

Saj, Flatbreads and Lebanese Pastries

by David Lebovitz

66 comments - 04.15.2013



Since a number of people have been asking, whenever I ask the bakers who are making flatbreads in Lebanon, specifically what their formula is for they breads they are rolling out (or tossing), I'll get the same, vague response; "Flour and water..oh, and a little olive oil." And that's it, as they continue with their busywork.



While I suspect if I pressed them further, they might admit "Okay, and some yeast or leavening, and perhaps a pinch of salt." But more than any recipe or baker's formula, the most important ingredient that goes in to all the marvelous flatbreads I'm discovering in Lebanon: **technique**.



These bakers at **Heloui**, en route to the ruins at Ba'albeck in Chtaura, are making **Saj**, supple breads cooked on a domed griddle, which by no coincidence, is called a *saj*, too. The bakers start with a soft dough made with what they told me was "brown" flour.



Wanting to know more, when they weren't looking, I ran my hands through the flour, which felt like toasted white flour and I think their mix was a combination of whole wheat and toasted flour. However they were quite nice and I don't think they would have minded if they did see me doing that.

(But I think the butcher shop that had a pile of meat spread out right on their floor, that I saw later that day in a souk, was probably irked that we were staring at them. Fortunately I was with my friend Bethany, who knew the souk, and got the meat for our pastries from the right butcher shop. And I lived to tell about it.)



But you can never go wrong eating good ol' bread, and the making of Lebanese flatbreads is all about tossing, and turning, lifting and tilting. It was pretty amazing to be surrounded by a roomful of guys all pulling off hunks of dough, widening them with their fingers, then tossing

and twirling each one round and round, until they were big enough to be stretched over tufted pillows, then flipped onto the *saj*.



Each *saj* bread is about the size of a round pillowcase, and so thin that you could almost see right through it. A few fellows has an occasional rip or tear, but we decided the champ was the guy working in the coveted window spot, whose breads were lighter, rounder, and more perfect than any of the other guys working around him. And it's nice to see excellent rewarded, even in a small, roadside bakery. (The butcher shop, however, deserves a slap on the wrist...and a visit from the health inspector.)



As the guys lifted the breads off the domed griddles, they were stacked up high, then folded into bags, waiting to be picked up for customers pulling up in their battered cars – an inevitable state if you have the verve to drive in Lebanon – for their daily bread.



But lest you think this is man's work, a few hours later when visiting [Clos St. Thomas](#) for dinner and a tasting of some terrific Lebanese wines, a woman from the local village was there, twirling away. And she could easily show those fellows that she's still got it...





Speaking of women, a few days before, we made a morning stop at **Furn Al Sabaya**, a bakery in Amchit run by three sisters. While a number of women are at home, cooking only for their husbands and families, Lorenza, Martha, and Lucie are baking up traditional Lebanese pastries, sweet and savory.



First up, which was definitely in the category of “Don’t try this at home unless you live in a small village in the hills of rural Lebanon”, were triangles of whole wheat dough, pinched together, surrounding a warm mound of cooked wild herbs, called **Fatayer**.



While watching the women work, a neighbor came in with her own container of za'atar, which many people in Lebanon blend – and grow – on their own since they like their own balance of herbs, sesame, and sumac.



One thing you learn about the Middle East, if you travel and eat, is that everyone will insist that their way of doing or cooking something is better than the way others do it. But I didn't see that with za'atar, which is a national obsession in Lebanon, as people seems accepting of variations. However my comprehension of Arabic is nil, so perhaps I wasn't privy to any spirited conversations that were going on around me about it.



At the bakery, bread doughs were quickly rolled out, the za'atar was mixed with local olive oil, then spread over the dough and baked until firm and chewy. Then handed back to the customer, who'd leave with their container of za'atar and a couple of warm flatbreads wrapped in paper.



But for morning visitors like me, one could start with a simple egg tart. (Well, after I ate two of the herb-filled triangles.)



I've never seen anyone make a tart filling right in the tart shell. So score another one for the ladies of Lebanese!



It was very simple; two eggs, some fresh herbs, olive oil and salt got stirred together with a fork in the partially baked crust, then it's quickly baked inside, creating an open-face breakfast tart. Cut into wedges, I enjoyed it with a cup of the ubiquitous Nescafé. (I mean, I enjoyed the pastry. The Nescafé is something you learn to deal with in many places.)



A few dabs of butter are dotted over the very thin pastry, then a mixture of almonds, walnuts, sugar, and a touch of cinnamon gets spread over the top. A hole is cut in the middle, and

very, very gently, the dough is rolled outward, with a little patience and a lot of finesse, to make a large, nut-filled circle.









