

## Ancient grain for modern times

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If you have resolved to eat more healthfully this year, consider laying in a supply of bulgur. No whole grain is more versatile, economical, quick cooking and savory than this toasty sibling of cracked wheat. You can like brown rice or steel-cut oats, but with bulgur you can fall in love.

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### IMAGES



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I was already a bulgur enthusiast when I went to Turkey on vacation last spring. But there, my infatuation deepened. At the table of Ayfer Unsal, a fellow food writer in Istanbul, I tasted a fascinating lamb and sour-plum stew dotted with tiny bulgur dumplings. At Ciya, one of the city's best restaurants, I devoured the bulgur and tomato salad and succulent kebabs of ground lamb and bulgur. Elsewhere I ate Turkey's equivalent of steak tartare - fine bulgur kneaded with red pepper paste and raw ground lamb - as well as savory patties of mashed chickpeas and bulgur; bulgur pilaf with lentils; even a milky beverage made from fermented bulgur.

The Turks, I later learned, consume about a half-pound of bulgur a week per capita. That's a pace we Americans can aspire to.

I'm not abandoning pasta - never, no way - but I did want to build my bulgur repertoire. So I turned to Jale Boga Robertson, a Turkish-born, Marin-based cooking teacher who leads culinary tours of her homeland.

"My family makes their own bulgur," Robertson confessed during the few hours she spent in my kitchen recently teaching me some family-style bulgur dishes. "We don't go to the store and buy it."

She meant her family in Adana, the city in Southern Turkey where she was raised. Every fall, the family receives a couple of crates of new wheat - its share of the harvest from land inherited from her grandfather. In traditional homes like hers, the whole grains are boiled until tender in a large kettle, then drained and spread out on cloths on the town's flat roofs to

dry in the sun. The roof, says Robertson, is where all the winter preparations take place, like drying peppers, tomato paste and eggplant.

Unsal, who grew up in Gaziantep, near the Syrian border, has memories of an even more primitive procedure. The local women would take the wheat - high-protein durum wheat - to a nearby spring, where water and space were plentiful. They washed the wheat, then boiled it in large cauldrons over a fire fueled with grapevine cuttings. The cooking took all night, so the women would keep each other awake by telling jokes and stories. In the morning, they would send a little of the cooked wheat to their families for breakfast after enhancing it with chopped walnuts. The rest would be spread on muslin sheets - borrowed or rented if you didn't own them - to dry in the sun.

## **By the numbers**

When the wheat had thoroughly dried, it was ready for grinding. Robertson recalls accompanying her father to the community mill, where he would specify how the family's supply should be ground - some coarse for pilaf, some medium-coarse for kofte (a large category of croquettes and patties) and the rest fine for kibbe (stuffed croquettes with a bulgur coating). The numbers that American packagers use to indicate the grind - ranging from one for the finest to four for extra coarse - mean nothing to a Turk.

"I thought, what is this bulgur No. 2?" recalls Robertson of her first puzzling visits to American markets a dozen years ago.

Archaeological finds in Greece and the Eastern Mediterranean suggest that people have been processing wheat into bulgur for millennia. Today's fans may love bulgur because it cooks so quickly, but that wasn't what motivated the ancients.

"Think about it," says Paula Wolfert, the Sonoma author of "Mediterranean Grains and Greens" (HarperCollins, 1998).

"You grind some wheat coarsely and leave it around and it would spoil. But if they cooked it and dried it, it would keep. That's the only reason (for bulgur). It's a preservative."

The cooking also killed insects and larvae, a critical step for grains destined for storage, says Clifford Wright, the culinary historian and author of "A Mediterranean Feast" (William Morrow, 1999).

## **The bulgur trail**

A taste for bulgur largely follows the arc of the Eastern Mediterranean, from Greece and Turkey through the Levant - Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel and Palestine - and as far east as Iraq, then on to the North African nations of Egypt and Tunisia. "Wherever the Turks were, they brought bulgur with them," says Wolfert.

Harry Perch, an Assyrian immigrant who settled in Fresno in the early part of the 20th century, helped bulgur conquer a new continent. By 1930, Perch and his sons had started what would become the Sunnyland Bulgur Co., known today as Sunnyland Mills, the largest producer of premium bulgur in the country.

The Arrowhead Mills, Near East and Sadaf brands of bulgur are all from Sunnyland Mills, as is the bulk organic bulgur found at Whole Foods. Unlike Turkish bulgur, most of which is made from durum wheat and has a golden color, Sunnyland Mills bulgur comes from soft white wheat and is light brown.

