



Milk thistle is pared by hand and is a staple of traditional Arab cuisine.

# An extraordinary culinary experience

Traditional Arab food foraging is alive and cooking in the Galilee

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A foraging walk in the lower Galilee last week was the starting point for a workshop on traditional Arab ways of cooking native wild herbs. Individuals interested in the subject met at the house of housewife Nazera Madi in the village of Arrabe. Madi is a pleasant, middle-aged woman who modestly covers her hair and neck with a kerchief, although her colorful sweater and slacks show Western influence. She led the group along streets bordered with low stone walls, past houses with logs stacked tidily to on one side, fuel for the iron

wood-burning stoves in the living rooms. In front gardens, yellow and red rose bushes bloomed, faithful to the Middle Eastern love of fragrant flowers. Date palms swayed, and fig trees, looking chilly without their fuzzy leaves, pointed bare branches to the sky. The muezzin close by was calling worshipers to prayer; the sinuous melody echoed back loudly as we walked down the village street. Sakhnin lay across the highway, a sprawl of white buildings in the distant hills. It felt like another country.

Across the highway we entered a grove of ancient olive trees. Madi used her kitchen knife to root out the winter vegetables. Mallows, wild mustard and beet greens, wild chicory, spinach

and milk thistle grow there. These are traditional staples of Arab cuisine.

Madi dexterously peeled away prickly stems, getting down to the tender rosettes in seconds. It was easy to see, in her quick, matter-of-fact way with the knife, the years she'd processed those wild plants to make them fit to eat.

A cluster of tiny white-and-purple Johnny-Jump-Ups peeked out from a tangle of stringy sow thistle. Those little flowers complement any salad bowl, being not only pretty but also healthy. But Madi paid them no attention. Other edible greens underfoot that she knew of but ignored were nettles, chickweed, flowering garlic and marigolds.

"My mother and grandmother ate more kinds of wild herbs," she explained. "I don't pick all of them, myself."

Indeed, this note sounded a number of times over the afternoon. Traditional foods are dropping away from the modern Arab kitchens, and field greens that sustained families for centuries are becoming dim memories.

"Making *f'tir* [savory pastries stuffed with wild beet greens] is a two-day process," she explained "You gather and clean the greens the first day, then make the dough, cook the greens, stuff the pastries and bake them the second day."

"I called my kids and told them I was making *f'tir*. They said, no thanks.

They don't really like these old foods."

That's probably why Madi doesn't bother to harvest all the wild vegetables that grow just a few minutes from her home. Picking them takes only a few minutes; the real labor starts in the kitchen, washing the herbs and peeling away undesirable parts, chopping, frying and simmering. If no one appreciates them, the work isn't worthwhile.

BACK AT her home, Mali served coffee and baklava in her living room, then took the group downstairs to her workshop kitchen. It was hospital-clean, almost sparse. In one corner stood a bowl containing yeast dough for f'tir pastries. Bunches of wild chicory and wild beet greens, already cleaned and ready for cooking, lay on a work table. A raised wooden block supported a chopping

board at convenient waist level. Several onions and lemons had been placed next to a bowl of salt. Apart from a sink, a few pots on a gas range, and several large aluminum trays, that was all.

The members of the foraging group now set to work chopping and frying onions. The wild beet greens had to be chopped very fine – not an easy task when your tool is a not-very-large kitchen knife. The greens were kneaded by hand, to release the juice, and set them to simmer in plenty of boiling water. When they changed color, we drained them and squeezed the liquid out again.

In another room, Madi ground chili peppers, the dust of which caught in our throats and stung for a few minutes, making us cough. We seasoned the greens with fried onions, canned harissa and spices, then set them aside. This was the green filling for f'tir pastries. My fellow participants assured me that it was delicious. For reasons of kashrut, I myself tasted nothing, although I certainly put my nose to everything and inhaled.

I rolled dough circles out thin, following Madi's technique as I folded the circles into triangles over the filling. The manual work was soothing, leaving space in the mind to relax. Then I realized that the empty-looking room must have looked crowded and bustling in the past, when the family women would get together to cook.

"Yes," said Madi. "My sisters and sisters-in-law used to come here and split the tasks up. It was fun, and made the work seem light." At the end of the session, every woman would take her share home.

Today, Arrabe's husbands and children hurry off in different directions in the morning, just as in Western homes, and the housewife stands

Miriam Kresh is at work stuffing savory pastries with wild beet greens for a dish known as 'k'tir.'



Nazera Madi's foraging walk and cooking workshop was organized by Galileat, an enterprise that brings visitors to the Galilee for extraordinary Arab, Druse and Jewish food experiences – including a certified-kosher Druse workshop and lunch.

in her kitchen alone.

Madi poured olive oil into a large, round electric cooker that sat on the floor. She called it "the oven." The f'tir baked in it. Squatting to turn the pastries over, she looked, I thought, as her own grandmother and great-grandmother must have.

There was a pot of cooked freekeh, wheat harvested while still green. A scattering of toasted, slivered almonds complemented the soft texture of the wheat with a little crunch. While the group worked with the greens and dough for f'tir, Madi put up another pot of greens – wild chicory, seasoned with onions and spices in a similar way to the f'tir filling. And lunch was served upstairs, in the dining room.

I munched on a sandwich I'd brought along, and took pictures.

The meal, consisting of f'tir pastries, freekeh, cooked chicory greens, and labneh, looked homey, substantial and satisfying. One of the other women in the group helped herself to another f'tir and sighed, "It's all so good, and I'm eating so much...."

I came home with the recipes and the knowledge to recreate it all at home if I so chose. And I did. F'tir with fresh spinach was a hit in my family. *Nazera Madi's foraging walk and cooking workshop was organized by Galileat, an Israeli tourism enterprise that brings visitors to the Galilee for extraordinary Arab, Druse and Jewish food experiences (including a certified-kosher Druse workshop and lunch). For more information, contact Paul Nirens at paul@galileat.com or visit the website: www.galileat.com.*