

## ARID LANDS

On ancient sands in the northern Negev, archaic plants are cultivated at the Ramat Hanegev Agro-Research Center. With minimal rainfall, less than two inches per year, plants with names that can barely be pronounced are producing extraordinary results. On my visit in January, Tzion Shemer (General Manager of the Ramat Negev Desert Aggroresearch & Business Center) said what's new in the Negev, may be very, very old.

Tzion explained that finding the right plants to grow has been a labor intensive, highly detailed project. *Salicornia*, *atriplex* and *portulaca*, are unfamiliar salad names, yet tons of these odd salad greens have been grown, shipped and well received in European and Israeli markets. Agricultural research and testing discovered how well familiar and unfamiliar plants will grow when irrigated almost entirely by brackish water pumped from deep in the earth with amazing results.



*Salicornia*

.Brackish water has a high salinity level which stresses the plants to develop differently, often with a higher food value, sugar content, intense color and flavor. Computer controlled, fresh water is added to balance the sugar content and taste; Plants also have a longer shelf life, pleasant flavor and intense color. Tests showed astonishing side effects; such as a medicinal value for several prominent diseases.

An unusual plant is *Salicornia*, which looks a lot like wild sea-asparagus. It has a tasty crunch, the stalks snap off easily and can be eaten fresh or cooked. Tzion serves it plain, steamed or stuffs it into many dishes. A huge advantage for cultivating *Salicornia* is its ability to fight hypertension! In 2009, 500 tons were exported to Europe and used mainly as a vegetable. Research is ongoing to possibly develop a medication from *Salicornia*.

Another leafy green plant is *atriplex*, with a pleasant taste that can be cooked or used fresh in green salads. Tests show this plant could naturally combat diabetes. *Portulaca*, a familiar

name, but different looking plant, has a higher level of Omega 3 than most fish. These may be just the tip of a sandy iceberg that can provide future cures.

Surprisingly, grapes, pomegranates and olives are being grown here, too. 600 dunams of olive trees are under cultivation, irrigated with brackish water and now mechanically harvested. Tzion said that the station tests up to 50 brands of olive oil; the olives grown with brackish waters tested with a high protein food value. Grapes are small but sweeter than usual.

About 5000 Israelis reside on Moshavim (settlements) in the area; who are often among the first to make use of the new agricultural developments and techniques. For instance, they found that alfalfa grown in the sands has a high protein level making it a good animal food.

Fresh produce is only one valuable export; the other one is the fountain of knowledge Israeli researchers impart and share with the agricultural world in the Middle and Far East. Groups come from near and far to observe, study and bring their knowledge back to their homelands.

We sampled the delicious cherry tomatoes, the well known Desert Glory and gorgeous colorful sweet peppers. Perfect vegetables are exported to Europe and other neighboring countries. Less than perfect produce, about 40%, finds its way to nearby local Israeli markets.

Popeye may have eaten spinach for his strength, but soon we may eat herbs and greens grown in Israel's northern Negev for their strength to fight diseases. Look for greens with those strange names, like *Salicornia* "Sea Asparagus", *atriplex* and *portulaca*. Will these salads be our strength builders for wellness or possibly replicate medications someday?



Red and Golden Peppers



Salicornia



Cherry Tomatoes

## **FISH or CHICKEN in TOMATOES, PEPPERS and SALICORNIA (OR SEA ASPARAGUS)**

There was no way to get an exact recipe from Tzion for Salicornia. He insisted that anyone who can make asparagus can do this. Here's his recommendation which I tried, needless to say with asparagus.

3- 3 1/2 lb. whole kosher fryer

3T olive oil

1 medium onion, sliced

1 medium tomato, seeded and diced

1/2C red pepper, diced

1/2C yellow pepper, diced

6 - 8 slim asparagus stalks

1C cooked rice

Salt and pepper to taste

On the stovetop, in a large skillet, heat 2T olive oil; add the onion and cook until softened. Add the tomato, red pepper and yellow pepper; cook 3 minutes. Add asparagus stalks and cook about 5 minutes; add the rice. Remove from heat and cool. Note: asparagus can be steamed. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Preheat oven to 400°F.

Brush the chicken inside and out with olive oil; loosely stuff with the rice mixture. Bake any remaining stuffing in a small ovenproof bowl. Roast the chicken for 20 minutes; reduce heat to 350°F and continue to roast about 45 minutes more. Thermometer should read 160°F. Rest and cut into serving pieces. Serve with steamed asparagus and greens as a side dish.

## **RICOTTA CHEESE BALLS – Dairy**

*Adapted fom Haaretz Magazine, 1/8/10*

10 oz. ricotta cheese, drained

3 oz. Parmesan Cheese, grated

3T flour mixed with 3T bread crumbs

2 eggs, lightly beaten

Salt and pepper to taste

1/2C Bread crumbs, divided

Olive oil

Balsamic Vinegar, optional

Drain ricotta cheese several hours in a cheese-cloth lined sieve. After the liquid drips out of the ricotta cheese, place it in a bowl; add eggs 2T bread crumbs and Parmesan cheese. Combine well and add the flour, season with salt and pepper.

Moisten hands and form marble size ball and roll in bread crumbs to completely coat. Heat half a cup of olive oil in a medium skillet add the cheese balls and fry until golden brown. Turn once if needed. Serve warm, drizzled with balsamic vinegar, if desired.

### **ZUCCHINI CHOCOLATE CHIP CAKE** *Dairy or Pareve*

*This is a very popular cake in Israel as zucchini are so plentiful.*

2 ½ C flour, + 1 T for pan

1 t baking soda

½ t baking powder

½ t salt

2 sticks, (1 cup) unsalted butter or margarine, softened

1 C packed light brown sugar

1t vanilla

3 large eggs, room temperature

2 C coarsely grated zucchini, (8 oz.)

1 C semisweet chocolate chips

½C walnuts, toasted and chopped

Preheat oven to 350° F. Grease and flour a 3-qt. Bundt pan, tap out excess flour.

Sift together flour, baking soda, baking powder and salt into a bowl. In large bowl of electric mix, beat together butter and brown sugar in a large bowl at high speed until pale and fluffy, about 3 minutes. Add vanilla. Reduce speed and beat in eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition; beat until batter is smooth and fluffy, about 2 minutes.

Reduce speed to low and add all but half a cup flour mixture, mixing until just combined. Toss zucchini, chocolate chips and walnuts with remaining flour mixture, add to batter, mixing with a rubber spatula, batter will be thick.

Spoon batter into pan, smooth top. Bake in center of oven, rotate pan halfway through baking. Bake until sides begin to pull away from pan; a cake tester will come out clean, about 45 to 50 minutes. Cool cake pan on a rack 30 minutes. Run a knife around sides of pan to

remove. Invert onto a rack and cool completely. Cake keeps well at room temperature 3 days.  
May be frozen. Makes 16 to 18 slices.

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