

Salata Milaaha or Fatt Malaahi

(Sailors' Salad)

By Laila El-Haddad



When considering sustainability, we must remember the sustainability of traditions. And one should look no further for the perpetuation of such traditions than to the kitchen – even under the direst economic, social, and political circumstances. Palestinians in Gaza are experts at *tadbeer*, the making do with what little is available. This is of utmost importance, especially at times when such traditions are threatened with extinction.

In the Gaza kitchen, nothing goes to waste. I learned this lesson early on from my mother and grandmother. Zucchini pulp is added to lentil soup or stir-fried with onions, and stale bread transforms a simple side-dish salad into a meal. A case in point is *Fatt Malaahi*.

I learned about this recipe while conducting research for my book, *The Gaza Kitchen*, which I co-authored with Maggie Schmitt. Um Hamada, one of the women to whom we spoke at the Jama'iyyet Judhoor al-Zeitun (Olive Roots Cooperative) in the old city of Gaza, told us about it as she showed us around Al-Manar tahini factory in her neighborhood, one of the last such presses in the area. *Fatt Malaahi* is one

of the many salads that incorporate red tahini, the delectable variety that is found only in Gaza and made by pressing roasted, rather than steamed sesame seeds. This recipe also makes good use of leftover bread.

Thousands of miles away, across the Atlantic, Basema Abu Daff and her son Sami Zaharna – two Gazans who live near me in the United States – are equally obsessed with this humble salad. Basema explained that sailors (*milahee*) would make this salad when they didn't have much on hand except hard bread. "They would mix it with tahina and anything else in season, such as tomatoes, cucumbers, or basil."

"Ya salaam!" exclaimed Sami, her son, an engineer, part-time imam, and self-described "*fatt malaahi* evangelist." At her brother-in-law's house in Edgewater, Maryland, Basema showed me how to make the irresistible salad, and it was Sami's job to taste – and devour it promptly! This salad is also a staple on the Ramadan table.

Back in Gaza City, my dear friend Professor Refaat Alareer explained, "The best thing about it is that, according to my grandma, all the farmers would bring whatever they had available, put it in the mix, and eat it together, always with their hands. And of course, with olive oil! It was considered the second most important ritual after prayer."

Serves 3–4

Ingredients:

- 1 small round of day-old Arabic bread, toasted
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 2 to 3 hot green chili peppers, to taste
- 1 packed cup (about 25 grams) fresh basil, torn
- 4 green onions, finely chopped
- 2 Middle Eastern cucumbers or half a hothouse cucumber, finely chopped
- 3 medium-sized tomatoes, finely chopped
- ¼ cup (60 milliliters) red tahina or regular tahini, whisked well with 1 teaspoon dark sesame oil
- Juice of 2 medium lemons
- Radishes, pitted green olives, and pickled peppers, to garnish

Break the toasted bread into small pieces. Set aside.

Chop the chili peppers, removing some of the membranes and seeds if you prefer less heat. With a mortar and pestle, pound the peppers along with the salt until soft. Add the basil and muddle in a circular motion to extract the flavor. Add the green onions and crush well, followed by cucumbers. Finally, stir in the tomatoes and mash. Mix the entire salad to incorporate all ingredients.

In a separate bowl, whisk the tahina with the lemon juice until emulsified. Immediately before serving (not earlier, or the bread will get soggy), mix the tahina sauce and bread pieces into the salad. The juices from the tomato will thin out the tahina and soak into the bread. Transfer to a serving dish and flatten the top. Drizzle the surface of the salad generously with olive oil.

The second edition of The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey, by Laila El-Haddad and Maggie Schmitt, is now available for purchase from the Educational Bookshop in Jerusalem or at Amazon!



To finish, garnish with pitted green olives, pickled peppers, and radish slices.

Variation: *Fatt Salata* (Bread Salad): With your hands, rub torn pieces of bread together with tomatoes and the olive oil, thickening and emulsifying it. Mix in salt, lemon juice, and crumbled feta cheese. Cucumber may also be added. Omit the onions, basil, and peppers.

Enjoy!