Photos from the early days show the company's vast drying yard, where the cooked wheat was spread on screens to parch under the sun. Today, of course, most of the world's bulgur production has moved indoors, into factories where the grain can be processed in an efficient and sanitary fashion. Giant pressure cookers, tunnel dryers, electric grinders and mechanical sorters do the work that Turkish women used to do laboriously by hand. Ironically, Sunnyland Mills now produces much of its electricity with solar power, but the grains are dried mechanically.

"Bulgur is the meat of the poor," said Robertson, as her bulgur and red lentil soup simmered on my kitchen stove. The grain does provide some protein, but as ancient cooks seemed to intuit, it lacks an essential amino acid found in legumes. Pairing bulgur with lentils or chickpeas, as Turkish and Middle Eastern recipes routinely do, completes the protein.

Just before serving, Robertson stirred the seasonings - a skilletful of butter-fried onions, red pepper, toasted cumin and dried mint - into her soup.

## **Comfort food**

"This is the comfort food of Turkey," she said, ladling out bowls of the fragrant puree. "Twenty-four hours a day, there's lentil soup at restaurants. Most people like to have it in the morning."

With fine bulgur, she made kisir, a Turkish salad subject to varied interpretations. Unlike Lebanese tabbouleh, the parsley salad with a little bulgur in it, kisir is all about the grain. Some cooks add walnuts, pistachios, cucumbers, lettuce or purslane to the softened bulgur.

Some moisten the grain with cold water and knead it; others use hot water and let the bulgur swell on its own. In some households, bitter orange juice replaces the lemon. Sweet-tart pomegranate syrup is an option, and the amount of hot pepper paste is up to the cook.

"I put pepper paste in everything," admitted Robertson, whose hometown is known for its spicy food. She and her mother, an excellent home cook, talk on Skype regularly, and the first thing Robertson asks is, "What did you cook today?" Like most people whose knowledge of cooking does not derive from books, she scorns tablespoons and measuring cups. "In Turkish, we say your hand has the measurement."

Robertson plunged her hands into the moistened bulgur to mix it thoroughly with tomato paste, pepper paste, green onions, fresh mint, pomegranate molasses and the other seasonings. Then she arranged the cool salad on a platter lined with lettuce cups, which diners use to wrap the kisir, taco style.

"When ladies get together for chatting, they make kisir and tea," said Robertson.

To demonstrate the use of extra-coarse bulgur, she made an exquisite lamb pilaf with chickpeas and a concentrated broth made from the browned lamb shoulder.

"If you can stand a spoon straight up in the pilaf, it is done," announced Robertson, who implemented that culinary tip from her mother, then draped a kitchen towel over the cooked grains for a brief rest.

Like the soup, the pilaf got a scented boost just before serving - a drizzle of warm butter perfumed with cumin, red pepper and mint. Presented on a silver Turkish platter, the steaming pilaf needed no nutritionists to make the case for the allure of this ancient grain.

## **Does bulgur qualify as a whole grain?**

Whole grains retain the bran and germ that are discarded when grains are refined - when wheat is made into white flour, for example. The bran and germ don't account for much in terms of volume, but they contribute almost all of the nutritional value - fiber from the bran, vitamins and minerals from the germ.

How much of the bran and germ are lost when wheat becomes bulgur? It depends on the processor.

Ayfer Unsal, the author of two books in Turkish on bulgur, insists that Turkish processors remove the bran. Judging from its even golden color and sweet, mild taste, the Duru brand bulgur from Turkey available in the Bay Area appears to be de-branned. The company did not respond to an e-mail inquiry.

Mike Orlando, co-owner of Sunnyland Mills, confirms that his company's bulgur is partly de-branned.

"Any time you move grain, there's some removal," says Orlando. In addition, the grains undergo "a little scouring" to make it easier for water to enter.

"Our process mimics what has been done for 4,000 years," says Orlando. "It's what the ladies used to actually do with their hands. They would rub the grains against each other to nick that bran layer. Now we just use machines to do it."

Cynthia Harriman, director of food and nutrition strategies for the Whole Grains Council, a nonprofit advocacy group, served on a task force that tried to develop guidelines for defining whole grains for research and labeling purposes.

"The bulgur situation is indeed a complex one," wrote Harriman in an e-mail message. Harriman and her colleagues canvassed bulgur manufacturers to inquire about bran loss in processing, which varied considerably. In the end, the group decided not to let "the perfect be the enemy of the good," says Harriman, and recommended that "minimally processed bulgur" be considered a whole grain. The FDA takes a similar stance in its draft guidelines.

