

# eat like a local morocco

Sunny Morocco has a fondness for rustic olive oil, lemon pickle, spices and dried fruits. It's an eater's paradise!

Words KALPANA SUNDER Photographs KALPANA SUNDER and EBEN LENDERKING

Morocco's cuisine bears testament to the country's position at the crossroads of many civilisations and cultures. The rich, eclectic fare embraces influences ranging from Arab, Berber, Moorish, Jewish, Mediterranean, North African and French. Marrakech and most other cities in Morocco have a bustling street food culture with plenty of options to choose from at hawker stalls, including kebabs such as *méchoui* (from a whole grilled lamb), breads, meats and salads.

In Morocco, locals espouse the communal style of eating. Dishes are shared by family and friends. The midday meal is the main meal; a typical repast begins with a series of hot and cold salads. A dish that you will find everywhere is tagine, a slow-cooked stew of meat, vegetables and lentils, dried fruits like prunes and apricots, served in a traditional clay vessel. Couscous, too, is very popular here. The fine semolina grain is traditionally hand-rolled before being steamed and served with vegetables such as carrots, zucchini and local gourds. Another favourite is pastilla (also called b'stilla), an Andalusian dish brought to Morocco by the Moors. Its crisp pastry crust is usually stuffed with chicken or pigeon, often with a hint of cinnamon, almonds and sugar.

Many Moroccan dishes, including tagine, are lent a unique zing by lemons preserved in a salt-lemon juice mixture. Another interesting local ingredient is argan oil, a strong, nutty-flavoured oil from the south of Morocco. It is used as a dressing for salads, in desserts, and even as a dermatological product.

Bread or *khubz* is an omnipresent motif in Moroccan food, with most bread being baked in communal ovens. The seasoning is generous with spices such as ginger, turmeric, cinnamon, cumin, paprika and saffron. It is forbidden to throw away bread, so families give leftover bread to the poor, or to their livestock.

Morocco is a spice lover's paradise. Cumin is used in almost every Moroccan dish and is considered so important that it is served on the table along with salt and pepper. The ubiquitous spice mix that is sold at all spice markets is called *ras el hanout*, made with ingredients such as coriander, monk's pepper, ash berries, cardamom, cumin, clove, nutmeg and turmeric.

A meal in Morocco usually ends with fruits and sweets dense with cinnamon, honey and nuts. Many desserts are similar to our halwas and barfis. A popular sweet treat is *chebakia*, or spiced sesame cookies.

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**Chef Fouzia Habrich has worked at Dar Les Cigognes for the past four years as the head chef. She learnt how to cook from her mother and siblings and is a *dada* or Moroccan cook who prepares traditional recipes at weddings and special occasions. She is a specialist in the traditional Berber-Marrakech style of cooking.**

## MENU FOR 4

- \* Cucumber & lemon salad
- \* Saffron rice with caramelised onions
- \* Tagine of turnips, zucchini & fava beans
- \* Moroccan mint tea
- \* Sweet pastilla with milk & almonds

## Cucumber and lemon salad

Serves 4 ■ 20 minutes ■ EASY ✓



**lemon** 1

**salt** 1/2 tsp

**cucumbers** 11/2, peeled, deseeded and very thinly sliced

**red onion** 1/2, very thinly sliced

**extra virgin olive oil** 3 tbsp

**freshly ground black pepper** 1/4 tsp

**dried oregano** 1 tsp, lightly crushed

■ Peel the lemons, taking care not to break them. Remove the white piths carefully and then section them. Coarsely dice the sections. Transfer to a bowl and toss with the salt.

■ To assemble the dish, arrange the sliced cucumbers on a plate, followed by the onions, and then the lemon pieces. To make the dressing, whisk together the olive oil, pepper and oregano. Spoon it over the dish and serve.

