

CLEVELAND Jewish News

One smart little paper.

NEWS > LOCAL

Cooking with the flavors of Israel

Print Page

By Joan Kekst
Food Writer

Published: Friday, April 24, 2009 11:21 AM EDT

In November 2008, CJN Food Writer Joan Kekst took part in the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland's mission to Israel. While visiting the sites of various Federation-funded programs, she met with Israelis aided by the programs and asked them to share their favorite recipes.

First course: ISHA

On previous trips to Israel, I had tasted and loved many unique Middle Eastern foods and spices. When I tried to recreate these dishes at home, they were merely a limp reminder of the flavors in Israel that had fully awakened every imaginable taste bud. This time I was determined to watch and help Israelis prepare these dishes and carefully note the ingredients and cooking instructions!



Ethiopian women roast beans over open flame, steep the beans in hot water, and pour into tiny cups as part of their native coffee ceremony.

On the 2008 Federation mission, I first visited the community center in Abu Gosh, one site for ISHA, a Federation-sponsored women's health and wellness initiative for women with diverse backgrounds.

The Arab village of Abu Gosh, established in 1520, is named after a single family; most of the villagers claim to be their descendants. In the 1948 War of Independence, the Arabs of Abu Gosh remained neutral, and it was the only village in the area to survive intact.

Accompanied by Hannah Soltz-Aharony, Israeli director of ISHA, I joined a dozen Arab women at the community center in Abu Gosh. They wanted to cook traditional maklouba for me. This very ancient family dish, usually served to a large crowd, takes at least half a day and a kitchen army to prepare. It consists of layers of chicken and vegetables, cooked separately at first, then simmered together in a broth with rice.

The kitchen buzzed. The director of the center spoke English quite well, while the rest of the women spoke rapid Arabic and Hebrew. When important procedures were underway, however, we rarely needed words. Cooking is very visual – hand motions with a few words did the trick.

One perky woman tugged my sleeve inviting me to watch her mix dough for lechem, bread, which would be Iraqi-style pita. All at once, most of the women pointed and chattered to me in Hebrew, only drifts of which I could catch. They wanted me to notice that at least half the flour they used was whole wheat – different now because ISHA has taught them whole wheat

flour is healthier.

They also now know that frying isn't so healthy; they usually just boil or roast their meat and vegetables. But today, the maklouba, traditionally made by frying the meats and vegetables, would be a special treat.

New aromas and textures of spices filled the air alongside the happy babble of women in the kitchen. The pita dough was ready, and I was summoned to help divide the dough into balls and then flatten them out for baking. To a new, modern electric pita oven several dozen stones were added to double the heat source.

While I was busy watching and taking notes, two salads had been made: tabbouleh with cucumbers cut in the tiniest dice I'd ever seen and a lettuce and tomato salad splashed with just the right amount of lemon juice and olive oil.

The dessert was a fried dough made with ketach seeds and dipped into a sugar syrup.

Yes, it was a heavy meal, but I loved it, along with the friendliness of the women.

Second course: PACT

First, some history about the Ethiopian family with whom I cooked:

Hiwan Picado's life turned tragic 27 years ago when soldiers attacked the Jews in her tiny Ethiopian village. Her husband and others were killed. Afterwards, Picado and her eight children joined most of the remaining villagers on the arduous journey by foot to the Sudan border. Only half the large group survived the three-month trek through the Sudan desert.

At the makeshift port, Picado was immediately confronted by a soldier who asked for one of her children, or else they would all be killed. "Kill us," she answered the guard defiantly. Shocked by the determined woman, he could not kill them. Picado's family finally gained access to the waiting ship to become part of Operation Moses, which relocated them to Israel.

Hard years of adjustment followed.

I met Picado and her daughter Miri Picado-Aharony, now age 30, in Beersheva. Picado-Aharony and her husband work and also attend classes at Ben Gurion University, where she will soon get her master's in social work. Picado, who lives in a nearby apartment, babysits for her 6-month-old grandson.

