

{ International Flavors }

The Tastes of Morocco



Recipes from Flavors of Morocco by Ghillie Basan

Photos by Peter Cassidy, from *Flavors of Morocco* by Ghillie Basan, Ryland Peters & Small

It's a long way from Morocco to her home in the Scottish Highlands where she runs cooking classes, yet writer Ghillie Basan is best known for her books on the classic cuisines of the Middle East and southeast Asia, her latest being *Flavors of Morocco: Delicious Recipes From Northern Africa*. Still, it's not so strange that from the craggy, heather-covered Highlands she writes about the tribal traditions or the sensual souks of Fes or Marrakech—the crowded, colorful markets where vendors today, much as they did centuries ago, sell the ingredients that

lend themselves to the exotic flavors of Moroccan dishes such as kefta and kebobs. There, where the fragrance of ras-el-hanout, an exotic blend of more than 30 spices, mingles with incense-laden smoke to dominate the aroma of cooking and even the funk of the animals, are ancient stalls overflowing with a bounty of olives, sweet dried fruits, buckets of honey, crates of lemons, pungent herbs, and every variety of nut.

Basan, who's not only trained in cooking but also in anthropology, is intrigued by the colorful ingredients and mysterious dishes of Morocco as much as by the social interactions that swirl around them and the traditions by which they're enjoyed. She's been

enthralled by food since she was a very small child. “According to my parents, it all began on board *The Empress of England*, when we sailed from Scotland to live in the States in the early 1960s when I was 10 months old,” she says. “The stewards would pass by me with trays of savory canapés, olives, stuffed anchovies, and garlicky dips, and I would reach out with my little hand until I was given something far more delicious than baby food!”

An interest in anthropology developed some years later when her family moved to yet another continent, and it was only a matter of time before the twin passions for food and culture merged. “We went on to live in East Africa, and I grew up with an innate interest in tribal customs, languages, and how people live, so the fact that the two interests came together later seems only natural, although in a sense it came about by accident,” Basan recalls.

After culinary training at Le Cordon Bleu, she set out on a track to study languages at Edinburgh University, but that was quickly derailed by her discovery of a program in social anthropology. It was only when she began working as a journalist in Turkey that her interests and skills merged. “The anthropology and cooking came together as I began to travel widely and write articles about village life, family, food, and travel, which led to writing books on the cuisines of different cultures,” she explains. Because food is central to culture in the Middle and Far East and North Africa, her anthropological training and a “gutsy interest in food itself” widened her focus beyond recipes to the entire culinary life of the regions she studied.

It’s that breadth of interest and deep insight that make *Flavors of Morocco* not only a stellar cookbook but simply fascinating reading. Basan weaves stories of food—its cultivation, traditions, and preparation—into a tapestry that is truly a portrait of a people and their complex history, society, and cuisine, all derived from the varying cultures that have come and gone and at times coexisted, from the indigenous Berbers, nomadic Bedouins, the Moors and Sephardic Jews who were driven from Spain—the latter who practiced Jewish dietary laws—and the Arabs whose eating practices were governed by Islamic dietary restrictions.

Add to that melting pot the influences of the Ottomans and the French who colonized the landscape, and the sum is a fusion of delectable ingredients, cooking techniques, and culinary traditions carried to North Africa from the far-ranging ancestral homelands of the waves of inhabitants through the centuries. The Berbers, for example, contributed couscous and tagine cooking, while the Bedouins, explains Basan, contributed dates, milk, and grains. The Arabs introduced exotic spices such as cumin, ginger, saffron, and cinnamon, and the French brought sophistication. And the land itself provided figs, lemons, melons, olives, peppers, and eggplant.

Basan’s fascination with the culture and the exotic food of North Africa is contagious. Spend some time reading her accounts of the *dadas*—the “priestesses” of the kitchens, descendents of African slaves now deeply respected for their culinary wizardry—and you not only will want to try the dishes, but you may start

looking for flights to Casablanca or booking passage on the *Marrakech Express*. Her love affair with North Africa began on her first visit to Morocco when she was a university student, traveling on a budget. “But the food was so reasonably priced, I could sample most things, and the tastes never left me. I love the scented and citrus notes of Moroccan cuisine—the use of saffron, orange flower and rose waters, and the tangy preserved lemon—as these are what make it unique. And I also love the mix of tribal African, Berber, and Arab, which is reflected in the architecture, the designs of rugs and scarves, and in the food.”

