

# A TASTE OF LEBANON

In a country full of diversity, Lebanon's food brings people together. *Lauren Hills* embarked on a trip to Beirut to sample some traditional tastes

Arriving in the Hamra district of Beirut via the narrow streets, you will notice the many cafes, shisha bars and fresh produce stands that line the busy walkways. You will also notice people chatting over a steaming cup of strong coffee, or choosing a fresh piece of manoucheh from their local baker. What makes this vibrant setting more striking is that the once-beautiful buildings are now dilapidated and scarred with bullet holes from the civil war that besieged the city for almost 30 years.

Beirut's sense of place and solidarity is felt throughout the streets. Hamra is home to the American University of Beirut (AUB) and is in walking distance from the corniche of the Mediterranean Sea that is dotted with seafood restaurants, cafes and places to enjoy a cool drink and watch the sun go down.

Just perpendicular to AUB is Rue Bliss, where you can enjoy a cup of coffee and a croissant at some of the student hangouts in the area. While meandering through the humming streets of Hamra look out for Cafe Younes, a gorgeous and eclectic

coffee shop that boasts chilli-chocolate lattes and ginger-biscuit cappuccinos. Pair a steaming coffee with a plain croissant, and you will be ready to start exploring Beirut.

If you are arriving in the city straight from the UAE, where many a restaurant menu serves Lebanese and other Arabic food, it is interesting to experience the cuisine from its origins. Mixed grill, Arabic bread, tabbouleh and of course hummus, are found throughout in the Middle East; however, there is nothing better than being in Lebanon to taste Lebanese dishes.

The best way to find the great food outlets around Beirut is to ask the local people about their favourite restaurants and foodie hideaways. You will be steered along an exciting path less-travelled by tourists; open your heart and mind to the city, and you will get a very rich experience in return.

For modern Mediterranean cuisine, La Plage, which is situated along the Corniche, is a relaxing and beautiful spot right on the sea that offers uniquely flavoured pizzas, fresh seafood of every kind and a 'tan for dessert', as you can sit by the poolside after you have enjoyed your meal.

In so far as traditional Lebanese meals go, you can do no better than Le Chef along Rue Gouraud in Gemmayzeh. This is a Beirut institution for the cheap, cheerful and delicious 'home-cooked' Lebanese food, and the charismatic headwaiter, Charbel Bassil, has humorously trademarked the word 'welcome' for his own personal use (a very un-official certificate on the wall of the restaurant 'reminds' you that this is so).

At Le Chef, you can enjoy a chicory starter, which is a crispy mix of fried onion and spinach seasoned with fresh lemon juice. For mains, try a simple chicken and rice dish prepared and served the Lebanese way. Bassil will insist that you crumble crisp Arabic bread on top of the chicken and pour a spinach and onion vinegar over the dish.

"These are dishes of the kings of Egypt, and this is how they must be prepared and served," says Bassil.

For dessert try the mohallabiah; a creamy coconut mixture made with cinnamon, sugar and rosewater. Soft and sweet, this dessert is traditionally served to celebrate the birth of a baby.

## "Make food not war"

With traditional recipes and restaurants found amongst more modern French and Mediterranean food outlets, it is perhaps through the fresh produce of Lebanon that you can get a sense of the origins of the food and the authentic food preparation.

Every Saturday at Saifi Village in the Old Town area of Beirut, the Souk al Tayeb organic market takes place. Farmers and organic food enthusiasts from all over Lebanon gather at the souk to sell, sample and purchase the best organic produce from all over the country.

Food enthusiast and television personality Kamal Mouzawak founded Souk al Tayeb in 2004, not only to promote organic food from Lebanese soil, but also to bring people together through a common love for Lebanese food.



A view from the corniche, Hamra



Freshly made saj and labneh



Organic produce from Souk al Tayeb



Shisha prepared at La Plage along the corniche



Charbel Bassil, headwaiter at Le Chef



“In a conflict country like Lebanon, where people could kill and die just for a difference in a religious or confessional belief, it is not easy to look for what can bring people together. It is the land; its produce and the cuisine that is common. ‘Make food not war’ is an important movement here. There is little difference between Muslim and Christian cuisine, but there is a big difference between coastal, inland and mountain cuisine,” says Mouzawak.

