

A Mediterranean Feast of Many Dishes, Many Flavors

The traditional *mezze* means “welcome” to a sumptuous meal of fresh tastes and textures

BY LISSA DOUMANI

A whiff of extra-virgin olive oil, the irresistible scent of onion and garlic, the fresh citrus allure of lemon juice. These are the fragrances that whet my appetite when I approach a *mezze* table—that spread of many savory dishes served in Lebanon, Greece, and other eastern Mediterranean countries. Smoky eggplant *baba ghanouj*, creamy *hummus*, and fresh herbal *tabbouleh* are a few *mezze* dishes you may know already.

The *mezze* brings people together: it’s served family-style, with many dishes spread across the table. *Mezzes* are perfect for parties or buffets.

MENU

Tabbouleh
(Parsley & cracked-wheat salad)



Hummus
(Chickpea & tahini purée)



Baba Ghanouj
(Eggplant & tahini purée)



Foul Imdamis
(Lebanese fava beans)



Loubieh Bziet
(Green beans with onions)



Kibbeh
(Minced lamb with cracked wheat)



Labne
(Drained yogurt with mint)

A *mezze* is a great way to entertain. Here, seven “do-ahead” dishes offer lots of fresh vegetables and fragrant herbs, earthy grains and beans, and just a touch of rich yogurt and lamb.

Photos except where noted: Alan Richardson



Tabbouleh is a parsley salad with a little cracked wheat, not a cracked-wheat salad with a little parsley.

Parsley, mint, tomato, and scallion make tabbouleh a bright contrast to earthier mezze dishes, such as smoky eggplant baba ghanouj.



MEZZES, LARGE OR SMALL, WORK WELL AT HOME

When feasting on *mezze* in Lebanon, you can always tell how many courses are to come by counting the number of plates stacked in front of you. At home, just choose the dishes that suit your time and the number of diners. You don't need to go to extremes to enjoy a *mezze*. Some of the recipes are time-consuming to prepare, but many of them can be made the day before. Whether you serve one or two of these recipes as appetizers, or bring out all of them for a fuller *mezze* experience, you'll find that the delight of Lebanese cuisine translates easily into your own cooking style.

Flavors of the *mezze*. While a *mezze* can be endless in variation, many of the dishes have common flavorings. Olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, allspice, and cinnamon are constants, as are fresh vegetables for scooping and dipping. A typical arrangement is a whole head of romaine lettuce, standing upright with the leaves' tops cut off, surrounded by cucumbers, tomatoes, scallions, radishes, and carrots. Pita bread (another edible utensil) is always present, as is *labne*, which looks like cream cheese but is made from drained yogurt that's been lightly salted and flecked with fresh mint. *Labne* is

delicious and seems to improve the flavor of anything it accompanies.

THE RIGHT WAY TO MAKE *TABBOULEH*

A good *tabbouleh* is a parsley salad with a little cracked wheat, not a cracked-wheat salad with a little parsley. I don't know when Americans reversed these proportions, but I feel it's my duty to set the record straight. *Tabbouleh* should also have an amount of mint, scallion, and tomato equal to that of the parsley. Lightly dressed with good olive oil and lots of fresh lemon juice, this is a very green and refreshing salad.

THE PLEASURE OF DIPPING IN

One of the joys of eating at a *mezze* table is the tactile fun of plunging pita bread and vegetable slices into smooth, savory pastes. That's why *hummus* and *baba ghanouj* are two of the most frequently served dishes.

***Hummus* couldn't be much easier to make.** It's a purée of cooked chickpeas, tahini (sesame-seed paste; its consistency is similar to that of peanut butter), lemon juice, and garlic. Whir it all in a food processor until very smooth, and you've got great *hummus*.

The ingredients for *baba ghanouj* are almost identical to *hummus*—chickpeas are switched for

eggplant—but the eggplant takes a bit more preparation than the chickpeas.

Baba ghanouj is guaranteed to make a mess of your kitchen, but it's worth every spot. The eggplant is roasted or grilled whole, and the flesh is scooped out and mixed by hand with the other ingredients. Some recipes suggest roasting the eggplant in your oven, but this doesn't impart the best flavor. You need an open fire, which can come from the gas flame on a stove or from your backyard barbecue. In either case, the technique is the same. Lay the eggplant on the open flame, rotating it occasionally. As the outside burns, the flesh becomes mushy. Carefully scrape away the skin from the pulp, removing all charred bits.

