

Cooking class, from souk to table

In Morocco, meals begin at market

By Patricia Harris and David Lyon
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MARRAKECH, Morocco — The conundrum here, where you'll find some of the most colorful souks, or markets, of North Africa, and some of the best food, is whether to shop or eat. Take a class with Souk Cuisine and you can do both.

In over six hours we would shop for food, learn to prepare several traditional dishes, and feast with our fellow students in a house inside the old city. We meet our seven classmates and guide Lyndell Day in the busy main square of Jemaa El Fna at precisely 10 a.m. "Your job is to get the best ingredients and come home with change," Day tells us as she distributes plastic bags, shopping lists, and purses containing a few dirhams, the local currency.

There is no better immersion in a local culture than going marketing. Day leads us through the labyrinthine souk to her favorite stalls. At a corner where gardeners display produce, she urges us to elbow our way in. "There's no queue system here," she says. "Smile and say 'hello' and have a laugh with them." None of us speaks Arabic, though we all have a smattering of French. The pace is frenetic but exhilarating as we gather the flavors of Marrakech — sweet oranges, fragrant cilantro, red-tinted onions like clappers shorn from a bell.

When we belly up to a cart selling the fermented clarified butter known as "smen," Day explains that "the stronger the smell, the better." She also advises that the darkest and most shriveled preserved lemons have the strongest flavor. By the time we reach the riad where we will



PHOTOS BY DAVID LYON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Above: Hrita (right), a cook with Souk Cuisine, shows Marieke Folkeringa a dessert technique in cooking class. **Below:** vegetarian couscous.

cook, we have four overflowing bags of groceries. And change.

The courtyard of the old home is equipped with a kitchen that could serve a modest restaurant. We each have a stainless steel table as a work station, while an eight-burner gas stove and a sink stand in one corner. Day gives us recipe booklets (available in English, Dutch, and French) and we divide up to tackle the ambitious menu. Our fellow classmates chop vegetables for cold salads, fold turnovers filled with shrimp and squid, simmer a dish of sardine balls in a tangy sauce, and knead and bake biscotti-like cookies to accompany mint tea.

We're preparing vegetarian couscous with sweet onions, pumpkin, and raisins. "To make a couscous is a commitment," says Day. "It takes almost two hours to make it as light as air in your mouth."

Fortunately, three local women work with us, moving from station to station, instructing us through taste, touch, and demonstration. The vascular surgeon in our group excels at cutting vegetables with a precision that is, well, surgical. We all enjoy tossing handfuls of herbs and pinches of spices into the dishes from a mise en place that has been prepared for us and looks as gorgeous as a still-life painting. By the time we are ready to begin cooking the couscous, we have an entire 6-foot table covered with ingredients.

Having always made couscous by simply pouring hot broth over



the dry grains, we feel a certain pressure to create the ethereal couscous that Day has described. The grains of semolina are steamed three times in a couscoussiere, essentially a basket insert that suspends the couscous over bubbling broth. In between steam sessions, we rake the grains with our fingers while adding water or olive oil, lift the mass between our hands, and rub to sift the grains through our fingers. Of course, it's the best couscous we have ever made.

By the time the cooking is done — miraculously at the same time — we have all worked up an appetite. We take photographs, compliment one another on our dishes, and toast our culinary success with a chilled rose from the nearby Atlas mountains.

Souk Cuisine, Zniquat Rahba, Derb Tahtah 5, Medina, Marrakech, Morocco; 011-212-673-804-955; www.soukcuisine.com. Classes cost \$64 per person and are held daily; reservation required.

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Vegetable couscous with pumpkin and onions

Serves 4

Ras el hanout is a Moroccan spice mixture available at specialty shops and Middle Eastern grocers. You can substitute a blend of equal amounts of ground cumin and ground anise with a pinch of ground cloves. Cook the couscous in one pot while you make the pumpkin mixture in another. Allow about 1½ hours cooking time. Couscous will triple in volume after the third steaming. The ingredient list looks daunting but the cooking is straightforward.

VEGETABLES

- 4 medium onions, thinly sliced
- ¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- ¼ teaspoon ground ras el hanout
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground turmeric
- Generous pinch of saffron threads
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- ½ cup golden raisins
- 1 small sugar pumpkin, seeded, peeled, and cut into 1-inch dice

1. In a large, heavy-based soup pot, combine the onions, cinnamon, ras el hanout, ginger, salt, pepper, turmeric, saffron, and olive oil. Cover with a lid. Simmer for 30 minutes or until the onions soften.
2. Add the sugar, raisins, and pumpkin. Simmer for 45 minutes or until the pumpkin is very tender.

COUSCOUS

- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 teaspoon butter
- 1 small onion, chopped
- 3 sprigs fresh parsley and 3 sprigs fresh cilantro, tied together
- ½ teaspoon ground turmeric
- ½ teaspoon ground pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1 teaspoon salt, and more to taste
- 1 tomato, peeled and chopped
- 1 can (15 ounces) chickpeas, drained
- 3 cups water
- 1½ cups couscous
- 4 large carrots, sliced lengthwise
- 1 medium zucchini, cut into thick wedges
- ½ cup tomato juice

1. In a large, flameproof casserole, heat ¼ cup of the olive oil. Add the butter. Stir in the onion, parsley

and cilantro, turmeric, pepper, ginger, ½ teaspoon salt, tomato, and chickpeas. Cook, stirring often, for 5 minutes or until the onion softens.

2. Add 2½ cups of the water. Bring to a boil.
3. Meanwhile, set a steamer basket or insert inside the pot so it does not touch the mixture on the bottom.

4. In a bowl, combine couscous with 2 tablespoons of the remaining olive oil. Rub the grains between your fingers to evenly distribute oil. Place in the steamer basket. Seal seam between the pot and the steamer basket with a long strip of foil rolled to make a gasket. Cook uncovered for 15 minutes or until steam rises from the surface of the granules.

5. Transfer the couscous to a large, shallow bowl. When it is cool enough to handle, using your fingers, rake it while adding ¼ cup of the remaining water and ½ teaspoon salt. Let stand 10 minutes. Return the couscous to the steamer rack and cook again for 15 minutes or until the steam rises through the couscous.

6. Transfer couscous to a shallow bowl and add ¼ cup of the remaining water and the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil. Set aside for 10 minutes.

7. Add carrots with enough water to cover them to the mixture in the bottom of the casserole. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, and cover the pan. Simmer for 10 minutes. Add zucchini and simmer 7 minutes more or until tender. Stir in tomato juice.

8. Return couscous to steamer basket. Cover and steam for 5 minutes.

9. Arrange the couscous in a large shallow dish. Set the carrot and zucchini mixture around the edges. Spoon the pumpkin mixture into the center. Adapted from Souk Cuisine