THE PALESTINIAN TABLE
Reem Kassis
About the book

The Palestinian Table is a stunning mix of traditional and modern Palestinian home-cooking recipes passed down through three generations of a family kitchen.

With rising interest in Middle Eastern cuisine, it is time to delve further into the nuances and subtleties of Palestinian food. Author Reem Kassis interlaces personal anecdotes, local traditions and historical context with her delicious, easy-to-follow recipes, giving an insight into the heart of a family home. The book includes more than 140 recipes ranging from simple breakfasts and quick-to-prepare salads to impressive celebratory dishes fit for a feast. With stunning photography of Jerusalem, the northern village of Rameh and the surrounding countryside, The Palestinian Table is a true celebration of the land, the food and the culture.

About the author

Reem Kassis is a cook and a writer. Her love of food stems from an upbringing in a family revered for its cooks. From a very young age, she spent weekends in her grandmothers’, mother’s, and aunts’ kitchens observing, learning, and soaking up everything there was to know about Palestinian cooking.
NINE SPICE MIX

I can still remember walking through Jerusalem’s old city as a child with my mother, going from vendor to vendor and buying different whole spices in bulk. My mother would roast the spices when we got home and the whole house would be drunken on the fresh, earthy aromas. For years after I left home, she continued doing this, always sending me a jar of freshly roasted and ground spices. Today I roast my own, but when I do, the smell always transports me back to that time.

Place all the ingredients in a large skillet (frying pan) over medium-low heat. Stir with a wooden spoon periodically to ensure the spices do not burn, until you begin to smell the aroma of the spices, about 10 minutes.

Remove the pan from heat and set aside to cool completely, about 1 hour. This step is crucial because if the spices are not cooled properly, they will form a paste when ground rather than a powder.

Place all the roasted spices into a heavy-duty spice grinder and grind until you achieve a fine powder consistency. Store the spice mix in an airtight container. It will keep for several months although the aroma will fade with time.

Note: This spice mix is featured in many of the dishes in this book, lending them a uniquely Palestinian flavor. It is my mother’s own blend but feel free to adjust to suit your tastes, or you can substitute with store-bought baharat or Lebanese seven spice mix for an equally tasty, albeit slightly different, flavor profile.
**Preparation time:** 40 minutes plus resting time  
**Cooking time:** 7–12 minutes  
**Makes** 10

### For the pastry
- 4½ cups (1 lb 2 oz/500 g) all-purpose (plain) flour, plus extra for dusting
- 2¼ cups (9 oz/250 g) fine whole wheat (wholemeal) flour
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon sugar
- 2 tablespoons olive oil, plus extra for oiling
- 1 tablespoon active dry (fast-action) yeast
- 2–2½ cups (18–20 fl oz/500–600 ml) warm water

### For the filling
- 2 cups (3½ oz/100 g) firmly packed fresh za’atar leaves (see Note, page 10)
- 8 scallions (spring onions), green and white parts finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ cup (4 fl oz/120 ml) olive oil
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper

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**ZA’ATAR-FILLED FLATBREADS**

One of the oldest and most traditional Palestinian pastries, these flatbreads, as well as being delicious, have an emotional significance for my family. My mother’s uncle, Yousef, was forced into political exile at twenty. The next time he saw anyone from his family was two decades later when my mother traveled to the U.S. He had one request—to bring him some of his mother’s akras za’atar.

Put the flours, salt and sugar into a bowl and mix together. Make a well in the middle; add the oil, yeast and half the water. Mix through with your fingers, adding more water and kneading until the dough comes together. If the mixture feels sticky, leave for 5 minutes then knead again. Repeat until you have a soft ball of dough. Alternatively, combine all the ingredients, but only half the water, in the bowl of a freestanding mixer fitted with the dough hook and mix on medium speed, adding water as necessary, until it comes together in a soft but robust ball. Rub with oil, cover the bowl with a damp dish towel, and set aside to rise for 1 hour.

Meanwhile, prepare the stuffing by placing all the filling ingredients into a large bowl and tossing to combine. Set aside until ready to use.

