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MEDITERRANEAN MEZE

Make the meze tradition your own with a shareable assemblage of small plates and wine pairings from all corners of the Mediterranean.

BY MIKE DESIMONE & JEFF JENSSEN
PHOTOS BY CON POULOS

Peruse any restaurant or wine bar menu. You will quickly realize that small, shared plates are here to stay—they've been the backbone of Mediterranean hospitality for centuries.

While Spaniards refer to their small plates as *tapas*, people of the other nations that adjoin the azure sea that spans Europe, North Africa and the Middle East call them *meze*.

The word has its roots in Turkey and Persia, but the custom of sharing small dishes is region-wide. When you dine out or visit a friend's home in Greece, Turkey, Lebanon, Morocco, Israel or Spain, you will almost always be offered a small plate and a drink.

Meze are often served together, creating a small buffet of flavors and textures. The Mediterranean party menu that follows showcases the best the calm sea has to offer, paired with wines from these diverse, exotic nations. They can be eaten standing or seated, and served all together or one at a time. Either way, these dishes will provide for a memorable night of cross-cultural dining and sharing.

STYLING: ROSCOE BETSILL



GREECE TOMATO KEFTEDES (TOMATO FRITTERS)

Keftedes (small, flattened meatballs) are popular throughout the country, but you will only find these flavorful tomato keftedes on the sun-kissed island of Santorini.

Recipe courtesy Selene Restaurant, Santorini, Greece

- 4 ounces all-purpose flour
- 1 ounce fine cornmeal
- 1 pound ripe tomatoes, finely diced
- 8 ounces white onions, finely diced
- 2 ounces scallions, finely diced
- ½ ounce fresh spearmint leaves, finely chopped
- ½ ounce fresh parsley leaves, finely chopped
- 2 ounces tomato paste
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper, finely ground
- 1 quart sunflower or olive oil, for frying

Preheat frying oil to 375°F, as measured with a candy or deep-fry thermometer.

In a large non-reactive mixing bowl, combine flour and cornmeal. Add tomatoes, onions, scallions, spearmint, parsley and tomato paste. Mix with hands until well combined, and season with salt and pepper. Let rest for 10 minutes.

Form fritters using hands or two tablespoons. Fry until they turn brown on both sides and float to the top. Remove from oil and drain on paper towels for a few minutes before serving. *Yields 36 fritters.*

THE WINE: Santo Wines 2010 Grande Reserve Assyrtiko (Santorini). Strong mineral notes and bright flavors of apple and peach are a natural accompaniment to these fritters, with their hint of mint.



ISRAEL HUMMUS

Vegetarian spreads and salads, called *salatim*, signal the start of lunch all over Israel.

Recipe courtesy Barbounia, New York City

- 1 pound dry chickpeas
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 6 garlic cloves, peeled, divided
- 1 pound high-quality tahini
- Juice of 2 lemons, divided
- 1 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 teaspoon white pepper, finely ground
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- 6 loaves pita bread, quartered

Place chickpeas in a large non-reactive pot, cover with water and add baking soda. Cover and let soak for at least 8 hours. Drain and rinse chickpeas, then add 1 cup of fresh water and 3 peeled garlic cloves. Cover and cook over low heat until tender, approximately 1½ hours.

Drain chickpeas, but retain cooking liquid. Dice remaining garlic cloves and put into food processor. Add 2 tablespoons of lemon juice and blend until very smooth. Gradually add chickpeas and purée until smooth. Add most of the tahini and enough cooking liquid to create a very smooth purée. Add salt, pepper, lemon juice and additional tahini, to taste.

Transfer hummus to a serving bowl and garnish with olive oil and chopped parsley. Serve with warm pita bread. *Serves 12.*

THE WINE: Recanati 2012 Yasmin White Chardonnay-Sauvignon Blanc (Galilee). Flavors of lemon-lime, pear and a hint of rose petal go well with this dip that's brightened with lemon.



GREECE

Offering visitors a bite to eat and a drink dates back to the ancient Greeks. Today, meze are often enjoyed at an *ouzeria*, an ouzo bar that serves small dishes alongside the anise-flavored spirit.

Common Greek meze include *tzatziki* (cucumber and yogurt dip), *dolmades* (stuffed grape leaves), *spanakopita* (spinach and feta in phyllo dough), *taramosalata* (fish roe dip), *keftedes* (lamb meatballs) and *saganaki* (fried cheese). No Greek meze is complete without olives and a salad made of tomato, onion, cucumber and feta.

