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Couscous Stews

A star of North African cuisine, these casual dishes express their rich cultural origins in three delicious versions. **BY JAMIE SCHLER**

COUSCOUS IS THE MOST EMBLEMATIC DISH OF MOROCCO, Algeria, and Tunisia—collectively known as the Maghreb. It's a substantial, magnificent centerpiece on any family table or festive buffet. Though it's generally referred to simply as *couscous*, this traditional dish is much more than the fluffy, steamed grains of the same name. A traditional couscous features meat, fish, or vegetables in a fragrant broth, cooked until exceedingly tender, and then topped with creamy chickpeas and plump sweet raisins and served over the couscous grains that lend their name to the whole concoction.

Couscous stews are cooked with enough liquid that a substantial amount of broth is left in the final dish. This broth, ladled onto each serving, is used to lightly moisten the couscous grains or to generously bathe the dish, as each guest desires.

North African cuisine is unscripted. It is informal at its heart, and meals are often prepared by a cook who has never used a cookbook or a written recipe. It's a no-holds-barred, anything-goes cuisine that invites improvisation, as long as you understand the underlying rules and traditions from which it derives. The three countries of the Maghreb boast dozens of variations of couscous, each influenced by the particular region from which it

hails. Depending on where it originates, the couscous may be reddened with tomatoes or simply sauced with broth, it may be meatless, or it may feature the fish of the local coastline. It may be savory-sweet or strictly savory.

The most common and best-known couscous, a dish of the Berber people of North Africa, features seven vegetables: carrots, turnips, onions, zucchini, tomatoes, pumpkin (or other squash), and eggplant, along with chickpeas. When this copious, soulful dish is served with lamb, chicken, or spicy merguez sausage, it is aptly named *couscous royale*.

Once you understand the basic preparation method and stock your cupboard with the staple ingredients, it's just a question of expressing your own personal take on a classic by using what's in the market that day and what your own favorite meat, fish, and vegetables happen to be.

Jamie Schler is an award-winning writer specializing in food and culture. Her first cookbook, Orange Appeal, features the fruit of her Florida childhood, the orange. She now lives in Chinon, France, where she owns a hotel, makes a lot of jam, and writes.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FELICIA PERRETTI

FOOD STYLING BY NICOLE TWOHY



couscous tfaya with caramelized onions, raisins, and spices

Tfaya, a delicious, sweet-and-savory vegetarian dish, is a specialty of Morocco and is served over couscous. If you make the stew ahead or have leftovers, add up to ¼ cup of water to the tfaya, then reheat over medium-low heat until just heated through. Serves 4 to 6

- 1½ oz. (3 Tbs.) unsalted butter
- 1 Tbs. olive oil
- 3 large yellow onions, cut lengthwise into ¼-inch-thick slices (about 6¾ cups)
- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- ¾ cup dark raisins
- 1 tsp. ras el hanout (see p. 89); more for serving
- ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 vegetable bouillon cubes, preferably unsalted
- ½ tsp. cornstarch

- 1½ cups whole-wheat couscous
- 4 large hard-boiled eggs, halved
- Flaky sea salt
- 12 to 15 small fresh mint leaves
- 3 Tbs. toasted sliced or slivered almonds


In a large skillet, heat 1 Tbs. of the butter with the oil over medium heat until sizzling. Add the onions and stir to coat. Lower the heat to medium low, and cook, stirring often, until the onions are soft, translucent, and golden-brown around the edges, about 30 minutes.

Add the chickpeas, raisins, ras el hanout, cinnamon, and a pinch each of kosher salt and pepper. Whisk one bouillon cube and the cornstarch into ¾ cup warm water until dissolved, and add to the pan. Continue to cook over low heat, stirring frequently and scraping up bits from the bottom of the skillet until the sauce reduces and thickens, the raisins plump, and the onions become meltingly tender without dissolving, about 5 minutes. Season to taste

with kosher salt. Cover to keep warm until ready to serve.

Prepare the couscous according to package directions, adding the remaining bouillon cube, 1 Tbs. of the butter, and 1 tsp. kosher salt to the water. When the couscous is ready, add the remaining 1 Tbs. butter, and fluff with a fork.

If you wish to serve traditionally, mound the couscous in the center of a large platter, and spoon the hot tfaya over the top. Sprinkle the cut side of each egg half with a pinch of ras el hanout and flaky sea salt. Arrange on the platter with the yolks facing out around the perimeter of the couscous. Garnish with the mint leaves and almonds.

 **Pair With:** CARIGNAN This dish could work with a rich white wine as well, but whole wheat couscous adds just enough earthiness to tip the scales toward a medium-bodied red. Plus, Carignan has baking-spice notes that will echo the cinnamon.

Four couscous fundamentals

A couscous is meant for improvisation. Once you've mastered the technique, be creative with the ingredients, but in doing so, be sure not to omit these four fundamental elements of a traditional couscous.

