

A Taste of the Middle East - Turkish Cooking

Turkish cooking reflects its geographical position set as it is half way between Asia and Europe. It is also influenced by history – the Ottoman Empire once extended from the borders of Germany as far as Bagdad, as far north as the edge of Poland and as far south as the islands of Greece.

It seems to me though that it shares much in common with many other Middle Eastern cuisines rather than a strong European influence, despite the fact that it is probably about to join the European Union.

Breads and salads are always served, so see below some classic examples of Turkish cooking.

Pita Bread

Most bread is allowed to rise before being shaped. These little loaves defy that rule. If the yeast is allowed to do most of its work in the oven then good pockets will form ready to fill with all sorts of goodies. It takes about 1 ½ hours, but most of that is waiting time.

475 mls (16 oz) hand hot water

1 packet of instant yeast

½ teaspoon of granulated sugar

2 teaspoons of salt

800 grams (1 ¾ lb) of strong flour plus a little extra.

Method

Pour the warm water into a large bowl and sprinkle in the yeast. Add the salt and sugar to the flour and mix. Gradually add most of this to the yeast mixture stirring to make a smooth dough. Work in the rest of the flour by hand kneading until the dough loses its stickiness. Turn out onto a clean surface and knead for 5 minutes. Shape the dough into a rectangle and divide - this will make 24 small loaves or 12 large ones. Shape each portion into a ball shape, place on a lightly floured surface. Now roll out each ball to form a circle about ¼ inch thick. They will be about 5 inches across for small ones and 8 inches for larger ones. The secret is supposed to be now flipping them in order to produce bigger pockets, but that may be just a myth. Let them rise in a warm place for about ¾ hour. If it is very warm cover them with a slightly damp cloth so that they do not dry out. Preheat oven and grease free baking trays at 240C, 475F, Gas 9. Bake near the bottom of the oven in batches until puffed and light brown. This should only take 3-4 minutes. If this seems rather a lot to make at once they freeze well. To use frozen pitas just remove from freezer, sprinkle with a little water and place in warm oven for a couple of minutes. To use split and fill pockets with meat, salad etc.

Tabbouleh

This is bulgar salad with lots of uses - as an appetizer, a topping, a filling for pitas and so on. For 4 people you need 175g (6 oz) of bulgar which you should cover with cold water and let soak for about 20 minutes. Drain and squeeze out excess water. Fluff it up with a fork to separate the grains. Combine with tomatoes, onion, parsley or cilantro and mint. A dressing can be made from olive oil – about 100mls (4 fl oz) to the juice of a lemon or lime with salt and pepper. Some people like to include a little cinnamon or mixed spice. Place dressing ingredients in a screw top jar. Replace lid firmly and shake. Pour over salad and toss to mix.

About the Author

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