

Helbeh (fenugreek cake)

This cake is one of Sami's childhood favourites. It is essentially a semolina cake soaked in syrup, similar to many other Levantine cakes (SEE SEMOLINA, COCONUT AND MARMALADE CAKE, PAGE 264), but the fenugreek gives it a very unusual edge. We haven't come across anywhere else.

Sami's grandmother used to say that breastfeeding mothers must eat helbeh because fenugreek will encourage milk production. Despite their firm protests, bitter fenugreek tea was always given to kids for curing minor illnesses. It was believed to have a great medicinal effect but, unfortunately, had a flavour to match.

500g fine semolina
75g plain flour
70g pine nuts, blitzed into large crumbs
80ml olive oil
80ml sunflower oil
40g unsalted butter, melted, plus extra to grease the tin
1½ tsp fenugreek seeds
1½ tsp fast-action dried yeast
½ tsp baking powder
½ tsp salt
25g whole almonds, blanched and peeled

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300g caster sugar
100ml water
2 tbsp lemon juice
1½ tbsp rose water
1½ tbsp orange blossom water

Helbeh cake comes with a disclaimer. Not everyone likes it. In a quick survey we did among the chefs in our restaurant, NOPI, only five out of seven approved. But those five absolutely loved it! Fenugreek, the ultimate curry ingredient, has a strong savoury association on many people's minds and some can't shake it off. However, a bit like cardamom, it works in a sweet context very well and adds magical 'exoticism' that really appeals to others. If you like cardamom, rose water and intense sweetness, you are likely to enjoy helbeh. It is fantastic with a small cup of strong black coffee.

Always make helbeh at least a day before you want to serve it and don't be tempted to tuck into it sooner; the flavours really need the time to come together properly.

Mix the semolina, flour and pine nuts in a large bowl. Add the oils and melted butter and mix well. Set aside.

Put the fenugreek seeds and 600ml of water in a medium saucepan and bring to a boil, then simmer on a low heat for about 25 minutes until the seeds are plump and tender. Drain the seeds, reserving the cooking water, and add them to the semolina mix. Add the yeast, baking powder and salt, then gradually stir in 180ml of the hot fenugreek water; if you don't have enough liquid make it up with water. Knead the dough on a work surface until it is completely smooth.

Grease a 24cm round cake tin with butter and line it with baking paper so that the paper comes three quarters up the sides of the tin. Pour in the semolina mixture and press it down with your hand so it's levelled and smooth.

Use a small, sharp knife to score the surface of the cake with parallel lines 5cm apart, followed by another set of lines at a 45-degree angle, creating a diamond pattern. Place one almond in the centre of each

diamond. Cover the cake tin with a clean tea towel and set it aside somewhere warm for about an hour. Towards the end of the resting time, preheat the oven to 220°C/200°C Fan/Gas Mark 7, making sure you allow plenty of time for your oven to heat fully.

Put the cake on one of the lower shelves in the hot oven and bake for 20 minutes. Reduce the heat to 200°C/180°C Fan/Gas Mark 6 and bake for a further 20 minutes or until it is golden brown and a skewer inserted in it comes out clean.

Prepare the syrup while the cake is in the oven. Place the sugar and water in a small saucepan and mix well with a wooden spoon. Heat up and once it boils, add the lemon juice and simmer gently for 4 minutes. Take the syrup off the heat, allow it to cool down just a little and then add the orange blossom and rose waters.

Once the cake is cooked, remove it from the oven and immediately drizzle the syrup all over it, making sure you use the whole quantity of syrup. Leave aside until the cake is completely cool before covering it well in foil or parchment paper. Serve the next day.