Then the serpentine pastry is cut into sections, and eaten right away, while the nutty filling is still warm.





Related Links & Notes

A number of people have asked me about books on Lebanese baking. Some of the best authors about Middle Eastern food include [Claudia Rodin](#), [Anissa Helou](#), [Yotam Ottolenghi](#) and [Sami Tamimi](#), [Greg Malouf](#), [Bethany Kahdy](#) (who I'm traveling with) as well as others, would be good places to check for recipes, baking techniques, and descriptions. You can also find recipes online, such as a [Saj Bread](#) recipe and video, and a recipe for [Markouk Saj Bread](#).



66 COMMENTS

- By [Patricia Shea](#) on [April 15, 2013 8:07 AM](#)

I am just loving these posts about the Lebanon – keep them coming – all the food looks so good!!
Thank you.

- By [Susan Walter](#) on [April 15, 2013 8:44 AM](#)

Wow!! That mwaraka technique is amazing!! What a fascinating visit you are having. I am full of envy but so glad you blog it all :-)

- By [Fatima](#) on [April 15, 2013 8:46 AM](#)

What a lovely idea of baking bread with toasted flour i'll try that once.

About the eggpastry, i thought that it was common in the middle east. I know that you've some egg'pastry in Turkey and east-europe, i really love the idea. I think it would be lovely with some feta or spinach

I love lebanon, i hope to visit it sometime insha'allah.

Keep the post coming!

ps. Ghillie Basan also has a nice cookbook about lebanon.

○ By [David](#) on [April 15, 2013 9:08 AM](#)

I've experimented with toasted flour and it adds a wonderful flavor, but you need to add a bit more liquid to the recipe as the toasting dries things out a little.

Thanks for the reference to Ghillie Basan. I don't know much about Lebanese cooking, precisely, so am interesting learning all I can while I'm here!

• By [Linda](#) on [April 15, 2013 8:56 AM](#)

Wow! All of that looks fabulous. I think I will put Lebanon on my list of places I want to visit.

• By [Justina](#) on [April 15, 2013 9:30 AM](#)

Wonderful!!! Did you see (green) sour apricots or, (also green), sour plums at the market and if so, any recipes that use them?!!

At Berkeley Bowl in Berkeley CA, I bought sour plums and sour apricots that are so beautiful and I know they are often in Middle Eastern recipes...

But can find nothing more than a NY Times recipe for sour plum sauce.

Thanks so much!

○ By [David](#) on [April 15, 2013 10:15 AM](#)

Yes, we had those tiny little green unripe plums. You're supposed to dip them in salt and nibble them with drinks, although I was not wild about eating them – they're too sour. I think they'd be good pickled, and someone said they are good that way in cocktails.

(I once made a Japanese liqueur out of them, so you might be able to find a recipe for *ume* liquor and give that a try.)

○ By [Sonia](#) on [April 15, 2013 11:56 AM](#)

Would you be interested in trying the Turkish beef stew with tart green plums?

<http://almostturkish.blogspot.com/2012/06/beef-stew-with-tart-green-plums-yesil.html?m=1>

▪ By David on April 15, 2013 3:22 PM

Really interesting – thanks for the link! :)

• By herkkusuun lautasella on April 15, 2013 9:30 AM

that flatbread egg tart looks absolutely fabulous and like a must for breakfast!! maybe with some hot moroccan mint tea...

• By Dina on April 15, 2013 9:34 AM

The Mwaraka is so interesting! What a technique!!! As for the saj, it reminded me of something else people in villages make back home. It's not a pancake, it turns out like flaky pastry, but we call it saj. It's basically baked in this stone dish, covered, sealed with dough, then buried under hot coal. It is not "typical" of where I come from, but things evolve and change and take a life of their own if you've been under the Ottoman Empire for 500 years.... But maybe it is typical... :)

• By Kavey on April 15, 2013 9:39 AM

This time a couple of years ago, my husband and I were travelling around Lebanon with Bethany, your posts are bringing back memories. I remember watching in utter fascination as the ladies at Furn Al Sabaya made the Mwaraka... and of course it was fabulous to eat it hot from the oven!

Enjoy the rest of your trip, so many wonderful food experiences to enjoy!

• By Zachary on April 15, 2013 9:44 AM

Two cookbooks in French that are fantastic for Lebanese cuisine:

Cuisine libanaise d'hier et d'aujourd'hui by Andrée Maalouf and Karim Haïder.

La cuisine libanaise familiale: 227 recettes faciles by Nouhad Asseily

When in Beirut last March I had the pleasure of being invited to an eggplant-themed dinner: all of the dishes (and there were at least 10!) featured the eggplant...dans tous ses états!

