

Subject: Tunisian Chickpea Soup with Harissa
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Tunisian Chickpea Soup with Harissa

In my opinion, the prize for the most colorful, balanced, freshest, most delicious and most exciting of all Mediterranean streets foods goes to Tunisian lablabi. A soup like meal in a dish, it consists of a large bowl of torn stale bread covered with long simmered chickpeas, a boiling rich broth made with the bones of veal, and medium-cooked eggs, with the whites firm and the yolks still runny. It is served under an ample amount of the famous Tunisian hot sauce harissa, topped with a pinch of capers, a few juicy olives and roasted sweet red pepper strips. Finally, it's garnished with ground cumin, a lemon quarter and at the last minute, a drizzle of some intensely fruity extra virgin olive oil. The resulting mélange, in its colorful abstract beauty, resembles a Joan Mitchell painting.

Makes 8 servings

Ingredients:

- 1/2 pound dried chickpeas, soaked overnight with a pinch of baking soda
- 2 cups rich veal or chicken stock
- 1 pound veal bones (optional)
- 4 cloves garlic, halved
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- salt and pepper, to taste
- 3 cups cubed stale peasant-style bread
- 1/3 cup harissa (recipe follows)
- ground cumin, to taste
- 24 cured black olives, pitted
- 1 heaping tablespoon small capers, drained
- 1 red bell pepper, roasted and finely chopped
- olive oil (for drizzling)
- 1 lemon, halved

Preparation:

Set the oven at 225 degrees. Drain the chickpeas and rinse them thoroughly. Place in a deep, heavy pot. Add the veal or chicken stock, veal bones (if using), garlic, oil, salt and enough water to cover the chickpeas by 1 inch.

Bring the mixture to a boil, cover and transfer the pot to the oven. Cook for 3 hours or until the chickpeas are tender. Remove and discard the bones and garlic. Skim off the fat. Taste the cooking liquid and add salt and pepper if needed. Keep the chickpeas in the cooking liquid. (This may be made a day in advance. Cool, cover and refrigerate, then reheat to simmering before continuing.)

Divide the stale bread among 8 deep soup bowls. Add a ladle of the chickpeas and some of the cooking liquid. Dribble 1 tablespoon of harissa onto each serving, dot with pinches of cumin and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Add olives, capers and red pepper to each bowl, and more cooking liquid if necessary. Drizzle each serving with olive oil and add a squeeze of lemon juice. Serve at once.

Tunisian Harissa

Tunisia is the only Mediterranean country whose hot sauces can be measured on a seismic counter! When the Ottoman Turks returned from the East they brought back Goan red pepper, which they distributed throughout their empire. From the Balkans to North Africa, wherever pepper seeds grew well, the resulting red pepper powders---both hot and sweet---became famous: the paprika of Hungary; the boukha of northern Greece; the flavorful red pepper of Aleppo in Syria; the Mars of southeastern Turkey; the hot and hotter peppers of Nabeul and Gabes in Tunisia. These Tunisian hot red peppers are not unlike our easily available New Mexican and dried Guajillo chile peppers. The chile sauces prepared from Tunisian peppers are important ingredients in Tunisian cuisine, packed and kept under olive oil so as to be always close at hand.

Makes about 1/3 cup

Ingredients:

- 1 clove garlic
- 2 dried New Mexican chilies, stemmed, seeded and torn into 2-inch pieces, softened in warm water and squeezed dry
- 1 sun-dried tomato half, softened in warm water and squeezed dry
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/8 teaspoon ground caraway
- olive oil
- lemon juice (optional)

Preparation:

In a food processor, combine the garlic, chilies, tomato, salt, coriander and caraway. Pulse the mixture until it is pasty. Add some oil by the teaspoon, pulsing the machine until the mixture is thick and spreadable.

Thin the harissa with enough warm water and olive oil to make it a saucy consistency. Add more salt, coriander, or caraway

if you like and some lemon juice (if using) to round out the flavor.

Source: The Slow Mediterranean Kitchen