1. COUSCOUS GRAINS OR SEMOLINA

is a hard, coarsely milled durum-wheat product. It is somewhere between a grain and a flour, and is used in making pasta, porridge, puddings, breads, cakes, or cookies. Semolina comes in many grain sizes; the term *semoule* or *semolina* is most commonly used for very fine grains, so fine that they tend to soften and lose their shape in cooking and are most often used in desserts and puddings. Couscous, on the other hand, refers to the medium or larger grains that retain their individual granules when cooked. Perfectly cooked couscous, prepared with salt, olive oil, and broth, then topped with butter before serving, is light and fluffy, never dry.

When preparing traditional North African dishes, look for medium-grain durum wheat or semolina Moroccan-style grains. They shouldn't be precooked or instant but, regardless, the grains will take only 5 to 7 minutes to prepare with boiling liquid.

2. THE VEGETABLES ARE THE MAIN FEATURE

of couscous and are always fresh, local, and seasonal. The most commonly used vegetables are onions, bell peppers, zucchini, carrots, turnips, pumpkins or sweet potatoes, eggplant, toma-

toes, peas or fava beans, artichokes, and okra.

3. THE CONDIMENTS ARE AN INTEGRAL PART

of this dish, adding flavor, heat, sweetness, and character. They include oil (vegetable, olive, or argan) and butter; harissa (a thick paste of puréed red chile peppers and spices, sometimes with the addition of oil and dried tomatoes, usually sold in tubes or small cans in specialty shops); spices (including ras el hanout—a traditional spice blend, the spices included and their quantity unique to each region—usually cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and saffron); garlic; yellow coloring (from turmeric or curcuma); dried fruits and nuts (raisins, almonds, chickpeas, dates, prunes, apricots); fresh flat-leaf parsley and fresh coriander; and honey.

4. THE MEAT AND FISH

can be lamb, beef, chicken, spicy merguez sausage, köfta, snapper, grouper, or any other protein that you like and that will stand up to cooking in broth. Hard-boiled eggs are often prepared for a vegetarian or lighter couscous.

chicken couscous with dried fruit

Dried fruit and nuts are found in many North African dishes. What I love about this simple yet flavorful dish is that the naturally sweet dried fruits take center stage against a backdrop of chicken and savory broth. Add a second onion and increase the amount of dates and apricots for a richer dish. Serves 4

- 1½ lb. boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces or left whole
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 3 Tbs. olive oil
- 2 medium or 1 large yellow onion, halved and thinly sliced lengthwise (about 4 cups)
- 1 large clove garlic, peeled and quartered
- 1 tsp. ras el hanout
- ½ tsp. ground coriander
- ½ tsp. ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp. saffron threads
- 2 cups chicken or vegetable broth; more as needed
- ½ cup raisins
- ¼ cup dried apricots, halved lengthwise
- 1½ cups couscous
- 1 oz. (2 Tbs.) unsalted butter
- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- ¾ cup dried pitted dates, halved lengthwise
- ½ cup toasted slivered almonds
- ¼ cup fresh cilantro, coarsely chopped
- Lemon wedges, for serving

Pat the chicken dry with paper towels, then season with 1 tsp. salt and ½ tsp. pepper. In a large Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot, heat 2 Tbs. of the oil over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add the onion and garlic, and cook, stirring, until soft, 2 to 3 minutes. Add the ras el hanout, coriander, and cinnamon, and stir to coat the onion in the spices until fragrant, about 1 minute. Transfer to a plate and set aside.

Add the remaining 1 Tbs. oil to the pot, and heat until shimmering. Add the chicken in a single layer, and cook over medium-high heat, undisturbed, flipping halfway

through cooking time until brown in places, about 5 minutes total.

In the meantime, heat the broth in a medium pan. When hot, dissolve the saffron in ½ cup of the broth and set aside. Return the onions and any juices to the pot, and stir until combined with the chicken. Add the saffron broth and cook, scraping up any browned bits on the bottom of the pot. Then add the remaining 1½ cups broth. Bring the liquid to a boil, then reduce to a simmer. Add the raisins and apricots, and cook with the lid ajar, stirring occasionally, until the chicken is cooked through, about 20 minutes more.

Meanwhile, prepare the couscous according to package directions, adding 1 Tbs. butter and 1 tsp. salt to the water (alternatively, prepare the couscous with broth instead of water). Leave covered until ready to serve.

Add the chickpeas, dates, and the remaining 1 Tbs. butter to the chicken mixture, and cook until just warmed through, about 3 minutes.

Fluff the couscous with a fork, divide among four plates, and top with the chicken mixture, ladling some of the broth over the couscous. Sprinkle with the almonds and cilantro, and serve with the lemon wedges.



Pair With: VIOGNIER The exotic spices in this dish will be beautifully complemented by the wine's aromatics. And while it's typically not sweet, Viognier's fruitiness will balance the sweetness in the raisins, apricots, and dates.



