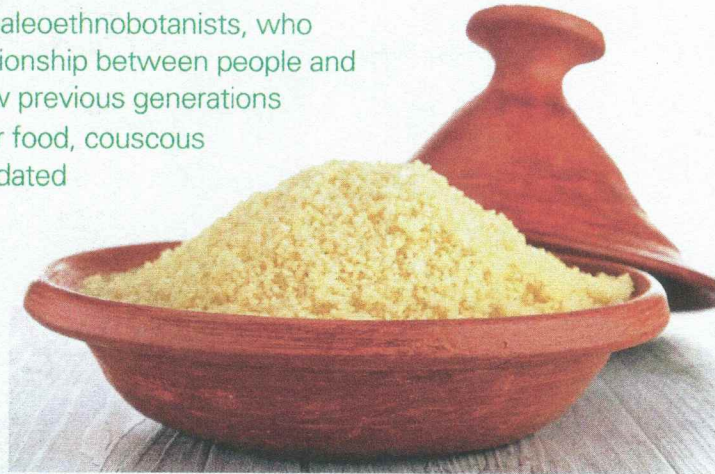


According to paleoethnobotanists, who study the relationship between people and plants and how previous generations used plants for food, couscous may have pre-dated noodles.

In some parts of Italy, couscous is as common as spaghetti. Move over *magret de canard* and *moules frites* – couscous served with savoury



slow-cooked meats continues to gain popularity in French cuisine, voted France's third favourite meal in a 2011 study conducted for the magazine *Vie Pratique Gourmand*. There are confirmed references to couscous consumption in France dating as far back as 1630 in Toulon and 1699 in Brittany. Despite this significant appreciation for couscous, however, it can hardly be claimed as a national dish in France or Italy.

In fact, countries around the world have taken up this North African staple, which first emerged from Morocco in the 13th century, likely because it's delicious, healthy and easy to prepare. A traditional couscous is made with a base of tiny grains of semolina (durum wheat) that are steamed. Once the grains are cooked, they are typically served with either meat or fish and a warm vegetable broth. In some countries, chutney, chickpeas and harissa – a hot chile paste – may also accompany the couscous.

Like so many dishes that have evolved from ancient roots, there are many cultural recipe variations. Couscous was originally made from millet, a short seed-grass that grows well in semi-arid climates. The shift in popularity to semolina couscous occurred sometime in the 20th century. However, it is still possible to find couscous made from cornmeal in Brazil, or pearl millet in Senegal, and there are even variations made with barley.

Couscous is essentially simple pasta, made from flour and water. The tiny grains are formed when the semolina is sprinkled with water and then rolled by hand in a circular motion to form the balls. The pellet size is tested with a sieve; those that fall through the mesh are deemed too small. The couscous maker dusts flour over the granules to keep them from sticking together and repeats the rolling process until each ball is of the correct diameter. Only then are these tiny spheres put out in the sun to dry. The process is very time-consuming; one needs to have the right touch and correct hand temperature. Traditionally, women made couscous in large batches.

Hand-made couscous is heated in a *couscoussière*, similar to a large double boiler, where the top section allows the steam to reach the grains through tiny holes. The couscous is wrapped in cheesecloth and steamed, and at regular intervals the granules are rubbed to ensure they do not stick together. Once it's cooked, the starch is typically served with savoury stewed lamb, beef or seafood on a shallow communal platter called a *gsaa*.

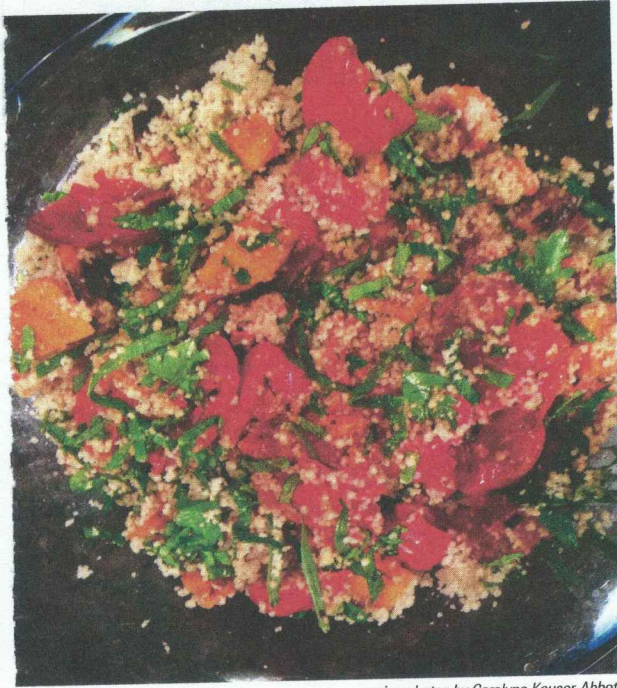
Couscous is a tasty alternative to rice or noodles. The magic in couscous preparation is to arrive at a light, fluffy texture. The tiny granules are quite bland on their own, and therefore pair perfectly with tender slow-cooked stews and accompaniments.

