

Stories

of

Jah Lemon

part sixteen

The Land of Orange Blossom Water

Celebrating Citrus in Tunisia

Natty Mark Samuels

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Dedication

to

Anita Shervington

founder of Blast, the STEM project

for her support of African School and its herbal medicine teachings

Jah Lemon

I know you've been doing some culinary research before the trip, Cindy, so what dishes are you hoping to try in Tunisia? I know you're going to write about the trip, for the *Grapefruit* readers.

Cindy Citrus

Yes, I've been enjoying the food research Ras! Can't wait to sample! Food like the Cauliflower Fritters. I like the way they blend the flour, eggs and lemon juice together. Other ingredients include nutmeg and cloves. I imagine it as a snack food, that can be bought at roadside stalls and cafes. Cauliflower appears to be popular there, as I came across a salad of the vegetable, roasted, with chickpeas and a lemon juice dressing.

Jah Lemon

Although I would try it, as you know, I'm not a fan of cauliflower, so what could I dig into?

Cindy Citrus

I would say Baba Ghanoush, which is popular all over North Africa and the Middle East, but you're not keen on aubergines either! One dish I know you'd love, is the Roasted Red Peppers with Feta, Capers and Preserved Lemons. How does that sound?

Jah Lemon

Yes, that's the one for me! Perfect! I'm sure I'll be going up for a second portion! When putting together the Souss Masa issue of the Stories, celebrating Citrus in Morocco, I learnt that preserved lemons or limes are a Maghrebian speciality.

Cindy Citrus

Yes, preserved in salt and lemon juice, they're used all over the region, in all kinds of dishes. It was lovely to read a quote from a book on African and Middle Eastern cuisine, which stated that "Lemon is the linchpin of Middle Eastern cooking, but other types of citrus are important, too."

Jah Lemon

"Linchpin," I love that! Like something central or integral. So what other culinary delights will you be indulging your senses in?

Cindy Citrus

Artichokes appears to be a popular vegetable there also, especially amongst the professional chefs. I came across a dish called Artichoke Hearts with Ginger, Honey and Lemons. Even for the person not a fan of artichokes, knowing that they're "tossed in olive oil with garlic, herbs and preserved lemon", has got to be appealing.

Jah Lemon

I agree. And I know that they can also be prepared in spiced honey, which sounds like a real treat. OK, so we've mentioned some savoury offerings, what about some sweet ones?

Cindy Citrus

Well, first up are the doughnuts, known locally as "yo yos." For Citrus Advocates such as us, as far as sweet things are concerned, it can be hailed as a "tour de force." Imagine Ras, a doughnut soaked in honey, with orange zest and juice, lemon juice and orange blossom water.

Jah Lemon

Yes! Sounds like a gem in the sweet tooth diadem.

Cindy Citrus

If its possible, I'll bring one back.

Jah Lemon

Please do. And you don't have to limit it to one!

Cindy Citrus

Ha Ha. I'll see what I can do, my friend.

Jah Lemon

Hard to beat that one, but what else is there to tempt the one attracted by sweet things?

Cindy Citrus

Just to say, that they also flavour their ice cream with orange blossom water. Another item on the sweet list, is Citrus Almond Cake. It includes the zest of both oranges and lemons, mixed with the eggs and the oil. Noticed on a recipe, that sunflower oil is recommended, whereas olive oil is the most commonly used. And the syrup contains cinnamon, as well as the juice of the two aforementioned fruits. The writer of the recipe says that it is "is lovely with crème fraîche and berries."

I've noticed that in North African cuisine, that as far as nuts go, pistacchios are a favoured choice, as well as the almond version; such as in a Fruit Salad, that consists of orange slices, dates and pistachios. This particular recipe had something for those who like a tippie! An Orange Butter Sauce goes over the fruit salad, containing butter, sugar, zest and juice of orange and lemon, with Grand Marnier and dark Jamaican rum. And while we're talking of a sauce, this is a good time to mention harrisa, which is an omnipresent accompaniment to many Tunisian meals; it's a paste made from chillies, garlic and lemon with the option of the three Cs: coriander, cumin and caraway.

Jah Lemon

So we've mentioned a fruit salad, as well as a cauliflower one, what about another?