Traditional serving

For special occasions, when plating the **Moroccan Lamb and Seven-Vegetable Couscous**, the couscous grains are customarily mounded in the center of a large, round serving platter and formed into a pyramid. The vegetables, which are sliced and cooked in long wedges, are then placed upright leaning against the grain pyramid. The whole dish is sprinkled with raisins and chickpeas. Then either ground cinnamon or finely chopped fresh coriander is dusted over the vegetables and grains.

FOR A FAMILY MEAL, scoop the grains onto a large serving dish (shown at right), and place the lamb and vegetables over the grains. Dust with whole or chopped fresh coriander.

The broth is served on the side, allowing each guest to scoop up a ladleful, stir in some harissa to dissolve, then pour over their serving of couscous. The harissa can also be added to flavor the pot of broth, but because it's spicy, it's best to allow each guest to add harissa to taste.

The couscoussière

Many are familiar with the **TAGINE**, the North African meat and vegetable dish cooked down until it is coated in a thick sauce. The word *tagine* not only refers to the food but also to the terra-cotta cone-shaped lidded dish in which one both cooks and serves the dish. As it happens, couscous also can be prepared in a specially designed cooking vessel, the **COUSCOUSSIÈRE**. This large, double-chambered pot is most often made of stainless steel, aluminum, or tin but can also be found in copper and even clay. Resembling a double boiler, it is used to cook the couscous stew under the couscous grains. As the stew simmers in the lower chamber, the grains cook in the steam of the meat and vegetable broth below. You don't need a couscoussière to prepare a traditional couscous. In fact, my husband (who learned North African cuisine in home kitchens during his time living in Morocco) and I always use our deep, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven or a high-sided skillet to cook our couscous.



moroccan lamb and seven-vegetable couscous

This traditional dish is served as the centerpiece of every festive and celebratory meal in North African communities around the world, from weddings to funerals, for the feast of the Muslim Ramadan, or for the main course of the Jewish Shabbat meal. In my home, I often prepare this warming dish for hearty and healthful family dinners.


Serves 6 to 8

- 2 lb. boneless lamb, such as shoulder or leg, trimmed and cut into 1½-inch pieces**
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil; more as needed**
- 1 tsp. ground coriander**
- 1 tsp. ground cumin**
- 1 tsp. ras el hanout**
- ¼ tsp. saffron threads**
- 1 15-oz. can crushed tomatoes**
- 2½ cups lower-salt chicken or vegetable broth; more as needed**
- 2 large carrots, cut into 1- to 2-inch pieces (about 1½ cups)**
- 1 large turnip, cut into 1- to 2-inch pieces (about 1½ cups)**
- 1 large Japanese eggplant, halved lengthwise then cut crosswise into ½-inch-thick slices, or 1 medium regular eggplant, quartered lengthwise, then cut crosswise into ½-inch-thick slices (about 1½ cups)**
- 8 oz. pumpkin or similar squash, peeled, seeded, and cut into 1-inch pieces (about 1½ cups)**
- 1 medium yellow onion, coarsely chopped (about 1 cup)**
- ¼ cup raisins**
- 1 medium zucchini, cut in half lengthwise, then cut crosswise into ½-inch slices (about 1½ cups)**
- 1 15-oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed**
- 1 oz. (2 Tbs.) unsalted butter**
- 1½ cups couscous**
- ¼ cup coarsely chopped fresh cilantro; more for garnish**
- Harissa, for serving**

Pat the lamb dry with paper towels. Generously sprinkle with salt and pepper. In a large Dutch oven or other heavy-duty pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat until shimmering. Working in batches, add the meat in a single layer, and sear, adding more oil as needed, about 2 minutes per side. Transfer the lamb to a plate as it becomes done. Lower the heat to medium, and return the lamb and any accumulated juices to the pot. Add the coriander, cumin, ras el hanout, and saffron, and toss to evenly coat the lamb. Continue to cook, stirring, until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes.

Add the tomatoes and broth. Bring to a boil, then lower the heat to a simmer, cover, and cook for 45 minutes.

Remove the lid and skim any foam from the surface of the broth. Add the carrots, turnip, eggplant, pumpkin, onion, and raisins. Cook, covered, over low heat, stirring occasionally, until the vegetables begin to soften, 14 to 15 minutes. Add the zucchini and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the zucchini begins to soften, about 10 minutes. Add the chickpeas and stir gently to combine. Continue to cook, 5 to 7 minutes more. Stir in 1 Tbs. of the butter until melted, and set aside. Prepare the couscous according to package directions, adding the remaining 1 Tbs. butter and 1 tsp. salt to the water (alternatively, prepare the couscous with broth instead of water). Just before serving, toss the couscous with the cilantro. Mound the couscous on a large platter topped with the vegetables and meat, garnish with more cilantro, if you like, and serve with harissa on the side.

 **Pair With:** ZINFANDEL There's a party of flavors going on here, and this wine has enough complexity to entertain them all. Avoid a high-alcohol Zin—it could exacerbate the harissa's heat.