The advent of instant couscous, mechanically formed and pre-cooked, has almost eliminated the lengthy preparation except in the most traditional households. The packaged product, available in grocery stores, is already dried and partially cooked. A short bath of boiling water allows the grains of couscous to rehydrate as the liquid is absorbed.

As inhabitants of northern Africa migrated to other Mediterranean countries during the last few centuries, the popularity of couscous has grown. The island of Sicily, which Italians claim for their own though many Sicilians argue it's more aligned with North Africa, hosts an annual Cous Cous Fest each September. This festival, now in its 16th year, is held in San Vito Lo Capo. It provides an opportunity for chefs from around the world to compete with their creative couscous variations.

But you don't have to leave Calgary to enjoy good couscous. The Casbah restaurant, for example, is owned and operated by Rani and Carrie Drissi. Moroccan born, Rani Drissi says that couscous is a dish intricately woven into the essential fabric of Moroccan culture. The Berbers, often considered the inventors of couscous, called it *seksu* or *kesksu*. The Drissis aim to reproduce a uniquely Moroccan experience. Their couscous is made from scratch and finished with *smin*, butter preserved with salt and seasoned with thyme. While diners await their meals in an enchanting, silk-adorned room, Casbah's couscous is steamed in a *keskes*, the Arab name for a couscoussière.

Although trips to North Africa, France or Sicily all sound enticing, you can find the necessary ingredients for an excellent couscous in Calgary, so you can indulge in a culinary trip to Morocco without having to spend MAD money (Moroccan dirham) on the airfare. Whether you decide to dine out at one of Calgary's authentic restaurants or make couscous – the dish, not the granules – at home, it's a staple you should add to your exotic culinary repertoire.



recipe photos by Carolyne Kauser-Abbott

Three variations of couscous:

Each of these recipes is meant to feed four people, with some leftovers. Prepare your couscous following the instructions on the package for four people. Including boiling the water, the preparation time for it is typically no more than 10 minutes; you should plan to make the couscous right before serving.

▲ Vegetarian Couscous with Butternut Squash and Oven-dried Tomatoes

This version makes for a great side dish or lunchtime salad with some greens. If you want to serve it as a main course, you may wish to add the chickpeas for some extra protein.

12-14 large, ripe plum tomatoes cut in half lengthwise

6 T. olive oil

2 T. balsamic vinegar

**2 T. muscovado – unrefined brown – sugar
salt and pepper to taste**

2-1/2 c. diced butternut squash

1 large onion, sliced

1 t. ground cinnamon

2 t. ground cumin

1 package instant couscous

pinch saffron threads

**1-1/2 c. chickpeas from a can or bottle,
drained (optional)**

**3 T. each, chopped fresh tarragon, mint and
flat-leaf Italian parsley**

1-1/2 T. lemon zest

salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preheat your oven to 300°F. Brush the tomato halves with 2 T. olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Season lightly with muscovado sugar, salt and pepper. Spread out on a baking tray, cut-side up, and bake for as long as 2 hours; the tomatoes should shrink and start to lose their moisture. Remove the tomatoes from the oven and increase the heat to 350°F.

Toss the butternut squash in 2 T. olive oil, salt and pepper. Spread a single layer on a baking sheet and bake for about 20-25 minutes, until the squash starts to soften. In a frying pan, heat the remaining 2 T. olive oil on medium and sauté the sliced onion for 2-3 minutes, until translucent. Add the cinnamon and cumin and cook for another 2 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

Prepare the couscous, adding saffron threads to the boiling water.

If you're adding chickpeas, combine them with the couscous as you're fluffing the grains.

Mix the roasted tomatoes, squash, and onion mixture together in a bowl with the fresh herbs and lemon zest. Add the vegetables to the couscous, trying not to over-mix. Season to taste. Serve warm or as a cold salad. **Serves 4 to 6.**

Couscous with Lamb and Chicken ►

This is a traditional preparation and presentation for couscous. The recipe comes from a friend in France who lived in Algeria for a period of time.