ISRAEL

Israeli *mezze* (the preferred local spelling) has roots in many regions, especially North Africa, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. *Salatim* is an array of vegetarian spreads and salads in which roasted eggplant and peppers, sesame paste, leafy greens and chopped tomatoes mingle in a variety of dishes.

Harissa, transplanted from Morocco, is common, as are cold-weather vegetables like beets, red cabbage and carrots, staples of Eastern European cuisine. *Baba ganoush*, hummus and *muhammara* (red pepper dip) will almost always be on hand, accompanied by pita bread.

LEBANON

When visiting friends or dining in a Lebanese restaurant, a first glass of wine or *arak* (anise-flavored liquor) will always be accompanied by a bowl of *bzourat*, a spiced mix of nuts and seeds.

Lebanese meze are mainly vegetable-based, with the exception of *kibbeh*, raw beef or lamb and bulgur. Spreads and salads are made with eggplant, chickpeas, bulgur and tahini, all flavored with olive oil, lemon and fresh herbs. Mint, parsley and sumac are common flavorings. Cheese is a popular option, especially fried *haloumi* and thick *labneh* mixed with herbs or chopped vegetables and served as a dip.

BEIRUT-STYLE TABBOULEH

While tabbouleh is often served with pita wedges, this version doubles up on the vegetable goodness by using endive leaves as edible scoops.

Recipe courtesy Mike DeSimone & Jeff Jenssen

- 4 tablespoons fine bulgur wheat
- 2 large tomatoes, seeded and finely chopped
- 3 cups fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1 cup fresh mint leaves, finely minced
- 1 lemon, juiced
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg, finely ground
- ½ teaspoon fine sea salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper, coarsely ground
- 6 scallions, thinly sliced
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 heads of endive, washed and separated into individual leaves

In a large glass or ceramic mixing bowl, combine ½ cup warm water and bulgur, and soak for 15 minutes. Discard water, and rinse bulgur twice, draining thoroughly. Add tomatoes, parsley, mint leaves and lemon juice. Toss, then add nutmeg, salt, pepper and scallions. Toss, pour olive oil over entire mixture, and toss again.

Transfer to a serving bowl and place in the center of a large platter. Arrange the endive leaves around the bowl. *Serves 12.*

THE WINE: Ixsir 2013 Altitudes Rosé (Lebanon). The tangerine, butterscotch and spice notes and strong acidity hold up to the bright flavors of tomatoes and parsley, mixed with lemon juice and mint.



MOROCCO

The *tagine*, a round earthenware pan with a cone-shaped lid, is the preferred cooking method for lamb, chicken and vegetables across North Africa. Tagines are often served over couscous, an ingredient present in many dishes, both hot and cold.

When visiting, adventurous diners can try grilled camel brain, or stick to lamb or chicken kebabs, marinated eggplant, stewed lentils, grilled sardines or tomato and cucumber salad. Moroccan mezze also include spicy oil-cured olives and *msemen*, an airy bread stuffed with sautéed onions or meat.

TAGINE CHICKEN WINGS

Preserved lemons—a Moroccan kitchen staple—add a bright dose of citrus to this party-style take on the traditional tagine.

Recipe courtesy Mike DeSimone & Jeff Jenssen

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon fresh cilantro, finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- 1½ teaspoons turmeric
- ½ preserved lemon
- 6 whole chicken wings, separated into 12 pieces, wingtips discarded
- 1 small red onion, finely diced
- 15 green olives

In a heavy-bottomed ceramic or metal Dutch oven, or a two-piece Moroccan tagine, combine olive oil, garlic, parsley, cilantro, salt, pepper, ginger and turmeric, and mix with a wooden spoon. Cut the preserved

lemon lengthwise into 2 equal pieces. Carefully remove the pulp and reserve the peel. Chop lemon pulp and add to tagine. Add chicken wings, turning to coat with the spice mixture, and add onion.

Place tagine over medium heat (if using a ceramic tagine, place a metal heat diffuser on the burner), and sear the chicken for about 20 minutes, turning frequently, until the skin is evenly crisped. Gradually add 4–6 tablespoons of water in small increments to prevent sticking.

When chicken is browned, add 1 cup of water, reduce heat to medium-low and cover. Simmer for approximately 45 minutes, occasionally removing cover to stir and turn chicken. Afterward, add lemon peel and olives, cover and cook for 5 minutes. *Serves 12.*

THE WINE: Ouled Thaleb 2012 Médaille Sauvignon Blanc (Morocco). Flavors of apricot, citrus zest and rose petal marry well with the burst of preserved lemon in these tagine-braised wings.



SPAIN

While tapas have been elevated to haute cuisine throughout much of the country, they are thought to have started as coverings to keep fruit flies out of wine glasses.

