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Flavorings in Lebanese Desserts and Pastries

by: Joumana Accad

The two main flavorings in Lebanese desserts, pastries, jams, confections and sweet breads are **rose water** and **orange blossom water**. Rose water is the distilled water of rose petals gathered during the blooming season of a certain type of rose called *al-ward al-joory* or *Rosa Damascena*. Orange blossom water is distilled from the blossoms of a variety of oranges called *boosfeyr* or Seville oranges.

Orange blossoms (called *zafeer*) are harvested during the month of April. The blossoms are distilled and the water is then bottled and used in hundreds of pastries, jams and puddings. It is also used in folk medicine: Sprayed on people's faces when they feel ill, for example. My grandmother would give me some

orange blossom in a small Turkish coffee cup at night when I complained about a tummy ache, as it is believed to facilitate digestion and soothe the nerves.

Making this orange blossom water is an ancient tradition that goes back thirteen centuries to the times of the Ummayyade Caliphates; back then, it was used for celebrations and was an ingredient used to flavor puddings and jellies.

Most folks in Lebanon nowadays rely on a commercial bottle of orange blossom water; however there are people who still make it at home and some who sell their handmade water at local markets. The orange blossom water is a clear liquid (although the homemade variety tends to be a very pale yellow), with the exquisite fragrance of orange blossoms. It is added in a small quantity (one teaspoon is sufficient) in puddings, pastries, jams or syrups.

Orange blossom water is also a drink offered on a regular basis at social gatherings or in restaurants. The drink is called "white coffee" and is offered *in lieu of regular coffee* to people who do not like to drink coffee. This white coffee or *ahweh bayed* is presented in the same demitasse or Turkish coffee cups, except it is a clear liquid. A sweetener such as sugar is also offered at the same time.

White Coffee (Ahweh Bayda)

Compliments of Chef Joumana Accad

Gluten-free recipe / Vegetarian recipe / Vegan recipe

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Ingredients: Per one serving

Water - about 2 ounces
1/2 teaspoon orange blossom water
Sugar (optional), to taste

Directions:

- Pour half a teaspoon of orange blossom water per demitasse cup.
- Bring water to the boiling point. Pour the boiling water into the cup. Add sugar to taste and stir to dissolve.
- Serve.

Shortbread cookie (Ghoraybeh)

Compliments of Chef Joumana Accad

Vegetarian recipe

Ghoraybeh is a traditional cookie, basically a shortbread. Made with ghee and flour or fine semolina and some sugar.



Ingredients:

6 ounces shortening (Crisco is fine)(170 g) or ghee or clarified butter
12 ounces cake flour or a mixture of all-purpose and rice flour (340 g)
5 ounces powdered sugar (160 g)

Flavoring:

1 tablespoon of rose or orange blossom water
If needed, an egg white to bind the dough (or half of an egg white)

Directions:

- Cream the shortening and sugar in a mixing bowl for at least 10 minutes until the mixture is considerably lighter in color.
- Add the sifted flour gradually and mix just until incorporated. If the dough is too dry, add the flavoring and (or) the egg white. The dough should be smooth and moist. Wrap in plastic and let it rest in the fridge for one hour or longer.
- Roll the dough between two sheets of wax paper if you are going to use it with cutouts. If making the traditional ring shape, use a small scoop; scoop out even-sized portions, one at a time, roll between your fingers to get a sausage shape and connect the two ends. Place a pistachio or pine nuts on top of the connected point.
- Place the formed cookies on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Heat the oven to 325F and bake for 15 minutes, without letting the cookies brown. Traditionally these cookies are

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white as snow.

Rose water...

Just like the orange blossom water, rose water is a distillate of the petals of the Damascus Rose (*Rosa Damascena aka ward al-joory*), grown in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Palestine. Its usage goes back to the early Islamic era. It is used mainly for desserts, sherbets and syrups. The best rose water in Lebanon is found in Qsarnaba, a small village in the central Bekaa.

Arab folk medicine also uses rose water in case of sunburn as it is believed that it will soothe and rejuvenate the skin. Rose water is also used for religious purposes, as it is sprinkled inside mosques.

The distillation of rose petals is an artisanal activity that takes place during the blooming season in May and June. The best method of distillation is with steam rather than water. Unfortunately, most commercial production nowadays uses artificial essences instead of the real thing. However, it is still possible to find natural rose water at farmer's markets in Lebanon, made by local producers who cultivate this variety of rose.

Milk Pudding (Muhallabiyeh)

Compliments of Chef Joumana Accad

Vegetarian recipe / Vegan recipe

No pudding equals *muhallabiyeh* in creaminess and purity. Consisting of milk, sugar, cornstarch (or rice flour), and flavorings. That's it! A must in your fridge. My grandmother made it for us weekly from powdered milk as cows were scant in Lebanon. *Muhallabiyeh* is a healthy, creamy and refreshing, dessert.



Ingredients:

This quantity will yield 4 servings

1 1/2 cups of milk (can be lowfat)

1/2 cup of whipping cream or half-and-half

1/3 cup of cornstarch (or rice flour- but it will take longer to thicken)

2 tablespoons of sugar (or more, to taste)

1 teaspoon of orange blossom water and rose water

3 pebbles of mastic, crushed with one teaspoon of sugar in a mortar (optional)

4 tablespoons of pistachios, peeled and crushed

Directions:

- Measure the cornstarch and mix into 1/4 cup or so of the milk until smooth.
- Pour the milk and cream into a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Add the sugar, place on medium heat and stir with a wooden spoon.
- When the milk mixture starts showing some steam, add the cornstarch mixture and stir continuously until the milk thickens.
- Add the rose and orange blossom water and stir a couple minutes longer. A few seconds before removing from the heat, stir the crushed mastic pebbles in.
- Pour into a bowl (preferably with a spout) through a strainer, to collect the cooked bits of milk.
- Immediately, divide the mixture into 4 small cups. Cool at room temperature, garnish with chopped pistachios then refrigerate.

Note: If you are going to use the mastic, heat it with the milk towards the end of cooking; beware that it could leave bits on the pan that will require some scrubbing to remove! so, it is important to grind it well with a teaspoon of sugar first, in a small porcelain mortar for example.

To peel pistachios, soak them in water for one hour or longer, then rub them with your fingers; the peel will come right off. Dry and use.

Note: All recipes are published on Chef Joumana Accad's website at: www.tasteofbeirut.com.

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