- By [jennifer Barnaby](#) on [April 15, 2013 10:11 AM](#)

I've always wondered how Mwaraka was made without a seam and now I know. Great post, Lebanese is one of my favourite cuisines.

- By [taylor nelsen](#) on [April 15, 2013 11:08 AM](#)

that video is mesmerizing! instant saj.

- By [emile](#) on [April 15, 2013 12:07 PM](#)

Hello David my name is Emile I am a Lebanese Australian but I have been living in Beirut for 5 years now. I just wanted to bring to your attention a type of bread that is not well known even in Lebanon it is called the bread of the village and to my knowledge it is only available in some villages around Batroun in the North. It is a flat bread like saj but it's baked in a stone oven and it splits in two, it is by far the best tasting bread hope you can get to try it one day.

- By [David](#) on [April 15, 2013 3:23 PM](#)

Batroun is lovely. We had lunch at Chez Maguy which was excellent but didn't see or have that bread. We did have the famous lemonade, though. Will have to go back ~

- By [Rhonda](#) on [April 15, 2013 12:18 PM](#)

What fascinating photos, now I want to learn to make mwaraka..

- By [Yael](#) on [April 15, 2013 1:45 PM](#)

What great pictures you have taken from making of that bread:)

- By [Caroline](#) on [April 15, 2013 1:57 PM](#)

This is just fantastic! I am so familiar with these foods, and yet have no real access to the magic that happens within the kitchen (or roadside!) walls. The nut pastry though, is a new one for me;

what skill! And the lady slapping, turning and twirling, all of it so instinctual! I could watch her for hours. Superb, informative and enjoyable post David, and I am turning a deeper shade of green with each one!

- **By Joanie on [April 15, 2013 2:25 PM](#)**

Fatayer is one of my favourites, stuffed with lamb and pine nuts or spinach and labne! A great website for anyone interested in learning how to cook Leb cuisine is Maureen Abood's, "Rose Water and Orange Blossoms". She is a professional pastry chef, trained in California. Her recipes are excellent and authentic, made like my Mother used to or I.

- **By Kathy Weld on [April 15, 2013 2:32 PM](#)**

At the risk of repeating myself: PLEASE take me with you next time!!!

- **By [TasteofBeirut](#) on [April 15, 2013 2:54 PM](#)**

Hi David,

did not expect to see you in Lebanon. Ahlan wa sahan! I spent sunday with Um Elias in Fawara (Chouf mountains) and she was baking 200 loaves of markouk; that yellow flour that you see is probably corn flour that is used like the Italians use semolina. Hope you'll get to visit the Chouf before the end of your trip.

- **By [David](#) on [April 15, 2013 3:21 PM](#)**

You live in a wonderful food city – so many places to go and see...and eat! Wish I had time to do them all..

Thanks for the tip on the flour. It may be semolina, as it felt rough, but because it was on trays, I thought maybe they put it on them to cool after toasting? Either way, it was a pretty amazing place.

- **By [christelle is flabbergasting](#) on [April 15, 2013 3:18 PM](#)**

I so much want to be there with you! Thanks again for this beautiful post that reminds me how much (and why) I love Lebanese cuisine!

- **By Mari @ Oh, Sweet & Savory on April 15, 2013 3:53 PM**

What gorgeous breads & pastries. I want to reach into the screen & grab some to eat them!

- **By Elise Moser on April 15, 2013 4:09 PM**

There is a little Turkish restaurant here in Montreal called Avesta where the women make lavash on a saj in the front window, right on Ste-Catherine Street. They don't use a pillow, but the bread is thin and delicious.

- **By Angela on April 15, 2013 4:27 PM**

Wonderful, I'm saving up for this trip!

- **By Stevie Pierson on April 15, 2013 4:31 PM**

Thanks for such a truly delicious and enlightening post. Great photos, too. And ugh, Nescafe. I am in New York hungering for your life! Quick question: what, if any savory fillings, would go into these breads or tarts?

- **By Maureen Abood on April 15, 2013 4:40 PM**

Wow wow!! Thank you for this fabulous post, David. I have been learning to throw saj bread since I was a girl at my Sitto's knee, but it does take a lot of practice. You are right that it is as much, if not more, about technique as it is the ingredients.

I share wonderful, easy-to-follow recipes for fatyar, man'oushe, ka'ak, talami, and other Lebanese sweet and savory pastry (with lots of great photos) on my blog of Lebanese cuisine, Rose Water & Orange Blossoms, at <http://www.maureenabood.com> .

