



A food hunt in Alexandria, LEFT, can lead to stellar renditions of Egyptian dishes like *molokhia* (recipe, p. 114).

A Lesson in Egyptian Classics

With the opening of a Cairo cooking school devoted to Egyptian recipes, an overlooked cuisine is finally on the rise. Writer Salma Abdelnour gets an education.

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETRINA TINSLAY

MY GRANDMOTHER ALYCE was famous in our family for the Sunday lunches she'd cook in her small town in Lebanon. When she was alive, before my parents and I came to live in America, I was too young and rowdy to pay close attention to all the meze dishes, grilled meats, stews and salads on her table. But I do remember one dish, *molokhia*, vividly. It was dark green and soupy, and I wanted no part of it. I knew one thing about it, though: It was Egyptian.

It would be a few years before I would begin to like *molokhia*, by which I mean fall madly in love with it. It has layers of cinnamon-scented chicken and buttery rice surrounded by a wonderful sauce of dark, bittersweet greens—an adult-looking dish, to be sure. Even though the Lebanese consider it a staple, they'll generally concede

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credit for it to the Egyptians. *Molokhia*, which means “of the kings,” is what first put Egypt on my radar, well before I'd learned much else about the country.



FOOD PRIDE

“I hope one result of all the eyes on Egypt will be a renewed interest in its culture, including its food traditions.”



Of course, politics, not food, has turned the world's attention to Egypt since the 2011 uprising that toppled Hosni Mubarak from an almost-30-year dictatorship, and the subsequent struggle over the post-revolutionary leadership. It has been a tumultuous year, no doubt about it, and as the country

From City to Mountain



COOKING AT QASR TWENTY

At this new school in Cairo, travelers take lessons on how to cook like Egyptians. Salma Abdelnour learned to make molokhia like her grandmother's.



HANGING OUT AT LE RIAD

This chic, all-suites boutique hotel is located in Cairo's oldest quarter. Guests can have breakfast on the roof terrace with sweeping city views.



HIKING IN THE SINAI PENINSULA

Tour operators can plan hikes through the St. Katherine Protectorate's rocky red mountains, ending with lunch inside a Bedouin tent.

continues to undergo all kinds of changes (parliamentary elections, a new constitution), the world is watching. I hope that once the headlines die down, one positive result of all the eyes on Egypt will be a renewed interest in the country's history and culture, including its fascinating and little-known culinary traditions.

ON A RECENT TRIP TO EGYPT between episodes of unrest, I made a point of spending time exploring the country's food. My reintroduction to the cuisine began one sunny morning in Cairo, at the 14th-century Khan El Khalili souk. After peeks into the ancient market's many textile and spice shops, my guide, Lamia El Tawdy, took me to a vendor to try a sandwich of *ful*, fava beans stewed in olive oil and garlic. I've eaten *ful medammes*, ubiquitous around the Middle East, my whole life, but never quite like this. The warm, soft, olive oil-laden fava beans were ladled into folds of Egyptian bread—bouncy, stretchy, tasting of whole-grain wheat and so unlike the Arabic pita I knew. My guide saw me smile and said, "If you see someone looking completely at peace, you know they've just eaten *ful*."

I was staying at Le Riad, a stylish little hotel near the souk. My room, the King Farouk Suite, was named after Egypt's deposed ex-monarch. As I settled in later that day, I browsed through an August 1952 issue of *Paris Match* left out on the coffee table. It showed a photo spread of the former king, who, after getting toppled in the revolution just a month before, was lounging in Capri with his family, bored in exile.

For dinner that night, my mind was focused less on the country's fallen regimes than on its food. I learned that it takes some effort to hunt down good Egyptian-cuisine restaurants in Cairo. My contact in the city, Eric Monkaba, a cool-tempered, impeccably dressed 31-year-old of Syrian heritage who grew up in Michigan, took me to a place he loves called Abou El Sid. Four years ago, Monkaba launched a Cairo-based travel-planning company called Backpacker Concierge, which I'd hired to help arrange guides and hotels. More recently, he and Hossam El Sherbiny opened a Cairo cooking school called Qasr Twenty, reportedly the first in the city to specialize in Egyptian dishes.

