

The Cuisine of Morocco

An Historical Survey

The coastal strip of northern Africa that comprises the modern states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and northwestern Libya is known in Arabic as the Maghreb, which means the place of the sunset, or the west. For several hundred years much of Spain was also part of the Maghreb. Morocco's position at the extreme northwestern end of the region earned it the Arabic name al-Maghreb al-Akhtar, the land farthest west, and it was once the last frontier of Islam.

Morocco's indigenous people, the semi-nomadic Berbers, were known to the Romans as the Mauri. They had little contact with other cultures until about 1200 BC, when seafaring Phoenician traders developed commercial interests along the Mediterranean coastline of North Africa and certain river shores. The defeat of the Phoenicians by the Romans at Carthage in 146 BC brought the land of the Mauri (Mauretania) under Roman rule. During this era, several trade routes running from the Mediterranean coast to sub-Saharan Africa were opened. These routes connected the Berbers in the coastal plains with the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, and brought another set of cultural influences and foodways to them.

The key event in shaping Morocco's history was the arrival of the Arabs and Islam in the 7th century. In time the Berber clans embraced Islam. Looking to expand Muslim territory in the name of the Prophet, the Arabs and an Islamicized Berber army began in 711 to conquer much of the Iberian peninsula. Moorish Spain became known as al-Andalus (Andalusia). When Spanish-born Muslims and Sephardic Jews were expelled during the Reconquest of Spain by the Christian monarchy in the late 15th century, they returned to Morocco as refugees and brought along their distinctive cultures.

European penetration into Morocco for foreign markets intensified in the 15th century. Portuguese adventurers established themselves in ports along

Regional Moroccan Food

A Quick Tour of Moroccan Foods and Their Regional Variations

Moroccan Food in a Nutshell

Morocco's adventurous cuisine is based on the liberal use of spices. Yet it should not be thought of as spicy, because the rich, aromatic seasonings are subtly married to the healthy foods they enhance. Typical spices include cumin, paprika, cinnamon, saffron, turmeric and dried ginger. Other important seasonings are parsley, cilantro, onions, garlic and cayenne pepper. The complex mixture called *ras l-banut*, which is a proprietary concoction made by spice shop owners, is also widely used in cooking. It contains herbs, common spices, such as those mentioned above, and many exotic additions, including components thought to be aphrodisiacs (see p. 125).

Several ingredients are essential to Moroccan cooking. Lemons preserved in salt and lemon juice impart a unique, pungent flavor to salads and stews of fish or meat, especially chicken (see recipes, pp. 56–57). All sorts of olives pickled in aromatics are nibbled as snacks, added to salads or cooked in stews, frequently in combination with preserved lemons. Moroccans appreciate olive oil and use a generous amount of it in their dishes, mopping up the excess with bread. Aged, salted butter (*smen*), often mixed with dried herbs, provides a strong, cheesy flavor (an acquired taste) to couscous and certain sauces and soups. *Smen* that is many years old is a coveted commodity that is saved for special occasions. A thick, fiery paste of Tunisian origin (*barissa*) is served as a relish on the side. It is made with dried, hot red chile peppers, olive oil and garlic, and is added to dishes according to taste. Flavored waters distilled from fresh rose and orange blossoms are used in a variety of sweet and savory dishes. Rose water (*ma ward*) is added to certain pastries, and orange-flower water (*ma zber*) is put in some pastries, cakes,

Tastes of Morocco

You are encouraged to try some of these classic and nouvelle Moroccan recipes before you leave home. This is a wonderful and immediately rewarding way to preview the extraordinary cuisine of Morocco. Most of the special Moroccan ingredients necessary for these recipes are available in the United States (see *Resources*, p. 71). Satisfactory substitutes are given for those that are unavailable.

SOUPS

Harira

Peppery meat, vegetable and legume soup. Serves 8–10.

The recipe for this traditional soup, which breaks the fast during Ramadan, was provided by Rafih and Rita Benjelloun, co-owners of The Imperial Fez, the popular and acclaimed Moroccan restaurant in Atlanta, Georgia. Rafih is from Fès, the oldest Imperial city of Morocco, and Rita is from Marrakech, one of the most popular tourist destinations in Morocco.

- ¼ CUP CHICKPEAS (SOAKED IN WATER 24 HOURS)
- ¼ CUP FAVA BEANS (SOAKED IN WATER 24 HOURS AND SKINNED)
- ¼ CUP LENTILS
- SALT TO TASTE
- ¼ CUP OLIVE OIL
- 1 LARGE ONION, FINELY CHOPPED
- ½ POUND LAMB SHOULDER, DICED INTO ½-INCH PIECES
- 1 POUND TOMATOES, SEEDED AND PUREED (ABOUT 1 CUP)
- ½ CUP TOMATO PASTE
- ½ CUP FRESH CILANTRO, FINELY CHOPPED
- ½ CUP FRESH FLAT-LEAF PARSLEY, FINELY CHOPPED
- 2 TABLESPOONS BLACK PEPPER

HELPFUL PHRASES

RESTAURANT

WHAT IS THE “SPECIAL” FOR TODAY?
(WHAT’S GOOD TODAY?)

Shnu mizyan annaharda?
Shnoo mee-zee-ANNE en-nab-HAR-dab?

DO YOU HAVE ANY SPECIAL REGIONAL DISHES?

Wash ʿindkum shay makla mhalliyya?
Wahsb END-koom sheb MEHK-lab meh-bell-LEE-yab?

IS THIS DISH SPICY/HOT?