Bran or no bran, bulgur is not de-germed, so it should retain most of the vitamins, minerals and fats found in the whole grain. "Most of the germ is there," says Orlando of his product, "and we know it's there because there's some rancidity over time."

Once you open a package of bulgur, keep it in a cool, dry place. If you don't expect to finish the package within a couple of months, keep it in the refrigerator.

- Janet Fletcher

## **Green wheat for great pilaf**

Once bulgur wins you over, you are ready for freekeh (also spelled frik or firik), a green, or unripe, wheat prized in Turkey and the Eastern Mediterranean. Harvested when the wheat kernels are still moist and immature, the stalks are burned in the

field over a wood fire. After threshing to separate the kernels from the burnt chaff, the wheat is cracked (or sometimes left whole) and sold as freekeh, a smoky cousin of bulgur. Use it in pilaf (see recipes).

"In Gaziantep villages, they mix freekeh and bulgur together and make a wedding pilaf with lamb," says Unsal. "It's the most delicious thing you can ever eat."

- J.F.

## Resources

Here are some places to find bulgur in a range of sizes, pomegranate molasses, coarsely ground medium-hot red pepper such as Maras or Aleppo, Turkish hot red pepper paste, red lentils and freekeh (frik):

**Parkside Farmers' Market**, 555 Taraval St. (at 16th Avenue), San Francisco; (415) 681-5563.

**Indus Food Center**, 1920 San Pablo Ave. (at University), Berkeley; (510) 549-3663.

**Jasmine Market**, 307 Third St. (at Union), San Rafael; (415) 459-4866.

**Kalustyan's**, *kalustyans.com*; (800) 352-3451

## Which bulgur for that dish?

In the old days, says food writer Ayfer Unsal, bulgur processors offered only two sizes: a fine grind for kibbe and kofte (croquettes or patties); and a coarse grind for soups, stuffings and pilafs. Manufacturers today produce a wider range, often indicating grind size with numbers, from one (for the finest) to four (for the coarsest). The two finer grinds are roughly interchangeable in recipes, as are the two coarser sizes. (See **F1** for pictures and descriptions.)

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## Fine bulgur:

No. 1 bulgur is used for Eastern Mediterranean salads such as tabbouleh.

## Medium bulgur:

No. 2 bulgur is used in the same recipes as fine bulgur by those who prefer a slightly coarser texture.

### **Coarse bulgur:**

No. 3 bulgur is used in pilafs, soups and stuffings.

### **Extra-coarse bulgur:**

No. 4 bulgur is used in pilafs, soups and stuffings by those who prefer an even plumper grain.

## **Turkish Bulgur Salad with Parsley & Mint (Kisir)**

**Serves 6**

You can make the salad up to 2 hours ahead and keep it at room temperature. In summer, replace the tomato paste with 2 finely chopped tomatoes.

- 1 cup fine bulgur (No. 1)
- 1 heaping tablespoon Turkish hot pepper paste (see Resources)
- 1 heaping tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 cup thinly sliced green onions (white and green parts)
- 1 cup coarsely chopped Italian parsley
- 1/2 cup coarsely chopped fresh mint
- 1 fresh Anaheim chile, halved lengthwise, seeds and ribs removed, then sliced thinly crosswise
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- -- Juice of 1 large lemon (about 1/4 cup)
- 1 tablespoon pomegranate molasses (see Resources)
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt, or more to taste
- -- Butter lettuce leaves
- -- Coarsely ground medium-hot red pepper, preferably Turkish Maras or Syrian Aleppo pepper (see Resources)

**Instructions:** Place the bulgur in a large bowl and dampen it with 3/4 cup hot water. Cover with a kitchen towel and let it rest for about 10 minutes. Fluff it with a fork to separate the grains, then add the pepper paste and tomato paste and mix

them in well with your hands so that all the grains are coated. Add the onions, parsley, mint, Anaheim chile, olive oil, lemon juice, pomegranate molasses and salt. Mix well with your hands. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Put the butter lettuce leaves around the edges of a large platter. Put the bulgur salad in the center. Top with a generous sprinkling of red pepper.

To serve, spoon some of the salad into the center of a lettuce leaf and fold like a taco.

**Per serving:** 221 calories, 4 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 13 g fat (2 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 456 mg sodium, 5 g fiber.