## Saffron rice with caramelised onions

Serves 4 ■ 45 minutes + soaking

■ EASY ✓

**oil** 2 cups

**onions** 4 medium, peeled and halved, thinly and evenly sliced and separated

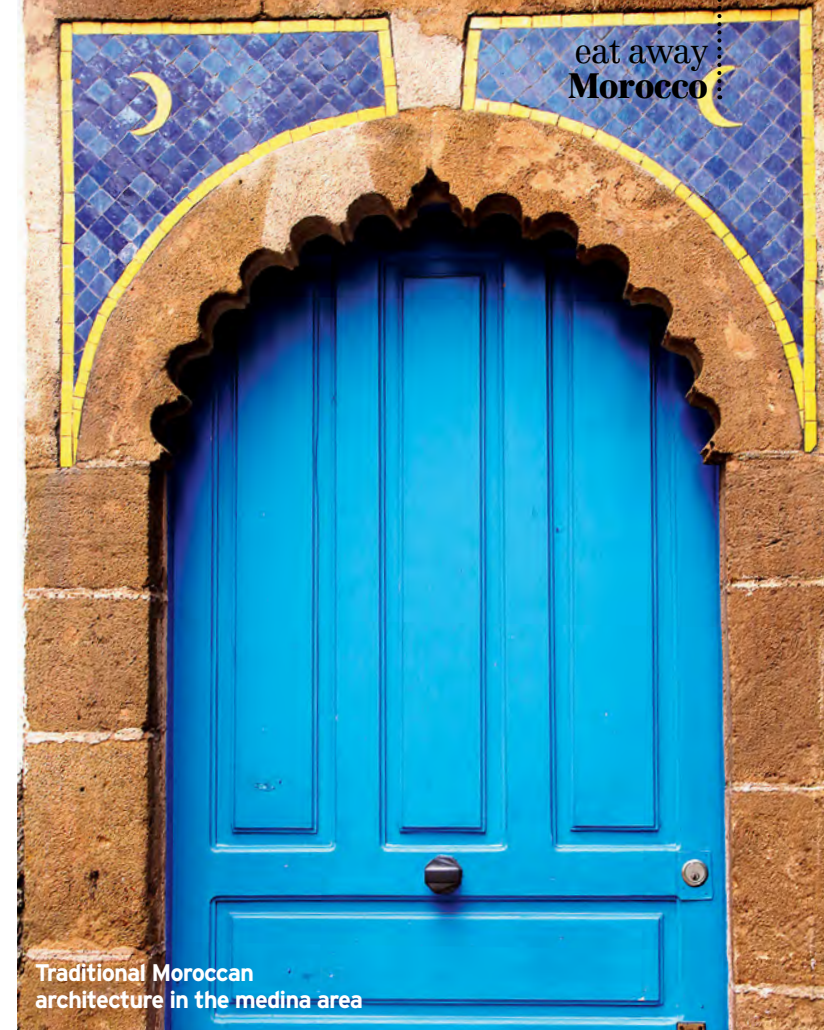
**unsalted butter** 150g (try Lurpak available at gourmet stores)



Moroccan mint tea



Tafernout, a flatbread baked on a bed of pebbles in a clay oven



eat away  
Morocco

Traditional Moroccan architecture in the medina area



Tagine of turnips, zucchini and fava beans





Metal lanterns from the Jewish quarter

In fact, Moroccans use a lot of dried fruits and nuts like dates, almonds, figs, dried apricots and prunes in savoury dishes too. Almond milk, made from a blend of almonds, rose water, orange-flower water, sugar and milk, is very popular here.

Be sure to sample Moroccan mint tea, or *atai* (traditionally made with plenty of sugar) that is

served from embellished metal pots and poured into glasses. Before taking a sip, look the host in the eye and say ‘*bi saha raha*’ which means ‘enjoy and relax’. In most Moroccan homes, pastries are served along with the mint tea rather than at the end of a meal. The city is dotted with pâtisseries — a legacy of the French. The quality of pastries and cakes is usually excellent.

