

My Iraqi Nana's Date Cookies

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Sweet Dates in Basra was inspired by my father's rich experiences of growing up in Iraq in the 1940s. Unlike the war-torn country we see on the news, this was a place of family, friendship and warmth. By naming Iraq's most emblematic fruit in the title, I hoped to suggest two other meanings for 'dates': the romantic encounters between two lovers and the promising time when they meet, after independence but before the Second World War.

Pervasive violence in Iraq has made it impossible for my father to fulfill his longstanding dream of returning there. But he has been able to pass on its cultures and traditions to me and my siblings through stories, pictures and recipes.

My Iraqi grandmother, Nana, cooked many of the foods now associated with Middle Eastern cuisine, from rice-stuffed grape leaves to flaky baklava deserts. And while I could not hope to match her skills in producing these delicacies, the recipe for date cookies below continues to be a family favorite.

My sons, raised on the very sugary American version of what we think of as cookies, nonetheless love to devour these date treats, which have only natural sweetness.



For millennia, people knew dates as a wonder fruit that can promote everything from fertility to longevity, and modern science has confirmed their many nutritional benefits. In my experience, these cookies prove that dates can also be addictive!

For the dough:

- 2 cups of white flour
- 1 cup of whole wheat flour
- ½ stick of butter
- 1 packet of yeast
- 1 cup of water
- 1 teaspoon of salt

For the filling:

½ pound of pitted dates, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons of butter
1 tablespoon of water

For the coating:

1 egg white
3 tablespoons of sesame seeds

To make the dough:

Soak the yeast in the water for 10-15 minutes.
Melt the butter; while it is melting whisk the flours and salt in a mixing bowl.
Whisk the melted butter into the yeast and then add that mixture to the flours.
Knead into a smooth dough but do not over mix.
Cover the dough with a damp cloth and let it rise until doubled, about one hour.
Preheat the oven to 400 degrees and line two cookie trays with parchment paper.

To make the filling:

While the dough is rising, gently simmer the dates, butter and water in a saucepan, stirring frequently for 7-10 minutes to make a soft mixture. Remove from heat and let it cool.

To form the cookies:

When the dough is ready, roll it into walnut-sized balls and flatten to make a circle about two inches in diameter. Place a ball of the date filling the size of a hazelnut at the center, gently gather the edges of the dough over the filling and press them together. Turn the dough over and press it gently to flatten until it is about 2 ½ inches in diameter, so flat so you almost see the dates through the dough. Dip it into the egg white and then sprinkle on both sides with sesame seeds. Repeat until you have used all of the dough and filling.

Arrange the cookies on the baking sheet and prick them with a fork so they do not puff (you can make a circular design or spokes for visual effect). Bake for about 10 minutes on the middle shelf and then 5 more minutes on the top, until golden brown.

Makes about 18 cookies.