## **Bulgur & Red Lentil Soup**

**Serves 6 to 8**

This soup can be made a day ahead and is arguably even better when reheated.

- 1 cup red lentils (see Resources, F4)
- 1 cup coarse bulgur (No. 3 or No. 4)
- 10 cups chicken stock, vegetable stock or water
- 3 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 yellow onion, minced
- 1 teaspoon toasted and ground cumin
- 1 teaspoon coarsely ground medium-hot red pepper, preferably Turkish Maras or Syrian Aleppo + more for garnish (see Resources)
- 1 teaspoon dried mint
- -- Kosher salt to taste
- -- Lemon wedges

**Instructions:** Combine the lentils and bulgur in a large pot with the stock or water. Bring to a simmer, skimming any foam. Cover and reduce the heat to maintain a simmer. Cook until the lentils have completely broken down and the bulgur is quite soft, about 40 minutes.

In a small skillet, melt the butter over moderately low heat. Add the onions, cover and sweat until the onions are soft and have released their moisture, 5 to 10 minutes.

Uncover and raise the heat to medium. Cook until the moisture evaporates, then add the cumin, red pepper and mint. Cook, stirring, for about 1 minute to draw the fragrance out of the spices, then stir this mixture into the soup. Season to taste with salt.

Accompany each portion with a lemon wedge so diners can add lemon juice to taste.

**Per serving:** 226 calories, 14 g protein, 32 g carbohydrate, 6 g fat (3 g saturated), 12 mg cholesterol, 102 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

## **Turkish Bulgur Pilaf with Lamb & Chickpeas**

**Serves 6**

Accompany this main-course pilaf, if desired, with plain yogurt or with a sauce made by whisking yogurt with grated cucumber, minced garlic, salt and dried mint.

- 4 tablespoons butter
- 1 pound lamb shoulder, trimmed of fat and gristle, in 1/2-inch cubes
- 1 cup thinly sliced yellow onion
- 2 fresh Anaheim chiles, halved lengthwise, seeds and ribs removed, then sliced thinly crosswise
- 2 cups coarse bulgur (No. 4)
- 1 cup cooked chickpeas (rinsed if canned)
- 2 teaspoons salt, or more to taste
- 1 1/2 teaspoons toasted and ground cumin
- 1 1/2 teaspoons dried mint
- 1 1/2 teaspoons coarsely ground medium-hot red pepper, preferably Turkish Maras or Syrian Aleppo + more for garnish (see Resources, F4)
- -- Freshly ground black pepper

**Instructions:** In a large deep pot, melt 1 tablespoon butter over moderate heat. Add the lamb and brown on all sides. Add 5 cups water, bring to a simmer, then adjust the heat to maintain a simmer and cook for 45 minutes.

Drain, reserving the broth. Measure out 3 cups broth, or add water if needed to make 3 cups. Put the 3 cups broth in a small pot and keep hot.

Return the large pot (no need to clean it) to moderate heat and add another 1 tablespoon butter. Add the sliced onion and chiles and cook until slightly softened, about 5 minutes. Stir in the bulgur, then add the browned lamb, hot lamb broth, chickpeas and salt. Bring to a simmer, then cover and reduce heat to low. Cook until the bulgur has absorbed all the broth and is tender, about 20 minutes. Uncover, drape a dishtowel across the top of the pot to absorb some of the steam, and replace the lid. Set aside to rest for 10 minutes.

Just before serving, melt the remaining 2 tablespoons butter in a small skillet. Add the cumin, mint, red pepper and several grinds of black pepper. Cook, stirring, for about 1 minute to draw the fragrance out of the spices, then stir this mixture into the pilaf with a fork. Season to taste with salt and transfer to a serving platter. Serve immediately.

**Per serving:** 433 calories, 21 g protein, 47 g carbohydrate, 20 g fat (10 g saturated), 68 mg cholesterol, 758 mg sodium, 11 g fiber.

## **Chicken with Roasted Green Wheat Pilaf**

**Serves 4**

Adapted from "Lebanese Cuisine," by Anissa Helou (St. Martin's Griffin, 1994).

- 1 cup freekeh (see Resources and 'Green wheat for great pilaf')
- 1 small whole chicken, about 3 pounds
- 1 medium onion, peeled and quartered
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1 1/2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1/2 teaspoon ground allspice
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon

- 1/8 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- -- Plain yogurt, preferably whole milk, whisked until creamy

**Instructions:** Put the freekeh in a bowl and add cold water to cover generously. Swish with your hand to dislodge any loose chaff or wheat hulls. Skim any particles that float to the surface. Put the freekeh in a sieve and rinse well. Set aside.

