

A Delightful Middle Eastern Salad: Tabouli, traditional and gluten -free

by Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff

This year, spring seems to have arrived early. It is important to keep our bodies hydrated during the coming months by drinking a lot of water and consuming more moist and raw leafy greens.

Salads provide essential micro nutrients, such as vitamins and minerals as well as enzymes, which can help us with our digestion. Salads are a delightful and attractive addition to any meal.

Most salads made with your familiar lettuce are easy and quick to prepare. But, for a variation, look for something different—an ethnic recipe that is diverse in composition. This Middle Eastern recipe called Tabouli, goes well with any lunch or dinner menu. And it is also an ideal companion for picnics and cookouts.

You can find many variations of a tabouli recipe depending on what country it came from or simply what fresh ingredients are available. A traditional recipe of tabouli usually includes soaked bulgur (pre-cooked cracked wheat), finely chopped mint and parsley as well as other raw vegetables. The important aspect of this salad is to keep it very green with very finely chopped lots of parsley and mint. In this column, in addition to the traditional recipe made with bulgur, a wheat-free recipe is provided for those who are on a gluten-free diet.

Traditional Tabouli

Ingredients for traditional tabouli:

- ½ cup bulgur (cracked wheat)
- 3 cups warm water
- 2 cups minced parsley leaves (after removing stems)
- ¾ to one cup fresh mint leaves, minced (after removing stems)
- ½ cup finely chopped scallions (with some of its green parts)
- ½ cup very small cubes of peeled cucumber
- ½ cup small cubes of firm tomatoes (chopped cherry tomatoes work well)
- ¼ cup red or yellow bell pepper, cut into tiny pieces

For Dressing:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons lime or lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- ½ teaspoon fresh minced oregano
- ½ teaspoon or to taste salt
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste

Soak the bulgur in warm water for ½ hour. Wash and drain parsley and mint leaves thoroughly. Discard their rough stems. Using a wide-bladed knife, chop the leaves very finely. You can use a food processor for this task, but be careful not to over-process or else the leaves will be pureed. Prepare the rest of the vegetables as described above, making sure they are chopped into tiny pieces. Set the leaves and vegetables in a large bowl.

Drain the soaked bulgur completely by using a muslin cloth or by taking the grain one handful at a time and pressing with your hands to squeeze out as much water as possible. Add the grains to the greens and vegetables.

Whisk together the dressing ingredients in a bowl or a jar. Add the dressing to the grains, greens and vegetables mixture. Mix everything thoroughly but gently. Serve tabouli at room temperature with wedges of pita bread or crackers. You can also refrigerate tabouli for later use.

Gluten-free Tabouli

Bulgar is a wheat product. So here is a gluten free version made with basmati rice. This recipe will make approximately two cups of cooked rice. You will only need ½ to ¾ cup of rice. The rest can be refrigerated to use for a future meal.

Ingredients for Gluten-free Tabouli;

For Rice:

- 1 cup water
- ½ cup basmati rice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon oil

To assemble Tabouli:

- 2 cups minced parsley leaves (after removing stems)
- ¾ to 1 cup fresh mint leaves, minced (after removing stems)
- ½ cup finely chopped scallions (with some of its green parts)
- ½ cup very small cubes of peeled cucumber
- ½ cup cut into tiny pieces of firm tomatoes (chopped cherry tomatoes work too)
- ¼ cup red or yellow bell pepper, cut into tiny pieces

For dressing:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 tablespoons lemon or lime juice, freshly squeezed
- ½ teaspoon oregano, dried or fresh and minced
- ½ teaspoons salt or to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste

First, cook the basmati rice. Boil the water in a saucepan. Rinse and drain the rice thoroughly, then add to the boiling water. Stir the grains and bring the water to a second boil. Then turn the heat down to low, cover and cook the grains for 12–15 minutes until all the water has been absorbed. Keep covered for five minutes. Then open the pot and spread out ¾ cup of the cooked grains onto a platter to cool for 30 to 45 minutes. You can refrigerate the rice to speed the cooling process (left over, day-old rice works fine for this recipe).

Prepare the leafy greens and rest of vegetables as described in the list, following the instruction from the traditional tabouli recipe above. Also, prepare the dressing following the same instruction.

Place the leafy greens and vegetables in a mixing bowl. Add the cooled rice. Drizzle and mix enough dressing to glaze tabouli, but do not drench it (leftover dressing—if any—can be saved for later). Serve the tabouli right away or refrigerate in a covered bowl until ready to serve.

Makes four to six servings

-----This recipe is modified from Shanta's cook book "Cooking Together: A Vegetarian Co-op Cookbook", Copyright © 2017 by Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff

Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff the author of "Cooking Together" and "Flavors of India". Both cookbooks are available from CCFC (contact Paula) or at Other Avenues Food Store and Rainbow Grocery Coop in S.F. Shanta writes recipes and articles on food and nutrition. She teaches vegetarian cooking classes in the Outer Sunset, SF. You can view Shanta's recipes on youtube by clicking Shanta Nimbark Sacharoff's youtube videos.