

Sugar and spice

Peggy Markel fell in love with North African cuisine on a visit to Morocco two years ago. Today her Marrakesh cookery courses explore the country's spices and ingredients. Lori Zimring de Mori joined her to sample everything from sweet mint tea to saffron-scented seafood tagine.

16 November 2002

A couple of springtimes ago, I spent an Easter holiday in Morocco with a couple of friends. One of them was Peggy Markel. Like me, she was an American living in Italy, where her cookery school, La Cucina Al Focolare – in Regello on the wilder side of Tuscany – was one of the first to offer hands-on experience dispensed by inspirational teachers steeped in the culture and cuisine of the region.

This was Markel's first trip to Morocco, but she was immediately convinced that there was similar potential for a school in a country where the cooking is a relatively unopened book. "The food, the people, the colours and textures. It offered up such a strong dose of magic and the chance of excavating old traditions and bringing them to modern life. I couldn't get enough of this place," she says.

On that first trip, Markel met Meryanne Loum-Martin, a French-Senegalese lawyer-turned-designer creating beautiful living spaces from the elements of Moroccan style, and her husband, Gary Martin, an American ethnobotanist, whose work is the promotion of agricultural, cultural and biological diversity. It was a perfect match.

Eighteen months and half a dozen return trips later Markel was ready to start doing in Morocco what she succeeded in doing so well in Italy for the last 10 years: discover a place through its culinary traditions, markets, cooks, landscapes, farmers and artisans.

Students stay at the Martins' guesthouse, Jnane Tamsnaãone, in Marrakesh. Surrounded by acres of date palms and a sprawling orchard, vegetable and herb garden, the 10-room guesthouse is an oasis of hushed courtyards, faded Berber rugs, candlelit lanterns, improbably perfumed flowers and unsurpassed hospitality. Minutes away the seductive chaos of

the medina beckons with its tangle of souks selling everything from live chickens to spices brought up through the Sahara on camelback (or so they say). Who can fail to get a feel for Moroccan cookery in this setting?

I'd eaten my share of the food over the years – great platters of couscous scattered with chickpeas, vegetables and lamb; elegant **pastillas** whose delicate filo crusts hid a mixture of pigeon and eggs laced with cinnamon, almonds and sugar; tagines of chicken and preserved lemons cooked in traditional conical covered earthenware dishes. I'd dutifully equipped my kitchen with bags of imported couscous; little packets of ras el-hanout (the mysterious spice mixture no Moroccan home is without); bright tubes of spicy harissa; and an embarrassing number of cookbooks. What I was lacking was context. The Moroccan diet might spring from the same Mediterranean bounty as southern Europe's, but its methods, flavours and traditions come from a rich and sensual world of their own.

Our first day began with the staple of Moroccan cooking: couscous. An outdoor kitchen had been set up in the late morning shade of a courtyard. Our teacher was a young woman named Bahija; her dark hair tied up in a white kerchief. She seemed shy, but melted into earnest expressiveness the moment she began to speak.

She told us that couscous is both the name of Morocco's most famous dish and the tiny semolina granules used to make it (just as a tagine is both the name for the earthenware vessel used to slow cook stews over a brazier and the stew itself).

We learned that couscous is not, in fact, a grain, but coarse ground semolina flour (or less frequently barley) mixed with water and rolled into little balls, then passed through sieves and dried to form the tiny uniform specks. We also learned by what magic the tiny granules are steamed – three times – over a pot of simmering vegetables without falling through the holes into the spice-laced broth.

"You have to work the couscous ... make sure it doesn't form lumps," she explained, spreading the dry granules on to a round platter and moistening them with fistfuls of water and a splash of vegetable oil. Her hands moved quickly over the plate, rubbing the granules lightly between flat palms as if as each one needed to be gently coaxed into action. In between tossing chunks of aubergine, pumpkin and courgette into the couscoussier, Bahija taught us how to make two of the traditional accompaniments: **tfaya**, a sweet onion and raisin confit spiced with pepper and ground ginger; and a

brilliantly fiery harissa made with home-grown chillies, garlic, paprika, caraway and cumin. f

After a morning's cooking, our efforts became lunch, matched with several glasses of chilled local rosé that, like most Moroccan wines, works well enough under the shade of a date palm but tastes a bit like it was made by someone who doesn't actually drink the stuff.

We became Bahija's faithful acolytes, watching her every move in awe, and scribbling down notes. But we found it difficult to achieve the same results. Take the fiendishly complex pastilla. Layers of the papery round sheets of dough (similar to filo) were laid out on a huge platter like overlapping flower petals, painted with butter and then layered with meat, more filo, egg, cinnamon and almond, more filo and so on until the whole thing was a few inches high. At this point Bahija folded over the "petals", laid another filo sheet on top, painted the whole thing with egg yolk and smoothed the surface with her hands, pushing all the air out. By now the construction that had seemed so utterly delicate and fragile at the beginning was as sturdy as a well wrapped parcel.

