

IN THE KITCHEN

SALTED LEMONS? SWEET!

BY KITTY MORSE

I watched my hand luggage slip through screening at the airport security checkpoint in San Diego and waited for the agent to wave me through.

“What’s this?” she asked, pointing to the offending object on her screen.

“A jar of salted lemons,” I answered, a little embarrassed. “I need them for a cooking demonstration in Chicago.”

I awaited my sentence, fully expecting her to send me to the secondary inspection area where I would have to relinquish the precious jar.

“Salted lemons? What do you use them for?”

As rapidly as the moving X-ray belt allowed, I explained that salted preserved lemons were a traditional Moroccan condiment, and that you could add some to fish, poultry or vegetable stir-frys.

“You should try coating the rim of a margarita glass with salted lemon pulp!” I cried out as a parting shot.

I got a thumbs up in return. “Sounds delicious! Have a good trip!”

In Morocco, where I was born, salted lemons are a staple of every kitchen. This traditional condiment is a newcomer to the American culinary scene, however, it has newfound visibility due to the enthusiasm of a handful of chefs on TV’s Food Network, and to the increasing popularity of Moroccan cuisine.

Tita, my great-aunt and culinary mentor, turned me into a salted lemon addict when I was growing up in Casablanca. Later, when my husband and I moved to San Diego’s North County, I was thrilled to discover that lemon groves were as ubiquitous as they are in Morocco. For three decades now I have enjoyed the seasonal pleasures that growing juicy Meyer or hardy Eureka lemon trees can bring, from the sweet scent of their delicate blossoms to harvesting the plump, sunshine-colored fruit. If my home-grown harvest proves insufficient to preserve enough lemons for family and friends, I augment my supply at one of my favorite venues, the Saturday morning farmers’ market in Vista.

After rinsing the fruit, I follow Tita’s method to the letter, selecting lemons no larger than a golf ball and slicing them open just as she taught me. Then, I stuff them with sea salt and press them down tightly in a jar until the juice rises to the rim. Once the lid is tightly sealed, I love to watch the bright yellow citrus settle inside the jar. In a day or two, when the rind softens some-





Photograph: Cheryl Koehler

what, I will add another fruit, perhaps two, for the lemons must always remain immersed in their own salty brine. That done, I arm myself with patience. For the next three or four weeks, I will essentially ignore the lemons as they cure on my kitchen shelf, until the rind turns fork tender and the juice becomes as syrupy as honey.

With a fresh supply of the intensely flavorful lemons, I set about preparing Moroccan tagines of chicken with olives and preserved lemons (which legendary food writer Roy Andries de Groot once described as the best way in the world to cook chicken!) or lamb with artichoke hearts and lima beans.

Often, more contemporary recipes come to mind, like coating a roasting chicken with the jam-like pulp, or rubbing some over fish before I grill it. My stir-frys take on a novel North African twist when I add a little diced rind to Asian vegetables. And I am convinced that if I could only invite the airport security guard to sample guacamole or fresh tomato salsa flavored with a little salted lemon, I would easily win her over to the idea of making her own!

Kitty Morse is the author of nine cookbooks, five of them on Moroccan cuisine. She is presently working on a book about preserved lemons. She will conduct cooking classes at Rancho La Puerta Spa's Cocina que Canta, July 5 to 12; www.kittymorse.com.

KITTY'S ROASTED PEPPER, TOMATO AND SALTED LEMON RELISH

Serves 6

2 red bell peppers, roasted, peeled and seeded
¼ teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons diced salted lemon rind (see note)
1 tomato, peeled, seeded and diced
1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
1 garlic clove, minced
¼ cup olive oil
1 baguette bread, sliced

Finely dice the roasted peppers. Combine with the salt, salted lemon rind, tomato and vinegar. Set aside.

Turn oven on to broil. In a small bowl, combine the garlic and olive oil. Cut 12 slices of baguette on a diagonal. Paint each one with olive oil/garlic mixture. Place on a baking sheet. Broil until lightly browned, 2 to 3 minutes on each side. Let cool and top with some of the tomato/bell pepper mixture. Serve immediately.

Note: Grill peppers over an open flame or under a broiler, turning them carefully with tongs, until skins blister evenly, 8 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a bowl or plastic bag, and seal. Let cool. Peel and seed. Drain in a colander.

Note: Preserved lemons are available from Dry Dock Fish under the label *Mo' Rockin' Preserved Lemons*, at the Vista, Oceanside, Del Mar and Orange County farmers' markets. Contact www.lemonlady.com or call Dry Dock Fish at 800 214-3474.