Wash hadi l-makla harra?
Wahsb HAD-eel MEHK-lab HAHR-rab?

WE WOULD LIKE (TO ORDER) . . .

Allah ykhaleek, kanbghiyu (natlub) . . .
Abl-LAH ee-hall-LEEK can-BREE-yoo (NAHT-lube) . . .

WHAT ARE THE INGREDIENTS IN THIS DISH?
(WHAT IS IN THIS DISH?)

Shnu kayn fee hadi l-makla?
Shnoo cane fee HAD-eel MEHK-lab?

WHAT ARE THE SEASONINGS IN THIS DISH?

Shnu al ʿatriyaat fi hadi l-makla?
Shnoo el ab-tree-YAT fee HAD-eel MEHK-lab?

THANK YOU VERY MUCH. THE FOOD IS (VERY) DELICIOUS.

Barak Allahu feek. Hadi l-makla ldeeda bizaaf.
Bab-rabk Abl-LAH-who feek. HAD-eel MEHK-lab lah-DEE-dab bee-ZAF.

bestila bil djaj variation of the festive pie called *bestila*. It is made with chicken instead of squab.

bestila bil hut bestila variation of the festive pie called *bestila*. It contains fish in a marinade called *chermula* (see *Foods & Flavors Guide*), which is a mixture of tomatoes, onion, garlic, cumin, paprika, hot red pepper, cilantro and flat-leaf parsley.

DELICIOUS **bestila bil ruz** variation of the festive pie called *bestila*. It contains a rice filling that is flavored with almonds and orange-flower water. The dish can be a first course or a dessert.

bibi m^cammar stuffed turkey.

birkukis (berkukesh) dish of large (3 mm or greater) couscous granules (*mbammsa*) cooked in milk.

NATIONAL FAVORITE **bisar (bessara, bisara, byesar)** hearty, thick, Berber dish of puréed broad (fava) beans topped with some paprika, cumin and a drizzle of oil. It is breakfast street food and resembles hummus, which is made of chickpeas. In Marrakech and the surrounding countryside markets, it typically is cooked in characteristic round-bottomed, earthenware crocks with flared rims. These cooking vessels sit at an angle on a charcoal burner to facilitate removal of their contents with a long-handled ladle.

NATIONAL FAVORITE **boulfaf (bu-lfaf)** type of kebab in which pieces of fresh lamb's liver seasoned with cumin, paprika and cayenne are individually wrapped in sheep's caul, put on skewers and grilled over charcoal. *Bu-lfaf* is one of the traditional lamb dishes eaten during 'Id le-Kbir (Aid el Kebir), the four-day religious festival that includes the sacrifice of a lamb. (Fr. *brochettes de foie*)

bousaif bil chermula braised swordfish seasoned with *chermula*, the classic "dry" marinade for fish. See recipe, p. 61.

braniya stew of lamb named for the fried eggplant that garnishes it.

NATIONAL FAVORITE **brik** savory filled pastry, usually containing eggs. It is of Tunisian origin.

briwat (briouat) bil bid pastry triangles filled with eggs and herbs.

briwat (briouat) bil fakya pastry triangles filled with dried fruit.

briwat (briouat) bil kefta pastry triangles filled with minced meat.

FABULOUS **briwat (briouat) bil luz** pastry triangles filled with almond paste. See recipe, p. 62.

briwat (briouat) bil merguez cigar-shaped pastries filled with small beef or lamb sausages heavily seasoned with paprika and cayenne pepper, which give the sausage a reddish color, along with black pepper and garlic. (Fr. "*briouat*" aux "*merguez*")

fliyya (fliou) wild mint (pennyroyal) consumed as an herbal tea. Although ingestion of concentrated pennyroyal oil can be toxic, normal consumption of pennyroyal tea is harmless.

fogga^c mushroom.

frach pigeon.

frik fresh, young corn. It is also the name for cracked green wheat or barley, which is fried and eaten only when the mature grains are not available.

frit fried potatoes (chips); French fries.

fti tender.

ftur breakfast.

ful fava bean.

ful gnawa black-eyed pea.

fwad viscera.

gamila small saucepan.

garfu fork; also called fersheta and mtshekka.

gazuz carbonated soft drink.

gda lunch.

geddid strip of preserved meat.

gedra (gdra) bottom part of a couscoussier, a two-part cooking pot made of aluminum, stainless steel or earthenware. The gedra or lower part is used to cook stews. The keskas or top part is a tight-fitting, colander-like pot with a perforated bottom in which couscous granules are cooked and flavored by steam escaping from the stew simmering in the lower pot.

gedra dial trid domed ceramic utensil used for cooking thin, circular sheets of a somewhat oily pastry dough for the dish called trid. This dish is considered a primitive form of bestila, the classic squab pie (see bestila, this Guide).

gelmi (genmi) mutton.

gemh wheat. Wheat flour is called dgig (dqiq), farina and thin.

ger^{ca} (gra^c, qra^c) hamra pumpkin or squash; also simply called ger^{ca} (gra^c, qra^c).

ger^{ca} (gra^c) slaoui long, pale-green, slightly curved squash; also simply called slaoui (slawi, slawiya).

gerga^c walnut; also called guz.

gernina (garnina) wild thistle, a relative of the globe artichoke, which is available only in early spring. The plant's pale-green stems are trimmed of leaves and tough fibers, chopped into little pieces and cooked with meat and preserved lemons in a stew (tagine) of the same name. The stems impart a bitter flavor and are thought to be good for the liver.