SIMPLE BEANS BECOME EXOTIC DISHES

One popular *mezze* dish has an unfortunate name—*foul*. (*Foul* is pronounced FOOL; the word means “beans” in Lebanese.) The taste of *foul indamis*, however, is nothing but delicious. It's very simple to make: sauté onions and garlic in olive oil, simmer with beans, tomatoes, and spices, and finish with a generous drizzle of lemon juice and olive oil.

The only tricky part of the recipe is finding the beans. They're often labeled as fava beans, but they aren't the fava beans commonly found in grocery stores. The beans you want are round, reddish brown, and a little smaller than chickpeas. They're sold in Mideastern groceries in cans labeled *foul mudammas*.

The dish the Lebanese call *loubieh bziet* (LOO-bee-ah be-ZET) means “green beans with onions,” but that doesn't effectively convey how wonderful this dish is. The onions are sliced thin and cooked very slowly until they become browned and sweet. Green beans are added, the pot covered, and the whole thing cooked for 30 to 40 minutes. The result is a dish of meltingly soft beans and onions. Served hot, warm, or cold, and scooped with pita or your fingers, the combination is irresistible. Okra or greens can be substituted for the beans, and sometimes tomatoes are added as well.

KIBBEH, RAW OR COOKED—IT'S YOUR CHOICE

My favorite *mezze* dish may be *kibbeh*. *Kibbeh* is minced lamb mixed with cracked wheat, and it's eaten both raw and cooked. I prefer *kibbeh nayye* (pronounced KIB-eh NAH-yee), the equivalent of steak tartare.

The process of making *kibbeh* is similar to that of making meatloaf. Essentially, you mix ground meat with seasonings. But since *kibbeh* is eaten raw, special care must be taken. You'll need two pounds of boneless leg of lamb. Ask your butcher to completely trim every bit of fat, tendon, and sinew from the meat. If your butcher can't oblige, you'll have to go through the process at home. The success of this

In Lebanon, *mezze* is a tradition of hospitality

My family gave me an early introduction to the Middle East's *mezze* tradition, but it wasn't until I visited Lebanon last year that I experienced a full-fledged *mezze* firsthand. While I had eaten many of these dishes when I was growing up, it wasn't the same as being presented with thirty dishes at one table—with a main course to follow!

Eating and sharing of food with guests and strangers is an honored ritual in the Middle East. While the enormous quantities of a *mezze* may seem daunting, it is offered in the spirit of hospitality. Uninvited guests are common party fixtures, and the sheer volume of food saves hosts a lot of guesswork.



dish is absolutely dependent on using perfectly lean, trimmed, fresh lamb.

The meat must be ground fine, and either a food processor or a mixer with a meat grinder attachment will work well. If you use a meat grinder, put the meat through twice. If you use a food processor, chill the blade first and chop only small amounts at a time. Too much meat at once will make the machine work harder, which will warm up the lamb. It may become a purée instead of a fine grind.

To assemble the *kibbeh*, add the cracked wheat, grated onion, and spices to the meat and mix with your hands. It's important to keep your hands cool as you mix the meat, so set a bowl of ice water at your side and dip in your hands occasionally.

If you're not up to trying raw lamb, shape the *kibbeh* mixture into small patties and sauté them slowly in clarified butter or olive oil. These are delicious stuffed in pita and served with *labne*.

Don't serve these green beans *al dente*.

A good *loubieh bziet* depends on long cooking. The slowly sautéed onions and gently simmered green beans need a long time on the stove for the flavors to meld.

How to serve many dishes at once

The *mezze* is custom-made for party-giving. Here's a countdown to help you prepare a *mezze* in advance.

It's nice to take care of things ahead of time, but remember that the *mezze* is an inherently casual way of eating. Nothing is meant to be served piping hot, and the best temperature for most dishes is lukewarm. Nor are quantities meant to be a sure thing in Middle Eastern cooking. The yields for these recipes are much like the Lebanese attitudes toward hospitality—they will expand to fit.

It isn't a meatloaf, it's kibbeh. This mixture of lamb and cracked wheat, lightly seasoned with cinnamon and allspice, can be served raw as shown, or shaped into small patties, fried, and stuffed into pita bread.



2 DAYS AHEAD

- ◆ soak the chickpeas (if using dried)
- ◆ make the *hummus*
- ◆ order the lamb

1 DAY AHEAD

- ◆ make the *labne*
- ◆ make the *loubieh bziet*
- ◆ make the *foul imdamis*
- ◆ pick up the lamb; give it a very thorough trim

THE DAY OF THE MEZZE

- ◆ make the *baba ghanouj*
- ◆ make the *tabbouleh*
- ◆ make the *kibbeh*

1 TO 2 HOURS BEFORE SERVING

- ◆ bring the *hummus*, *foul imdamis*, and *loubieh bziet* to room temperature
- ◆ cook the *kibbeh* (if not eating raw)
- ◆ wash and trim the vegetables for dipping

Tabbouleh

(Parsley & cracked-wheat salad)

It's important to chop the ingredients by hand; the food processor tends to make mush. Make sure the parsley is washed and dried well. If you're making this ahead of time, don't add the lemon juice until just before serving. Serves six to eight as part of a *mezze*.

- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup fine-grind cracked wheat
- 1 bunch (about 6) scallions, chopped fine
- 3 cups finely chopped parsley leaves (flat-leaf preferred)
- $\frac{2}{3}$ cup finely chopped fresh mint
- 4 medium tomatoes, cored, seeded, and diced
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup fresh lemon juice
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Soak the cracked wheat in warm water for about 30 min. Squeeze out the water and put the cracked wheat in a large bowl.

Toss the scallions, parsley, and mint with the cracked wheat. Add the tomatoes, drizzle in the olive oil, and toss again. Add the lemon juice, salt, and pepper. Toss again and taste for seasoning.

Hummus

(Chickpea & tahini purée)

This makes a wonderful dip for vegetables. Make sure the chickpeas are very tender. If the *hummus* is too thick, thin it with water. Serves six to eight as part of a *mezze*.

- One 19-oz. can chickpeas, or 1 cup dried chickpeas that have been soaked and cooked until very tender
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup tahini (sesame-seed paste)
- 1 clove garlic
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup fresh lemon juice
- Salt to taste
- Olive oil
- Cayenne

If using canned chickpeas, drain them, reserving the liquid, and rinse them. If using dried, cooked chickpeas, drain them and reserve $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of the cooking liquid.

Purée all the ingredients in a food processor until very smooth, adding the reserved liquid as needed. You should have a medium-thick paste. Season with salt. Transfer the *hummus* to a shallow bowl, drizzle with olive oil, and sprinkle with cayenne. Serve with pita or raw vegetables.

Baba Ghanouj

(Eggplant & tahini purée)

The most important part of this dish is roasting the eggplant. I do this on my gas stove, and it makes a mess, but the flavor can't be beat. Other options are on a grill, under a broiler, or in a hot oven. The oven is least preferable because it can't give the eggplant the desired slightly charred flavor. Serves six to eight as part of a *mezze*.

- 3 lb. eggplant
- 1 tsp. minced garlic
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup tahini (sesame-seed paste)
- 2 Tbs. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. salt

To roast the eggplant, set each eggplant directly on the flame, grill, or grate. (If you're using the oven, set a tray on the rack under the eggplant to catch any drips.) The

eggplant will start to crack and give off juices; it should become an ashy gray-black. Turn it as it cooks, but be careful—as it softens under heat, it becomes difficult to move without splitting. When the eggplant is charred gray and very tender, transfer it to a plate to cool.

Slice off the top of the cooled eggplant, and then cut it in half lengthwise. Use a spoon to carefully remove all the pulp, but avoid any bits of blackened skin. With a fork, stir the eggplant to break up large pieces and add the rest of the ingredients. Taste as you mix and adjust seasonings. Turn the *baba ghanouj* into a bowl and chill before serving.

Foul Imdamis

(Lebanese fava beans)

Despite the recipe's name, these fava beans are nothing like the ones used in Western cooking. This addictive dish uses beans called *foul mudammas*, which are available in cans at Lebanese groceries. If you can't find them, chickpeas are the best substitute. Serves six to eight as part of a meze.

1/3 cup olive oil
4 medium onions, chopped
2 cloves garlic, minced
4 medium tomatoes, chopped
Two 20-oz. cans foul mudammas, drained
1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/4 tsp. ground cumin
1/4 tsp. ground ginger
1/4 tsp. cayenne
1/4 tsp. ground cardamom
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
1/4 cup fresh lemon juice

Heat a medium frying pan over medium heat until hot. Add 1/4 cup of the olive oil to the pan, wait about 30 seconds, and then add the onions. Sauté until the onions are translucent, about 5 min. Add the garlic and tomatoes and cook for 5 min. over medium heat. Add the beans and spices; cook for 15 min. over low heat, stirring occasionally. Taste and adjust seasoning.

Just before serving, stir in the lemon juice. Drizzle the remaining olive oil over the beans and serve with pita.

Loubieh Bziet

(Green beans with onions)

This recipe also works well with okra, spinach, escarole, and chard. Tomatoes, fresh or canned, may also be added to the green beans. Serves six to eight as part of a meze.