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

- Most Moroccans eat with their hands, using the thumb and two fingers of the right hand, using pieces of flatbread to scoop up bites of food.
- Moroccan mint tea is not just a refreshment, it's a ritual. It is poured from special silver teapots with curved spouts from high above the table, to be splashed creatively into short glasses.
- Street food and fresh produce is everywhere – you must try the local chewy macaroons and pieces of blood-red prickly pears on toothpicks.
- The villages between Marrakech and the Atlas mountains are known for their traditional flatbread called *tafernout*. It is baked in a clay oven on a bed of pebbles. This method of cooking helps distribute the heat evenly and gives a beautiful texture and colour to the bread.
- During the holy season of Ramadan, when Muslims fast during the day, *harira*, a thick chickpea soup made with fresh dates, is often served at night in restaurants and in homes.

## MENU DECODER

- \* **AMLOU** A paste of almonds, honey and argan oil.
- \* **BEGHRIR** Honey pancakes made of flour, semolina, yeast, eggs and milk.
- \* **BRIOUAT** Small spring rolls stuffed with meat or vegetables.
- \* **CHEBAKIA** Fried cookie dough dipped in honey and sesame seeds.
- \* **KHUBZ** Moroccan flatbread.
- \* **MEHELBIYA** A classic Moroccan pudding similar to panna cotta made with cornflour, milk, sugar, orange flower water, almonds and cinnamon.
- \* **SMEN** A rancid butter concoction like Indian ghee, with the flavour of blue cheese. It is made with butter, ground semolina and salt.

**cinnamon stick** 1  
**green cardamoms** 8 pods, cracked  
**whole black peppercorns** 5  
**basmati rice** 400g, washed and soaked in salted water for 3 hours  
**pistachios** 5 tbsp, roughly chopped  
**saffron threads** 2 pinches, infused in 1/4 cup of boiling water  
**sea salt** to taste (try Roland available at gourmet stores)

- To caramalise the onions, heat the oil in a deep frying pan (the oil should not come more than halfway up the sides of the pan). Once piping hot, fry the onions in small batches, stirring to keep them from sticking together. When they are golden brown in colour, remove and drain on kitchen paper, blotting off any excess oil. Repeat until done. Keep aside.
- Melt the butter over a medium flame and sauté the cinnamon, cardamoms and black peppercorns for about 5 minutes to bring out their flavours.
- Drain the rice and add it to the pan, then stir to coat with the butter and spices. Turn the heat to high, then stir in the pistachios and salt. Add 800ml water to cover the rice.
- Bring the rice to a boil, cover with a lid, and then simmer for 5 minutes. Drizzle the saffron water over, cover, reduce the heat to low, and cook for a further 4-5 minutes. Switch off the flame and let the rice stand, covered, for 10 minutes. Serve with the caramelised onions on top.

## Tagine of turnips, zucchini and fava beans

Serves 4 ■ 1 hour ■ **EASY** ✓

**turnips** 3 large, peeled and quartered lengthwise  
**zucchini** 8-12 small, halved lengthwise  
**fava beans (papri)** 400g, husked and shelled  
**olive oil** 3 tbsp  
**onions** 2-3 tbsp, finely minced  
**sweet paprika** 2 tsp (try Pote available at gourmet stores)  
**white pepper** 1 tsp, freshly ground  
**salt** 1 tsp  
**dried powdered ginger** 2 tsp



Cucumber and lemon salad



Tagine pots are a common sight at most local markets



A fresh fruit stall at Djemaa el Fna



Saffron rice with caramelised onions





Sweet pastilla with milk and almonds

**parsley** 1-2 tbsp, finely chopped  
**mint** 1 tbsp, finely chopped

■ Soak the chopped turnips, zucchini and fava beans in water to prevent them from getting dry or discoloured. ■ Pour the olive oil into a tagine pot. In case you do not have one, use a saucepan with a tight-fitting lid. Toss in the onions and spices and stir well to coat. In the centre of the pot, create a small mound of the fava beans, and alternating with the turnips and zucchini, lay them all around like a tepee. Add any remaining beans. Stir in 1/4 cup of water and sprinkle over the parsley. ■ Cover the pot and cook on moderate heat over charcoal or directly on the stove for about 30 minutes until the vegetables are done. Add more water if required. Garnish with the mint just before serving.

