

Foods of the Middle East and Mediterranean

So suppose you have captured a terrorist from the Middle East, what do you feed him or her? The first answer is nothing really good, because they are terrorists and we hate them.

But what if the terrorist is not really a terrorist, and is really just some local yokel who was in the wrong place (like everyone else who lives in Afghanistan for example) at the wrong time and was rounded up and sent to Gitmo? The person has no international status as a prisoner of war, and is not convicted of a crime, and cannot be released because we do not want the embarrassment, so what do you feed that guy? If you know he is innocent, and it is his birthday, should you not try to do something nice to him? Sort of make it up to him for the whole wrongful imprisonment and torture thing? This way he will at least have some good times to look back on, and in the event the world wide caliphate is established, you will be in tight with him and the other Jihadists.

So in an effort to map out a meal or two for you and your terrorist, I will start by giving some shopping and pantry suggestions about some common and tasty treats, and a little bit of cultural discussion.

First, many of the foods of the Middle East are also the foods of North Africa and really the whole Eastern Mediterranean. That little sea divides lands, but is a great highway for trading ships carrying spicy goods from India to Italy. Spices were an especially popular way to season rotted and spoiled food in pre-refrigeration days, and were valued and adopted widely over the centuries.

Next, I am going to suggest some basic products you should always have on hand if you are a fan of foods from this region, and tell you where to get them in the most economical manner. Then we will jump into some of my favorite recipes and see if we cannot get you and your terrorist excited about the comfort foods of the region.

The Pantry

In our pantry, we always try to have the following foods:

- Chickpeas, also known as garbanzos. What you call them is up to you, just think about which word is the most fun to say, and go with it.
- Tahina, which is a nut butter made from sesame seeds.
- Beans (dried)- I like the dark ones, fava beans are also common
- Lentils (dry) – brown, green, orange, they all are fun.
- Feta cheese – I love the salty taste of feta! My wife buys it in shrink wrap, package, but I like it better in big chunks still soaked in brine. Just for the record, I am completely right about this, and am not afraid to admit it, because she never reads my web site.
- Medium coarse sea salt in a nice small dish (not really coarse, but coarse)
- Really nice olives, not from a can.
- Falafel – the mixes are fine. Cheapest in bulk, even if you get them out of the bins at whole foods. They get a little pricey in the small boxes.
- Lemons
- Morton's Hot Salt
- Pepper in a pepper grinder. Just go get one and throw the little pepper shakers away.
- Couscous – little tiny pastas that are really yummy in the tummy!
- Beer and Wine. Your terrorist might not drink, but I do. A nice smooth tequila would be good too, but not really that middle eastern, more south western.
- A nice plain yogurt.
- Goat cheese – I do not like it but my wife and kids go through it fast. It is really expensive in most stores, but Sams Club has a good cheese section, and the goat cheese is really good and inexpensive there. We buy the kind that is soft, and they use it like cream cheese.
- Olive oil, extra virgin, cold press only. Spend the money.

So where do we get this stuff? You can buy most of it at Whole Foods, and give them your whole paycheck, or you can seek out a specialty store and spend half the money. Specialty stores that would be candidates would have words like Middle Eastern Foods, or Mediterranean Foods, or Greek Foods in their name or store title. I bet you can figure out the rest from here. And get all the different types of olives. Do not even hesitate, get them all.

When you go to a Middle Eastern or Greek store, ask them for some sweets too. Something like Baklava, or some other honey soaked treat would be great for anyone who has never been completely whacked out on sugar. I am not saying these people over do the sweets so much, but I suspect when they want to cut back on sugar, they slam a couple of cases of Mountain Dew as a sugar substitute. And I have also seen them drink a lot of warm coke, bottle after bottle.

Recipes

Mediterranean Couscous Salad

This is a GREAT SUMMER DISH

1. Couscous – Put 1 ½ cups of water in a pan, add half a teaspoon of salt, and a quarter teaspoon of pepper, and bring to a boil. Add one cup of couscous and remove from heat. Let sit for 5 to 10 minutes, then fluff with a fork lightly and let cool to room temperature.
2. Add the following ingredients to a large bowl and then toss in the couscous:
 - a. 1 large tomato, coarsely chopped.
 - b. ¾ cup crumbled feta (crumble a bit small, pea sized).
 - c. ½ cup shredded fresh basil (don't over squish the cup, keep it loose).
 - d. 1/3rd cup of thinly sliced green onions
 - e. 1/3rd to ½ cup chopped pitted olives (the good ones! Do not use canned crap!).
 - f. 1/3rd cup olive oil.
 - g. Red lettuce for color
 - h. Lemon juice – up to three table spoons but really it is up to you and your terrorist.

Moroccan Stew – the Bearded Ones preferred recipe

This is served over couscous.

1. Combine in a pan and stew over a low heat:
 - a. Two or three good potatoes – 1 inch cubes
 - b. 1 pound eggplant, chopped into 1 to 2 inch cubes
 - c. Carrots and onions (to taste and color) – maybe 2 onions (or not) and two or three carrots.
 - d. 1 red pepper 1 can chick peas (15 ounce or so size)
 - e. 2 to 3 squash
 - f. Garlic – I do 5 cloves or one head
 - g. 1 can peeled tomatoes (15 – 16 ounces)
 - h. 2 boxes of raisins (the ones you stick in kids lunch bags if you are interested at all in your kids overall health and make them school lunches – not the really little ones cheap smug people hand out at Halloween, the ones about the size of a card deck)
 - i. 1 to 1 1/2 tablespoons of cinnamon
 - j. 2 tablespoons of Durkees hot sauce
 - k. You can throw in some chicken or fish if you eat animals but I do not.
2. After it is stewed (the cubed potatoes are a good indicator of done), ladle over a bed of couscous, and salt (with the medium coarse sea salt) to taste (or not).