Put the chicken breast side up in an 8-quart pot and add 6 1/2 cups water. Bring the water to a boil over high heat, skimming any foam. Add the onion, cinnamon sticks and salt. Cover and reduce the heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook 45 minutes, basting the breast occasionally with the liquid. Remove from the heat, turn the chicken breast side down, re-cover and let stand until the breast meat is fully cooked, about 15 minutes longer. You can leave the chicken in the warm broth while you prepare the freekeh.

Melt the butter in a saucepan over moderate heat. Add the freekeh and stir to coat it with the butter and toast it lightly, about 1 minute. Add the allspice, cinnamon, pepper and 1 1/2 cups broth from the chicken pot. Bring to a boil, then cover and reduce the heat to low. Cook until the freekeh has absorbed the broth and is tender, 25 to 40 minutes, depending on the coarseness of the grain. Remove from the heat, wrap the lid with a clean kitchen towel and put it back over the pan to absorb steam. Let the freekeh rest, covered, for 10 minutes.

Transfer the chicken to a chopping board and cut into slices or serving pieces, removing the skin if desired. Spoon the freekeh onto a serving platter or shallow serving bowl, top with the warm chicken and serve immediately with yogurt. Strain the remaining broth and reserve for another use.

**Per serving:** 554 calories, 47 g protein, 25 g carbohydrate, 29 g fat (10 g saturated), 146 mg cholesterol, 647 mg sodium, 6 g fiber.

## **Bulgur Pilaf with Toasted Noodles**

**Serves 3**

Adapted from "The Cooking of the Eastern Mediterranean," by Paula Wolfert (HarperCollins, 1994).

- 2 tablespoons butter
- 1/2 cup spaghetti or vermicelli broken into 1- to 1 1/2-inch pieces (about 2 ounces)

- 1 cup coarse bulgur (No. 4)
- 1 1/2 cups simmering chicken broth or water
- -- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

**Instructions:** Melt the butter in a saucepan over moderate heat. Add the broken pasta and cook, stirring, until it turns nut-brown, about 2 minutes. Add the bulgur and cook, stirring, for 1 minute. Add the simmering broth or water. If using unsalted broth or water, add 3/4 teaspoon salt. If the broth is salted, taste and add more salt if necessary.

Adjust the heat to maintain a simmer and cook uncovered for 3 minutes. Cover, reduce heat to low, and cook 10 minutes. Remove from the heat. Wrap the lid in a kitchen towel and replace it on the saucepan to absorb steam. Let the pilaf rest, covered, for 10 minutes.

Just before serving, add several grinds of black pepper and fluff with a fork.

**Per serving:** 320 calories, 11 g protein, 52 g carbohydrate, 9 g fat (5 g saturated), 21 mg cholesterol, 46 mg sodium, 10 g fiber.

## **Bulgur with Onion, Tomatoes & Feta (Hondros)**

**Serves 3 to 4**

Adapted from "The Foods of the Greek Islands," by Aglaia Kremezi (Houghton Mifflin, 2000). Pair with a green salad for a delicious, wholesome and easy dinner. If desired, add a can of drained chickpeas along with the bulgur. In summer, substitute fresh tomato for canned.

- 3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil + more for serving
- 1/2 cup chopped red onion
- 1 cup coarse bulgur (No. 4)
- 1 teaspoon coarsely ground medium-hot red pepper, preferably Turkish Maras or Syrian Aleppo (see Resources)
- 2 cups chicken broth, vegetable broth or water
- 1 cup canned plum tomatoes, preferably San Marzano, minced to a pulp
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese, preferably imported Greek, French or Israeli + more for serving
- -- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper

- 3 tablespoons chopped Italian parsley + more for serving

**Instructions:** In a large saucepan, heat the oil over moderate heat. Add the onion and saute until soft, about 5 minutes. Add the bulgur and red pepper and saute, stirring, until the bulgur is coated with oil. Add the broth or water and the tomatoes and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover and simmer for 10 to 12 minutes, until the bulgur has the consistency of a very moist risotto. Remove from the heat and let stand, covered, for 3 minutes.

Stir the feta into the bulgur. Season to taste with salt and black pepper. Serve in bowls, topping each portion with more feta and parsley and with a drizzle of olive oil.

**Per serving:** 299 calories, 10 g protein, 33 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (4 g saturated), 17 mg cholesterol, 223 mg sodium, 8 g fiber.

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