

Dipping into Mezze

Bethany Kehdy serves up three warming mezze dishes from her Tiverton kitchen

PHOTOS BY SARKA BABICKA

Middle Eastern mezze spreads have become something of a dining phenomenon with people preferring to order smaller, communal platters to share. The word *mezze* derives from the Persian word *maza* which means 'to taste or nibble'. Mezze is the experience of sharing, in a leisurely way, taking time out to savour your food and company. While the Middle East is renowned for these lavish mezze spreads, they are in fact traditionally reserved for the weekends, when families come together for long, lazy afternoons at restaurants dotting the shores of the Mediterranean, or they retreat to the fresh, crisper air of the mountains.

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Mezze can be simple nuts and crudités, or an elaborate procession of vegetarian, meat or seafood spreads. A typical meat mezze begins with cold dishes, such as refreshing tabbouleh (parsley, tomato, onion, and bulgur wheat salad), velvet, smooth hummus and tahini dip, and tender asbeh naye (raw sheep's liver). This is followed by hot servings of crunchy, sweet and sour larks (the little birds are cooked in pomegranate molasses) and finally mixed grills such as kafta (minced lamb, parsley and onions on the skewer) and shish tawouk (skewered cubes of chicken marinated in garlic-infused yogurt sauce). Desserts, such as rahet (Turkish delight) with biscuits and seasonal fruits, are served with ahweh or tea. Dipping into the different mezze dishes with your hands, using the Arabic bread as a scoop, is



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customary, and while individual plates are placed for each diner, they are not meant to be piled high, buffet-style. Arak, a clear distilled, aniseed-flavoured

alcoholic drink, is the beverage of choice and is a great accompaniment to shisha.

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Warm Lentil Salad with Halloumi Cheese, Oven Roasted Tomatoes & a Za'atar Vinaigrette

I'm a raving fan of lentils and they make an appearance in our meals at minimum a couple of times a week. Aside from being cheap, wholesome, filling and a great source of protein, they are also fairly simple and quick to cook and ideal for packed lunches or quick suppers.

Serves 4 as a side dish.

You will need:

200g green lentils, rinsed well
12-15 cherry tomatoes
3 sprigs of green or spring onion (more or less to taste)
100g Halloumi cheese, chopped into 1cm cubes
A handful of rocket leaves (or a mix of herbs)
2 tablespoons za'atar mix
1 lemon, juiced
45ml extra virgin olive oil
Salt & pepper to taste

1 Cover lentils with water and bring to a boil, then simmer for 15 minutes or until they are soft but not mushy. It's best to read the directions on the carton/bag.

2 Pre-heat oven to 325°F/160°C/Gas 3 and pop the tomatoes into a baking pan, drizzle with a little olive oil, sprinkle with some salt and bake till soft (about 15 minutes).

3 In the meantime, prep all the ingredients, such as chopping the green onions and Halloumi cheese.

4 Lightly drizzle a pan with some olive oil and place on a medium flame, then add Halloumi cheese and let it crisp on each side for about 5 minutes.

5 By now the lentils should be ready, so drain them. Remove the tomatoes from the oven. Mix all the ingredients together; at the end, add the rocket and enjoy with crispy Arabic bread or a side of grilled fish or chicken. *Enjoy warm or cold.*



Arnabeet Mekli Ma Tarator – Fried Cauliflower

Serves about 6 people as part of a multi-course meal

You will need:

1 head of cauliflower
100ml tahini
2 cloves garlic, minced (optional)
60ml water
1-2 lemons, juiced (more or less to taste)
About 1 tablespoon of finely chopped fresh parsley or herb of choice
Salt and pepper to taste
Vegetable oil for frying

1 Whisk together the tahini, garlic, water, and lemon juice (adding little at a time to taste) together in a bowl until no lumps remain. Season to taste, and set aside. You can sprinkle with the parsley or herbs or set aside for individual sprinkling.

2 Cut the cauliflower into medium-sized florets, wash and pat dry.

This is a common Lebanese dish. It is served with tarator or tahini sauce, which is tahini paste diluted with water and flavoured with garlic (optional), lemon and salt to taste. It is simple to make and in our household is always a quick yet delicious option on days when we are very busy. Tear off a piece of Arabic bread, wrap the fried cauliflower and dip into the tarator. Simple treasures.

3 Heat vegetable oil in a fryer to 375°F (190°C) and fry.

4 Fry small portions of the cauliflower florets in the hot oil until they turn golden brown. This should take about 6-8 minutes. Remove and place on a paper towel-lined plate and repeat. Serve immediately with the tarator sauce and Arabic bread.



Za'atar Fried Chicken

You will need:

- 1 egg
- 125ml/4fl oz yoghurt
- 5 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 4 tablespoons za'atar
- 2 teaspoons sumac
- 115g/4 oz flour
- 80g/2¾ oz breadcrumbs
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon allspice
- 4 chicken legs, skin on (optional)

Putting it all together:

1 In a mixing bowl, whisk the egg, with the yoghurt, garlic, salt, za'atar, and sumac.

2 Into a ziplock bag, add the flour, breadcrumbs, salt, and allspice. Seal the bag and shake to combine.

3 Toss chicken legs in the yoghurt mixture, coat well (you could leave to marinate overnight at this step), then transfer into the flour bag and shake well to coat. Transfer to a plate, and set aside in the fridge so it all sets (about 30 mins).

4 Remove from the fridge and dunk the chicken legs back into the yoghurt mixture and finally toss in the flour mixture. Repeat with all chicken legs.



5 Meanwhile, heat enough oil for deep frying in a pan and when the temperature reaches 170°C/325°F, carefully add the chicken legs, being sure not to overcrowd (if you decide to double the recipe, for example) and cook for 10 minutes on each side, till golden brown and the internal temperature is 180°C/350°F.

6 Serve warm or at room temperature with garlic sauce (see below).

This fried chicken brings together my Lebanese and Texan backgrounds without any clash of flavours. Double dipping the chicken legs into the batter creates a great steaming pouch, which yields more juicy meat and more crunch factor. The yoghurt adds a lovely tang and new dimension. I wouldn't have thought I'd be one to say this, but I prefer it to the traditional contender, buttermilk. Za'atar can be purchased from most supermarkets or can otherwise be found at your local Middle Eastern grocer. I find this fried chicken tastes better at room temperature, hence I've included it as a perfect mezze dish.

Garlic Aioli Dip

You will need:

- 1 head of garlic, smashed
- 185ml/6 fl oz sunflower oil
- Juice of ½ small lemon
- Pinch of salt

Putting it all together:

1 Add the garlic to a small food processor with the salt. Whiz till the garlic forms a paste then add lemon juice and give it another whiz till it forms a thin paste.

2 Add the egg white and keep mixing until bubbly and smooth.

3 Trickle the oil in slowly, while the mixer is running, until it reaches a creamy consistency.



NB It's important that you trickle in the oil little by little. Use vegetable over olive oil as the olive oil tends to give a bitter taste and discoloration.

This fierce dip is to be enjoyed in near-microscopic proportions, even by the most extravagant garlic lovers. It's typically served alongside BBQd chicken or kebbeh naye (Middle Eastern steak tartare) but I also find it pairs wonderfully with fries, basted on to flatbreads and layered with an array of toppings, the list is endless.