Building on knowledge gathered from previous excursions to Morocco, Basan, along with her two children, immersed herself in the culture and gained intimate access to people and places that’s not available to the average tourist. Arrangements with a travel company provided her with drivers and special visits to culinary meccas and facilitated chats with cooks. “One of the highlights for



Rose-Flavored
Milk Pudding
(muhallabia)
(recipe on page 42)

us as a family was trekking in the Atlas—the children were transported by mule—chatting to the village people in their vegetable gardens high up the mountain slopes, stopping in the makeshift kitchens to chat, and then eating in Kasbah Toubkhal with its magnificent views of the snowy peaks.”

Her language skills gave her entrance to worlds frequently closed to other culinary travelers. “Being able to speak French helps, as I can sit for hours chatting in the souks, or with the women in their homes.” The souks, says Basan, “have changed little over time—of course, more tourists and no slaves for sale! The rural souks are quite medieval in atmosphere, with the animals being butchered in front of you and cows heads and hooves lying around amongst the cones of sugar, the vats of natural herb dye, and a variety of dried insects, lizards, and snake skins to be ground for various ailments.”

Nor have the kitchens or cooking methods changed greatly through the years. “Of course, like anywhere, there are many wealthy Moroccans, some of whom are educated in Britain, France, and the States, and who lead very modern lives in grand houses with European-style kitchens but, for the majority of the population, the kitchen is fairly basic for both traditional and economic reasons. However, there is no need for anything else as the cuisine lends itself to simple utensils, such as a mortar and pestle, copper cooking pots, and a clay tagine, and the cooking is done on a gas burner or in a mud oven,” she explains.

What has changed, however, is the status of the *dadas*, women of African descent who were taken in slavery by Berbers and Arabs to cook for their households or serve as wives. It’s a custom, says Basan, that came from tribal Africa. “There was always an air of mystery surrounding them,” says Basan, who had the rare opportunity to interview a modern *dada*, Laaziza Grizmi, who “is highly respected and who seemed unaware that her ancestors were, in fact, slaves, as in her lifetime she has enjoyed the freedoms attributed to any other women in the Berber society.”

The changes in the culinary culture in the region, she explains, are akin to those in many parts of the developing world. “The roles of women and men are less defined in the culinary domain, so more men are following a new trend of becoming professional chefs, and the traditional utensils are being discarded for the speedier electric blenders and pressure cookers. But this is only the case in the cities; rural life still adheres to the age-old traditions,” she explains.

Since tradition dictates that recipes are not generally committed to writing but rather are handed down generation to generation, Basan observed and absorbed. She watched, listened, tasted, and took notes, and she rolled up her sleeves and cooked. “As the Moroccans love to talk about their food and, particularly, their own tribal specialties, they often chat about the different ways of cooking a different dish or describe a particular dish to me. I also cook dishes with the women in their homes, and I taste different dishes in restaurants, so no actual written recipes are passed to me, but I write down the things I’m learning, and I re-create the dishes when I get home.” The result is a collection of recipes

representing the range of influences and the spectrum of dishes that make up Moroccan cuisine, from salads, soups, breads, and pastries to tagines, couscous, grills, roasts and, of course, desserts.

While all are delicious, not all of the dishes blend well with a modern, health-conscious diet. “The salads and the pulse and vegetable dishes are the healthiest in Moroccan cuisine, as some of the soups and meat dishes employ fatty meats or large quantities of ghee and butter,” explains Basan. “The sweet dishes are often very sweet with enormously fattening amounts of sugar or honey but, as a treat now and then, they are irresistible.”

— Kate Jackson

Rose-Flavored Milk Pudding (muhallabia)

Silky and light, this traditional pudding is a classic throughout North Africa and the Middle East, as the recipe traveled with the invading Arabs across the region. Often served at religious feasts, it can be flavored with rosewater or orange flower water and a generous dusting of confectioner’s sugar.

