

Couscous aux légumes d'hiver anglais



One of Morocco's most celebrated dishes is 'couscous aux sept légumes'. Seven is a lucky number in Morocco, and each region and city has its own variant version of this wonderful dish. Some say it should be made with not only seven different vegetables, but also seven spices and seven-year-old aged butter, called 'smen', for maximum good fortune. By these standards this recipe is pretty charmed. (I'm counting the chickpeas and the chillies.)

Having greatly enjoyed eating and helping make this dish several times during our time in Morocco, I couldn't

wait to try it at home. Normally, you'd expect to see fresh tomatoes, aubergines, courgettes and the like, but I couldn't wait for summer. So here is my winter version, employing all the usual suspect British root vegetables from our organic box. We're lucky enough to have a small pot of delicious homemade smen given to us by a kind woman we encountered in the mountains near Taliouine (of saffron fame). It smells like blue cheese and adds a unique rich savoury note to the couscous. If you don't happen to have any aged butter, use regular butter or Indian ghee instead. If you like, you can mash blue cheese into some butter to mimic the smen flavour.

I've simplified the recipe by using tinned chickpeas, quick-cook couscous and water or stock. For the real deal, you should really cook the chickpeas from scratch (soaking them in advance and then peeling them), roll and steam your own couscous (steaming it three times over the simmering vegetables), and use a hunk or two of meat to make the broth. It is also sometimes served with a delicious sweet relish of caramelised onions and raisins. But this simple way works just fine, and there's no need for any meat. The vegetables come out most delicately tender and exquisitely flavoured; you may be surprised how delicious turnip and swede can be.

For a traditional Moroccan banquet such magnificent couscous dishes would be served following the meat course and before the desserts. But they are really meals in themselves. To eat, people cluster around the giant communal dish, usually sitting on cushions or benches around a low table, and eat with their hands. As we found, the knack of shaking handfuls of couscous into neat balls and then popping them into your mouth, using just your right hand and without smearing food all over your face, is one that requires considerable dexterity. After embarrassing ourselves on numerous occasions, we slowly learnt that it's all in the wrist action, and the use of the soft, moist vegetables as glue to bind the couscous. This is great party food!

Serves: 6

Total time: 1½ hours

120 ml (½ cup) olive oil

2 onions, preferably red, peeled and quartered lengthways

bouquet garni of several sprigs parsley & coriander, with some leaves kept for garnish

1½ tsps fine salt

1 tsp freshly ground black pepper

2 tsps ground ginger

1 tsp paprika

½ tsp turmeric

1 cinnamon or cassia stick, snapped in half

1 tsp tomato concentrate

1½ litres water or unsalted chicken/beef stock

selection of 6 different root vegetables: 1-3 each (depending on their size) of:

carrots, turnips, swedes, potatoes (fairly waxy ones), parsnips, cabbage, squash, etc

1 to 3 small fresh hot chillies (depending on how hot you like your food)

1 tin chickpeas (with no added salt or sugar), drained

⅛ tsp ground saffron threads

600g (1lb 5oz, c.3 mugs) quick-cook couscous, preferably wholewheat or barley

3 tbsps Moroccan *smen* or *ghee* or regular butter (with some blue cheese if you like)



1. Put oil, onions, herbs, salt, spices, tomato concentrate and water or stock into a very large saucepan, cover and simmer for 30 minutes.
2. Meanwhile scrub/scrape/peel root vegetables as needed and cut into what you imagine might be attractive wedges, batons or chunks. Keep the pieces large, so they will cook slowly, and long, so they can be arranged in a pyramid. If using cabbage, choose a small, tight one and quarter it lengthways through the stem so it holds together.
3. Add vegetables, whole chillies, chickpeas and saffron to prepared broth, re-cover and simmer gently for around 50 minutes or until everything is really tender but not falling apart. Add more water to keep vegetables covered if necessary and check the seasoning.
4. 20 minutes before you think the vegetables will be ready, start preparing the couscous. I like to do this in the warmed serving dish, ideally a tagine or other large and round, fairly shallow receptacle. Season couscous with a little salt, pour over the same volume in boiling water from the kettle, stir once and immediately cover. Leave to sit 10 mins. Stir in *smen* or butter and a few ladlefuls of broth from the pot. Recover and let sit another 10 mins. By now it should be fully cooked, moist but not soggy.
5. To assemble, fluff couscous with a fork and mound into a pyramid. Check broth seasoning, then carefully lift vegetables out of pot one by one with a slotted spoon and arrange around the couscous. Spoon the oniony chickpea mixture on top and pour over a little more broth. Garnish with reserved coriander leaves. For best results, eat communally from the one big dish and beware of the chillies...