

Middle Eastern Cuisine

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Around the Table

with The

Catholic Foodie

Jeff Young

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Before You Get Started: Tips for Cooking Middle Eastern Food

- My favorite tool in the kitchen, after my chef's knife, is my mortar and pestle. Nine times out of ten, if a recipe calls for minced garlic, I crush it with my mortar and pestle instead. Add a little salt to the garlic to create friction and beat it to a pulp, literally. We make salad dressing just about every day, and they all start with garlic being crushed with the mortar and pestle.
- Dried chickpeas are better than canned, but it takes planning. They need to be rinsed, picked over to remove pebbles or other debris, then soaked in cold water overnight. The following day they need to be boiled until soft. Then you can use them for Hummus or any other recipe. The only exception is Falafel. For Falafel, you only soak the chickpeas, you do not boil them.
- Sometimes eggplant can be bitter. To reduce the bitterness, you can coat generously with salt and allow it to "sweat" in a colander. The eggplant will sweat out some of the liquid that can make it bitter. Just make sure to thoroughly rinse the eggplant before cooking with it to remove the excess salt. This process works, but it can be long, lasting two to three hours. A quicker alternative is to soak sliced eggplant in salt water for 15 to 30 minutes. This will also prevent the eggplant from absorbing any olive oil you are using to cook it with.
- There are many different brands of tahini on the market. We used Joyva for the longest time, but our new favorite brand since returning from the Holy Land is Al Wadi. It is available in Middle Eastern markets and online.
- Your food will only be good as the ingredients you use. I always try to buy the best ingredients I can afford, especially when it comes to fresh ingredients and certain kitchen staples, like extra virgin olive oil. There are many different brands, and I can't recommend just one. Here are a few things you will want to look for as you shop for olive oil: 1) Look for "cold pressed" on the label, 2) look for "extra virgin" on the label, 3) packaged in green glass to protect the oil from the damaging effects of sunlight, 4) look for a date stamp on the label. Unlike wine, olive oil does not improve with age.
- Fresh squeezed lemon juice is always best. The \$5 I spent on a little wooden reamer is probably the best \$5 I have ever spent. I use it every day, and I am constantly amazed at what a little fresh lemon juice can do to a recipe.
- The salt that I use most days is simple kosher salt. My wife prefers sea salt, so we use both. There are so many varieties of salt, and each one can add a different flavor to a dish. Experiment and see which salts you prefer.

A note about language and culture:

The Arabic language spoken by many cultures in the Middle East is a very old language. Many of the words translate into English with different spellings. That's why there are different spellings for so many different dishes. For example Tabbouleh could be spelled Tabouli, Taboule, or Tabouleh. Makloubeh could be spelled Makloubah, or Maqlooba. Editorially, I had to make a decision for CatholicFoodie.com and for this book. I have attempted to maintain a consistency that meshes with the way I saw words spelled in the Holy Land. If you want to do further research on any of the recipes in this book, keep in mind that you might need to search for multiple spellings.

A note about the difference of American Middle Eastern cuisine versus Israeli Middle Eastern Cuisine:

Shibly Kando, who runs the Kando Store in Bethlehem and also helps Voice of Faith Tours, is someone I met on my first pilgrimage to the Holy Land and we quickly became friends. We keep in touch on Facebook and he frequently comments on food photos I post. More than once, as I was testing recipes for this book, Shibly noted how differently this or that dish looked than what he is accustomed to in the Holy Land. He was in the States a few weeks ago and I had the opportunity to sit down with him and talk about the book and some of the editorial decisions I had to make.

I finally came to the conclusion that the beauty of cooking at home is that you can make dishes the way you like them. If you like extra tomatoes in your Tabbouleh, then you can add them. I also observed a natural fusion between cuisines takes place over time. My wife's grandfather (originally from Lebanon) moved to Louisiana in the late 1800s. Over the next century, the Lebanese dishes that were part of their daily fare began to take on Louisiana overtones. The results of that fusion are what I was introduced to in the early 1990s when I first met my wife. Does that make the food that I prepare at home any less Middle Eastern? No. This is simply part of my in-law's experience as people of Lebanese descent living out their days in America. In many ways, my experience of Middle Eastern cuisine has been a fusion between Lebanese and Cajun/Creole cuisines.