3 - 4 T. olive oil

6 pieces of lamb collar (neck), including the bone

6 chicken thighs, including the skin

1/3 c. tomato paste

1 medium onion, chopped

3 garlic cloves, crushed

1 T. ground cumin

1 T. ras el hanout, a Moroccan spice blend

4 c. water

4 carrots, peeled and chopped

1 turnip, peeled and diced

2 zucchinis, diced

1 each red and green peppers, seeded and chopped

1 small Napa cabbage or regular cabbage, chopped

6 canned artichoke hearts, drained

1 c. chickpeas from a can or bottle, drained

2-3 t. salt

1 package instant couscous

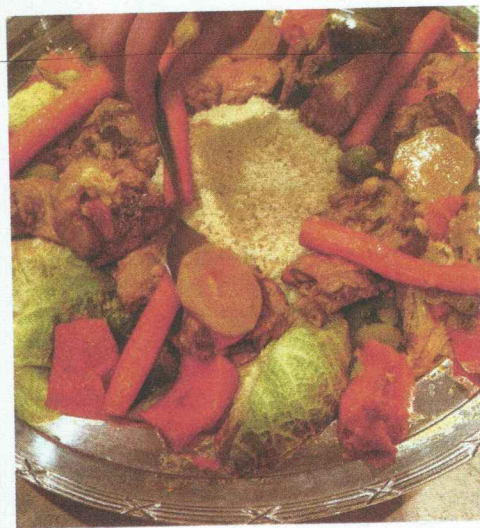
1 T. harissa, from a can, mixed with a little water

In a large stockpot, heat the olive oil on medium and brown all the meat slightly. Remove the chicken and set aside on a plate. Add tomato paste, chopped onion, garlic and spices to the pan; allow the spices to cook for 1-2 minutes. Add the water and turn up the heat until the water boils. Reduce the heat to medium and cover the pot. Cook for about 15 minutes. Return the chicken to the stockpot. Add the carrots and turnip and cook for another 15 minutes.

Taste the sauce at this stage and adjust the spices if necessary. Add the chopped zucchini, peppers and cabbage. Cook for 5 minutes. Add the artichokes, chickpeas and salt to suit your taste. Reduce heat to low and simmer, until your couscous is ready.

Prepare the couscous according to the package instructions.

Serve the couscous on a large platter surrounded by the meat and vegetables. With a large slotted spoon remove the meat and vegetables and arrange around a central mound of couscous. Strain the remaining liquid from the pot and serve in a bowl alongside your meal. Serve the harissa on the side. **Serves 4 to 6.**



Aida's Dawood Basha served with Couscous

Aida, the owner and chef at Aida's Bistro, has a Lebanese background. She does not profess to serve a traditional North African couscous; instead she uses the tiny grains as a delicious alternative to rice. This is her recipe for Dawood Basha, meatballs sautéed with zucchini, eggplant and green pepper in pomegranate molasses, served with couscous.

For the meatballs:

1 lb. lean ground beef

1 medium onion, finely diced

salt and freshly ground black pepper

For the vegetables and sauce:

1 medium onion, chopped

2 medium zucchini, chopped

1 medium eggplant, chopped

2 green peppers, seeded and diced

3 tomatoes, diced

2-3 T. olive oil

1/3-1/2 c. pomegranate molasses

salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 package instant couscous

Prepare the meatballs first. Mix together the ground beef, diced onion, salt and ground pepper until combined. Roll the beef mixture into tiny meatballs the size of your thumbnail. Set the meatballs aside while you prepare the vegetables.

Chop each of the vegetables to a medium-sized dice. Heat the olive oil on moderate heat and sauté the onion until translucent, 2-3 minutes. Add the meatballs and allow them to brown slightly, but not to cook completely. Add the diced zucchini, eggplant and pepper, and cook until the vegetables start to soften. Add the diced tomatoes and cook until they soften. Add the pomegranate molasses, salt and pepper. Cook the mixture, uncovered, on low heat until the sauce begins to thicken.

Prepare the couscous. Serve it warm with the Dawood Basha on individual plates.

Serves 4 to 6.

Delicious couscous served at:

The Casbah

720 - 11th Avenue SW, lower level
403-265-9800, casbahrestaurant.ca

Aida's Bistro

2208 - 4th Street SW
403-541-1189, aidasbistro.ca

The Sultan's Tent

Main Floor #4, 14th Street NW
403-244-2333, sultanstent.ca

Where to find ingredients:

The Silk Road Spice Merchant

Main Store (in Inglewood)
1403A - 9th Avenue S.E.
403-261-1955, silkroadspices.ca

Silk Road offers two spice blends that are well-suited to couscous:
Ras el Hanout and a Turkish Baharat.

Superstore is a good place to buy couscous.

These stores sell couscous and pomegranate molasses:

Shaganappi Grocery

3919 - 17th Avenue SW
403-249-4200

Chahine Supermarket

#1, 7196 Temple Drive NE
403-590-2695

The Cookbook Co. Cooks

722 - 11th Avenue SW
403-265-6066, ext# 1