Picado-Aharony's success is due in large part to PACT, Parents And Children Together, a program co-sponsored by Cleveland's Jewish Community Federation helping Ethiopian families adapt to Israel. Picado-Aharony now works for PACT, helping new groups of Ethiopians assimilate in Israeli society.

Picado is happy to recreate Tigret (a high class) Ethiopian Jewish holidays by preparing her favorite foods. These include chicken wat, a spicy stew; injera, the sourdough Ethiopian bread on which all food is served; and a wat of lentil and vegetables. Teaching me meant Picado could again remind her daughter how to cook these dishes. Picado-Aharony "mustn't forget" her Ethiopian roots, her mother feels.

On the stove, onions simmered in a pot with a bit of oil. Garlic and skinless chicken pieces came next, and later, water along with baharat, a red pepper spice mixture. Picado warned us to use small amounts at first, as one needs to become accustomed to these fiery spices.

Picado then made injera, the daily bread required at every meal to scoop up the fiery stews. She took out a heavy-bottom fry pan. It ensures even heat to most closely replicate the slow cooking of the traditional clay tanur (oven).

Imagine my surprise when Picado used a ball made of cloth pieces tied with a string and saturated with olive oil to grease the injera pan. My grandmother kept a similar cloth ball to grease her pans!

The finished injera is very sponge-like. Picado lifts it with her fingers onto a plate to cool. The injera rounds are stored in a straw basket with a funnel top, which keeps them fresh for several days.

The remarkable welcome I received in the Aharony home made the day magical. By the time we sampled the enormous lunch, we felt like family. Picado-Aharony gave us spice samples and invited us to come back and see her wedding pictures. Perhaps one day I can return to cook my American-Ashkenazi favorites for them!

From ISHA women in Abu Gosh:

MAKLOUBA – Meat

12-14 chicken pieces, drumsticks and thighs

Kosher salt and pepper to taste

2 T vegetable oil

2 onions, sliced

Cinnamon, sumac, zahtar to taste

3-1/2 C water or chicken broth

2 carrots, scraped and sliced

2 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cut in chunks

1/2 head of cauliflower, separated

2 small zucchini, sliced lengthwise

1 small eggplant, peeled and sliced

2 C long-grain white rice

Clean and skin chicken; season to taste with salt and pepper and set aside. Heat oil in a large stockpot. Sauté onions until golden. Add chicken pieces and herbs, and sauté about 7-8 minutes per side. Remove chicken to a clean pot. Add water or chicken broth and bring to a simmer.

Meanwhile, sauté vegetable pieces with salt, pepper and spices of your choice in the first pot. Add oil as needed. Remove vegetables and place on top of chicken, making sure the liquid covers all. Cover pot and simmer on very low heat, about 20 minutes.

Soak rice in cold water. Add rice, cover pot, and continue to simmer another 20 minutes. About halfway through, poke some holes in the rice layer and allow steam to escape. When rice is cooked, remove from heat and let rest 10 minutes.

Place a tray that is considerably larger than the uncovered pot on top, invert, and firmly tap the top of the pot. Lift up the pot and allow the chicken and vegetables to slip out. Mix them on the tray, if you wish. Serve immediately. Makes 10 or more portions. Can also be made

with lamb or beef.

PITA - *Pareve*

1 pkge of yeast or quick-rising yeast

1/2 C warm water

1/2 t sugar

1-1/2 C white flour

1/2 C whole-wheat flour

1 t salt

1 C lukewarm water

Extra flour for hands and rolling

Vegetable oil

Dissolve yeast in warm water. Add sugar, and stir until dissolved. Let sit for 10-15 minutes until water is frothy. Combine flours and salt in large bowl. Make a small depression in the middle of the flour and pour yeast/water mixture into the depression. Slowly add the lukewarm water and stir with wooden spoon or hands until dough is smooth and elastic.

Place dough on floured surface and knead for 8-10 minutes. Dough should no longer be sticky. Coat a large bowl with vegetable oil and place dough in bowl. Turn dough to coat all sides. Cover and allow to sit in a warm place until it has doubled in bulk (time varies according to temperature).