### Moroccan mint tea

Serves 4 ■ 10 minutes ■ EASY

**water** 4 cups  
**fresh mint** 10 sprigs + 4 extra for garnish  
**green tea** 3 tsp  
**sugar** 3 tbsp

■ Boil the water. Combine 10 mint sprigs, green tea and sugar in a teapot, then fill it with more hot water. Let the tea brew for 3 minutes, stirring the leaves once or twice, then strain into cups. Garnish with the remaining sprigs of mint.

### Sweet pastilla with milk and almonds

Serves 8 ■ 1 hour ■ MODERATELY EASY

**filo pastry** 20 sheets (try Jus Rol available at gourmet stores)  
**oil** 2 cups  
**whole almonds or walnuts** 180g, blanched  
**icing sugar** 2 tbsp (try Blue Bird available at gourmet stores)  
**cinnamon powder** 1/4 tsp  
**cornflour** 3 tbsp  
**milk** 1.15l + 4 tbsp extra, cold  
**caster sugar** 115g (try Tate & Lyle available at gourmet stores)  
**salt** a pinch  
**blanched almonds** 4 tbsp, ground  
**rosewater** or **orange blossom water** 2 tbsp  
**strawberries** 10 large, sliced, to decorate  
**honey** 1 tbsp to drizzle (optional)

■ Cut the pastry sheets into uniform circles, each about 20cm in diameter. Cover the uncooked sheets to prevent them from drying out. Heat 1cm of oil in a deep frying pan. Fry the pastry sheets, 2 pressed together at a time, on both sides until pale golden and crisp, adjusting the heat to keep them from turning brown. Drain on kitchen paper. Prepare 10 such sets and keep aside. ■ Leave the oil in the frying pan. Brown the whole almonds or walnuts in the oil. Drain, and when cool, chop coarsely or crush. Mix with icing sugar and cinnamon powder to taste. ■ Blend the cornflour and 4 tbsp of milk to make a paste. Heat the remaining milk to boil with the caster sugar and salt. Stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, add the paste and cook until reasonably thick (the sauce should coat the back of the spoon). Add the ground almonds and perfumed water. Whisk until very smooth and continue cooking for 1 minute. Remove from the heat and chill in the pan. ■ To assemble, place 2 sets of pastry sheets on a large plate and sprinkle over half the chopped, browned almonds. Cover with 3 sets of pastry sheets and spoon over a few spoonfuls of the milk sauce. Cover with another 2 sets of pastry and sprinkle over the remaining almonds. Cover with the remaining pastry sheets and spoon over a few more spoonfuls of milk sauce. Decorate with strawberries and drizzle over honey, if you like. Serve immediately.

### HOW TO GET THERE

Fly Emirates through Dubai to Casablanca and connect by Royal Maroc to Marrakech. Alternatively, drive from Casablanca (about a three-hour trip). Return airfare is priced at approximately ₹ 59,000. Indians need a tourist visa to visit Morocco, granted by the Moroccan Embassy in New Delhi. A multiple entry visa costs ₹ 2,414.