While the origins of cuisine are often difficult to define, this is particularly true of Lebanese cuisine, as it is a country of such diversity. The land in Lebanon differs greatly from area to area - the coastal plains will yield very different produce from the steep mountainous areas.

Apart from the geography, the historical influences are also very significant in influencing Lebanese cuisine. The Phoenicians settled along Lebanon’s coastline around 5,000 years ago and traded wheat, dried pulses nuts and olives – all still used in the country’s cooking today. Adding to this, the Ottoman rulers remained in Beirut for more than 400 years, and the country experienced the influence of French colonisation last century.

“Lebanon is not East, not West, not Muslim, not Christian, not coastal, not mountainous, not inland... but all of these influences together. It is really unique in this way. Lebanese cuisine is a mix of different ingredients and different influences. Just like the language itself,” says Mouzawak.

Typical Lebanese products from the regional soil includes olives, which are enjoyed soaked or as olive oil; wheat, which is mainly used in burghal form; grapes that are eaten fresh or enjoyed in arak or wine; and zaatar, which is a wild herb that is mixed and used in manouchéh, a soft bread dough that is often enjoyed for breakfast.

The mezze is perhaps the star of Lebanese cuisine. Made up of salads and dips such as tabbouleh, babaganoush, moutabel, falafel and of course hummus. Scoop up these scrumptious tid bits with soft, warm Arabic flatbread such as pitta, saj or khobz and you will be enjoying these tastes in the most authentic way.

### Simply skillful

Lebanese food is essentially simple; prepared with produce from local soil and with spices used sparingly.

“The key spices are cinnamon, black and white pepper and a 7-spice mixture (a blend of nutmeg, coriander, allspice, clove, cinnamon and black and white pepper). Sumac, a lemony spice, is also used to season salads, eggs and fish,” says Anissa Helou, the author of Mediterranean Street Food.

While the ingredients might be straightforward, there is much craft and culinary detail involved. Stuffing, chopping, grinding and spicing is all part of the preparation of Lebanese food. The kibbeh, a Lebanese dish from the Ehden region, is created with fine skill. Known to be rich and rather oily, the kibbeh is meat paste that is prepared by pounding together lamb or beef mince with bulghar, onion and herbs.

The food of Lebanon encompasses geographic and cultural diversity, and each bite is a rich and flavoursome culmination of past and present as age-old recipes are enjoyed today. Mouzawak sums this up perfectly when he says that “Each bite speaks better than any history book could. It speaks about the land, about the people and about past and present life.”



### HOW SWEET IT IS...

The sweetest dessert in Lebanon, Baklava is used to describe a variety of pastries, usually filled with nuts and drenched with sugar syrup. A selection of these, including borma (made with bird’s nest-like pastry), kol-wa-shkor (roughly translated from the Arabic ‘eat and be grateful’), and nammora (semolina cake with nuts on top) are often served at the end of a meal.

Baklava is a good example of the results of culinary crossover. Sheets of paper-thin filo pastry, originally an Ottoman invention, are brushed with melted butter and layered with sweetened mince nuts. During the French colonial era, the French obsession with baking helped refine Lebanese baklava, culminating in scores of different patterned and decorated sweetmeats.

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# TRY THESE LEBANESE RECIPES AT HOME



## Muhammara

**ROASTED PEPPER AND WALNUT DIP**  
10 MINS, SERVES 4

Pomegranate molasses is available in bottles from larger supermarkets and delis.

4 roasted red peppers (250g) peeled, drained and chopped  
75g walnuts, toasted and finely chopped  
2 tbsp fine breadcrumbs  
1 lemon, juiced  
1 tbsp pomegranate molasses (or lemon juice)  
1/4 tsp dried chilli flakes  
1/4 tsp ground cumin  
1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for drizzling

- 1 Mix the peppers and walnuts for a chunky dip or whizz in a food processor to medium-fine for a smoother version.
- 2 Transfer to a mixing bowl and add the rest of the ingredients. Toss to combine. Taste and season with salt.
- 3 Put the muhammara in a bowl and drizzle with olive oil. Serve with flatbread.