At Abou El Sid, a cacophonous, banquet-lined restaurant, I was happy to discover stuffed pigeon, an Egyptian specialty since the time of the pharaohs. The two small birds arrived elegantly displayed side by side, dark pink and juicy inside, with crisp caramelized skin and a stuffing made of the roasted cracked wheat called *freekeh*. Next came a fragrant bowl of *koshary*, more comfort food than royal-banquet star. It's made with two key Egyptian ingredients, lentils and chickpeas, layered in a bowl with rice, macaroni and fried onion. I took my cue from others around me, mixing the ingredients together and drizzling on a tomatoey hot sauce. An absolute carb-fest, loaded with crunch, sauciness and spice. How had I never heard of it before?

I asked Monkaba why he thinks Egyptian cuisine is less known around the world than, say, Moroccan or Lebanese. "The French brought back new flavors and dishes from their colonies to their home country, and to the world, but French occupation of Morocco and Lebanon penetrated more deeply than it did in Egypt," he explained. "Also, the British were in Egypt significantly longer than the French but never managed to incorporate themselves into the culture, and it's no surprise they exported nothing of the cuisine."

Qasr Twenty aims to bring Egyptian food back from obscurity. The school is on the second floor of a 1930s Art Deco building, with each room painted a



EATING KOSHARY

"It was an absolute carb-fest, loaded with crunch, sauciness and spice. How had I never heard of it before?"



different shade—purple, gold, green. Light flooded in through arched windows and balconies as the staff, skilled Cairo chefs and home cooks, set out ingredients. In Egypt, *molokhia* is often made with rabbit, but we were going to make it with chicken, the way I'd always known it in Lebanon. The dish has a sauce of Jew's mallow leaves, grown all over the Middle East. I learned that I needed to mince the leaves very finely, until they reached an almost elastic consistency. I helped prepare the broth to boil the chicken, then browned the meat in butter. Then we cooked the greens in the chicken broth. "Never let them come to a boil!" an instructor called out to me. We stirred in a paste of mashed garlic cloves and ground coriander. I'd never made *molokhia* before, perhaps afraid mine wouldn't live up to my grandmother's, and I felt lucky to have this hands-on training.

As it simmered, we started the *shorbet ads*, or lentil soup. I loved the red-orange color the soup developed as we simmered the red lentils with fiery-hued tomatoes and carrots. We passed the soup through a strainer, pressing down hard to make a puree (a blender would work, too), then spiced the soup with cumin and chile. We made Arabic-style croutons to sprinkle on top, tearing pieces of pita bread and frying them until they became crunchy-hot.

"Egyptian cuisine needs to be more appreciated," El Sherbiny said as he, Monkaba and I ate a lunch of dishes made in class. One of the staff chimed in from the kitchen: "Lebanese food is more famous, but it's mostly appetizers." Whoa! I had to pipe up: "Lebanese cuisine goes far beyond meze," I said defensively, enjoying the sparring match. But point taken about Egyptian food.

AFTER LUNCH, MONKABA HAD ARRANGED for me to go to Alexandria, three hours away by car. When my taxi rolled into the ancient port city, along the dazzling Mediterranean waterfront, I felt a rush. I emerged onto a graceful, park-like square filled with palm trees and fronting the shoreside boulevard, which curls around the coast and seems to stretch out endlessly into the past and future.

I boarded a tram and rode through the dense downtown, packed with tiny old shops and rows of 19th-century Italianate buildings, on the way to dinner with Monkaba and a local guide. The sprawling Ibn El Balad restaurant, crowded with enormous family-size tables and towering stone columns, has been a hit with Alexandrians since it opened a few years ago. I sampled the *molokhia* as well as *ruqaq* (buttery, crackling phyllo squares filled with slightly sweet spiced beef) and *mumbar* (small, luscious chitterlings flavored with cardamom). I wished Egyptian-cuisine restaurants like this one were more ubiquitous.

I planned to end my trip to Egypt with the Bedouins in the Sinai mountains. From Cairo I flew into Sharm El Sheikh airport, on the Red Sea coast, and took a one-and-a-half hour taxi ride to Dahab—one of those remote seaside towns where beach bums from around the world come to wind-surf and end up staying months, years, a lifetime.

Monkaba had hired a Bedouin guide to meet me for a trek in the St. Katherine Protectorate, a desert-and-mountain ecosystem two hours by car from Dahab, and he'd arranged for members of the Bedouin Jebalia tribe to cook me lunch in their tent. In the car, I stared at the rocky red mountains as the driver stopped to let camels cross the road. My guide and I hiked up the dry,

ON SHORBET ADS

"I loved the colors as we simmered red lentils with fiery-hued tomatoes and carrots."