Bread: The Staff of Life

Bread has been referred to as the staff of life, because bread has been seen as a life-giving necessity in cultures across the globe. It is a common staple of life. It's no wonder Jesus (who was born in *Bethlehem* which means *house of bread*) left us his Eucharistic presence—the ongoing memorial of his suffering, death, and resurrection—in the humble and common form of bread and wine.

The Middle East is made up of different countries, different peoples, and different religions and cultures. Their cuisine, however, is strikingly similar, despite the vast differences in religion. The region is home to Christians, Jews, and Muslims, but bread is common to all of them. Actually, for all three religions, bread is considered to be holy, a gift from God.

What we know in the United States as Pita is known by other names across the Middle East. As a matter of fact, *Pita* is a Greek name. It is also known in the States as *Arabic Bread* or *Syrian Bread*. In Arabic it is *Khubz*.

Claudia Roden, renowned cookbook writer and cultural anthropologist, tells a story in *The New Book of Middle Eastern Food* that highlights the reverence the people of the Middle East have for bread. At a conference in Istanbul a foreign correspondent stuck a piece of bread under the leg of a wobbly table to steady it. While apparently not a big deal for the foreigner, all the Middle Easterners who saw this dashed forward to retrieve the bread and kiss it.

In many areas of the Middle East, the act of baking bread is accompanied by prayer. There are prayers before starting, when kneading, before baking, and of course giving thanks before eating.

Arabic Bread (Pita Bread)

There are many different types of “Pita” bread in the Middle East. Some are thick, and some are thin. Some form a pocket inside when they are baked (which makes them ideal for sandwiches), and some do not. Some are topped with herbs and spices, others are not. But some form of flatbread is served with just about every meal in the Middle East. The bread is used to sop up sauces or dips (like Hummus), but it is also used as an eating utensil to scoop up meat, rice, or vegetables. Some salads even have a flatbread as one of the main ingredients, like the well-known Fattoush salad.

Make Pita at Home: It's Easy & It's Better for You

It's certainly true that Pita is readily available in grocery stores around the United States. But, I want to challenge you to make your own at home. It's easy to do, doesn't require a huge time commitment, and it's healthier for you than store-bought Pita, which is always full of additives and preservatives. Make it at home, and you're making it healthy with just a few simple ingredients flour, water, salt, yeast, olive oil, and sugar.

Baking Arabic Bread requires a solid pre-heated surface in an oven that is durable and can retain heat well. Regular baking sheets will probably not do the trick. A thick baking stone can work, but my experience with putting cold (or even room temperature) materials onto a hot regular-sized baking stone has always yielded in a broken stone. For any serious

home baking, I highly recommend The Baking Steel made by Stoughton Steel, Inc. I prefer using a Baking Steel over a baking stone for three main reasons:

As a ¼-inch piece of steel. It's not going to break.

Things cook much more quickly on steel. Steel's thermal conductivity is 18 times greater than that of ceramic, which is what baking stones are made of. Not only will breads (and pizzas!) cook more quickly on a Baking Steel, they will also result in the oven-spring and mild charring that we have come to expect from restaurant and bakery-quality ovens.

It absorbs and retains heat well. So when you open and close your oven repeatedly as you bake Arabic Breads in batches your oven is less likely to lose heat when the door is opened.

INGREDIENTS

- 3 cups all-purpose or bread flour (I prefer to use King Arthur Flour, but you can use whatever you like), you will also need extra flour for dusting, etc.
- 3 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil
- 2 teaspoons of instant yeast
- 2 teaspoons of kosher salt or sea salt
- ½ teaspoon of sugar
- 1 cup of water, plus a little more as needed

INSTRUCTIONS

1. In a stand mixer with a dough hook (or a food processor fitted with a dough blade) combine the flour, olive oil, yeast, salt, and sugar. Turn the mixer or processor on medium-low and slowly add 1 cup of water. You are looking for the dough to form a ball that is slightly sticky. You might need to add a little more water to make this happen. Usually, I use 1 cup plus 1 to 2 ounces of water before the dough is the way I want it to be.