- ½ cup rice flour
- 4 cups rice milk
- ½ cup plus 2 tablespoons superfine sugar
- 2-3 tablespoons rosewater
- 1-2 tablespoons confectioner’s sugar

Serves 4-6

In a small bowl, mix the rice flour with a little of the milk to form a loose paste. Pour the rest of the milk into a heavy-based saucepan and stir in the sugar. Bring the milk to boiling point, stirring all the time, until the sugar has dissolved. Reduce the heat and stir a spoonful or two of the hot milk into the rice flour paste, then tip the mixture into the pan, stirring all the time to prevent the flour from forming lumps. Bring the milk back to a boil and stir in the rosewater. Reduce the heat to low and simmer gently for 20-25 minutes, stirring from time to time, until the mixture becomes quite thick and coats the back of the spoon.

Pour the mixture into a large serving bowl, or individual ones, and leave to cool. Chill in the refrigerator and, just before serving, dust with confectioner’s sugar.

TD&N Nutrient Analysis: Calories: 275; Total Fat: 2 g; Saturated Fat: 0 g; Polyunsaturated Fat: 0 g; Monounsaturated Fat: 0 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 90 mg; Carbohydrates: 65 g; Fiber: 0 g; Protein: 2 g



Use unsweetened rice milk to minimize sugar and calorie intake.

Shrimp Tagine With Ginger and Fennel (tajine bil kimroun)

Many shellfish tagines are not so much traditional as they are inspired by cultural influences, such as the shrimp and mussel tagines of Tangier that resemble the cooking of Andalusia across the water. Serve this tagine as an appetizer or entrée with chunks of crusty bread.

4-5 tablespoons of olive oil
20 raw jumbo shrimp, with heads removed
2 onions, chopped
2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
2-inch piece of fresh ginger, peeled and finely chopped
A pinch of saffron threads
1-2 teaspoons smoked paprika
14-oz can of tomatoes, drained of juice
A small bunch of fresh cilantro, finely chopped
A small bunch of fresh flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped
1 teaspoon sugar
4 fennel bulbs, trimmed and sliced thickly lengthwise
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
Bread, to serve