Once the dough has risen, divide into 10 equal-sized portions. Line a large tray with plastic wrap and oil then place the dough on the tray. Let rest for 5–10 minutes.

Take one portion of dough and, with your hands, flatten it into a rough circle. Take about a tenth of the filling and spread it evenly over the pastry. Starting at the top use both hands to fold the pastry into thirds, oiling each layer as you fold. You should now have a long rectangle. Take one of the short sides and fold into thirds again, this time horizontally, oiling each layer as you go. You should now have a square shape. Oil the pastry again and set aside on an oiled surface and cover with oiled plastic wrap. Repeat with remaining pastry. Set aside to rest for 15 minutes while you preheat the oven to 475°F/240°C/Gas Mark 9.

Flatten it out with well-oiled hands into a 8-inch/20-cm square, then place on a baking sheet. Repeat with the rest of the pastry. Bake for 7–12 minutes, or until a light golden color. Check the underside, if it has not browned, you may need to flip it and bake for 2 minutes to brown the bottom.

Remove from oven and transfer to a wire rack to cool. Serve warm with halloumi cheese or labaneh (page 24), a side of fresh vegetables, and a cup of sweet mint tea (page 243).
FRIED EGGS WITH ZA’ATAR AND SUMAC

This is the breakfast my father loves to make us at home. Fried eggs without za’atar and sumac is unacceptable to him so if he’s frying the eggs, you can bet there will be plenty of flavor and plenty of olive oil. You can use as little or as much za’atar and sumac as you like; you can also add or substitute duqqa (page 240) in this recipe. I like to pan-fry the eggs in a lot of olive oil so I can mop up the flavored oil with a piece of fresh bread, but you can use less oil if you prefer. And if you want the eggs to have crispy edges, cook each one separately.

In a small, nonstick skillet (frying pan), heat the oil over medium heat until hot but not smoking. Crack the eggs into the oil and sprinkle with the za’atar and sumac. When the outer edges start turning opaque, after about 1 minute, cover the pan with a lid and reduce the heat.

Lift the lid every 20 seconds or so, tilt the pan, and spoon some of the oil over the eggs, taking care not to burn yourself with the sputtering oil. This will help the top whites to crisp, the yolk to cook faster, and the oil to gain more flavor.

Cook until the egg is your desired level of doneness, about 3 minutes for runny yolks and 5 minutes for fully cooked. Transfer the eggs to a plate and pour the oil over the top. Enjoy with pita bread and labaneh.

Preparation time: 2 minutes
Cooking time: 5 minutes
Serves: 1

2 tablespoons olive oil
2 eggs
1 teaspoon za’atar
1 teaspoon sumac

To serve
— labaneh, homemade (page 24)
or store-bought
— pita bread, homemade (page 36)
or store-bought
FRIED KUBBEH

A crispy dough encasing a spiced meat and nut filling, these crunchy, meat filled parcels are a go-to dish for any gathering, and no mezze table is complete without them. This recipe yields a large quantity, but if you are already going to the trouble of making them, it’s well worth making extra to freeze as they keep well for a couple of months and can be fried directly from frozen.

To make the dough for the shells, put the bulgur wheat into a large bowl and cover with cold water. Soak for 15 minutes, then drain, squeezing out as much excess water as you can.

Put the onion, herbs, lemon zest, salt and spices into the bowl of a food processor with 2 tablespoons of cold water and process until finely ground (minced). Add the meat and pulse until evenly combined. Finally add the bulgur wheat and continue to process until it resembles a smooth dough.

Tip the mixture into a large bowl and knead briefly to ensure everything is evenly combined. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour, and up to overnight, to make it easier to work with. Meanwhile, prepare the filling ingredients and mix together; set aside.

Pour some ice water into a shallow bowl and keep nearby to wet your hands as necessary while you shape the kubbeh.

To prepare the kubbeh, tear off a small egg-sized chunk of the dough and roll into a ball. Place in the palm of one hand and with the index finger of the other hand make a hole in the center. Continue pushing into it while rotating, until you have a small cup shape with thin walls.

