

BERKSHIRE JEWISH VOICES

Traveling with Jewish Taste

Cookbook Review: Fress a Little Fussy, but Baharat Spiced Chicken Beyond Scrumptious

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



As anybody who reads this column knows, I've been the lucky recipient of many cookbooks over the past year, sent by publishers who want their writers' works reviewed. I've tried many recipes and enjoyed most of them. Now it's time to pull on the elastic waistband slacks again because I'm reviewing yet another. This one is called *Fress*, a collection of Middle Eastern and Eastern European recipes gathered from author Emma Spitzer's extended family members. I've now prepared a dozen dishes in the book, and can honestly say that most of those I tried were good. Some fantastic. A couple not so great.

The publisher's blurb states, "Emma's style of cooking is unfussy and uncomplicated, extracting the maximum taste from the humblest of ingredients without spending hours in the kitchen." I beg to differ. The woman does love her exotic flavorings, and I've been buying so many little jars and bags that my cabinets are overflowing. Who just happens to have nigella seeds, baharat, juniper berries, or barberries in the house? (Okay, I do have both orange blossom water and rosewater in my kitchen cabinet, but, hey, I write about food.)

One of the out-of-the-ordinary spices that Spitzer uses is mahleb powder. Made by crushing the seed inside the pit of the St. Lucie cherry, mahleb powder provides a flavor that is a cross between bitter almond and cherry, with a hint of vanilla. It has been a staple in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean desserts for centuries. Archaeologists, in fact, believe that it was first used in Ancient Mesopotamia. You may ask (as I certainly did) who ever had the idea to find spice there? Were a bunch of guys sitting around a campfire on the banks of the Euphrates

River, eating cherries and spitting the pits at each other, when a bored Sumerian decided to crack one open with a rock? Did he then taste it? Was he so hungry that he wanted to suck out every iota of the fruit?

At any rate, the flavor must have been a hit, as it has definitely stood the test of time. Mahleb is now a unique and intriguing addition to my baking repertoire.

In the dessert section of the cookbook was a recipe for Spiced Date Ma'amoul Cookies that called for said mahleb powder, as well as an item called a ma'amoul mold, something I just happen to have in my kitchen.

Off the track for a moment: Never having heard of ma'amoul cookies before, I went into research mode, where I learned something that brought me back in time and solved a mystery. Back in 2004, our daughter Elana spent a semester at the University of Haifa, studying Hebrew and Arabic. Naturally, being not-quite-helicopter parents but missing our baby, we went over to visit and followed her around to places she loved to frequent. One of these places was the Druze village Daliat el-Carmel, where she had heard that a particular type of tea she favored was sold.

Elana approached the proprietor of one particular shop and asked, in Arabic, if he stocked the sought-for item. He did indeed, and the young man and his father were so taken with her that they refused to accept payment for said tea. (The father also tried to marry her off to the son, but that's yet another story.)

Their generous gesture meant, of course, that I felt obligated to purchase something. The item I bought looked like a mold of some sort, with a long handle and four deep indentations in different sizes, each with its own distinct design. It turns out that what I had bought was a ma'amoul mold, used for making ma'amoul cookies!

So, I made a batch of these very rich and buttery cookies, stuffed with a spiced date and nut filling. The cookies were mouthwateringly luscious, prompting "most delicious cookie" status from several members of the family. The

only negative is that the called-for confectioner's sugar dusting obscures the beautiful designs.

Another spice, or rather spice mix, that Spitzer favors is baharat. Unfortunately, she neglects to provide the recipe for it. On poking around the internet, I found that there as many formulae for baharat as there are regions and cooks,

so I chose one and used it for the Baharat Spiced Chicken. The dish, made aromatic with a dozen spices, garlic, and onions, was redolent of the Middle Eastern shuk. It was beyond scrumptious and, even better, relatively easy to prepare.



Baharat Spiced Chicken

Made a day ahead, this recipe is super easy to prepare. You can use chicken breasts if you prefer them to thighs.

Ingredients

12 bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs
2 red onions, thinly sliced
2 tablespoons baharat
2 teaspoons ground sumac
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground coriander
4 preserved lemons, halved and flesh scooped out and discarded
3 garlic cloves, crushed
1-3/4 cups chicken stock (using 1 tablespoon chicken stock powder)
3 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon sea salt
A few grinds black pepper
Rice or couscous, to serve



Directions:

Add the chicken thighs to a large, sturdy resealable plastic food bag with all the other ingredients, then seal securely before massaging the bag to mix everything together. Let marinate in the fridge for a minimum of 2 hours but preferably overnight.

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Add the chicken and all the remaining contents of the bag to a roasting pan and roast for 45 to 50 minutes until the chicken is golden brown and the juices run clear when pierced with a knife.

Serve the chicken with a generous amount of the onions and lemon skins over rice or couscous, lading the juices on top.

Baharat

You'll only use two tablespoons of the baharat for this recipe, so after you mix all the spices together, seal them in an airtight jar for future use. I'm pretty sure you will make this recipe again. If you don't, call me and I'll take it off your hands.

Ingredients:

4 tablespoons ground black pepper
2 tablespoons ground coriander
2 tablespoons ground cinnamon
2 tablespoons ground cloves
3 tablespoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
4 teaspoons ground nutmeg
4 tablespoons paprika

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites and artifacts around the world. She invites readers to read her blog at carolgoodmankaufman.com and to follow her on Twitter @goodmankaufman.

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