## Tabbouleh

**30 MINS + 30 MINS STANDING, SERVES 4**

For the best results drain the tomatoes of excess juices. You'll find 7-spice mixture in Middle Eastern shops, but if you can't get hold of any, use ground all-spice instead.

30g fine bulghar  
600g firm ripe tomatoes, finely diced  
1/2 bunch spring onions, trimmed and very thinly sliced  
2 bunches flat-leaf parsley  
1/4 bunch mint, leaves only  
1/4 tsp ground cinnamon  
1/2 tsp Lebanese 7-spice mixture  
1/4 tsp finely ground black pepper  
1 lemon, squeezed  
150ml extra virgin olive oil

- 1 Rinse the bulghar in 2 to 3 changes of cold water, drain well and put in a salad bowl large enough to take the finished dish.
- 2 Add the tomatoes, then the spring onions.
- 3 Chop the parsley as finely as possible with a very sharp knife to prevent bruising and add to the salad bowl.
- 4 Chop the mint leaves in the same way as the parsley and add to the bowl.
- 5 Cover with a tea towel and leave for about 30 mins until the bulghar has softened.
- 6 Add the spices and season to taste. Add the lemon juice and olive oil and toss everything together.
- 7 Taste and adjust the seasoning if necessary.



## KNOW YOUR LEBANESE

By Anissa Helou

### Tabbouleh

Parsley, grilled mint and tomato salad, not predominantly bulghar or cous cous as many people think.

### Kibbeh

Mixture of bulghar and minced lamb in different shapes. In the Lebanese version, kibbeh bil-saniyeh, the meat and bulghar mixture is made into casing with a stuffing of onion, pinenuts and minced lamb

### Burghul bi d'feeneh

A kind of bulghar risotto with meat and chickpeas.

### Hindbeh bil-zejt

Boiled wild chicory sautéed in olive oil and garnished with caramelised onion.

### Muhammara

A spicy dip that varies in texture and traditionally mixes walnuts, chopped grilled peppers and breadcrumbs, though chefs often devise their own variations, adding garlic chilli sauce or cayenne pepper.

### Labneh bi za'atar

Smooth dip of strained yogurt (labneh) flavoured with za'atar, a mixture of dried thyme, sumac and sesame seeds.

## Kibbeh

**GROUND LAMB/BEEF WITH STUFFING**

**40 MINS PREP + 10 MINS COOK, MAKES 25 MEDIUM-SIZED KIBBEH**

### SHELL

2kg finely ground beef or lamb, lean, divided  
1/2 kg bulghar cracked wheat  
1 1/2 tsp salt  
1 1/2 tsp pepper  
1 tsp all-spice  
1/2 tsp cumin  
2 medium onions, 1 finely chopped, 1 coarsely chopped  
1/2 cup toasted pine nuts (optional)  
2 tbs olive oil  
vegetable oil for frying

- 1 Soak the wheat for 30 mins in cold water. Remove and drain.
- 2 Remove excess water by squeezing it through thick a clean dish towel.
- 3 Place the wheat into a medium bowl and combine with 1kg meat, coarsely chopped onion, 1 tsp salt and 1 tsp pepper.
- 4 Mix well and place a small amount in food processor until a dough-like consistency is reached. You can slowly add an ice cube while processing if this is needed.
- 5 Cover the mixture for the kibbeh shell and put it to the side.

*A pestle and mortar can be used instead of a food processor, however it will take you over an hour to achieve the desired consistency.*

### STUFFING

- 1 Sauté the finely chopped onion in olive oil in a medium-sized frying pan.
- 2 Add pine nuts and ground lamb/beef and mix well.
- 3 Add allspice, salt, pepper and cumin. Once beef is light brown, remove from heat.
- 4 Allow the stuffing to cool for 10 mins.

### ASSEMBLE AND FRY

- 1 Take a handful of shell mixture and create a ball. With your finger, poke a hole in the ball, making a space for the stuffing.
- 2 Add the stuffing and pinch the top to seal the ball. You can then shape it as you desire.
- 3 Fry in 350C oil on a stove top or in deep fryer for 10 mins or until golden brown. Drain the excess oil.