prepared hummus is readily available in all Middle Eastern markets and most American supermarkets, However if you would like to prepare authentic hummus it is quite simple.

3 medium cloves garlic
2 (15 oz. cans) chickpeas (Garbanzo Beans)
4 T sesame paste (tahini)
3 T fresh lemon juice
2 T olive oil
1 T cumin
½ tsp salt.

Chop garlic in food processor until fine. Add 1 can of chickpeas with its liquid to processor.. Strain and discard liquid from 2nd can of chickpeas and add to processor. Add the tahini, lemon juice, oil, cumin and salt and blend until smooth. If too thick add additional lemon juice.

Roasted Eggplant Dip (Baba Ghanouj):

3 pounds dark skinned eggplant
2T sesame paste (tahini)
1 tsp. salt
2 cloves garlic mashed
Juice of 2 lemons
2 T olive oil

Wash eggplant and pierce with a fork in several places. Broil with the skin on, turning frequently until a fork penetrates easily and the inside feels soft. Remove from oven and let cool. Remove the skin and mash the eggplant to a puree. A food processor can be used, but as the texture should be lumpy, the finished product is not as authentic. Add the tahini, salt, garlic lemon juice and oil to the eggplant and mix well. Taste and adjust seasonings as desired.

Feta Cheese and Olives are always a must as an appetizer or on the family table. Wrapping a cube of Feta cheese along with an olive in a triangle of pita bread is a traditional family favorite.

Feta Cheese:

Set out a dish of Feta Cheese cut in ¾ inch cubes. Feta Cheese comes from several countries with Greek Feta being the Mediterranean version and often preferred for its' consistency and saltiness. At Middle Eastern markets you can sample different varieties to see which you prefer.

Olives (Zatoun):

Middle Eastern markets have many varieties and some of the best are the Greek Kalamata olives, and the Greek Green and Black olives. These varieties are often available in jars in supermarkets also.

Arabic or Pita Bread (Khobaz arabee):

Commonly known as pita, Arabic bread has become very popular and can be found in most supermarkets, however the very best and freshest bread is found at Middle Eastern markets. Khobaz arabee is on the table for every meal and traditionally in a Syrian home; the father stands at the head of the table and breaks the bread for the family. For appetizers, however, we pre-cut round loaf into 8 triangles, and serve them in a basket or on a plate. The bread is used to scoop the dips and opened to enclose the feta cheese and olives.

SALADS:**Yogurt with cucumbers (Khyar mi laban):**

1 quart plain yogurt
1 large cucumber
1 clove garlic or ½ tsp garlic powder
½ tsp. salt
1 sprig fresh mint or 1 T dried mint

Peel and dice cucumber. Mash garlic with salt in bottom of bowl. Add yogurt and mix well. Add cucumber. Garnish with mint. Use as sauce for stuffed grape leaves.

Lebanese Pita Bread Salad (Fattoush):

1 large or 2 small loaves of Pita bread
Olive oil for brushing on bread
1 tsp. garlic powder
1 head romaine lettuce
½ bunch green onions
1 medium cucumber, peeled and diced
½ bunch fresh mint chopped (or 2 T dried)
1 medium tomato, diced
Black olives

Dressing:

¼ Cup olive oil
3 T fresh lemon juice
Salt and black pepper to taste.

Brush pita bread lightly with olive oil, sprinkle with garlic powder, toast well and break into bite size pieces. Cut lettuce and onions into small pieces. Mix in salad bowl with diced cucumber, tomato, chopped mint and bread. Combine the oil, lemon juice, salt and Pepper in a bowl. Adjust lemon juice, salt & pepper as desired. Pour over the salad and mix well. Garnish with black olives. Optional – sprinkle with za'atar.

Syrian Potato Salad (Batata arabee Salata):

1 pound red potatoes
Olive oil
Juice of 1 lemon
1 onion chopped
1 tsp. cold water
Salt and pepper to taste
1 T chopped parsley
Olives
2 tomatoes, sliced
1 T dried mint

Boil potatoes, leave skins on or peel as desired and cube. Coat with olive oil, add lemon juice, onion, salt and pepper. Garnish with parsley, olives, sliced tomatoes and dried mint. Serves 4

Parsley and Cracked Wheat Salad (Ta'bouleh)

½ cup fine Bulghur or Crack Wheat
1 bunch green onions
2 large bunches parsley
½ bunch mint
4 large tomatoes
¼ cup olive oil
¼ cup fresh lemon juice
1 tsp. salt
1tsp. allspice

