



# OPEN SESAME

Tehina shortbread cookies are a delicious way to enjoy sesame seeds

Story by Carol Goodman Kaufman | Photo by Allan Jung

Many Sunday mornings throughout my childhood, my dad would pick me up from Sunday school and head toward the local delicatessen. While he shopped for pastrami and corned beef, I would gaze longingly at the deli's countertop, on which sat a box adorned with the image of a mustachioed and turbaned man. And every once in a while, if my prayers were answered, my dad would buy me a bar of said man's halvah.

Of course, the Joyva company still uses the man with the turban as its logo, but I no longer dream about halvah. Or didn't dream, that is, until I tasted the super fresh ambrosia produced by Halvah Kingdom, an Israeli purveyor of the stuff. The "king" produces a wide variety of flavors that can wreak havoc on one's waistline.

Back in my Sunday school days, I didn't know that halvah was made from crushed sesame seeds. Nor did I know that the candy isn't the only food based on the seed.

And I certainly didn't know that there were three different types of sesame seeds. We are probably most familiar with the white ones, as they are used most widely in baked goods ranging from bagels to Scali bread.

But the darker the seed, the more flavorful. Brown sesame seeds are often found in cereals, candies and baked goods. But they are also expressed for the lovely oil they produce, one of its most basic uses. Sixty percent oil by weight, sesame seeds were historically one of the first crops processed for oil. When they are pressed, the paste that remains is *te-hina*, based on the Arabic word *tahn*, which means "ground." Tehina can serve on its own as a dip or as part of the recipe for hummus.

Finally, there are black sesame seeds, used both in food and as medicine.

Culinary historians have traced two main origins of the wild sesame plant. While most varieties stem from Africa, the oldest domesticated seeds were excavated in what is now Pakistan, dating to about 2,500 BCE. From there the seeds spread west about 500 years later, where the Babylonians pressed the seeds for oil. And another half millennium after that, in northeast Africa, ancient Egyptians are reported to have used the ground seed as a flour.

But sesame was, and continues to be, widely used in Asia. The Chinese have employed the seeds for at least 5,000 years, and not just for food. They burned the seed's oil and used the resulting soot to prepare the high-quality substance

variously known as India ink and Chinese ink, thus adding to the confusion regarding the seed's origins.

Because Hindus believe that the god Yama blessed the seeds, sesame is part and parcel of many important rites and rituals in that faith's tradition, where the seeds are viewed as symbols of immortality.

The Japanese are the world's largest consumers of sesame seeds, using 160,000 tons of the stuff every year. And no wonder. Sesame is one of the key ingredients in Japanese cuisine. Ironically, even though sesame's origins are in Asia and Japan is definitely Asian, the Japanese don't get their seeds from Asia. No, they come from Latin America, where the African American Intellectual History Society says they arrived in the holds of slave ships.

But Israelis, with only 6% of Japan's population, eat 50,000 tons of the stuff every year — most of it in the form of tehina. That's a whopping 11-plus pounds per person per year. Compare that with the 3 pounds of peanut butter we Americans eat. However, although we are not among the biggest sesame eaters, the Globe Newswire reports that we are projected to use 120,065 tons of sesame seed extract this year alone.

Alas, not everybody loves sesame

seeds, as they are a common food allergen that, according to the National Institutes of Health, causes problems for about 1.5 million Americans.

Sesame boasts two special features: The oil is stable enough to resist rancidity, and the seed itself is high in protein, thiamin and Vitamin B6.

If you've ever read "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" from "Tales of the Arabian Nights," you will know that, in at least one version, sesame seeds were once thought to have magical power enough to open a cave holding magic treasure, as in "Open Sesame." However, it turns out that this phrase only appears in Antoine Galland's 18th-century French translation of the tales. My sources tell me that no earlier Arabic reference to "open sesame" can be found anywhere.

However (there's always a "however"), the fact remains that farmers may have developed an incantation of sorts to intone around the sesame harvest. Timing is everything when it comes to this plant. If the farmer waits too long, the pods will burst open and scatter the seeds widely. But reap too early and the flavor of the seed, and its oil, will be blah.

So, "open sesame" may indeed be what farmers chant when they hope to catch the seeds at prime time!

## TEHINA SHORTBREAD COOKIES

Adapted from a recipe by Michael Solomonov

Makes about 30 cookies

### Ingredients:

1¾ sticks unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 cup sugar

1 cup tehina

2 cups all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

Pinch kosher salt

¼ cup sesame seeds (optional)

### Directions:

In a stand mixer, combine the butter and sugar and beat until light and fluffy, about 2 minutes.

Add the tehina and continue mixing until well incorporated.

In a bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, and salt.

Transfer the dry ingredients to the tehina mixture and beat until just

incorporated.

Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 1 hour or overnight.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Line two baking sheets with parchment paper.

Take a heaping tablespoon of the dough and roll into a ball before placing onto the prepared baking sheets\*

Bake until the cookies are light brown around the edges and set, about 15 minutes.

Let cool on the baking sheets for 10 minutes, then transfer to a wire rack to cool completely. (Move them sooner and they'll fall apart!)

The cookies can be stored at room temperature in an airtight container for 1 week. If they last that long.

\*If you feel like gilding the lily a bit, dip one side of the cookies into a small dish of sesame seeds before baking. ■



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