

Dates stuffed with pistachio and rose paste

This is a Moroccan recipe, and the perfect accompaniment to mint tea to round off a lavish Moroccan feast. Dates are one of Morocco's finest exports. While travelling around Morocco we drove all the way to Erfoud on the edge of the Sahara for its October date festival, only to find that the unusually wet weather had flooded most of the date palm groves and raging torrents had destroyed several key roads and bridges. Not what we expected to find in the desert!



Further West, in the foothills of the High Atlas mountains, we caught up with the date harvest (see pic). And just beyond we found the beautiful Valley of the Roses. In spring this valley is carpeted with roses, whose petals are harvested to make fragrant rose water, used as both a culinary and cosmetic ingredient. Rose water is also used in Iranian and Indian cuisine, and throughout the Arabic world. It was much more popular, along with orange flower water, in European cuisine in the past than it is today. Try it in cakes instead of vanilla.



But pistachios will always make me think of Turkey, and in particular Gaziantep (formerly Antep), renowned throughout Turkey and beyond for the fine pistachios which thrive in the surrounding dry, low hills. Here we ate our fill of baklava stuffed with naturally bright green pistachio paste, and marvelled at the women who sort the nuts one-by-one by hand, to ensure only the best are used. As in Morocco, Turkish cuisine combines nuts and sugar to great effect.



In London I buy my 'Antep fıstığı' (Antep nuts) from a brilliant little shop called Hot Nuts on Green Lanes, a few minutes walk from Manor House tube station. Green Lanes and nearby Blackstock Road are also a sure bet for good dates and rose water.

40-50 or so large, fairly moist dates

200g shelled pistachios, as green and fresh as possible

pinch of salt

100g caster sugar

approx 2 tbsps rose water

1. Put pistachios, sugar and salt in a processor and blitz until finely chopped.
2. Add rose water to taste and process until a stiff paste forms. There should be just enough oil in the nuts to bind the mix together when you squeeze a lump in your hand. If not, add a small dribble of vegetable oil or melted clarified butter.
3. Turn paste out, bring together into a brick, wrap tightly in clingfilm and chill until needed. (It also freezes well.)
4. Cut a slit down one side of each date and remove stones.
5. Cut paste into portions, each equivalent to the size of a grape. Squeeze each portion in your hand to mould it into an oval shape, like an American football, and pop it inside a date, letting it protrude temptingly from the opening. Serve at room temperature with mint tea.