Soak the wheat in cold water for a few minutes. Drain and squeeze dry. Chop onions, parsley, mint leaves and tomatoes very fine. Add wheat, lemon juice, olive oil, spices. Mix well. Adjust tartness with more lemon juice if desired. Serves 6

ENTRÉES:

Chicken with Bulgur (Cracked Wheat)

This stew is so tasty and healthy; it is essentially fat free and has whole grains and garbanzos as well. It can be made with any meat. Bulgur is available at regular grocery stores, or in Middle East specialty shops or health food stores. The spices are typical of Levantine food.

1 whole chicken, in pieces
2 qts water, or vegetable stock
3-4 whole cinnamon sticks
1/2 tsp salt
6 peppercorns
6 whole allspice kernels
1 cup #4 bulgur grain, rinsed
1/4 c. clarified butter
1 can garbanzo beans, drained
1 onion, chopped
1/8 c. olive oil

Remove skin and fat; rub chicken with baking soda and salt; rinse and drain. Place chicken in deep pot with liquid and spices; cover and boil; simmer on low heat for 30 minutes. Set aside to cool, reserving broth.

Place bulgur grain in another deep pot and brown dry for a few minutes (toasting) stirring constantly. Add butter and stir in until brown.

In a sauté pan, fry onion in olive oil until translucent; add beans and cook about 5 minutes. Add 3 c. broth to the grains. Cover pot and steam for 15 minutes. Add more broth if needed.

Remove chicken from bones and add to bulgur, layering in onion/bean mixture. Steam for 10 minutes. Let stand off heat for 15 minutes. Serve with yogurt, pita, fresh vegetables or salad.

Lamb Burgers with Pine Nuts (Kafta snoober):

1 pound ground lamb
1 T chopped parsley
1 onion minced
1 tsp. dried mint
Salt and Pepper
¼ cup pine nuts
Butter
1 12 ounce can tomato puree

Mix lamb, parsley, onion, mint, salt and pepper. Brown pine nuts in butter, stir and watch closely so they don't burn. Shape meat into rolls and fill each roll with 1 tsp. browned pine nuts. Place in a baking pan and pour tomato puree over rolls. Bake at 350 for approximately 30 minutes.

Grape Leaf Rolls (Warak inib mihshee)

Bottled grape leaves work fine if you do not have access to fresh grape leaves (in your own or a neighbor's backyard). Just drain off the brine, rinse the leaves thoroughly in cold water and squeeze out the moisture. For fresh grape leaves, small to medium size are best. Soak the fresh leaves in hot water for 15 minutes to soften, remove from water and squeeze out the moisture.

50 Grape leaves (1 large jar)
4 or more lamb bones (such as ones from the shoulder)
Juice of 2 lemons

Stuffing:

1 cup long grain rice
1 pound ground lamb or beef.
1 tsp. salt
2 tsp. allspice
Dash of black pepper

Lay leaf vein side up and with a sharp paring knife, cut off the stem and trim out the bottom largest part of the center vein. Where the vein has been cut out, lap the sides over each other and put 1 tablespoon of stuffing across the widest part. Shape the stuffing like a little cigar, lap the bottom of the leaf up, fold the sides in like an envelope and roll away from you. Don't over stuff or leave any stuffing exposed as it will tear and escape as the rice expands during cooking.

Place the bones on the bottom of a pot (a wide deep pot is recommended). The lamb bones provide great flavor to the cooking liquid and are delicious to eat, however if bones are not used place a vegetable steamer in the pot to prevent the bottom leaf rolls from over cooking. Arrange stuffed leaves in rows on top of bones, alternating the direction of each row. Sprinkle salt over the stuffed leaves and place an inverted plate on top to prevent shifting. Add water to reach the plate, cover pan and bring to boil. Lower the heat and simmer for 35 minutes until rice is tender. During the last 10 minutes add the lemon juice.

When grape leaves are done, turn off the heat and drain the liquid into a bowl (use to reheat leftovers). Carefully remove each grape leaf from the pot and stack on a platter. Put the bones in a separate dish. Or the more authentic way of serving is to hold an inverted round platter over the pot and gently turn it upside down. The leaves and bones should come out neatly.

Serve the stuffed leaves with the yogurt/cucumber salad as a dipping sauce.