### MINI GUIDE TO MARRAKECH EAT

■ The gargantuan square, **Djemaa el Fna**, becomes packed with food stalls by sunset. Most locals have favourite stands at this outdoor food court, which are numbered for easy reference. Try the fresh orange juice and the fish ‘n’ chips. You will also be offered fried aubergines as well as scrumptious Moroccan dates. *Keftas* (minced meat) and offal stew are commonly sold here. Vegetarians can try the local chickpea soup with vegetable couscous. End the meal with a slice of rich spice cake from the hawker carts. (Expect to spend approximately 10 Moroccan dirhams). ■ If you want to splurge, head to the stylish **Dar Yacout** (yacout.ma) with shiny *tadelakt*, or polished lime plaster walls and scalloped columns crafted in the Moroccan tradition. Owned by brothers Mohamed Zkhiri and Abdellatif, this classy hotel has received heads of states to kings and other dignitaries. Start with drinks and canapés on the rooftop terrace, then follow it up with a seven-course degustation dinner. Try their slow-cooked tagine *makkfoul* made with meat, tomatoes, onions and cinnamon. ■ For a meal fit for a king, head to the Royal Mansour Hotel owned by the King of Morocco and enjoy the food at their restaurant, **La Grand Table Marocaine** (Rue Abou Abbas El Sebti, Medina. Tel: +212 522 98 98 04). ■ **KosyBar** (kosybar.com), on the edge of the Mellah or the Jewish quarter, plays lounge music and overlooks the Koutobia Minaret and the walls of the ancient El Badi palace. Try their assorted Moroccan salad platter and the tagine. ■ For a glimpse into local French culture, head to the carefully restored **Le Grand Café de la Poste** (Tel: +212 524 42 27 14). Try regional dishes like tabbouleh and couscous.

### STAY

■ You must stay in a riad — a traditional courtyard house, at least for a few nights. The layout, with a central

courtyard, a lush garden and fountain as well as a terrace with a great view of the medina and nesting storks, makes for a unique local experience. Stay at **Dar Les Cigognes** (lescigognes.com), a charming riad near the Jewish market with stunning rooms furnished with traditional fabrics and designs, a hamam and Moroccan cookery classes. (Rooms from around ₹16,000 per night). ■ Luxury seekers should stay at the **Royal Mansour** (royalmansour.com; Tel: +212 529 80 80 80) the personal project of the King of Morocco. With Andalusian courtyards and pools, the hotel has riad-style townhouses with silk-panelled walls. (Rooms from ₹1,05,000 per night). ■ Another high-end place to stay is the **La Mamounia** (mamounia.com; Tel: +212 524 38 86 00), the city’s oldest hotel recently reopened after a three-year restoration. With velvet chairs and silk-shaded lamps, vast gardens and Moroccan craftsmanship evident in meticulously painted ceilings and mosaics, this is the place to soak in imperial pleasures. (Rooms from around ₹ 40,000 per night).

### DO

■ Visit **Majorelle Gardens** (jardinmajorelle.com), which was created by a French artist and is home to flora from five continents. It houses buildings in electric blue, canary yellow and terracotta shades as well as a carefully curated Berber Museum showcasing tribal culture. ■ To learn more about Moroccan architecture, visit the **Madrasa Ben Youssef** (Tel: +212 632 25 11 640), an Islamic school dating back to the14th Century with beautiful tiles, cedar panels and stucco.

### MUST BUY

\* **ARGAN OIL** Argan oil is produced from the nuts of the argan tree (*Argania Spinosa*) found in Morocco. Culinary argan is a great dip with bread, and can also be used in couscous and salads. You can use it to make *amlou*, a bread dip made by grinding roasted almonds and mixing it with argan oil and honey.



Breads that were baked in a communal oven



Marinated olives at a souk

\* **PRESERVED LEMONS AND OLIVES** Take home some of the region’s most prized produce. Head to the local souk to pick up small jars of pickled olives and lemons. \* **RAS EL HANOUT** Don’t leave without buying a jar of *ras el hanout*, a spice mix of around 30 difference spices whose name translates to ‘head of the shop’. The proprietor of each spice shop sells his own unique — and secret — *ras el hanout* mixture. It’s the Moroccan version of our garam masala. \* **TAGINE POTS** Large ceramic platters with floral designs and tagine pots are sold in most marketplaces. Spoons, ladles and jars made out of fragrant lemonwood sold at the local souks make great gifts.