

Bamia u Adas

Okra with Lentils

Serves 3–4

- 1 cup finely chopped onion
- 1 pound (approximately 450 grams) large okra, with each piece cut into four even pieces, or young, small okra, fresh or frozen
- 1 cup (200 grams) red lentils (or blanched fava beans or brown lentils)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 5 cups (1.2 liters) *Maraqqa* (page 24), packaged broth, or water
- 4 cloves garlic
- ¼ teaspoon cumin
- 1 cup basil leaves (25 grams), coarsely chopped
- Olive oil

Fry the onion in 3–4 tablespoons of olive oil on medium heat until golden. If you're using tough okra, add it now and sauté “until the okra overwhelms its mother” (this is a popular if somewhat obscure cooking phrase in Gaza, meaning “until it's wilted and soft”). If you're using tender okra, it seems you don't have to worry about its mother.

Add the lentils or blanched fava beans, salt and pepper, and liquid (water or broth). Mix well, then bring to a boil. Cover and reduce the heat. Simmer, partially covered.

When lentils are partially cooked but not completely soft, add the frozen okra (if you are using it). Continue simmering until the lentils are cooked through, stirring a few times. Adjust the amount of liquid if it appears too dry. The stew should have the consistency of porridge.

To finish, make a *taqliya*: Fry the garlic and cumin in 4 tablespoons of olive oil until it turns golden and fragrant. Add the chopped basil. Give it a quick stir to wilt it, then stir the entire *taqliya* into the pot along with any remaining oil. This crucial step, according to one of our informants, “makes the dish speak.”

At this point, you may either serve the stew chunky or partially mix it with a whisk or immersion blender. Serve with lemon wedges, *Khubz Kmaj* (page 100), and *Filfil Mat'hoon* (page 28).

For Palestinians from the farming villages in the north of Gaza, this is a basic everyday dish; those from other regions hadn't even heard of it. This recipe was given to us by a woman from Hirbiya, just to the north of the present Gaza Strip. The village was attacked by war planes and its inhabitants driven from their homes in 1948, but the recipes live on.

The recipe makes use of the tough end-of-season okra not considered suitable for okra stew. Dr. Akram Saleh, whom we met at Gaza's Red Crescent Society Clinic, explained, “At the beginning of the season, okra was cooked in the normal way, but then, a hundred days into the season, we would start to eat okra with lentils.”

In case your local market doesn't carry old, tough, late-season okra and you're not in a farming community with lots of late okra to consume, tender or even frozen baby okra works just fine.

Some cooks beat the finished stew with a wooden stirring tool called a *mufarak* until it is thick and smooth, and insist that it should be prepared with red lentils. Others say it should remain chunky and be made with brown lentils. Every single person who spoke to us about this dish did so with singular enthusiasm and passion, a tribute to this hearty, basic stew.