With a small spoon, fill the kubbeh with the filling, being careful not to overfill so you can close it properly. Once filled, gather the open edges together to seal. With moist hands, gently form the kubbeh into the shape of an egg, using the tips of your fingers to shape the top and bottom into pointed ends. Continue until you have used up all the dough and filling. At this point, the kubbeh can be fried or frozen.

To deep-fry the kubbeh, heat oil in a deep fryer to 350°F/180°C, or until a popping corn kernel placed in the oil pops. Working in batches, place several kubbeh in the oil, taking care not to overcrowd the pan. Fry for 5 minutes until a deep golden brown, then remove with slotted spoon and drain on paper towels. Serve immediately.

For the kubbeh dough
2 1/4 cups (1 lb 2 oz/500 g) very fine bulgur wheat
1 large onion, quartered
2 small sprigs marjoram, thyme, basil, or oregano, leaves only (optional)
1/2 teaspoon lemon zest (optional)
1 tablespoon salt
1 teaspoon Nine Spice Mix (page 22)
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 lb 2 oz/500 g lean goat, lamb, or beef meat, finely ground (minced) twice

For the filling
1 quantity toasted pine nuts (page 27)
1 quantity Meat with Onion and Spices (page 28)
vegetable oil, for frying
Vegetables and fruits are the basis, and often the lead actors, in many Palestinian dishes. Driving around the country, you see a landscape dotted with olive and fig trees, with grape vines and lemon trees. You see mountains blossoming with thyme and sage, and fields flowing with dandelion and cauliflowers.

Our people are deeply connected to this landscape, and the land represents their lives and livelihood. Produce is not something Palestinians simply pick up at the supermarket; it is often something we grow or our neighbors and families harvest, it is something we forage for or pick up from a local market. It is something we are familiar with and whose unique properties—like the bitterness of dandelion or prickliness of gundelia—we’ve come to embrace.

This is partly because vegetables were often all Palestinian families had to eat, so we learned how to treat them well. We learned how to create a rich variety of dishes whose origin came out of poverty. These vegetables have repaid us lavishly with an abundant repertoire of dishes from smooth arugula (rocket) yogurt (page 118) to cool Gazan tomato relish (page 122), from dandelion with caramelized onions (page 114) to a multitude of fresh salads. Having moved away from this land, though, I’ve found that that doesn’t mean letting go of it; it means finding new ways to connect to it. It’s about gaining a fresh perspective, and that’s what writing this book was about for me. It was about using food to preserve a piece of our culture and identity regardless of our geography.

The best thing you can do is to approach the following dishes with the same flexible mindset. These recipes are some of the most vibrant, creative, and fresh ones in this book. They can work as stand-alone meals or as sides, and they almost all rely on some kind of produce. With fresh eyes, an awareness of the landscape around you, and an attempt to use what is local and seasonal, your food can be magical. Can’t find dandelions? Use kale. Eggplants (aubergines) not in season for the yogurt and nut salad? Substitute with cauliflower. Tomatoes not at their best for the Palestinian salad? Try red bell peppers instead. The methods of preparation (e.g. mixing with yogurt or caramelizing onions) and the dressings (such as those with pomegranate molasses or garlic and lemon) are what lends many of these dishes their distinctive flavors. So get creative with the produce and you will not be disappointed.
Salads, sides and vegetables

EGGPLANT (AUBERGINE), YOGURT, AND NUT SALAD

Whenever we invited people over for a big lunch, my mother would usually make a variation of this salad and it would be the highlight for me. Her version was much richer than this one, though, because she fried the eggplants (aubergines), used a very strong garlic labaneh instead of yogurt, and topped it with plenty of fried pine nuts. Over the years I’ve adapted it into something that we can eat at home on a weekly basis—just as flavorful, but on the lighter and healthier side. As far as the nuts and garnish go, I often play around with it depending on my mood, so feel free to adjust based on what you have to hand.

Preheat the broiler (grill) to high. Slice the eggplants (aubergines) into ¾-inch/1.5-cm rounds, brush both sides with olive oil, and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Place the eggplants on an oven rack and broil (grill) for about 10 minutes on each side, or until they develop a golden brown exterior.