Preheat oven to 375° F. It's best to use a baking stone, as pita should cook very quickly.

Break off uniform sized balls of dough, about the size of an orange. Roll with rolling pin to about 8-10". Work the dough with the hands into a thin round shape. Bake immediately for 4 minutes. Turn over and bake 3-4 minutes more.

Remove and cool each piece before stacking. Store in plastic bags.

NOTE: Arab women heated stones and placed the pita over the stones so it baked top and bottom at the same time. It did not puff up as conventional pita does in our modern ovens.

TABBOULEH SALAD - *Pareve*

1-1/2 C bulgur

1 t salt

2 T fresh lemon juice

3 T olive oil

1 bunch flat-leaf parsley

6 sprigs mint, chopped

1 cucumber, peeled, seeded and thinly sliced

- 1 carrot, coarsely grated
- 12 cherry tomatoes, quartered
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- More salt and pepper to taste

In a medium pot bring 2-1/2 C water, bulgur and salt to a simmer. Cover and cook about 20-25 minutes until all water is absorbed. Transfer to a bowl; cool briefly. Combine lemon juice, oil, parsley and mint in a small bowl. Add cucumber, carrot, tomatoes and scallions. Stir into the bulgur and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve cold or at room temperature. Serves 8.

From a PACT family in Beersheva:

HIWAN PICADO'S DORO WAT (Chicken Stew) – Meat

- 1 C onions, chopped
- 2 T vegetable oil
- 10 pieces chicken legs and thighs, skinless
- 2 T flour
- Salt and black pepper to taste
- 2 T chicken bouillon powder
- 1 C warm water
- Deleh or bahaat (Ethiopian spices) to taste
- 6 hard-boiled eggs

Slowly sauté onions in oil until lightly brown. Dust chicken pieces with flour and season with salt and pepper. Add to the pot and brown on all sides. Dissolve chicken bouillon powder in warm water and add to the pot. Cover and simmer 30 minutes. Add more water if necessary.

Add deleh or baharat (recipe below) spices to taste. Drop the eggs into the liquid and heat thoroughly. Serve on injera. Serves 6-8.

BAHARAT – an Ethiopian Spice – Pareve

Similar to the traditional deleh spice

- 2 t black peppercorns
- 2 t coriander seeds
- 2 t cumin seeds
- 2 t cloves
- Seeds of 6 cardamom pods

1 t Hungarian paprika

1 t ground nutmeg

Dry-roast peppercorns, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, cloves and cardamom seeds in a small pan over medium heat about 10 minutes or until aromatic. Cool. Finely pulverize with paprika and nutmeg in a spice mill (a clean coffee grinder works well). Store airtight. Makes 2 T. Use small amounts at a time, according to taste.

LENTIL and RICE WAT - *Pareve*

1 onion, chopped

1 T vegetable or olive oil

2 cloves garlic, minced

1-2/3 C lentils, soaked several hours

3-1/2 C water

3/4 C rice, rinsed

1/2 t salt

Ethiopian spices to taste

Sauté onion in oil until limp. Add garlic and cook until aromatic. Stir in drained lentils. Cover with water; cook for 15 minutes. Add rice and cook until lentils are tender, about 15 minutes more. Season with salt and Ethiopian spices to taste. Serve on injera. Meat may be added if desired. Serves 6.

VEGETABLE WAT - *Pareve*

1 medium onion, chopped

2 celery ribs, sliced

5 medium potatoes, peeled and cubed

3 carrots, scraped and sliced

1 turnip, scraped and sliced

Salt, pepper and Ethiopian spices to taste

Combine vegetables in a pot. Add water just to cover. Simmer with salt and pepper until nearly tender. When vegetables are very soft, add Ethiopian spices to taste. Serve on injera. Makes 4-6 portions.

Copyright © 2010 - Cleveland Jewish News

[\[x\] Close Window](#)