- **By Adriana on April 15, 2013 4:59 PM**

That's the second time in two days I've seen this type of bread made on a cushion! It was featured last night in Diners Drive ins and Dives on the Food Network. As a gluten free person I am truly jealous of that wonderful stretch you get from using wheat flour, something us glutenfrees can only

really dream about. I long for a really tasty, light and flavourful gluten free flat bread that looks like this.

- **By Marge Perry on April 15, 2013 5:12 PM**

Okay, now I am dying to eat my way through Lebanon. Another one for the bucket list! Love this, David.

- **By Tags on April 15, 2013 5:30 PM**

One of the most important ingredients of any great recipe is a video camera.

- **By Mary Sweeting on April 15, 2013 5:32 PM**

That first image is a fine picture of a true craftsman at work, really love that light and his concentration. Loving the Lebanese food stories, so much to learn, thank you, Mary

- **By Susan on April 15, 2013 5:42 PM**

The egg tart looks so pretty! I've been trying to figure out how to cook an egg on a crepe so that it can be rolled up like a wrap...an on-the-go breakfast, if you will. The egg tart featured is a help.

The Mwaraka reminds me of an unleavened version of Potica, sorta-kinda. Nut fillings are popular everywhere I guess! I've been trying to master potica since forever but just cannot get that dough as thin as most recipes call for. I'm not a very patient person.

As far as toasting ground grain...I toast cornmeal to bring up the corn flavor to use when I make cornbread. It does make such a difference. It's the little things you learn from so many cultures and other sources along the way that helps us grow as cooks, don't ya think?

- **By Roxy on April 15, 2013 5:47 PM**

Thank you for documenting different cooking processes! Your pictures make me feel like I'm traveling and tasting even though my desk is not full of za'atar, olive oil and strong bakers....

Your curiosity is inspiring, I sometimes feel timid taking pictures of people when I travel. Did you ever feel that way? Or were you always up in people's toasted flour?

○ By [David](#) on [April 17, 2013 9:04 AM](#)

Taking pictures of people can be a challenge. I'm used to Paris, where people can be very reluctant to have their photos taken at markets and in shops. (In their defense, there are so many tourists/visitors in Paris that I think people get saturated with visitors asking to take their photos.)

My general rule is to spend a few minutes admiring what people do, then ask them nicely. I always try to engage people first, then I ask them if I can shoot a photo. It's also important that if people say "no" that you don't sulk. Some people just don't want their picture taken and it's important to respect that. Just say "Thanks".. and keep admiring what they do.

• By [Pam](#) on [April 15, 2013 5:51 PM](#)

My favorite post so far. I know it's different but the breakfast pastry reminded me of rugelach. Thank you David.

• By [Maddie](#) on [April 15, 2013 6:11 PM](#)

David, did you try any Lebanese wine, because they make very good wine! Living in Turkey now and the food is very similar here. A feast for the senses and everything is made with so much pride, passion and love!

• By [andrea](#) on [April 15, 2013 6:15 PM](#)

I too am loving these posts on Lebanon! More please!

• By [Reinventing nadine](#) on [April 15, 2013 6:24 PM](#)

David are you planning a trip to the south of Lebanon? There are some southern specialties that you should not miss such as fraqeh and kamoozet el banadoura and wild zaatar salad

- **By emily on April 15, 2013 7:50 PM**

...and now I'm hungry! lovely post David!

regards

Emily

- **By Mom on April 15, 2013 7:55 PM**

Thank you so much for linking to my post about Sam bread, I really appreciate it. I was getting few hits back from your blog to mine and I checked out your post!! A great post and beautiful pictures you have here, thanks for sharing!

- **By Anina (dieerdbeere.com) on April 15, 2013 8:33 PM**

These pastries are made in a manner I've never seen before! It inspires me so much and I'm thinking about future recipes..

For me the result looks like Börek in Turkey! But what a surprise, it was rolled from the inside and not at all made with filo sheets!

Thank you, David, for this and all the other interesting posts!

- **By Liza in Ann Arbor on April 15, 2013 9:04 PM**

I have really been enjoying this trip to Lebanon-bright spot in my day!

- **By Beth on April 15, 2013 9:12 PM**

Mmmm. It all looks good, but that nutty roll up has me curious. Is it baked in the wood fired oven as well?

- **By Alessandra on April 15, 2013 9:23 PM**

These pictures remind me of Syria, so painful to remember; do they have in Lebanon these sandwiches made with cheese, similar to halloumi, and mint? and meat pies with tamarind? I once went to Maloula in Syria with a group of christian pilgrims from Lebanon, and had the most wonderful feast at the house of one of them on the way back, I lost count of the meat pies I ate!