2. Now it's time to let the dough rise until it doubles in size. This will take between 1 to 2 hours. You can leave the dough in the mixing bowl or transfer it to a large glass mixing bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap or a clean, heavy kitchen towel. Leave the bowl in a draft-free place for an hour or two.
3. When the dough is ready, pre-heat the oven to 400 degrees. If you plan to use a baking steel, pizza stone, or a heavy cookie sheet place it in the oven first to allow it to pre-heat too. Next, turn out the dough on a lightly floured surface and cut into 6 even pieces. Gently shape each piece into a ball. Then, one at a time, roll out each ball into a round about $\frac{1}{4}$ inch thick.
4. Place each round on a lightly floured surface and lightly dust the tops of the rounds with flour, then cover with plastic wrap or a kitchen towel and allow to rise an additional 20 minutes.
5. When you are ready to start baking the Pita, dampen your hands with a little water and pick up one of the rounds of dough, patting off the excess flour and slightly moistening the dough. Then place the

round directly on the baking steel, pizza stone, or baking sheet. Repeat the process as room in the oven allows, then close the oven door and bake for 4 minutes. At the 4 minute mark, flip the Pita and bake for another 4 minutes. The Pita should then be puffed up and nicely browned. Remove the Pita from the oven with a pizza peel or a large spatula.

6. Repeat the process with the remaining rounds.

NOTE:

- This recipe makes 6 Pita breads.
- This bread is delicious right out of the oven, lightly brushed with melted butter. If you are serving it with a sauce or a dip, like Hummus, you do not need to brush it with butter.
- Pita keeps really well. It can be frozen in packs wrapped in aluminum foil, then reheated in the oven when you are ready to eat.
- I usually double this recipe and freeze what we do not eat right away.



Lamb-Stuffed Cabbage Rolls

I first tried stuffed grape leaves when I was dating my future wife back in early 90s. I think I tried them simply because I was fascinated with the woman I loved, and she told me they were good. Enough said. I do remember running an errand for my mother-in-law. Now this was years before she became my mother-in-law. At that time, she did not have her own grapevine, so she asked me to run and go pick some up from a family friend who did have a grapevine her backyard. It was the mother of a friend of mine, Father Jeff Bayhi. Well, a phone call was made, the leaves were packaged up, I was on my way, and Mama Bayhi was expecting me. The errand was a success.

Years later, my mother-in-law acquired her own grapevine. It was healthy and produced lots and lots of grape leaves for years. Then Hurricane Katrina stuck, and the vine was never the same after that. Eventually, that vine was uprooted and replaced by a new vine. Fresh grape leaves are now plentiful in the spring and summer.

But what about the winter? Or whenever you can't get your hands on fresh grape leaves? I think that's why God created cabbage. Which is convenient, don't you think? In the south we have a custom for New Year's Day. I grew up with this, and since I hated beans growing up (and cabbage), New Year's never really thrilled me. But the custom is this: if you want to be healthy, wealthy, and wise in the New Year, you need to eat cabbage and black-eyed peas. Now that I'm older, that's not a problem. And, thankfully, the cabbage always comes in the form of Lamb-Stuffed Cabbage Rolls.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 pound. ground lamb
- ½ cup (scant) raw long grain white rice
- Granulated garlic or fresh-pressed garlic
- Salt
- Cayenne pepper
- Juice of ½ a lemon
- 2 tablespoons butter, melted
- 2 small cans of petite diced tomatoes
- Chicken stock (32 oz.)
- 1 large head of cabbage

INSTRUCTIONS

1. For cabbage rolls, you need a larger head of cabbage. As you get toward the center of the cabbage, the leaves become too curly and are unusable, although you could use them to line the bottom of the pot. Cut the cabbage in half from top to bottom and remove the core. Parboil or steam the cabbage until the leaves are soft and pliable and are

easy to separate. Larger leaves can be cut into triangles roughly the same size as a grape leaf. Remove and reserve large or coarse ribs. You will use some of the unusable leaves and ribs to line the bottom of the pot.