In the meantime, put all the ingredients for the yogurt sauce into a bowl and whisk together to a smooth consistency. The lemon juice is optional but it helps bring all the flavors together, especially if you are using a mellow yogurt, not a tangy one.

Once the eggplants are done, arrange in overlapping circles on a round platter. Spoon over the yogurt mixture then top with pomegranate seeds, toasted nuts, and green leaves.

Variation: Use zucchini (courgettes), cut in half and sliced lengthwise, instead of the eggplants and use walnuts, pomegranate seeds, and sumac for the garnish.
BEEF PATTIES IN GRAPE LEAVES

Long before wrapping meat and fish in grape leaves became popularized in the West, it was a technique used across Palestine and the Levant to add flavor and preserve the moisture of meat during cooking. This particular variation, which wraps minced meat patties in the leaves, is considered one of the signature dishes of Jerusalem. It is often reserved for special gatherings or dinner parties because it looks so impressive.

Preheat the oven to 375°F/190°C/Gas Mark 5. Put about a quarter of the meat into a large mixing bowl and set aside. In a separate bowl, cover the bread in water and leave to soak for a couple of minutes.

Meanwhile, put the onion, tomato, parsley, olive oil, Nine Spice Mix, and salt into a food processor and process to a coarse consistency. Drain the bread, squeezing any excess moisture out with your hands, and add to the food processor, pulsing to evenly combine. Alternatively, very finely chop or grate everything by hand and mix together with the bread, mashing with a spoon as you mix.

Pour the mixture over the smaller portion of meat in the bowl and mix very well with your hands until fully combined. Add in the remaining meat and mix very gently with your hands, just until evenly distributed. Once you've added in the remaining meat, avoid overmixing in order to retain the course texture that will give the patties their fluffy texture.

Divide the mixture into about 15 portions. On a clean work surface, lined with parchment paper to make cleaning up easier, overlap 2–3 of the grape leaves, vein side up, (if the leaves are very large then use only 1) and place one portion of meat in the center. Gently shape into a round patty and fold in the sides of the leaves around it. Repeat with the remaining meat and leaves. Set aside.

In a small mixing pitcher (jug), combine the broth (stock) with the tomato paste (purée), Nine Spice Mix, 1 teaspoon of salt, and olive oil and set aside.

In a 12 × 8-inch/30 × 20-cm oven dish, arrange the grape leave parcels upright at an angle with potato and tomato slices between them. Pour the sauce mixture over, drizzle with some more olive oil and sprinkle with salt and black pepper.

Cover the dish with aluminum foil and bake in the oven for 40 minutes. Remove the foil and return to the oven for a further 15 minutes, or until the potatoes have started to brown. Remove from the oven and serve with Vermicelli Rice.

Preparation time: 30 minutes
Cooking time: 45–55 minutes
Serves 6–8

2½ lb/1 kg coarsely ground (minced) beef, lamb, veal, or a combination
3½ oz/100g pita bread or white bread with crust removed, roughly torn
1 onion, quartered
1 tomato, quartered
1 small bunch flat-leaf parsley
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 tablespoon Nine Spice Mix (page 22)
2 teaspoons salt
45–50 fresh grape leaves, blanched in boiling water for 1 minute (if using jarred, soak in cold water for 15 minutes then rinse thoroughly to remove any brine flavor)

For the sauce and vegetables
2½ cups (1 pint/600ml) broth (stock) or water
2–3 tablespoons tomato paste (purée)
1 teaspoon Nine Spice Mix (page 22)
1 tablespoon olive oil, plus extra for drizzling
3–4 potatoes, sliced into ¾-inch/2-cm rounds
3–4 tomatoes, sliced into ¾-inch/2-cm rounds
salt and black pepper

To serve
— Vermicelli Rice (page 30), to serve
This is the quintessential Palestinian brunch dish. Humble ingredients like chickpeas and tahini are transformed into something magical when combined with toasted bread and topped with succulent small pieces of fried lamb or beef and pine nuts. As much as we love to use bread to mop up our hummus, in this particular dish we toast the bread and put it at the bottom, then eat it with a spoon. For a vegetarian version, just use pine nuts for the topping.