- **By Sandtruck on April 15, 2013 11:28 PM**

Wonderful pictures, David. Everything looks so super yummy. I wonder if celiac me, also nut and egg free me, could find anything to eat there. Do Lebanese get celiac disease? Seems like the diet is wheat filled so I wonder.

- **By Ebru on April 15, 2013 11:53 PM**

Beautiful pictures and lovely descriptions! Absolutely lovely.. On a totally different subject, I was wondering if you had any fruit and nut balls recipe at all. May be one day you could share with us :-) All the best..

- **By Madeleine Morrow on April 15, 2013 11:54 PM**

In the Bastille market there is a stall selling flatbreads with za'atar. I wonder how these compare with the wonderful ones you have been eating in Lebanon?

Would love to know more about those personalised za'atar recipes you mentioned. Any chance of your getting a translation and some recipes on this theme for your blog? Made za'atar at home once when I ran out of the mixture but not sure it came out right.

Another cookbook to add to your list is The Lebanese Kitchen by Salma Hage.

- **By David on April 17, 2013 9:00 AM**

The ones you get at the markets in Paris, in my experience, aren't very good. The za'atar might be old and they don't use good olive oil – so to me, they always taste stale. As shown, folks in Lebanon often bring their own za'atar which is mixed with local olive oil.

I am doing a post in a bit about making za'atar, but it's important to have the right herbs to get it right, and to include some sumac, too.

- **By Iryna on April 15, 2013 11:59 PM**

How interesting, David! I am from Ukraine and my grandma used to make those sweet rolled flat bread desserts for us kids. Sweet memory!

- By [Rachel McGrath](#) on [April 16, 2013 12:15 AM](#)

This might be a daft question, but what are the cakes and sweets like over there?

- By [Julia Matusik](#) on [April 16, 2013 1:11 AM](#)

I'm thoroughly enjoying your trip to Lebanon. The skill required to produce these breads is truly amazing. I have visions of any Mwaraka I attempted to make as a torn and shredded pile on a baking tray.

- By [Zanne Stewart](#) on [April 16, 2013 3:06 AM](#)

Add me to the long list of fans. I always enjoy your posts but Lebanon has been particularly intriguing as I've never been and long wanted to visit. Thx, David.

- By [Johanna](#) on [April 16, 2013 3:14 AM](#)

i love the omelette tart-

it reminds me of that awesome Italian omelette scene filmed near the end of the movie "Big Night".

i want to make that omelette tart right now :)

do you have any idea what herbs they used? and was the dough the same as for the Lebanese Crepes/bread shown or was it a pastry crust..?

thanks!

just LOVE reading your posts and look forward to each one-

- By [David](#) on [April 17, 2013 8:57 AM](#)

It was some chopped flat-leaf parsley, but you can use any kind of herbs you want. Am not sure which crust it was exactly, but am pretty sure it was the same one used for all their other flatbreads.

- **By Rafter^B on April 16, 2013 4:11 AM**

You look so happy..even with Nescafe which is going some...

- **By David on April 17, 2013 8:56 AM**

You get used to the "Nescafé" when you're in this region. I guess it's easier than having a coffee machine on-site, although you have to be careful because often it has powdered milk (and sugar) mixed with it – !

- **By anna on April 16, 2013 6:58 AM**

gorgeous. haha you can tell someone is good at baking/cooking if they can't really tell you how they do it. it's just all in their subconscious. jealous of all that beautiful bread.

- **By breadsong on April 16, 2013 7:47 AM**

Hello David,

Thank you for writing about your experiences, travelling and eating in Lebanon – so interesting, so many delicious-looking foods!

The video of the lady twirling the dough is fantastic.

A dear friend gave me a book on Lebanese baking:

Man'oushé: Inside the Street Corner Lebanese Bakery, by Barbara Abdeni Massaad.

I wanted to let you know about this book, in case you might like it.

Happy travels!

- **By Adrianna on April 16, 2013 7:47 AM**

What were the fatayer filled with? Spinach with pine nuts? I actually do try to make them at home, not an easy task, though! Looking forward to read other posts from your trip to Lebanon!

- **By Caroline on April 16, 2013 2:20 PM**

You really take the most fantastic pictures...amazing! I love your travel reports, really fascinating.

- By Dale Coykendall on April 16, 2013 5:35 PM

Love watching these various techniques Thank you

- By Noreen on April 16, 2013 7:24 PM

this is so delicious!!! i love your food diary

- By Susan on April 17, 2013 6:26 AM

Awhile ago I checked out from the library Patisserie of the Eastern Mediterranean by Arto der Haroutunian. It doesn't seem to be in print, but used copies are available.