**Recipes for More Sephardic Comfort Food**

**with Susan Barocas**

**EGGPLANT CAVIAR**

***Ensalada de Berenjena (Ladino)***

***Patlican Salatasi (Turkish)***

I learned to make this garlicky eggplant dish as a child from my little (4’10” tall) Russian grandmother using our family’s large wooden chopping bowl with the very sharp red-handled chopper, the same tools we used to make haroset at Passover. I have since discovered that her Eastern European recipe is surprisingly similar to the Sephardic version (my father’s side of the family) with the only difference being the use of vinegar in the Ashkenazic version or most often lemon in the Sephardic. I usually serve it as a dip with cut up bell peppers, cucumber slices, endive and fresh pita or pita chips. It’s also surprisingly delicious as a spread for a sandwich layered with vegetables.

2 large purple eggplants (about 3 cups cooked)

2-4 cloves garlic

1-2 teaspoons good olive oil

1-2 tablespoons lemon juice or wine vinegar or to taste

Sea salt to taste

Black pepper to taste

Chopped parsley, Aleppo pepper, paprika and/or crumbled feta for garnish (optional)

**To cook the eggplant**

Before cooking, use a fork to poke holes through the skin of each eggplant in a few places to keep it from steaming or exploding as it cooks. Then lightly coat the eggplants with oil. Use one of the following methods to cook until the eggplants are very soft, even collapsing.

Method 1 – Grill: Roasting the eggplant over an open flame the traditional way gives the dish the special unique smoky flavor. Set the prepared eggplants a hot grill outside, gas or charcoal, turning them carefully and often with tongs until blackened and very soft.

Method 2 – Gas stovetop: Set the eggplants on top of the stovetop grate over a medium to medium high gas flame, still turning carefully and often.

Method 3 – Oven: Preheat the oven to 425 degrees. Set the prepared eggplants on a baking sheet covered with parchment for easy clean up, and roast for 45 to 60 minutes, depending on the size.

**To make the caviar**

Slice open each eggplant with care as some liquid will come out. Scoop out the very soft pulp, scraping it away from the skin and discarding any large clumps of seeds, keeping as much of the pulp as possible. Set the pulp in a colander or strainer, sprinkle with a few pinches of salt and let the liquid drain off into a bowl or the sink for about 20-30 minutes. This will make the caviar thicker and reduce any lingering bitterness in the eggplant.

To make by hand, press or grate cloves of fresh garlic into a large shallow bowl or flat plate. Add the eggplant pulp and mash with a fork to desired consistency. Add oil, lemon juice or vinegar, salt and pepper to taste and mix until very well blended.

To use a food processor, press or grate the fresh garlic. Add it to the bowl of the processor with the eggplant pulp, oil, lemon juice or vinegar, salt and pepper. Pulse in short spurts to chop to desired consistency. Be careful not to over-process to a totally smooth consistency.

Serve in a shallow bowl with garnishes as suggested. Great as a dip for veggies or pita, spread on crostini or small rounds of bread, as stuffing for cucumber cups or cherry tomatoes with their insides scooped out.

***TRIGO***

**Sweet Bulgur**

As with many Sephardic dishes, this one goes by the name of the main ingredient, *trigo* meaning wheat. Bulgur is made from crack wheat that is steamed, then dried. Many people make a porridge-like pudding for this dish, cooking the bulgur with milk for a long time. My family did not use milk or cook it as long, so I’m sharing our preparation which is comfort food for me. I love *trigo* for breakfast with banana, chopped apple or some berries. If you like, you can pour a little milk or cream on your serving. It also makes a good and different dessert, perhaps with some fresh fruit or ice cream. By the way, when you toast the walnuts, make some extra because you’ll want to put them on oatmeal, veggies, salads or just to nibble.

*Makes 4-6 servings*

3 cups water

1 cup fine bulgur

1 cup walnuts whole or halves and pieces, toasted and chopped

1/3 cup honey or to taste

1-2 teaspoons ground cinnamon

Pinch of salt

A pinch of ground clove or nutmeg

About 1/2 cup or to taste of optional add-ins: raisins, currants, chopped dates, chopped dried apricots

Bring water to boil in about a 4-quart pot. Add the bulgur, stir and bring back to a boil. Turn down to a simmer, cover the pot and let cook over low to medium-low for about 20 minutes or until nearly all of the water has been absorbed and the bulgur is tender and moist. Stir once about 15 minutes into cooking, scraping up any bulgur sticking to the bottom of the pot.

While the bulgur cooks, toast the walnuts. Spread out in a pan over medium heat. Toast for 10 to 12 minutes, stirring or shaking the walnuts very often, until they are aromatic. Don’t take your eye off of the pan because the nuts will go from toasty goodness to burned in a flash. When they are finished, let them cool, then chop to desired size.

After cooking the bulgur, turn off the heat and stir in the honey, cinnamon, salt and clove, nutmeg and/or any dried fruit you are using. Cover the pot and let sit for 15 to 20 minutes. The flavors will meld together and any dried fruit you are using will soften.

Serve warm or cold, from one larger serving bowl or in separate bowls sprinkled with the toasted chopped walnuts and perhaps a sprinkling of cinnamon, clove or nutmeg.

**CHILLED CUCUMBER YOGURT SOUP**

***Cacik (Turkish)***

This soup is thinner version of one of my favorite dishes, tzatziki. Traditionally, it’s made with full-fat yogurt (homemade, of course) thinned with milk, buttermilk or water. To make a lower fat version, use low-fat or non-fat yogurt. It will still be satisfyingly delicious. I am partial to the mint-dill combination in this soup, but other herbs such as tarragon or cilantro work well, too. I highly recommend using fresh herbs, but the dried will work in a pinch. Serve it very cold with a crusty bread or fresh flatbread for as part of a mezze, as a starter course or a light meal. It’s also good served over rice, quinoa or bulgur.

*Makes 6 to 8 servings*

1 1/2 pounds cucumbers, peeled

2-3 cloves garlic

4 cups yogurt, chilled

1-2 tablespoons good quality olive oil

1/2 -1 teaspoon sea salt or table salt

1/4 – 3/4 cup milk or water plus the liquid from the cucumber if it is not bitter

1/4 cup chopped fresh dill or 1 tablespoon dried

1/3 cup chopped fresh mint or 2 tablespoons dried

Garnishes could include: a drizzle of olive oil, sprinkle of Aleppo pepper, sliced or chopped cucumber, crumbled feta, chopped red onion or scallions

Finely dice the cucumbers or grate on the large holes of a box grater, saving the liquid along with the cucumber, or do each method with half the cucumbers for a more complex texture. Grate or press the garlic.

Put the cucumbers with their liquid in a mixing bowl. Add the yogurt, garlic, 1 tablespoon olive oil and salt. Stir everything together. Thin gradually with milk or water to the consistency you like. Add the mint and dill. Stir, taste and adjust both taste and consistency as desired.

Refrigerate an hour or two to allow the flavors to blend and the soup to get really cold. A few minutes before serving, put into individual bowls and garnish as desired. If it’s really hot and you’re eating outside, you can ladle the soup over an ice cube in each bowl. If you’re going to do that, take it into account when thinning the soup.