Preheat the oven to 350°F/180°C/Gas Mark 4. Cut the pita breads into ¾-inch/2-cm squares and put on a baking sheet. Bake in the oven for about 15 minutes, or until the squares are completely dry and crisp and starting to darken in color, moving the bread around with a wooden spoon from time to time. Remove and set aside.

Put the drained chickpeas and cumin into a pan and cover with water. Bring to a boil then reduce the heat and simmer while you prepare the tahini sauce, dressing, and meat.

Put the tahini, garlic, salt, yogurt, and lemon juice into a large bowl and stir to combine; the sauce will be thick and sticky at this point. Remove about ½–¾ cup of the chickpea cooking liquid and gradually mix with the tahini. You want a consistency that’s thick but easily pourable.

Prepare the lemon dressing by whisking all the ingredients together in a small bowl; set aside.

Start on the meat. Prepare the Toasted Pine Nuts in a large skillet (frying pan). Remove the pine nuts and set aside, reserving the oil in pan. Add the meat to the pan, sprinkle with the Nine Spice Mix, and cook over medium-high heat, stirring occasionally, for about 10 minutes until all water released by the meat evaporates and the pieces are browned.

While the meat is cooking, start assembling the dish. Spread the bread in a large, deep serving platter and spoon half the dressing over the top. Setting aside about 2 tablespoons of the chickpeas for garnish, use a ladle to scoop the remaining hot chickpeas, along with some of their broth, and spread evenly over the bread. You want the bread to soak up the liquid but not become a mushy mess, so add just enough water to achieve that, about ½ cup (4 fl oz/120 ml).

Pour the tahini and yogurt evenly over the chickpeas. Top with the meat and pine nuts. Garnish with the chickpeas, parsley, and chilli flakes or pomegranate seeds, if using. Drizzle the remaining dressing and serve immediately.
Goat herder in the village of Rameh, northern Palestine
**LAMB AND YOGURT RICE STEW**

Food is one of the ways Palestinians show respect and appreciation to others. In many parts of the country, if you want to truly honor a guest, nothing does it quite so well as a giant plate of mansaf. This is especially true in Taybeh, my husband’s hometown. The first time my parents visited my husband’s family, there was a plate of tangy and rich mansaf piled on top of paper-thin shrak bread, topped with lamb shanks, and sprinkled with pine nuts and almonds.

Heat the oil in a large stockpot over medium-high heat. Add the lamb shanks and sear on all sides. When the shanks are nicely browned on all sides, add 6 cups (2½ pints/1.5 liters) water and bring to a boil, skimming away the foam from the surface. Add the onion, spices and salt. Reduce the heat, and simmer for 1½–2 hours (40–50 minutes in pressure cooker), or until the meat is tender but not falling off the bone.

Meanwhile, rinse the rice under running water until the water runs clear. Soak for 15–30 minutes, drain, and set aside. While the rice is soaking, prepare the yogurt sauce and fry the almonds and pine nuts and set everything aside.

When the shanks are done, strain the broth (stock) through a fine-mesh strainer, discarding the onion and spices. Mix the broth and yogurt sauce, add the lamb, and cook for another 15–30 minutes. The strength of flavor will depend on whether you have used kishek for your yogurt sauce; it should be quite salty and sour.

Meanwhile, continue with the rice by melting the butter and oil in a pan over high heat. Add the drained rice, tossing to fully coat in the oil, and pour in 2½ cups (18 fl oz/550 ml) water, the salt, and turmeric and bring to a boil. Let it boil for 2 minutes, give it one more stir, then place a dish towel over the pan, close the lid tightly, and remove from the heat. Let it sit for about 15 minutes.

To assemble, tear up the bread and arrange in a large, round stainless steel or ceramic platter. Spread the rice over the bread and top with the shanks. Pour some of the yogurt sauce on top, enough to soak through the rice and bread. Sprinkle with the toasted almonds and pine nuts. Pour the remaining sauce into a bowl and serve with the rice.