Meat Pies (Sfeha):

Traditionally the dough is made from scratch, however cans of biscuits found in the dairy case work well for these mini pizzas. The filling is enough for 3 dozen pies.

Filling:

2 pounds ground lamb or beef
4 onions chopped
½ cup yogurt
½ cup pine nuts, sautéed lightly in butter
1 tsp. salt
1 tsp. allspice
black pepper

Combine all ingredients. Separate biscuits and flatten to thinness of pie dough. Spread filling on the biscuit dough and leave flat or fold up the edges slightly leaving the center open. Arrange on oiled baking sheets and bake until bottoms and edges are slightly browned, approximately 30 minutes. Another method is to bake for about 15 minutes until bottoms are lightly browned and then broil for a few minutes until tops are lightly browned. Yields 36 pies.

Rice with Noodles (Roz ma'a shareeyee):

2 cups uncooked long grain rice
1 tsp. salt
3 T butter
1 cup vermicelli style noodles crushed into pieces about ¼ inch long
4 cups boiling water
Optional: ½ cup pine nuts lightly toasted

Melt the butter in a heavy pot and add the vermicelli, stir until golden brown. Add rice and keep stirring about 2 minutes. Add the boiling water and salt. Cover and cook on low about 20 minutes until water is absorbed. Turn off heat and keep cover on for at least 5 minutes. Fluff with a fork. Garnish with toasted pine nuts if desired.

DESSERT:

Baklava—a Traditional Middle-Eastern Dessert

Everybody loves this recipe for baklava. Even if they think it will be “too sweet,” they will be surprised as the lemon flavor offsets the sugar and gives it a “light” flavor. This recipe is based on one from a Lebanese cookbook ([Alice's Kitchen](#) by Suwaya) but I reduced the amount of lemon based on comments from a tactful Lebanese family.

Don't be daunted by the three-step procedure. The first two can be done simultaneously and in less than one hour. NOTE: We BUY the filo dough from our local grocery! The assembly itself is not difficult or time-consuming. Baking time is just a little long. So, hang in there, and surprise your family and guests with home-made DELICIOUS baklava!

Clarified Butter (Samne) (makes 2 c./ enough for two trays of baklava)

1 pound unsalted butter
(optional) ¼ c. bulgur grain

In a one-quart pot, melt butter over low to medium; you can add the grain which makes it easier to pour off clarified butter, or you can just melt and cook. Let simmer 30 min to hour without stirring; watch so it doesn't burn.

The foam on the top will turn toasty. Take off heat; skim off foam, and let cool to lukewarm. “Stuff” will be on the bottom. Those are milk solids which we do not want.

Pour liquid off carefully, leaving sediment in pot. Strainer may be used. Can be stored in covered glass in refrigerator; will keep for some time.

Simple Fragrant Syrup ('Attar)

1 1/2 c. sugar

1 1/2 c. water

1/6 c. lemon juice; can add up to 1/4 c for more "lemon"

1 tsp orange blossom water (purchased at Middle Eastern grocery- about \$1.50 for medium bottle)

Combine water, sugar and lemon juice in saucepan and cook over low to medium heat. Stir frequently, until mixture thickens slightly about 30-45 min; careful not to burn it.

Cool slightly and add the orange blossom water. Store in glass; will keep for several months, refrigerated.

Baklava-

warning; you will need a pastry brush, 8 x 13" baking dish(metal or glass), and 2 hours to bake.

1 c. cold sugar syrup (above)

1 pkg filo dough, at room temperature

3 c. ground walnuts or pistachios

1 pound clarified butter (above)

1/2 c. sugar

2 tbsp. Orange blossom water.

Coarsely grind nuts and place in bowl. Add sugar and orange blossom water and mix.

Preheat oven to 225 degrees F.

With pastry brush, butter the dish. Divide filo dough into 2 equal parts, cutting so that the leaves fit the dish. '

Layer one sheet of filo in the tray, and brush with butter. Continue for 1/2 the dough.

Spread the nut filling over the dough. Continue layering and brushing until dough is finished. Cover final sheet with butter.

Using a sharp knife, cut the unbaked pastry into diamond shapes about 1 1/2 " wide, using parallel cuts.

Bake slowly in middle rack of oven for 2 hours or until golden brown. Immediately drizzle COOL syrup evenly over the top. Cool and re-slice to serve.

Makes about 25 pieces.

Now, was that so hard????