We learned to preserve lemons, prizing them open and sprinkling them with salt. And we chopped up boiled purslane for terjla, the agreeably tart salad which begins many Moroccan meals. The purslane is steamed with three cloves of garlic, mixed with fresh tomatoes (peeled, seeded and blended), cumin, paprika, olive oil, harissa, salt and pepper. Other salads are simple and never green. Tomatoes were always dressed with oil – sometimes olive, sometimes not – and usually sprinkled with cumin powder. In restaurants some vegetable salads are dressed with orange blossom water.

As for the tagines, their cooking all happens in the closed darkness of the terracotta vessel (though, alas, sometimes also in a regular soup pot and then transferred into a tagine). The best tagines can be found on roadside stands, the individual pots all lined up in a row, sitting on their little braziers. You'll see whole tomatoes perched on the top of the cones where they slowly heat and are then cut up and added to the aromatic contents.

To discover the food and culture that lay behind our tutorials, we drove across the dusty Haouz plain south of Marrakesh, into the unexpectedly lush valley of Ourika. There we met Jalil Belkamel, creator of Le Jardin de Senteurs et Cultures, a three-and-a-half-year-old organic herb garden. Jalil shook our hands, then put his to his heart in that most lovely of North African gestures. He led us (barefoot) around swirling teardrop-shaped

herb beds, stopping here and there to encourage us to pluck a leaf or sprig of one thing or another and rub it between our fingers. "This is thyme, a natural antibiotic ... marjoram for rheumatism ... absinthe, ah, this one has a bad reputation, but we use it for tea ... warming and aphrodisiac."

We detoured to a covered verandah and watched women kneading barley and semolina dough, which they rolled into flat discs, sprinkled with sesame, fennel, cumin or nigella seed and baked in mud and straw wood-fired ovens. We talked and drank tea. And learned that the ubiquitous Moroccan brew – poured with such flamboyance into filigreed, jewel-hued glasses and offered as a gesture of hospitality by rug merchants, restaurateurs and everyone in between – is not necessarily made from mint leaves, black tea and vast amounts of sugar. Depending on the season or purpose of the tea, it can also be flavoured with aromatics, such as scented geranium or absinthe.

On another day, we headed west towards Essaouira, in search of the wild Atlantic coastline and the fabled argan trees. Comically, goats clamber to the highest gnarled branches of the trees to forage for leaves and fruits. But it's the argan oil that's the real story. This ancient staple of the Berber villagers is the hot new gastronomic "discovery" in Paris, New York and London. Moroccans dip freshly baked bread into shallow bowls of argan oil at breakfast; use it with lemon juice, never vinegar, and savour its nutty, slightly toasty taste on cooked vegetables, salads and tagines; and mix it with ground almonds, honey and cinnamon in one of its most delicious incarnations: amlou.

If the production of olive oil seems labour-intensive, you should see argan oil being made – as it always is – by local Berber women. Two women with bright skirts spread around them sat cracking a pile of hard oval nuts between smooth stones with a methodical tapping that was almost musical. The ivory kernels hidden inside were roasted over a wood fire, ground by stone mill into a fine paste, then kneaded with tepid water until the pale brown oil finally emerged.

The rest of the trip was a dreamy whirl of impressions – lush, green barley terraces along a riverbed snaking into the Atlas mountains; a tagine of dried figs, walnuts and lamb on the rooftop of the Kasbah de Toubkal; the spice souk at dusk and the mystery of ras el-hanout unveiled; rose petals in a stone fountain and scattered on our table at the restaurant Dar Moha.

This was once the riad (city home) of Pierre Balman, and Moha is one of the country's star chefs, with the celebrity status of having appeared on a

Moroccan television cookery show. He combines traditional methods and his own inspiration for astonishing results. Salads: from aubergines dressed with honey and almonds; ground cucumber salad, carrots with honey and sesame seeds, puréed peppers, raw white cabbage, carrots with almonds and orange blossom water.

We had pastillas with pigeon, and another with fish. There were three tagines: seafood scented with saffron; quail wrapped in filo with raisins and cinnamon, and beef. We finished with a dessert of sliced oranges sprinkled with ground cinnamon. Despite having been on a cookery course, I knew I could only aspire to cook like this.

But by the time I returned home, my suitcases laden with saffron, cumin, cardamom and ginger, I knew something had changed. The scents were as seductive as ever, but they were no longer intimidating. Now I knew exactly what to do with them. E

Morocco: A Feast for the Senses is one of Peggy Markel's Culinary Adventures, PO Box 54, Boulder, CO 80306, USA. Tel: 00 1 800 988 2851, or fax 00 1 303 440 8598. Or you can contact Peggy at info@cookinitaly.com, or visit the website at www.cookinitaly.com .

There are 10-day courses available in Morocco in June, September and November, 2003. \$3,895 per person (£2,500) for double occupancy and \$4,195 (£2,700) for singles.