Falafel

First off, just buy the mix and follow the directions. It is much cheaper if you can get it in bulk. I add some finely chopped parsley to mine because that is how they did it in Egypt and I really liked it that way. They called it Tamaya for some reason, not falafel. We would buy 10 pieces, round and smaller than a chicken egg, in a newspaper cone for less than 10 cents. They would throw a good sized three finger pinch of coarse sea salt on top, and we would stroll about eating them. None ever reached home. They were just awesome.

The first key to making them at home in the US is to use way more oil than my wife, who never reads this site, thinks appropriate, so I tend to skulk around when frying them up. I also use half olive oil because I am too cheap to use all olive oil, but that is so wrong and you should try and be stronger than me and go all olive oil. So the pan should be filled so it cover 2/3rds of the falafel you drop in and are willing to flip them to fry the other side.

The second key is a decent spoon to shape them. Soup spoons work well. Scoop up the mix, and press it into the spoon and make the side not pressed into the spoon a bit larger, but still rounded. Sort of a heaping spoon of falafel! Then drop it into the hot oil, fry it up, and put on paper towels to drain the excess oil.

The 3rd key is a nice tahina sauce.

If eating as a sandwich, use pita bread, or a nice tortilla wrap. We like the whole wheat ones. We also add some lettuce, tomato or chopped cucumber, even half a spoon of a nice cucumber yogurt works great. Add a little bit of salt, some tahina sauce, and you are going to have a good time.

Tahina Sauce

There are a lot of ways to make this, here is one

1. Add tahini into a bowl, mix in garlic, salt, and oil, then add hot water, at least as much hot water as you have tahini. I like mine thin
 - a. 1/2 cup tahini (sesame seed paste)
 - b. 3 gloves garlic, crushed
 - c. 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt
 - d. 2 tablespoons olive oil

2. Next add
 - a. 1 to 2 tablespoons of lemon juice. Most recipes call for more and they suck. The lemon juice may cause the sauce to thicken and look granular. In that situation, thin with more boiling water.
 - b. 1 teaspoon parsley, finely chopped (optional), or a nice paprika garnish.

The Second Moroccan Stew Recipe

This is the recipe I would feed my terrorist if I was only 80% sure he was not a terrorist. I would not want someone who might really be a terrorist to have a great meal, so I would go with this one. It is good enough for the 80% innocent, and, I believe, possibly good enough to coax a confession out of a terrorist who wants the real thing, but had forgotten about it, until this close but not the real thing recipe pushed him over the edge. It might even get him to reveal the secret Islamic Terrorist Center where Obama was really born before he was snuck into Hawaii.

1. In a large pan or casserole pot heat
 - a. Heat 2 Tablespoons of vegetable oil
 - b. 1 medium thin sliced onion
 - c. 1 red bell pepper (sliced)
 - d. 1 teaspoon of cinnamon
 - e. 2 teaspoons of ground cumin
 - f. ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper

2. After heating for 5 minutes, when the vegetables are soft, add
 - a. 4 canned plum tomatoes and ½ cup juice from the 14 ounce can – split the tomatoes up with the spoon
 - b. 2 tablespoons lime juice
 - c. ¼ teaspoon saffron threads (not that I believe anyone will taste them)
 - d. 4 small new potatoes sliced ¼ inch thick

3. Cook until then potatoes are tender, about 20 minutes on moderate to low simmer (cover it up while it simmers). Then add the following, and simmer until the potatoes are very tender.
 - a. 2 cups broccoli florets
 - b. One 19 ounce can of chickpeas
 - c. One teaspoon of salt

Ful Meddamis

This is an Egyptian dish made of mashed fava beans with onion, garlic, parsley, lemon juice and salt. It is cooked for a long time, rumored to be two days. It is really, really good and a common breakfast food. I have never found a good recipe, but the one below is ok.

1. Soak one pound of fava beans in water overnight (get the small ones, the big ones do not mash well)
2. Add 7 cups of water and bring to a boil over medium-high heat.
3. Reduce the heat to low and add the juice of 1 lemon, the garlic (1 head) and the salt.
4. Cover and simmer over low heat (the beans will retain their shape only if cooked slowly) until the beans are soft-- moist but not soupy-- about 12 hours.
5. You should do this ideally in the crock pot.
6. Check occasionally and add water if the beans become dry.
7. Twenty minutes before serving, chop one bunch of scallions and combine with the remaining lemon juice.
8. Stir in the oil, season with salt and pepper, and set aside.
9. Discard the garlic and gently stir the lemon mixture into the beans.
10. Adjust seasoning.
11. Spoon into bowls, mash slightly.
12. Serve warm with pita bread.

I also like to throw in tomatoes, both during cooking or sometimes after.

Bowl of Beans

We like to cook up a crock pot of black beans or red beans and just eat the beans with crumbled feta cheese on top and some fresh bread. Here is how I make my beans.

1. Soak 2 pounds of beans overnight, drain. I try and always drain into a colander and pick through the beans a little to make sure they are rock free. I spread them on a white plate then dump it in the crock pot after visual inspection.
2. Add 1 can diced tomatoes.
3. Add a lot of garlic, I love garlic.
4. At least one large diced onion.
5. Sometimes a little celery, but not often.
6. Add salt or soy sauce.
7. A couple of splashes of hot sauce if you like.
8. Serve hot with Feta cheese on top.