Egyptian lentil soup is spiced with cumin and chile—comfort with a kick (recipe, p. 40).

BLACK BOOK

Here, some highlights from writer Salma Abdelnour's Egypt trip. She worked mainly with Backpacker Concierge, which creates individualized tours of Jordan and Egypt (backpackerconciierge.com).

HOTEL

Le Riad

In Cairo, a stylish boutique hotel with 17 suites and a great location just outside the Khan El Khalili souk. Suites from \$323; leriad-hotel.decharme.com.

RESTAURANTS

Abou El Sid

One of the best restaurants in Cairo for authentic Egyptian food, served in a loud, banquette-lined dining room. 157 26th of July St.; Zamalek; 011-202-2735-9640.

Ibn El Balad

A popular restaurant in Alexandria with Egyptian dishes like *ruqaq*—phyllo squares filled with

spiced beef. Mostafa Kamel St. (behind El Salam Theater); 011-203-541-1404.

COOKING SCHOOL

Qasr Twenty

Backpacker Concierge's Cairo cooking school, specializing in Egyptian classics and located in a 1930s Art Deco building near Tahrir Square. \$85 per person; 20 Qasr al Ainy; 011-20-109-494-1329 or qasrtwenty.com.

TREK

Embah Safari

Organizes trips into the Sinai Peninsula to experience Bedouin culture. From \$120 per person for a two-day trek; embah.com.

TRAVEL

stony, craggy-edged slopes, dotted with hardy mulberry and carob trees.

When we arrived at the tent, only about three yards square and made of goat hair, I introduced myself to the small group in Lebanese-dialect Arabic—a workable if spotty substitute for Egyptian Arabic—and sat quietly, watching an elderly woman from the tribe and her 10-year-old niece grind wheat. A few neighbors from the tribe, wearing the long-sleeved cotton gowns and turbans Bedouins prefer to keep the sun and sand off their skin, dropped by to chat and lounge on the floor cushions as they discussed a friend's upcoming wedding.

Lunch was impressive: focaccia-like bread baked in a stone oven in the tent and made from wheat I'd helped grind on a round stone mill; a soothing wheat porridge called *jerisha*, flavored with tart fermented goat milk; a salad of *girgir* (arugula), onions and tomatoes, grown in an irrigated garden nearby

and sprinkled with lemon and rock salt from mountain caves; and a lively soup made from dried tomatoes, chard and zucchini. The ingredients were all grown or foraged in the harsh desert climate, but the dishes were fresh-tasting and vibrant and prepared with skill, more a finely honed craft than just a means of sustenance.

It's been a little over a year since Egypt's revolution, and it's not clear yet what change will bring. But on a light, optimistic note, Monkaba and his team are planning to launch new culinary trips around the country—the first are slated for later this year—including cooking classes, a wine tour, a jam-making demo and a day spent learning Bedouin recipes in the St. Katherine Protectorate. The Cairo cooking school also happens to be a short walk from Tahrir Square, headquarters of the revolution and now—no surprise—the latest must-see for anyone who wants to understand the new Egypt.

Egyptian Red Lentil Soup

ACTIVE: 15 MIN; TOTAL: 45 MIN

8 SERVINGS

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Known as *shorbet ads*, this vividly hued lentil soup is very popular in Egypt.

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
 - 1 medium onion, chopped
 - 2 carrots, finely chopped
 - 3 celery ribs, finely chopped
 - 3 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 - 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 - ½ teaspoon ground coriander
 - ½ teaspoon ancho chile powder
 - 1 pound tomatoes, seeded and diced
 - 2 cups red lentils (14 ounces)
- Salt
Plain yogurt, lemon wedges and warm pita, for serving

1. In a large pot, melt the butter. Add the onion, carrots, celery and garlic and cook over moderate heat, stirring, until softened, 5 minutes. Add the cumin, coriander and chile powder

and cook until fragrant, 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes and cook just until softened, 2 minutes. Add the lentils and 8 cups of water and season with salt. Simmer over moderately low heat until the lentils are very soft, 30 minutes.

