

Chicken couscous with chickpea onion relish



This recipe is based on one given by Clifford Wright, an expert on Mediterranean cuisines and their histories. I have made some changes to reflect my own culinary experiences in Morocco and personal taste. This is not a quick or easy dish, but fantastic for feeding a crowd. The chicken, vegetables and relish look magnificent piled on top of a vast mound of steaming couscous in the centre of the table. Serve it with rose harissa sauce, for a fragrant chilli kick.

Clifford tells us that couscous might have a sub-Saharan origin, and that the origin of the word may be Berber. Having seen couscous cookery in Senegal and Mali, I can believe

this. One of its benefits is that it can be steamed over your pot of stew, so you only need one fire, which need not be a roaring hot one. So it is practical and economical, not to mention delicious.

The process of steaming couscous three times over your vat of aromatic broth, of judiciously adding extra water and letting it hydrate and then dry between steamings, of repeatedly rubbing it between your hands to separate the grains, is laborious to say the least. But the result is the most aromatic, flavoursome and fluffy couscous you'll ever taste, and your kitchen will smell fantastic. Here I provide full instructions, having had lessons from several women in Morocco who do it weekly as a matter of course. But you could of course buy quick couscous instead and pour over boiling water in the usual way.

Travelling in Morocco we ate our bodyweights in couscous several times over. It is served as a dish in itself, garnished with stewed vegetables and meat, rather than as an accompaniment to a tagine. Recently I quizzed a Moroccan chef in London as to why he was serving lamb tagine with couscous: "Because people here expect it; I wouldn't do it at home."

Serves: 8 hungry people (with leftovers)

Time: ages – best done over two days, or start early

breasts and legs of 2 chickens, ie 8 portions (use carcasses to make stock)

salt and pepper

olive oil

8 medium carrots

8 small turnips

For the broth:

3 litres chicken stock

160ml olive oil

2 cinnamon sticks

2 tsps freshly ground black pepper

2 tsps tumeric

2 tsps paprika

good pinch of saffron

1 tbsp powdered ginger
1 tbsp salt
large bouquet garni of parsley and coriander stalks
2 tsps concentrated tomato paste

For the chickpea onion relish:

1kg red onions, peeled and finely sliced
120ml olive oil
2 tsps salt
3 tbsps sugar
half quantity of spice mix (see below; save other half for next time)
1 tin cooked chickpeas, drained
200g sultanas, soaked in warm water for 15 minutes and drained

For the spice mix:

2 tsp ground cinnamon
1 tsp turmeric
½ tsp freshly ground black pepper
¼ tsp finely grated nutmeg
¼ tsp ground coriander seeds
¼ tsp ground cloves

For the couscous:

1kg raw wheat or barley couscous (not the 'precut' kind)
400ml water generously seasoned with salt (stir well to dissolve)
olive oil
60g melted butter, ghee or smen

To garnish:

200g blanched whole almonds, toasted in a dry frying pan until golden brown
chopped coriander and/or parsley leaves

1. Season chicken pieces with salt and pepper and bring them to room temperature.
2. Meanwhile you can get the broth going: Put ingredients into a large stock pot or casserole dish, bring to a boil then reduce to a gentle simmer and keep covered.
3. Heat a slug of olive oil in a wide non-stick frying pan over high heat and brown chicken in batches for a few minutes on each side.
4. Add chicken legs to broth and simmer gently, covered, for 45 mins. Add breasts and continue 45 mins.
5. Carefully lift chicken from pot and lay skin side up in a roasting tin. Add some broth to keep moist, cool and then store covered in fridge overnight. Cool and chill remaining broth separately.
6. The relish can also be made in advance: Cook onions with salt and olive oil in a heavy-based saucepan, covered, for 15 mins over a low-medium flame. Add sugar and spice mix and continue cooking another 30 mins. Now add chickpeas and sultanas and cook a further 30 mins. NB Stir occasionally throughout to check it's not sticking on the bottom. Finally, taste to check for salt, sugar and spicing and then cool and keep chilled overnight.

7. The next day reheat broth in a large pot over which you can rest your steamer. A Moroccan 'couscoussière', sold in many Moroccan food shops, is best. While it is heating, prepare your carrots and turnips by peeling and chopping into attractive chunky shapes. Then simmer vegetables in broth until tender. Lift them out to an ovenproof dish and moisten with a little broth.
8. Wash couscous in a bowl of water then drain well in a sieve. Tip into a wide, shallow dish, rake through with your fingers to spread it out and leave to swell for 15 mins.
9. Now attach steamer to pot and cover seal by tightly tying round a damp, twisted tea towel. Rub couscous between palms of your hands to break up the clumps and pile it into steamer above boiling broth. Do not cover. Once you see steam rising through the couscous, time it for 20 mins.
10. Dump couscous back into your wide dish (being sure to get it all, leaving none clogging the steamer's holes) and as soon as you can bear to handle it sprinkle on approximately half of your salted water and work it through with your hands, raking and rubbing to break up the clumps. It should feel evenly somewhat moist, but not soggy. Leave to dry for 15 mins then rub again and steam for a second time.
11. Dump couscous back into wide dish, add more salted water, rub, rake and let rest as before. This time when you rub the couscous just before the next steaming coat your hands with olive oil so that a thin film coats the grains. You'll only need a few tablespoons in total; it should not feel oily. Steam as before for a third time. (NB Reduce broth to a simmer and keep covered between steamings or it will reduce too much. If the level gets low, add some water.)
12. While couscous is steaming, reheat chicken and vegetables in a moderate oven, covered. If you like, uncover chicken towards end to brown the skin. Also reheat relish, either in oven or on stove.
13. Dump couscous back into dish for the last time. Rub through with melted butter and check seasoning.
14. To serve, pile couscous into a cone or dome shape in a large serving dish. Arrange chicken pieces and vegetables around the sides. Ladle broth over all to moisten, top with a generous dollop of relish and garnish with almonds and herbs. Pass extra broth and harissa at the table.