Cindy Citrus

I came across two which I know you'll love and hopefully the Grapefruit readership also. One is of Orange and Cinnamon. The other, with shallots, parsley, balsamic vinegar and olive oil, also including grapefruit, oranges and lemons, go to make a Citrus Salad with Liquorice Vinaigrette.

Jah Lemon

Yes, that will do me! I'm sure the readers will agree. Ok, so we've covered some savoury, sweet and salads, what about beverages?

Cindy Citrus

First up has got to be their version of lemonade, otherwise known as Citronade. There's a quote here I'd like to share with the readers...*The particularity of the Tunisian lemonade is that it uses the whole fruit including the zest. While most of the lemonade recipes use only the juice of the lemon, this citronnade eliminates only the white pith and seeds. This provides more body and flavour to the drink.* The interaction with almond continues, as I learnt that it is often served with these nuts. On the same site that gave the above quote, I learnt that the Jewish community of Tunisia, break the Yom Kippur fast, with citronade. Fitting really, when we think that they were the ones who were the first great dispersers of citron, through its importance in the Feast of Tabernacles; and remembering that the citron is the ancestor of the lemon.

Jah Lemon

Yes Cindy, we have to give thanks for the Semitic peoples, for they were the first to give us citrus. The Arabs being the first citriculturists of Europe, via medieval Andalusian Spain.

Cindy Citrus

Yes Ras, we know the monks were the first herb cultivators of Europe, but citriculture first came with the Muslims, which isn't always acknowledged; that they brought enhanced irrigation systems, to sustain and empower the cultivation in the groves and orchards of Spain, Italy and Portugal.

Jah Lemon

Like the lime peel that steeps in the coconut oil, you'll be able to steep yourself in the history of the country.

Cindy Citrus

Yes, I will go Djerba, to speak with the elders of the Jewish community and to Cape Bon, to where the citrus trees grow. To Nabel, Bni Khiar, Dar Chaabane, El Fehri and Hammamet....Was just thinking, that as I tried limoncello in Italy, I'll have to try Cedratine in Tunisia.

Jah Lemon

For those who drink, I think they will welcome the comparative spotlight. Might be a good way of generating further interest in the particulars of Tunisian cuisine, which is often overshadowed by that of its Maghrebian neighbour, Morocco.

Cindy Citrus

You know I'm not big a big drinker, certainly not of liqueurs, so a a sip or two will suffice for the comparison. I think you're right there. Like the Stories of yours, by putting in a recipe now and again of white meat and fish, I think is a good way of encouraging daily citrus use. I remember an earlier conversation, where you said the main objective of the Stories is to advocate for more citrus intake, but if people also start thinking more about a vegetarian diet, then that's a great bonus!

Jah Lemon

Just searching for ways to get people thinking about the benefits of citrus use. We've had some great brain-storming sessions: look at the one that produced Grapefruit! Now its a well-subscribed newsletter, which has led to the website of the same name. And your Tunisian adventure, will generate more interest in the newsletter and website and widen its readership. When you come back, we'll try and make the doughnut and the salad of liquorice vinaigrette.

Cindy Citrus

Definitely! We'll have a Tunisian evening. Was just thinking back to something you said earlier. It's true; when we think of North African cuisine, we tend to think first of Morocco and Egypt, so I'm really looking forward to the exploration into Tunisia.

One thing we'll have to make on our evening of Tunisian Citrus is something which I've been saving till the last. As well as the usual ingredients of flour, baking powder, sugar eggs and the seemingly omnipresent almonds, there's also mango, kumquats, orange and lemon. So we can finish the evening with either mint tea, coffee – which I'm told also has orange blossom flavouring - or citrus juice and an Olive Oil Cake with Citrus and Toasted Almonds.

Jah Lemon

Perfect! Sounds like a great finale to an evening of culture. Was thinking that with the support of the Food Bank, maybe we can use our evening with guests, as a template for a future fund raiser. You said you're going to take a video camera, so we can show the footage, as well as provide food and maybe some of their music also.

Cindy Citrus

Yes! Let's do it! And I was intending to explore the musical side of the culture also, so yes, this is all possible. We can put out some feelers to those from Tunisia resident here, for guidance into authenticity. Maybe do it in March, when Tunisia celebrates its Independence.

Jah Lemon

Why not? Yes, let's go for it!

Cindy Citrus

A celebration of citrus in Tunisia. I'm very much looking forward to immersing myself, in the Land of Orange Blossom Water.

Sources

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