

Spicy Fish in Cherry Tomato and Harissa Sauce

Dag hareef, a spicy fish bathed in a flaming-red sauce that begs for a thick slice of challah for dipping, graces almost every In North African table on Friday night. In the Libyan-Tripolitan version, it is known as Chraime, the fish cooks in a minimalist sauce of oil infused with cumin, caraway, and lots of paprika. The more elaborate Moroccan version, which is what my aunt would make, contains fresh tomatoes, peppers, and an entire bunch of cilantro. Cherry tomatoes aren't traditional, but they give this gutsy dish a touch of bright sweetness.

This dish is meant to be spicy, but how spicy is up to you. Start with half of the amount of harissa and chile, and fire the dish to your liking.

Serves 6

1/3 cup vegetable oil
10 garlic cloves, smashed
¼ cup tomato paste
1 jalapeno pepper, seeded and thinly sliced
1 tablespoon harissa (store bought or see recipe on p. 26 of Shuk)
3 tablespoons best quality sweet paprika
1 teaspoon ground caraway
1 ½ teaspoon cumin
2 pints cherry tomatoes
½ cup water
1 large bunch cilantro
6 portion size fish filets (grouper, bass, snapper, halibut)
 7-9 ounces each skin-on
Kosher salt
Freshly ground pepper

Pour the oil into a relatively deep, large sauté pan. Immediately add the smashed garlic cloves and cook on low heat just until fragrant, 3-4 minutes. Watch the pan closely to make sure the garlic does not brown, or it will become bitter.

Increase the heat to medium-high, add the tomato paste, half the jalapeno,

1 ½ teaspoons of the harissa, and all the paprika, caraway, and cumin, and stir for a minute or two, until fragrant. Add 1 ½ pints of the cherry tomatoes (reserve the rest for later) and season with salt. Reduce the heat to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes start to break down, 7 to 8 minutes. Pour in the water bring to simmer cover, and cook over low heat for about 30 minutes, or until thick and saucy.

Remove about 3 tablespoons of whole leaves from the cilantro bunch and reserve them for garnish. Tear up the rest of the bunch and toss into the pan. Give it a minute to blend with the sauce, taste and adjust the seasoning with salt, pepper and the remaining jalapeno and 1 ½ teaspoons of harissa if you want more heat. Bear in mind that once you add the fish, you won't be able to stir the sauce and play with the seasonings – make sure that the flavor and level of spiciness are to your liking.

Add the fish fillets, skin-side up, tucking them gently into the sauce. Sprinkle the remaining ½ pint cherry tomatoes on top of the fish.

Bring to a simmer over medium heat. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer, without stirring, until the fish is cooked through, 7 to 8 minutes. Thicker fillets, like halibut, will need 2 to 3 minutes more. To check the fish for doneness, make a small incision in the thickest part of the fish and make sure the flesh is opaque and flaky.

Serve straight out of the pan, garnished with the reserved whole cilantro leaves, with a lot of bread alongside or with couscous.

Mini Sidebar Grandmother's trick

Fresh seawater fish is expensive in Israel, so many home cooks make do with inexpensive frozen fish fillets, especially during midweek meals. If the fish is cooked in a rich sauce, such as this, you can get away with it. The problem is that defrosted fish tastes, well... fishy. This simple technique drives away unpleasant aftertastes and somewhat improves the texture. Thaw the fish in a bowl of ice-cold water. Once thawed, put shallow bowl sprinkle with salt and give it a generous squeeze of fresh lemon juice. Let the fish sit in the lemon juice for 5-7 minutes, rinse with water pat dry and continue with the recipe.

Red Harissa

Without a doubt, this is the most popular hareef across North Africa and the Middle East and as such has hundreds of variations. I've probably tasted most of them having grown up with Moroccan neighbors. In my version, sweet roasted red peppers form the basis of its flavor, with garlic, cumin, and caraway adding complexity. Feel free to use harissa as both a condiment and an ingredient in cooking.

Makes about 2 ½ cups

10 medium garlic cloves

2 large red bell peppers, roasted, peeled, and seeded (see page 155)

1¼ cups vegetable or extra- virgin olive oil

½ cup ground cumin

⅓ cup cayenne

⅓ cup sweet paprika

¼ cup ground caraway

2 tablespoons kosher salt

Put all the ingredients in a food processor and process to an almost smooth paste, stopping to scrape down the sides of the processor bowl every now and then. Store in a glass container with a tight-fitting lid in the fridge for up to 1 month.

Yemenite Salad with Fenugreek-Yogurt Dressing and Ja'ala

Two elements make this simple green salad stand out. The first is a ja'ala, a Yemenite Jewish snack of spiced nuts and seeds that adds flavor and crunch. The other key element? The lush yogurt-based dressing. Perfumed with fenugreek, the essence of Yemenite cuisine it adds a layer of exotic, curry like aroma to the salad. Find fenugreek at Middle Eastern and Indian groceries and online.

1 ½ tablespoons fresh lemon juice
2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 teaspoons honey
½ cup plain yogurt (not Greek style)
1 tablespoon dried fenugreek leaves
1 teaspoon kosher salt, plus more as needed

SALAD

2 or 3 romaine hearts separated into leaves, and wilted outer leaves removed
1 to 1 ½ cups Yemenite Ja'ala (recipe follows)

Make the dressing: Whisk together the lemon juice, oil, honey, yogurt, fenugreek leaves and salt in a small bowl. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Assemble the salad: Arrange the romaine leaves attractively in a large, shallow serving bowl. Spoon the fenugreek-yogurt dressing over the lettuce and scatter the ja'ala on top. Serve at once.

Yemenite Ja'ala

My Yemenite grandmother always served a big bowl of ja'ala at the end of every meal. As a kid, I, of course, would have preferred chocolate, but now I'm crazy about it. The scrumptious, savory mix of roasted nuts, seeds, and spices is still largely unknown beyond the Jewish Yemenite community. Historically, the Yemenite Jews were poor and ate a frugal diet of breads, legumes, soups, and an occasional meat stew. Ja'ala represented wealth and luxury and was reserved for important guests and festive family gatherings. Nowadays it's often served on its own or pre- or post-dinner snack. But it's just as delicious as a component in a salad or even as a savory topping to your morning yogurt.

Makes about 3 ½ cups

½ cup raw almonds (with skins)
½ cup raw hazelnuts
½ cup raw cashews

½ shelled raw pistachios
¼ cup shelled raw peanuts
¼ cup hulled raw sunflower seeds
¼ cup raw sesame seeds
1 teaspoon sugar
1 teaspoon sweet paprika
1 teaspoon granulated onion
½ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ cup boiling water
1 teaspoon extra-virgin olive oil

Preheat the oven to 250F degrees. Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

Put the almonds, hazelnuts, cashews, pistachios, peanuts, pumpkin seeds, sugar, paprika, granulated onion, and salt in a large bowl. Mix well, then add the boiling water and oil and toss until the nuts are well coated.

Spread in a single layer on the prepared baking sheet – you want the nuts a bit crowded so they stick and clump together a little as they roast. Roast for 20 to 30 minutes, until the nuts feel dry to the touch and taste toasted. (They may still be a little chewy, but they'll crisp up as they cool). Don't worry about stirring during cooking, but you can rotate the baking sheet halfway through if it looks like the nuts aren't roasting evenly. Let cool.

Store in a glass or other airtight container at room temperature for a week or longer. After a week, they might become stale, but if that happens, don't worry, to restore their crunch, just spread them over a baking sheet and toast in preheated 250F degree oven for about 10 minutes.