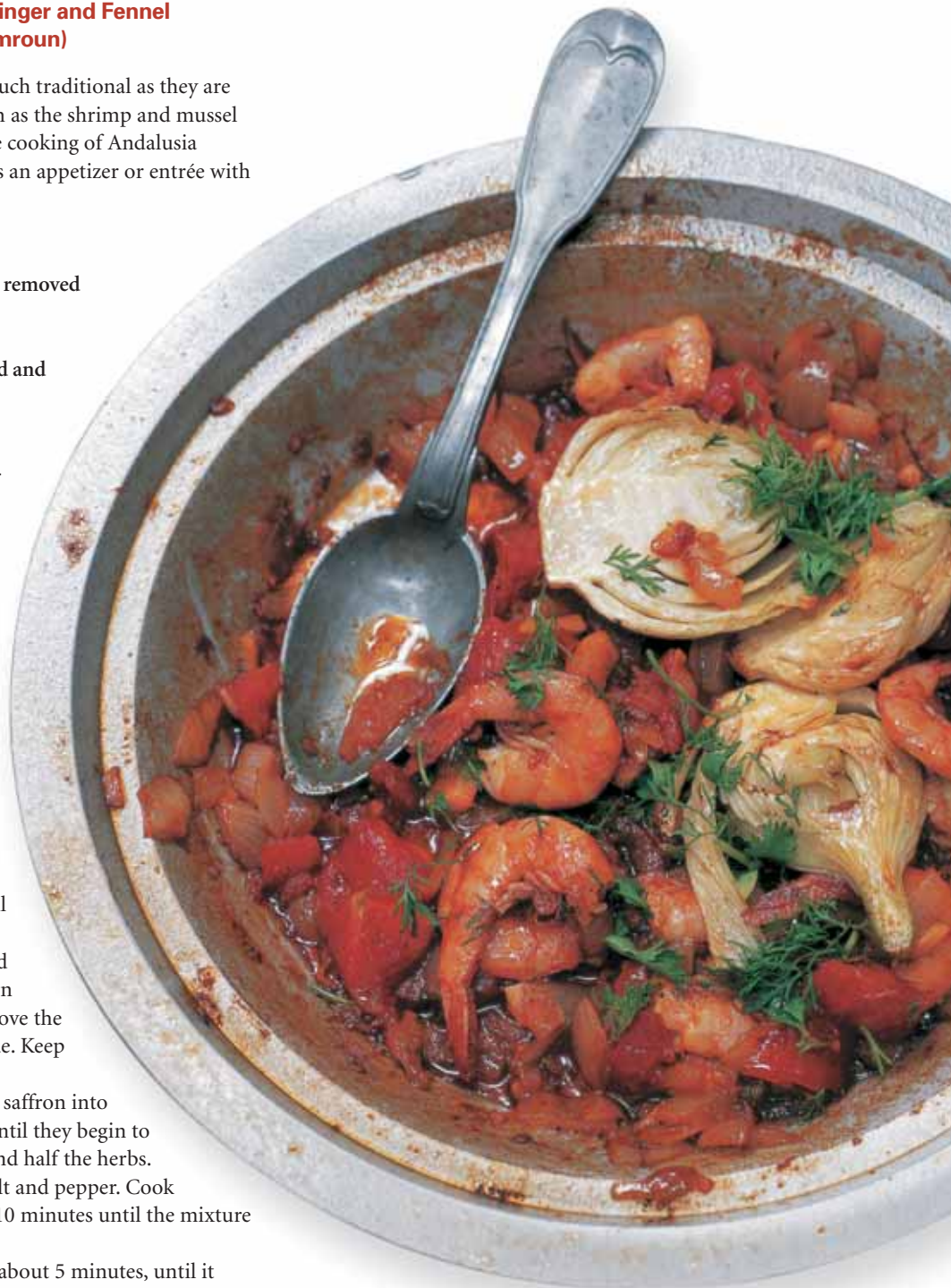
Serves 4

Heat 2-3 tablespoons of the olive oil in the base of a tagine or a heavy-based casserole. Add the shrimp and cook for 2-3 minutes, until they turn opaque. Using a slotted spoon, remove the prawns from the tagine and set aside. Keep the oil in the pan.

Stir the onion, garlic, ginger, and saffron into the oil and sauté for 3-4 minutes, until they begin to color. Add the paprika, tomatoes, and half the herbs. Stir in the sugar and season with salt and pepper. Cook gently, partially covered, for about 10 minutes until the mixture thickens to form a sauce.

Meanwhile, steam the fennel for about 5 minutes, until it softens. Heat the remaining olive oil in a skillet and add the steamed fennel. Cook gently on both sides for 4-5 minutes, until it turns golden. Sprinkle with salt and pepper.

Toss the cooked shrimp in the tomato sauce, place the fennel on top, cover with the lid, and cook gently for 5 minutes. Sprinkle with the remaining cilantro and parsley immediately before serving.



TD&N Nutrient Analysis: Calories: 301; Total Fat: 15 g; Saturated Fat: 2 g; Polyunsaturated Fat: 2 g; Monounsaturated Fat: 10 g; Cholesterol: 53 mg; Sodium: 412 mg; Carbohydrates: 32 g; Fiber: 10 g; Protein: 12 g

Chickpea Salad With Onions and Paprika (slada hummas)

Chickpeas, beans, and lentils are consumed daily in rural Morocco, particularly in areas where meat is scarce or expensive. They are cooked in stews, added to couscous, and find their way into salads. This dish is particularly good served warm and is often topped with crumbled goat cheese from the village.

- 1½ cups dried chickpeas (garbanzos), soaked in plenty of cold water overnight
- 1 red onion, cut in half lengthwise, then in half crosswise, and sliced with the grain
- 4 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 1-2 teaspoons paprika
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Freshly squeezed juice of 1 lemon
- A small bunch of fresh flat-leaf parsley, coarsely chopped
- A small bunch of cilantro, coarsely chopped
- 4 oz. goat cheese, or feta, crumbled (optional)