2. Working in batches, puree the soup. Season with salt and serve with yogurt, lemon wedges and warm pita. —*Eric Monkaba*

Hazelnut Dukka

🕒 TOTAL: 30 MIN • MAKES ABOUT 2 CUPS

Dukka (from the Arabic for “to pound”) refers to crushed nuts and seeds traditionally eaten on bread dipped in olive oil; the blend varies from cook to cook. Monkaba especially likes this garlic-free version.

- ½ cup hazelnuts
 - 6 tablespoons coriander seeds
 - 3 tablespoons whole cumin seeds
 - ¼ cup sesame seeds
 - 1 tablespoon dried thyme
 - ½ cup salted roasted pistachios
 - ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- Salt and freshly ground pepper

1. Preheat the oven to 350°. Spread the hazelnuts in a pie plate and toast for 12 minutes, until fragrant and the skins blister. Transfer the hazelnuts to a kitchen towel and let cool. Rub the nuts together to remove the skins and transfer to a food processor.

2. In a medium skillet, toast the coriander and cumin seeds over moderate heat, shaking the pan, until golden and fragrant, about 3 minutes. Spread the spices out on a plate and let cool completely, then finely grind in a spice grinder. In the same skillet, toast the sesame seeds over moderate heat until golden, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer the sesame seeds to the plate to cool. Add the coriander, cumin, sesame seeds and thyme to the food processor along with the pistachios, cayenne and 1 teaspoon each of salt and pepper and pulse until finely ground. Transfer the *dukka* to a bowl.

SERVE WITH Olive oil and crusty bread.
MAKE AHEAD The *dukka* can be kept in an airtight container for up to 4 days or refrigerated for up to 1 month.

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And it all started with savory McCormick® Gourmet Collection Roasted Ginger.

McCormick Gourmet Collection Roasted Ginger Vegetable Stir-Fry

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| Ingredients | 1 3/4 cups chicken or vegetable broth, divided | 3 tbsp. oil | 1 red bell pepper, cut into thin strips |
| | 1 tbsp. soy sauce | 3 garlic cloves, minced | 4 oz. snow peas, trimmed |
| | 1 tbsp. cornstarch | 4 cups cauliflower florets | 4 green onions, cut diagonally into 1/2-inch pieces |
| | 1 tbsp. sherry | 1 bunch thin asparagus, trimmed and cut diagonally into 2-inch pieces | Toasted Sesame Seed |
| | 2 tsp. Roasted Ground Ginger | | |

STIR 1 1/2 cups of the broth, soy sauce, cornstarch, sherry and ginger in medium bowl until smooth. Set aside.

HEAT oil in large, deep skillet or wok on medium-high heat. Add garlic and cauliflower; stir-fry 1 minute. Add remaining 1/4 cup broth; cover and cook 5 minutes or until cauliflower is tender-crisp, stirring occasionally. Add asparagus, bell pepper, snow peas and green onions; stir-fry 3 minutes or until tender-crisp. Re-stir broth mixture. Add to skillet; stirring constantly, bring to boil on medium heat and boil 1 minute. Sprinkle with toasted sesame seed, if desired. Makes 8 servings.

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Molokhia with Spiced Chicken

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ACTIVE: 30 MIN; TOTAL: 2 HR**4 TO 5 SERVINGS**

Molokhia gets its name from a dark leafy green of the same name. Also known as Jew's mallow, it develops an okra-like viscosity when cooked and is an acquired taste for some. In Lebanon, writer Salma Abdelnour grew up eating *molokhia* served with crispy pita croutons and a drizzle of dressing made with red wine vinegar and onion. But Egyptians often serve the dish without these garnishes, as in this recipe from Monkaba.

One 3½-pound chicken

- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 1 rosemary sprig

One 4-inch cinnamon stick

- 1 bay leaf

One 14-ounce package frozen *molokhia* (see Note) or two 10-ounce packages chopped frozen spinach

- 1 tablespoon minced garlic
- 1 tablespoon plus ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground cumin
- ¼ teaspoon sweet paprika

Steamed short-grain rice, for serving

1. In a large, deep pot, cover the chicken with the onion, rosemary, cinnamon stick and bay leaf and 12 cups of water. Top with a small plate to keep the chicken submerged and bring to a boil. Simmer over low heat until the chicken is cooked through, 45 minutes. Transfer the chicken to a platter and let cool slightly, then cut into wings, breasts, thighs and drumsticks and pat dry.
2. Strain the broth into a heatproof bowl. Skim off the fat. Return 2 cups of the broth to the pot; reserve the remaining broth for another use. Add the *molokhia* to the pot and simmer for 10 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, using the side of a knife, mash the garlic to a paste with 1 tablespoon of the coriander. In a small skillet, melt 1 tablespoon of the butter. Add the garlic paste and cook over moderately high heat until golden and fragrant, about 1 minute. Scrape the paste into the *molokhia* and simmer for 5 minutes longer. Season with salt and pepper.