At most bars, a small plate is offered with each glass of wine ordered. In addition to *albondigas* (meatballs made with lamb, beef or pork), classic choices include *ensaladilla rusa* (potato and tuna salad), *padrón* peppers, seafood salad, *croquetas*, seasonal bean salads, grilled octopus, fried shrimp with garlic, small pork fillets, *tortilla Española* (Spanish omelet) and a variety of small open-faced sandwiches called *pinchos* (note: the bread and toppings are held together by a toothpick, which is where the name derives from).

TURKEY

One of the world's leading grape-growing countries (although mainly for table grapes rather than winemaking), Turkey boasts over 1,000 indigenous grape varieties. Despite all those options, many Turks choose raki, the country's counterpart to ouzo.

Turkish meze tend to incorporate a lot of eggplant and peppers, but lamb is also widely served, either in *köftes* (meatballs) or kebabs. Seafood is ever-present, especially mussels and squid. Restaurants often present enormous platters covered with small dishes, and you can point to the ones that catch your eye.

SPAIN LAMB ALBONDIGAS IN TEMPRANILLO SAUCE

Bite-sized meatballs are a staple at nearly every tapas bar in Spain. Lamb is a favorite, and these Tempranillo-bathed albondigas are flavored with spices harkening back to the kingdom of al-Andalus.

Recipe courtesy Mike DeSimone & Jeff Janssen

For the meatballs:

- ½ pound ground lamb
- ½ pound ground beef
- 2 ounces Manchego cheese, finely grated
- 1 small yellow onion, finely diced
- 2 ounces ground almonds
- ½ teaspoon dried ground rosemary
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper, coarsely ground
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin

For the sauce:

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1 medium yellow onion, diced
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- ½ cup beef stock
- 2 cups Tempranillo
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- Pinch of ground cumin
- Rosemary or oregano sprigs, for garnish

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Using hands, combine meatball ingredients in a mixing bowl until blended. Roll into small meatballs, using about 1 tablespoon of mixture for each. Place on a rimmed baking sheet and bake for 40–45 minutes, until browned.

Heat butter in a large skillet over medium-high heat, swirling pan until melted. Add onion and stir occasionally until wilted and just turning golden, about 3 minutes. Add salt and pepper, to taste. Gradually add beef stock, stirring continuously. When beef stock begins to reduce, gradually add Tempranillo (about ¼ cup at a time) while stirring. Allow to bubble and reduce before adding more. Adjust heat as necessary so sauce does not burn. When all the Tempranillo has been added and reduced by about half, stir in dried oregano and cumin. Add small amounts of salt and pepper to taste.

Reduce to simmer, add cooked meatballs to



skillet and stir lightly until coated. Transfer to a platter or low-sided bowl. Garnish with rosemary or oregano sprigs and serve immediately. Yields 24.

THE WINE: Ramón Bilbao 2011 Crianza (Rioja). This Tempranillo's dark red fruit, hint of smoke and bright acidity make it an ideal match for these meatballs scented with cumin, oregano and rosemary.

TURKEY BÖREK STUFFED WITH SPINACH, FETA AND CURRANTS

Whether folded into triangles or rolled like cigars, *börek* (baked, filled pastries) are mainstays of Turkish restaurants, cafes and home kitchens.

Recipe courtesy Chris Borcich, chef, Troya Mediterranean Kitchen, San Francisco

- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 medium onion, finely diced
- 2 pounds fresh spinach, washed well
- 1 cup dried currants
- ½ cup pine nuts
- 1 cup Turkish feta, finely crumbled
- 1 pound phyllo dough
- 6 tablespoons of butter, melted

Heat a large frying pan over medium heat. Add olive oil and coat pan bottom. Add onion and sauté for 1 minute. Add spinach, cover pan and sauté, 2–3 minutes, until spinach wilts. Remove from heat and add currants, pine nuts and feta. Combine well.

Preheat oven to 375°F. Brush 1 sheet of phyllo dough with melted butter and cut in half. Fold each half and brush with more butter. Add approximately 1 tablespoon of filling in one corner and fold diagonally, then brush with butter and fold again. Brush finished pastry with more butter and repeat until finished.

Arrange börek on a nonstick baking sheet. Bake for 12–14 minutes, until golden brown. Let cool 10 minutes before serving. Yields 36 pastries.

THE WINE: Yazgan 2013 Mahra Bogazkere-Öküzgözü Red (Turkey). Soft tannins and brightness make this indigenous red blend a winning choice with the dish's tangy feta and sweet currants.

