

Recipes from the Middle East in the time of the Crusades



Cookery is an Art, not a Science

A cook's success depends not upon how well he or she keeps to a recipe, but how much the people eating the food enjoy eating what the cook has made for them. Hence, recipe books up until quite recently almost never have precise measurements for the ingredients, but relied on the skill of the cook to know what to do.

As many of these combinations, especially of spices, will be unfamiliar, the best thing for you to do is to be quite sparing with them until you have decided how much you like the flavours.

These recipes will assume making a dish for two people.

You can scale up, of course. People of the past cooked over fire and did not have clocks, so there is also rarely any indication of the temperature at which things should be cooked or for how long. As many people still appreciate today, the best source of fire cooking heat is charcoal because it gives an even, steady heat which can be controlled more readily.

Thus, the best advice for using a modern stove is

"Keep it low. Keep it slow. Keep an eye on it."

The following recipes have been adapted from the so-called **"Baghdad Cookbook"** which survives in a manuscript of the thirteenth century CE written in Arabic, itself extracted from an earlier work of the eleventh century CE. Based upon the translation of Charles Perry.

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Ribasiyya

Meat stew with rhubarb.

Ingredients

Meat (lamb, mutton or goat)

Cubed. (Modern practice allows 150>200 grams per person)

Salt

1 teaspoon of cumin

1 teaspoon of coriander

Almond meal

Rhubarb, squeezed for juice

Onion (One small onion per person or equivalent)

Method

Put the meat in a pot with water (just enough to cover it) and a little salt, and bring just to boil. Take the pot from the stove and skim off anything floating.

Mix in the cumin and coriander in equal quantities and return the pot to the stove to simmer gently with the pot uncovered for a while until the liquid is reduced by about half. Add finely chopped onion.

Add the rhubarb juice until the liquid again only just covers the meat.

Add some almond meal, about two dessert spoons per person.

Again simmer at a very low heat until the meat is fully cooked and the almond meal has thickened the liquid. Add more almond meal along the way if needed.



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Mishmishia

Meat stew with apricots.

Meat dishes with all sorts of fruit are common the Baghdad Cookbook, and remain very popular across the Middle East and North Africa today. They are known from medieval English cookery books as well.

Ingredients

Meat (lamb, mutton or goat)

Cubed. (Modern practice allows 150>200 grams per person)

Salt

Apricots, dried (five per person, or more if you like it more fruity)

Onions (One medium onion per person or equivalent)

1 teaspoon Cumin, ground

1 teaspoon Coriander, ground

Half a teaspoon Cinnamon

To your own taste Pepper

Mastic (This can be hard to find today, and the dish will be alright without it)

Almond meal

A splash of Rose water

Method

Put the dried apricots into hot water and allow them to soak for a while.

When they are becoming soft, boil hem lightly. Puree them and strain out any remaining lumps. Put the meat in a pot with water (just enough to cover it) and a little salt, and bring just to boil. Take the pot from the stove and skim off anything floating. Chop the onions and add them to the pot, along.

With a stick of cinnamon, a table spoon of pepper corns, a little mastic, and equal amounts of cumin and coriander (suggest a heaped teaspoon of each).

Add most of the apricot puree to the main pot, and mix the remaining puree with the almond meal as completely as possible before adding that.

Mix thoroughly and return it to the stove. The book says that some people like to add some saffron, but that is just for colour. Sprinkle a little of the rosewater on top, and leave it to cook slowly on a low heat until done.



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Badhinjan bi-laban

Aubergines in yoghurt

Meat dishes with all sorts of fruit are common the Baghdad Cookbook, and remain very popular across the Middle East and North Africa today. They are known from medieval English cookery books as well.

Ingredients

Aubergines

Yoghurt, natural

Garlic (as much as you prefer)

Half a teaspoon of Sesame oil

Half a teaspoon of Cumin, ground

Half a teaspoon of Coriander, ground

Method

Slice the aubergine into strips and cook it in boiling water with a small amount of salt. Do that until the fruit is as well done as you like it. Remove and dry well.

Crush the garlic and mix it through the yoghurt. Put the aubergine into the yogurt until fully covered. Mix small equal amounts of the cumin and coriander into the sesame oil and drizzle it over the aubergine and yoghurt mixture.

(Middle Eastern sesame oil pressed from raw seeds and has a very light flavour.

The oriental sesame oil that you will find in the average supermarket is pressed from roasted sesame seeds. You can use it, of course, but the flavour will be different.)

You can sprinkle some more of the spices over the dish if you like them.

Experiment with other ground spices such as cardamon, cinnamon, pepper and so on for some interesting flavour combinations.



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Khabis al-Jazar

Carrot pudding

Ingredients

Carrots (Peel them and thinly slice them crosswise)

Walnut oil

Flour, plain

Oil or Pistachio oil

Honey (For each pound of honey use 3 pounds of these carrots)

Method

Choose fresh tender and sweet carrots. Peel them and thinly slice them crosswise. For each pound of honey use 3 pounds of these carrots.

Boil the honey and remove its froth. Pound the carrot in a stone mortar.

Set a clean copper cauldron with a rounded bottom on a trivet on the fire, and put in it the skimmed honey and carrots. Cook the mixture on medium fire until the carrots fall apart.

Add walnut oil to the pot. For each pound of homey used add 2/3 cup of oil. Pistachio oil will be the best for it, but you can also use fresh oil of almond or sesame. Add the oil be-fore the honey starts to thicken.

However you do not need to stir the pot. You only scrape the bottom gently when mixture starts to thicken to prevent it from sticking to it. To check for doneness, use a stick or a spoon to see whether the pudding is thick enough or not yet.

When pudding becomes thick, put the pot down, and spread the dessert on a copper platter. Set it aside to cool down before serving. It will be firm and delicious.