4. In a small bowl, combine the remaining ½ teaspoon of coriander with the ground cinnamon, cumin, paprika and ½ teaspoon each of salt and pepper. Sprinkle the chicken all over with the spices. In a large nonstick skillet, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter. Add the chicken and cook over high heat, turning once, until golden and heated through and the skin is crisp, about 4 minutes.

5. Mound rice in the center of 4 or 5 shallow bowls and top with the chicken. Ladle the *molokhia* around the chicken and serve.

NOTE *Molokhia* (other spellings include *molokia*) is available at Middle Eastern markets. The leaves are usually sold frozen. Spinach is a fine substitute.

MAKE AHEAD The poached chicken and broth can be refrigerated for up to 3 days.

WINE *Fresh, full-bodied French white: 2010 La Vieille Ferme Luberon Blanc.*

Beet-and-Onion Salad with Mint**ACTIVE: 30 MIN; TOTAL: 1 HR 20 MIN****PLUS OVERNIGHT MACERATING****6 TO 8 SERVINGS**

For this chilled salad, beets and onions are macerated in a lemony dressing. When they're available, young spring onions are especially delicious here.

- 2 pounds medium beets (about 5), scrubbed
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons hazelnut oil
- ¼ cup plus 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon honey
- Kosher salt
- 1 small white onion, cut into thin slivers
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped mint

1. In a saucepan, cover the beets with water and bring to a boil. Cook over moderate heat, adding more water as needed to keep the beets covered, until they are tender, about 1 hour. Drain the beets and let them cool. Peel the beets and slice into thin wedges.
2. In a bowl, whisk the olive oil and hazelnut oil with the lemon juice and honey. Season with salt. Add the beets and onion and toss to coat. Cover and refrigerate overnight, stirring once or twice. Garnish the salad with mint and serve. —EM

Grape Leaves Stuffed with Pine Nuts and Spiced Rice**ACTIVE: 40 MIN; TOTAL: 1 HR 30 MIN****MAKES 2 DOZEN STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES**

In Egypt, cooks stuff this spiced rice mixture into all kinds of vegetables, like zucchini.

- 30 jarred brined grape leaves, drained
- 2 tablespoons pine nuts
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- One 14-ounce can diced tomatoes, drained
- ½ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley
- ½ cup short grain rice
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- 1 tablespoon finely grated orange zest
- ¼ cup finely chopped mint
- Salt
- 1 tablespoon olive oil

1. Soak the grape leaves in a large bowl of warm water for 20 minutes.
2. In a large skillet, toast the pine nuts over moderate heat until golden, about 4 minutes. Transfer to a medium bowl.
3. In the same skillet, melt the butter. Add the onion and cook over moderate heat, stirring, until softened, 5 minutes. Stir in the tomatoes and parsley. Add the rice and cook, stirring, until it begins to turn white, 5 minutes. Scrape the mixture into the bowl with the pine nuts. Stir in the cinnamon, cumin, orange zest and mint and season with salt. Let cool slightly.
4. Drain the grape leaves and pat dry. Snip off the stems. Spread 4 leaves on a work surface. Form a 1-tablespoon-size log of the rice filling at the stem end. Fold the sides over the filling, then tightly roll up the leaves to form cylinders, tucking in the sides as you go. Repeat with 20 more grape leaves and the remaining filling.
5. Line a saucepan with 3 grape leaves. Arrange the stuffed grape leaves in the saucepan in 2 layers. Drizzle with the oil. Top with the remaining 3 grape leaves and a small plate. Add enough water to cover the stuffed grape leaves and bring to a boil. Cover and simmer until the rice is tender, 45 minutes. Turn off the heat and let cool in the saucepan. Arrange the grape leaves on a platter and serve warm or at room temperature. —EM ●