Eggplant and Fresh Herb Tabbouleh

EGGPLANT AND FRESH HERB TABBOULEH

Taboulé d' aubergine aux herbes fraîches

SERVES 8

I have a great fondness for the North African style of making tabbouleh, which calls for couscous rather than the Middle Eastern bulgur wheat, and uses a greater proportion of grain to herb for a more filling salad. The classic *taboulé* revolves around tomatoes, cucumbers, and mint, but I prefer this eggplant version, spiked with a mix of herbs and a sesame dressing.

Throughout the summer I'll make salads like this one to serve as my workday lunches, taking advantage of how effortless it is to prepare couscous: I'll make a big bowl early in the week, and eat my way through it on subsequent days. But this particular tabbouleh is fit for a crowd, too; I always serve it at the party I throw for my birthday every July.

1½ pounds / 680 g small eggplants
Fine sea salt
2 cups (12 ounces / 340 g) whole wheat couscous
1 small red onion (4¼ ounces / 120 g), finely diced
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
2 cups / 480 ml boiling water
1 rounded tablespoon all-natural tahini
1 tablespoon harissa, homemade or store-bought, or more to taste
¼ cup / 60 ml freshly squeezed lemon juice
1 cup / 30 g sliced fresh mint leaves
1 cup / 30 g sliced fresh basil leaves
1 cup / 30 g chopped fresh cilantro leaves

1. Cut the eggplants into ⅓-inch / 8 mm dice. Put in a colander, sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt, toss to coat, and let rest for 1 hour. This will help remove any bitterness. Turn out onto a clean kitchen towel and squeeze gently to absorb the juices.

2. Set up a steamer. Steam the eggplant, tightly covered, until very tender but still holding their shape, about 12 minutes. Set aside to cool. This can be done a day ahead and the eggplants refrigerated.

3. In a large heatproof salad bowl, combine the couscous and onion. Stir in the olive oil and 1 teaspoon salt. Pour the boiling water over the couscous. Cover and let stand until the water is absorbed, about 10 minutes (or according to package directions). Fluff with a fork and set aside to cool.

4. In a small bowl, combine the tahini, harissa, and ½ teaspoon salt. Stir in the lemon juice, 1 teaspoon at a time, making sure it is incorporated before adding the next to prevent curdling. Add 2 tablespoons water and stir until smooth. You want a dressing that's pourable, but not too thin; add a little more water as necessary. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

5. Pour the dressing over the couscous and toss to combine. Fold in the eggplant and mint, basil, and cilantro. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve. The salad will keep for a few days.

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TAHINI

Tahini is made by grinding hulled sesame seeds until they release their oils and turn into an off-white, creamy paste with a nutty flavor and a delicate hint of bitterness. It is used extensively all around the Mediterranean and is the perfect ingredient for thickening sauces and dressings or jazzing up dips and soups. It goes well with apple slices for a snack, too.

You'll find it in natural foods stores and Middle Eastern markets. All tahinis are not created equal, so it may be worth trying different brands until you find the one you prefer; it should be nutty and delicately sweet, with no harsh bitter notes. Get one that's all-natural, containing just sesame seeds, and don't be tempted by "whole" sesame butter made from unhulled seeds; it is more nutritious, but significantly more bitter, too.