2. The Mahshi (or stuffing): In a large bowl mix the ground lamb, raw rice, and granulated garlic (we use fresh-pressed garlic), salt, cayenne pepper (all to taste), melted butter, lemon juice, and about half a can of tomatoes. Mix thoroughly with your hands.
3. Line the bottom of the pot with large cabbage leaves.
4. To roll the cabbage leaves: Cut the leaves uniformly until they are roughly the size of a grape leaf. I cut my into triangle shapes. Lay the leaf flat on table or counter. Take about a small finger's worth of mahshi and place it at the base of leaf (you do not want it to hang over the leaf). Fold the sides of the leaf in and then roll the leaf up to the top. Place leaf in pot on top of the lamb shoulder chops. Repeat the process until all mahshi is gone (or until there is no more room in the pot). Remember

- to alternate direction of leaves for each layer in the pot.
5. Add the remaining ingredients to the pot: chicken stock, can of tomatoes, lemon juice (we also add 3 cloves of sliced garlic). The liquid should just about cover the cabbage rolls (you can use more tomatoes, if desired).
 6. Place a pottery plate on top of the rolls. This prevents them from unrolling during cooking.
 7. Simmer on low to medium heat for about 45 minutes.
 8. Remove plate (carefully!) and serve.



Roasted Eggplant and Tomato Soup

I mentioned earlier that I have only recently become a fan of eggplant (or aubergine, as they say in the Holy Land), but I have always loved tomatoes. At one point in my life—very early on, I might add—tomatoes were the only vegetable I would eat. Besides corn. And don't start on the whole tomato-is-a-fruit-not-a-vegetable-thing. Try explaining that to a seven year old. They all know it's really a vegetable.

When you think of soup, you might be tempted to think that you just throw everything in the pot and pour some water on top, turn the heat up, and you're done. You *could* do that, of course. But I wouldn't recommend it.

This soup does call for chicken stock, four cups, in fact. But this soup is also pureed. If you prefer a soup that is chunkier, you can refrain from pureeing it. But you might also want to add a little more stock. Experiment. Taste and see. Make it according to your taste.

The only thing you can't change is the roasting part. Yes, you must roast the veggies first for this soup. It might seem like an extra step, but it is oh-so-worth-it. Roasting the eggplant, tomatoes, onions, and garlic before adding them to the stock intensifies and deepens their flavors. It's really what makes this soup.

If you're not big on creamy soups, just reduce the amount of cream called for, or toss it out completely. This soup will be good either way.

INGREDIENTS

- 2 medium eggplants, halved lengthwise
- 3 ripe tomatoes, halved
- 2 medium sweet yellow onions, peeled and halved
- 6 to 8 cloves of garlic
- Extra virgin olive oil (to drizzle over vegetables for roasting)
- 1 teaspoon dried thyme
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- ½ to 1 teaspoon cayenne or crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
- 4 cups chicken stock
- ¼ cup heavy whipping cream
- ¾ cup Feta cheese, crumbled
- Kosher salt and freshly cracked black pepper, to taste
- Lemon wedges, as garnish

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Place eggplant, tomatoes, onion, and garlic on a large baking sheet (or two smaller baking sheets if they won't fit on just one), and drizzle with olive oil. Roast in the oven for about 45 minutes, checking on the garlic after 30 minutes to make sure it doesn't burn. Pull the garlic whenever it is ready, peel it, then set it aside. The goal here is to roast the vegetables until they are tender and start to brown.
3. Remove the vegetables from the oven and allow to cool just enough so that you can handle the eggplant. Using a large spoon, scoop out the flesh of the eggplant and place in a large heavy-bottomed soup pot. Discard the eggplant skins.
4. Add the tomatoes, onions, and garlic to the pot with the eggplant. Add the thyme and the chicken stock and bring to a boil. Immediately reduce heat to a simmer and cook for about 45 minutes. You are looking for the onions to become very tender.
5. Using an immersion blender, puree the soup. If you don't have an immersion blender, you can do the same thing by transferring the soup in batches to a food processor or blender (just make sure your

- blender can handle hot soup!). Puree and return to the pot.
6. Add the cream and bring the soup back to a simmer. Taste and season with salt and pepper, and adjust any of the other seasonings.
 7. Serve hot in bowls. Top with crumbled Feta. You can also squeeze some fresh lemon juice over the soup in each bowl.