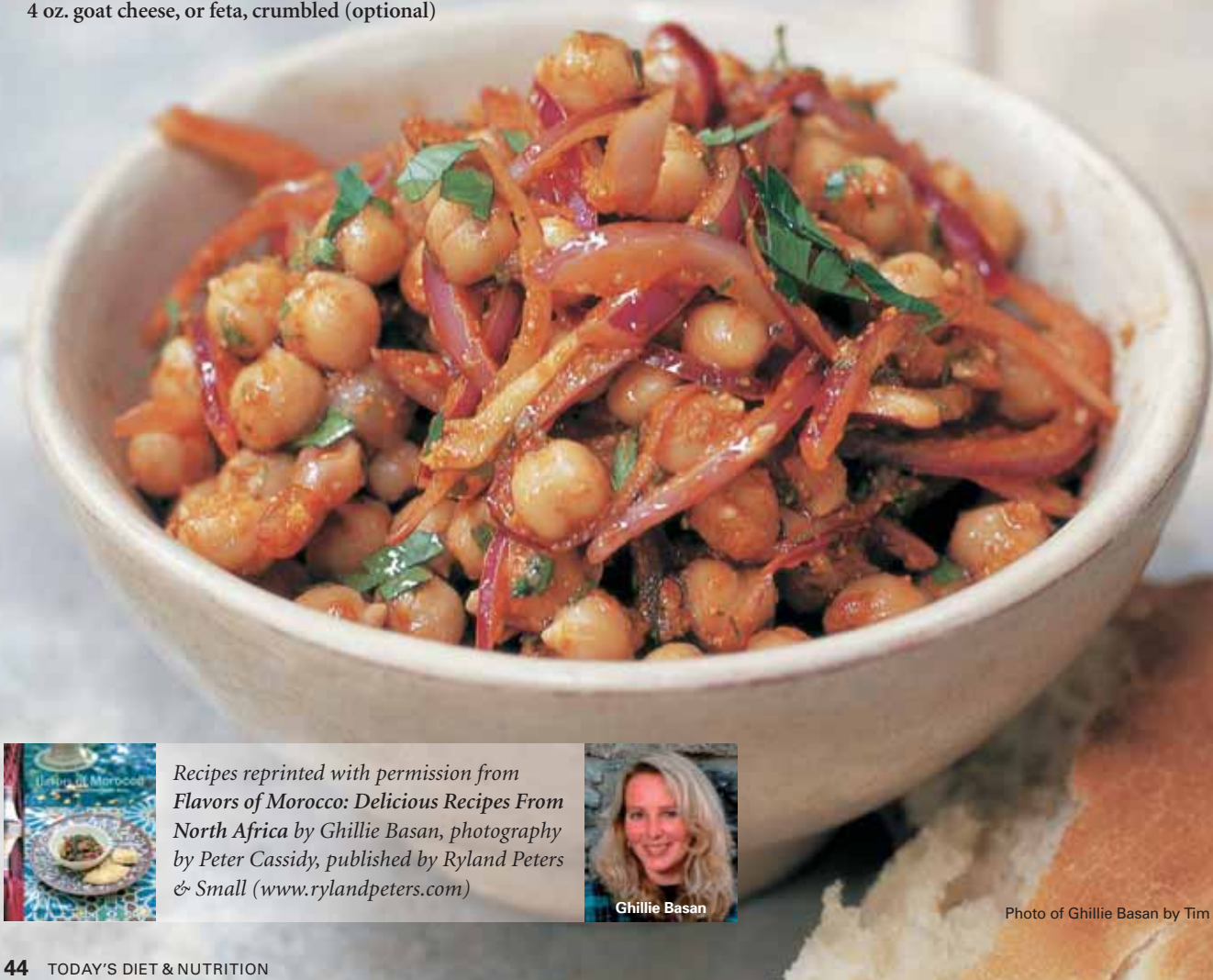
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
Bread, to serve

Serves 4

Drain the chickpeas and put them in a deep pan. Cover with water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer for about 45 minutes, until the chickpeas are tender but not mushy. Drain the chickpeas and remove any loose skins—you can rub them in a clean towel to remove them, or between your fingers.

Tip the warm chickpeas into a bowl. Add the onion, garlic, cumin, and paprika and toss in the olive oil and lemon juice while the chickpeas are still warm, making sure they are well coated. Season with salt and pepper to taste and toss in most of the herbs. Crumble over the goat cheese, if using, and sprinkle with the rest of the herbs. Serve while still warm with bread.

TD&N Nutrient Analysis: Calories: 362; Total Fat: 15 g; Saturated Fat: 2 g; Polyunsaturated Fat: 3 g; Monounsaturated Fat: 8 g; Cholesterol: 0 mg; Sodium: 13 mg; Carbohydrates: 47 g; Fiber: 12 g; Protein: 14 g



Recipes reprinted with permission from *Flavors of Morocco: Delicious Recipes From North Africa* by Ghillie Basan, photography by Peter Cassidy, published by Ryland Peters & Small (www.rylandpeters.com)



Ghillie Basan

Photo of Ghillie Basan by Tim Rogers