

## Eggplant with buttermilk sauce

I can't think of a more rustically elegant (is that a contradiction in terms?) starter. Serve with some robust white bread or pita and you are, literally, in food heaven. In the recipe you'll find Sami Tamimi's technique for getting the seeds out of the pomegranate, which I am afraid is now a very well-known secret.

Serves 4 as a starter

2 large and long eggplants  
1/3 cup olive oil  
1½ tsp lemon thyme leaves, plus a few whole sprigs to garnish  
Maldon sea salt and black pepper  
1 pomegranate  
1 tsp za'atar

### Sauce

9 tbsp buttermilk  
½ cup Greek yogurt  
1½ tbsp olive oil, plus a drizzle to finish  
1 small garlic clove, crushed  
pinch of salt

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Cut the eggplants in half lengthways, cutting straight through the green stalk (the stalk is for the look; don't eat it). Use a small sharp knife to make three or four parallel incisions in the cut side of each eggplant half, without cutting through to the skin. Repeat at a 45-degree angle to get a diamond-shaped pattern.

Place the eggplant halves, cut-side up, on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Brush them with olive oil – keep on brushing until all of the oil has been absorbed by the flesh. Sprinkle with the lemon thyme leaves and some salt and pepper. Roast for 35 to 40 minutes, at which point the flesh should be soft, flavorful and nicely browned. Remove from the oven and allow to cool down completely.

While the eggplants are in the oven, cut the pomegranate into two horizontally. Hold one half over a bowl, with the cut side against your palm, and use the back of a wooden spoon or a rolling pin to gently knock on the pomegranate skin. Continue beating with increasing power until the seeds start coming out naturally and falling through your fingers into the bowl. Once all are there, sift through the seeds to remove any bits of white skin or membrane.

To make the sauce. Whisk together all of the ingredients. Taste for seasoning, then keep cold until needed.

To serve, spoon plenty of buttermilk sauce over the eggplant halves without covering the stalks. Sprinkle za'atar and plenty of pomegranate seeds on top and garnish with lemon thyme. Finish with a drizzle of olive oil.

## Spicy Moroccan carrot salad

There are countless variations on this gutsy salad, all incorporating sweet spices, fresh herbs and some sort of lemony kick. My version is intense and will go well as one component in a feast of Middle Eastern salads, or just to accompany fried fish. You can serve it warm, as well as cold, with Freekeh Pilaf (page 241) for instance.

Serves 4

2 lbs carrots  
1/3 cup olive oil, plus extra to finish  
1 medium onion, finely chopped  
1 tsp sugar

3 garlic cloves, crushed  
2 medium green chiles, finely chopped  
1 green onion, finely chopped  
1/8 tsp ground cloves  
1/4 tsp ground ginger  
1/2 tsp ground coriander  
3/4 tsp ground cinnamon  
1 tsp sweet paprika  
1 tsp ground cumin  
1 tbsp white wine vinegar  
1 tbsp chopped preserved lemon  
salt  
2½ cups cilantro leaves, chopped, plus extra to garnish  
1/2 cup Greek yogurt, chilled

Peel the carrots and cut them, depending on their size, into cylinders or semicircles 1/2 inch thick; all the pieces should end up roughly the same size. Place in a large saucepan and cover with salted water. Bring to the boil, then turn down the heat and simmer for about 10 minutes or until tender but still crunchy. Drain in a colander and leave to dry out.

Heat the oil in a large pan and sauté the onion for 12 minutes on a medium heat until soft and slightly brown. Add the cooked carrots to the onion, followed by all the remaining ingredients, apart from the cilantro and yogurt. Remove from the heat. Season liberally with salt, stir well and leave to cool.

Before serving, stir in the cilantro, taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary. Serve in individual bowls with a dollop of yogurt, a drizzle of oil and garnished with the extra cilantro.

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