**Note:** Mansaf is traditionally made with kishek or jameed (page 112) but without garlic. The taste is so distinctive it really is worth hunting down. If you do find it, skip the fried garlic in the sauce. If you cannot find it, then keep the garlic in to enhance and improve the flavor yogurt.
FENUGREEK SEMOLINA CAKE
صينية حلبه

This is one of the most typical Palestinian desserts, although it is most commonly found in the center and south of the country. The fenugreek lends it a distinct “love it or hate it” flavor. The cake is soaked in syrup after baking and must then stand for a few hours, and preferably overnight, before serving. This recipe yields a cake of medium thickness, but some people prefer it thinner and crunchier, in which case you can adjust by using a larger cake pan. This moist rich cake is one of my favorite desserts, at its best when enjoyed with a strong cup of cardamom coffee (page 245).

Grease an 8 × 12 inch/20 × 30 cm rectangular cake pan with either tahini or butter (or use an 11-inch/28-cm round baking dish or cake pan).

Put the fenugreek seeds into a medium pan with 2 cups (16 fl oz/475 ml) water and place over high heat. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 20–25 minutes, or until the seeds are tender and plump. Strain the seeds, reserving the cooking water. Meanwhile, put all the remaining ingredients, except for the pine nuts and sugar syrup, into a large bowl and mix until well combined and resembling wet sand in texture.

Add the strained fenugreek seeds and 1 cup (8 fl oz/250 ml) of the fenugreek cooking water. Mix well with your hand or a wooden spoon and, if necessary, gradually add more water. You want the batter to resemble very soft dough—not so loose it can be poured like cake batter but not so stiff it can be kneaded liked bread. Instead, look for a consistency somewhere in-between that can easily be spread by hand in a baking dish.

Wet your palms and use them to spread the batter into the greased dish and smooth out the surface. With a sharp knife, score the cake with diagonal lines in one direction, then in the opposite direction, to form a diamond pattern. Place a pine nut or blanched almond in the center of each diamond. Set aside, covered, to rest and rise for about 1 hour. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 400°F/200°C/Gas Mark 6.

Bake the cake until a dark golden brown, about 20–30 minutes. Remove from the oven and pour over the cooled sugar syrup while the cake is still warm. Cool completely before serving, for several hours but overnight if possible. If you attempt to cut the cake before it has cooled completely, the pieces will crumble and not hold together.

Once cooled, the cake will keep, covered, at room temperature for up to 5 days or in the refrigerator for up to 2 weeks.
Nothing spells home to me more than the sight of my mother or aunt standing at the stove over a breeq of water, waiting for the right moment to stir in the coffee then lifting and stirring, lifting and stirring, until the coffee boils without overflowing—a very delicate dance. The hallmark Middle Eastern drink, coffee plays a central role in our culture and is served at every important event, gathering, and social call or meal. The way it’s made, the beans used, how much sugar, and how much cardamom varies from location to location and from family to family. In essence, however, it is an unfiltered boiled coffee flavored with cardamom, sometimes sweetened, and served in very small cups called fenjan. Even when sweetened, the coffee retains a strong bitter flavour, which is why it is almost always served alongside a sweet treat.

Put the sugar, if using, and 1½ cups (12 fl oz/250 ml) water into an Arabic coffee pot (this is easily found in Middle Eastern grocery stores, but if you cannot find one, you can use a Turkish cezve which is easily available online). Place over medium-high heat.

When the water is very hot but not yet boiling, remove from the heat, add the coffee and cardamom, and return to the stove. Reduce the heat and stir until the coffee boils. Continue to boil and stir until the froth dissipates. Some people like this froth so they remove the coffee from the heat after 1–2 boils. To ensure the coffee does not boil over, every time you see the coffee rising to the top, lift the pot up from the stove and stir until it goes back down. Repeat this process until it boils.

Remove from the heat and let stand for at least 5 minutes until the coffee has settled to the bottom. Pour into small cups and serve immediately.