



Howard Hillman's Great Peasant Dishes of the world

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hillmanwonders.com

Couscous

Morocco

It originated as a peasant dish. Today, it is a popular national specialty.

Pronunciation:

koos'-koos

Part 1 Recipe

■ Ingredients

Servings: 6 to 8

- **Dried chickpeas**
7 deciliters or 3 cups
- **Olive oil**
50 milliliters or 3 tablespoons
- **Lean boneless lamb shoulder**
900 grams or 2 pounds
- **Chopped white onions**
12 centiliters or 1/2 cup
- **Boiling water**
1 1/4 liters or 5 cups
- **Fresh lemon juice**
50 milliliters or 3 tablespoons
- **Chopped ripe tomatoes**
12 centiliters or 1/2 cup
- **Cinnamon**
2 milliliters or 1/2 teaspoon
- **Grated nutmeg**
1 milliliter or 1/4 teaspoon
- **Bay leaf**
1 medium size
- **Crushed dried mint**
2 milliliters or 1/2 teaspoon
- **Salt**
5 milliliters or 1 teaspoon
- **Ground black pepper**
1 milliliter or 1/4 teaspoon
- **Carrots**
4 medium sized

- **Turnips**
3 small sized
- **Couscous**
5 deciliters or 2 cups
- **Zucchini**
3 small sized
- **Italian sweet peppers**
2 medium sized

■ Steps

- 1** Soak the chickpeas overnight in four times their volume of water in a noncorrosible bowl.
- 2** Heat the olive oil in a heavy bottomed 5 to 7 liter (or 5 to 7 quart) pot.
- 3** Cut the lamb into 2 1/2 centimeter (1 inch) cubes. Brown them (in batches, if necessary) on all sides over moderate heat. Transfer the meat to a warm platter.
- 4** Reduce the temperature to low and sauté the onions for 2 minutes, stirring frequently.
- 5** Add the lamb, boiling water, lemon juice, tomatoes, cinnamon, nutmeg, bay leaf, mint, salt, and pepper. Stir, cover, and simmer the mixture for 20 minutes.
- 6** Drain the chickpeas and stir them into the lamb mixture. Simmer the ingredients, covered, for 45 minutes.
- 7** Begin this step 5 minutes before step 6 is completed. Peel the carrots and turnips. Cut the carrots into 2 centimeter or 3/4 inch long segments and the turnips into 2 centimeter or 3/4 inch cubes. When step 6 is completed, stir these ingredients

into the pot containing the lamb. Simmer, covered, for 15 minutes.

- 8** Begin this step as soon as the carrots and turnips start simmering in step 7. Put the couscous pellets in a 2 to 3 (2 to 3 quart) pan. Pour cold tap water into the pan until it reaches a depth of 1 inch above the pellets. Soak the pellets for 10 minutes.
- 9** Pour the couscous into a sieve, discarding the water. Return the couscous to its soaking pan. Slowly strain 5 deciliters or two cups of the broth from the large pot into the couscous. Bring this mixture to a simmer. Cover, and cook for 5 minutes over low heat.
- 10** Slice the zucchini into 2 centimeter or 3/4 inch cubes and the peppers into 1/2 centimeter or 1/4 inch thick rings. When step 7 is completed, stir in both ingredients and simmer the mixture, covered, for 10 minutes.
- 11** It should be time to turn off the heat under the simmering couscous pellets as soon as the zucchini and pepper mixture starts simmering in step 10. Fluff the pellets, cover the pan, and let it stand for 8 minutes. Then pour off any remaining liquid.
- 12** Mound the couscous pellets in the center of a warm, large serving platter. Using a slotted spoon, remove the meat and vegetables from the pot and neatly arrange them around the mound.

Part 2 Cooking tips

■ Pointers

- **Fat** - Trim all the surface fat off the lamb chunks.
- **Boiling** - Do not let the liquid boil in steps 5, 6, 7, and 10. If it does, the lamb will toughen.
- **Couscous** - If you are using coarse as opposed to medium-grind couscous pellets, extend the cooking time by 5 minutes.

■ Serving suggestions

- **Garnish** - Arrange a few parsley sprigs around the edge of the mound.
- **Sauce** - Traditionally, couscous is accompanied by a hot sauce called hrisa (or harissa). You can prepare it at home by combining 6 centiliters (1/4 cup) finely minced chili peppers with 15 milliliters (1 tablespoon) each of lemon juice, olive oil, and broth from the lamb pot.
- **Sauceboat** - Serve some of the strained broth in a sauceboat. Pour it over the couscous pellets if they lose some of their moisture at the table.
- **Eating** - In North Africa, couscous is customarily eaten with the right hand, using the thumb and first two fingers. Sometimes the meat, vegetables, and couscous pellets are scooped up with pieces of pita or other flat bread.
- **Beverage** - The best alcoholic beverage accompaniment is beer or a hearty red wine (Muslims, of course, abstain from alcohol).
- **Post couscous** - Follow the couscous with a dessert course of fresh fruits. End the meal with glasses of hot mint tea.

■ Variations

- **Ingredients** - Couscous is also made with chicken, mutton, kid, beef, and seafood alone or combined. Vegetable couscous also exists.
- **Seasonings** - Some cooks add flavoring ingredients such as saffron, garlic, and ginger to the pot.

Part 3 Travelog

I ate my first couscous in an unbaked brick farmhouse outside Tangiers on July 10, 1956. It was also the day Morocco regained its independence after nearly half a century under European domination.

Everywhere Moroccans were celebrating with unrestrained joy and my host slaughtered one of his fatted lambs for the occasion. For the festive meal, he clad himself in his best djellaba, the traditional long-sleeved, hooded robe of his Berber ancestors. His wife was equally radiant in her hand-embroidered, head-to-toe burkas.

A lamb couscous was served. Couscous, the national dish of Morocco, consists of a mound of steamed pellets of semolina flour ringed with stewed meats and vegetables.

Moroccans generally prepare couscous in a special cooking vessel called a couscoucier. It resembles an oversized, bulbous double boiler, except that the bottom of the upper pot (which holds the semolina pellets) is perforated. The holes allow the rising steam from the simmering stew in the lower pot to cook and flavor the pellets above.

Sometimes Moroccans make couscous without the couscoucier. Since few cooks

beyond North Africa own this cooking utensil (and would not want to invest in one for infrequent use), I give the non-couscoucier method in the accompanying recipe.

If you do have a genuine couscoucier, use it, as I do. Do not, however, concoct an ersatz one by suspending a metal colander over a stockpot - this oft-suggested method seldom produces satisfactory results.

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