1/4 cup olive oil
4 large onions, cut in half and sliced 1/8-in. thick
2 lb. green beans, ends trimmed
Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

In a large frying pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. When the oil is hot, add the onions. Sauté for a few minutes, until the onions turn translucent. Reduce the heat to low and cook the onions for 20 to 25 min., stirring occasionally. The onions should turn a rich caramel color.

Rinse the beans in a colander; you want just a small amount of water to cling to them. Add the beans to the onions, stir, and cover the pan. Keep the heat low and cook for about 45 min., stirring occasionally. These beans are not served *al dente*; they should dull in color and become limp. Season with salt and pepper and serve hot or at room temperature.



A quick whirl in the food processor gives you creamy, nutty hummus. Chickpeas, tahini (sesame paste), lemon, and garlic blend to make a nutritious dip for raw vegetables or pita bread.



For *baba ghanouj*, char the eggplant right on the burner. The skin will become an ashy gray-black (above). The process is messy, but the smoky-sweet flavor and creamy texture of the finished dip (above left) make it worth the trouble. Use an outdoor grill or your broiler if you don't have a gas stove.

Kibbeh

(Minced lamb with cracked wheat)

I love raw *kibbeh*, but the cooked version is also excellent. I've included instructions for both. Serves six to eight as part of a meze.

2 lb. boneless leg of lamb, every trace of fat, tendon, and sinew removed
3/4 cup fine-grind cracked wheat, soaked in warm water for 30 min.
1/2 cup finely grated onion
1 Tbs. ground cinnamon
1 tsp. ground allspice
1 1/2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. cayenne

(Recipe list continues)

Awkward name, delicious dish. Foul imdamis is a wonderful mix of Lebanese fava beans, onions, garlic, and spices. The right beans are small, round, brownish fava beans that are available in cans labeled foul mudammas in most Middle Eastern grocery stores.

SPECIAL TOUCHES THAT MAKE THE MEZZE

If you'd like to turn a *mezze* into a full-fledged party menu, there are a few accessories that will ensure you serve an unforgettable meal.

◆ **Start with *arak*, a strong, anise-flavored liqueur.**

Serve it on the rocks, and watch your guests' reactions as the clear liquid turns milky white when it hits the ice. A good nonalcoholic option is a spritzer made from pomegranate syrup mixed with club soda.

◆ **For dessert, try serving *baklava* from a local Middle Eastern bakery with some fresh fruit. *Flan* and simple nut-studded butter cookies are also popular desserts in Lebanon.**



FOR GARNISH:
1 small red onion, cut into wedges
Extra-virgin olive oil

Cut the perfectly lean lamb meat into 2-inch cubes. Put the cubes in a bowl, cover with plastic, and refrigerate for about 30 min.

Drain the wheat, squeeze out as much water as possible, and set aside.

To grind the meat, use a meat grinder with a fine die or a food processor. If you use a grinder, put the meat through the die twice. If you use a food processor, chill the blade and chop only small amounts at a time. Be careful not to overwork the lamb or you'll make a purée.

Fill a bowl with ice water and dip in your hands occasionally to keep them cool as you mix the ingredients. Add the wheat, the grated onion, and all the spices to the ground meat. Mix as if preparing a meatloaf. Taste and adjust the seasonings. Smooth the *kibbeh* into a large ball, dipping your hands in the cold water as you work. Slide the *kibbeh* onto a plate and make a small well in the center of the meat. Cover with plastic and chill for at least 30 min.

To serve, arrange sections of red onion, flower-petal fashion, around the *kibbeh*. Fill the well with olive oil and serve with pita.

For cooked *kibbeh*—After you make the meat mixture, shape it into 2½-inch patties that are the same thickness

throughout. Over medium heat, slowly sauté the *kibbeh* patties in clarified butter or olive oil. When cooked through, serve them as appetizers or stuffed in pita for sandwiches. *Labne* is an excellent accompaniment.

Labne
(Drained yogurt with mint)

The yogurt takes all day to drain, but it's hands-off cooking—you don't even have to watch over it.
Yields 1½ cups.

1 qt. plain yogurt, made without gelatin or thickeners
1 tsp. salt
¼ cup finely chopped fresh mint

Mix the yogurt and salt together. Line a colander with a double thickness of cheesecloth and set it over a bowl. Pour the yogurt into the cheesecloth, cover the colander tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate the colander and bowl for at least 8 hours. The longer the yogurt drains, the thicker the *labne* will be.

Remove the *labne* from the cheesecloth, turn it into a bowl, and return it to the refrigerator. Just before serving, stir in the mint. Serve in a shallow bowl with pita as an appetizer, or as part of a full *mezze*.

Lissa Doumani owns Terra, a restaurant in St. Helena, California, with her husband, Hiro Sone. ◆