

Harrison Township Public Library

Spice of the Month Club: Za'atar

Information

Flavor Profile: Aromatic blend with both earthy and subtle citrus undertones, and a hint of nuttiness.

Components: Ground Zaatar (*Origanum Syriacum*), thyme, oregano, marjoram, sumac powder, roasted sesame seeds, salt.

History:

Za'atar is one of the oldest spice blends in the world. The name za'atar derives from the za'atar plant (*Origanum syriacum*), which is the primary component. The spice and herb are used in Levantine cuisine, and popular throughout the Mediterranean region of the Middle East where the za'atar plant naturally occurs. In regards to the actual name za'atar, there is some confusion about the spice's origin, and it appears it was called many things by different ancient cultures.

There is evidence that Ancient Egyptians used the za'atar plant in a variety of contexts. Remains of *Thymbra spicata*, one species used in modern za'atar preparations, were found in the tomb of Tutankhamun. According to Dioscorides, this particular species was known to the Ancient Egyptians as saem. In addition to Egypt, the za'atar herb was used throughout the Fertile Crescent region according to a number of historic sources. Pliny the Elder mentions a herb maron as an ingredient of the Regale Unguentum ("Royal Perfume") used by the Parthian kings in the 1st century CE. In Jewish tradition, Saadia (d. 942), Ibn Ezra (d. circa 1164), Maimonides (1135–1204) and Obadiah ben Abraham (1465–1515) identified the ezov mentioned in the Hebrew Bible with the Arabic word "za'atar". In old Hebrew texts, it is often translated as hyssop, which is confusing, as there is a modern plant called *Hyssopus officinalis*. In modern times, the plant is often marketed in Israel as "holy hyssop."

From the Medieval times to the present, Za'atar has served as a staple of Arabic cuisine. The spice is of particular historical significance in Palestine, often serving as a representation of the homeland. Palestinian refugees view za'atar as an indicator of what house or geographic region an individual hailed from, as different families utilized different blends. Palestinians are not alone in the practice of altering the spice blend; housewives throughout the Fertile Crescent, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula make their own variations of za'atar. This general practice is cited by



Western observers of Middle Eastern and North African culinary cultures as one reason for the difficulties in determining the names of the different spices used.

Ecologists found that wild za'atar was on the verge of extinction in Israel due to overharvesting in the mid 1960's. In 1977, Israel passed a law declaring za'atar a protected species. Although the cultivation of the spice is possible, it is an intensive process. Violators of the Israeli law are subject to fines. Some Arab citizens of Israel (who traditionally picked the wild herbs) have described the legislation as "almost anti-Arab". The ban on picking wild za'atar is also enforced in the West Bank. In 2006, za'atar plants were confiscated at IDF checkpoints, further fueling tensions between Palestinians and Israelis.

Za'atar is traditionally prepared by drying the spice blend in the sun and mixing it with salt, sesame seeds and sumac. The spice blend is commonly mixed with olive oil and used as a dipping sauce for pita bread. It can also be spread on dough and baked as a bread. Za'atar is often used as a seasoning for meats and vegetables, or sprinkled on hummus. In Jordan, a common breakfast is bread dipped in a za'atar-yogurt mixture.

Regional Stars: Za'atar is a fundamental spice palette of the Middle East, Fertile Crescent and Mediterranean. It is most frequently used as a garnish for savory dishes.

Food Partners:

Complements: hummus, pita, most grains, lettuce, spinach, eggplant.

Pairs well with: Beef, Chicken, root vegetables, and white fish.

Healing Powers: Although not supported by modern science, za'atar was believed to have medicinal properties. Children in Palestine are often encouraged to eat za'atar to keep their minds alert, while throughout the Mediterranean region and Middle East, people believe that the spice blend can be used to reduce or eliminate internal parasites.

Recipes:

Pita with Za'atar (Manakish Za'atar)

Ingredients:

5 pita breads
4 tbs. Olive oil
2 tbs. Za'atar
1 pinch of salt

Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375 F.



2. Slit the pita open into 2 equal halves (open the pocket up inside the pita and divide the two sides in half) and place them on a baking sheet with foil.
3. Mix the oil, za'atar, and salt in a small bowl.
4. Brush the rough side of the pita rounds with the za'atar and oil mixture, covering the side completely.
5. Toast the pita and za'atar for approximately 6 to 8 minutes or until just lightly browned.

Based on this recipe: <https://www.thespruceeats.com/pita-with-zaatar-parve-2121768>

Tip: This is also really good if you want to sprinkle it with feta cheese before you pop it in the oven. I also suggest dipping it in yogurt or hummus.

Za'atar Past Salad

Ingredients:

Baked Eggplant:

1 lb eggplant, cut into ½ inch cubes
Olive oil
Salt and pepper

Za'atar Lemon Vinaigrette

½ cup extra virgin olive oil
2 tbsp. Freshly squeezed lemon juice
2 tbsp water
1-2 cloves garlic, peeled.
2 tbsp za'atar
Salt
1 tsp sugar or maple syrup

Salad Components:

1 lb pasta
1 pint cherry tomatoes, chopped
½ red onion, finely chopped
1 cucumber, chopped
4 - 6 oz feta cheese
Za'atar, toasted sesame seeds, and/or fresh parsley for garnish



Instructions:

1. Preheat the oven to 425 °F. Grease a large baking tray then spread the eggplant in a single layer. Drizzle a bit of olive oil over top, and sprinkle some salt and pepper. Bake for 15-20 minutes, then stir the eggplant, and bake an additional 15 minutes or until very tender and golden brown. Remove from oven and let cool.
2. Meanwhile, cook the pasta according to package directions, when done cooking, drain and let cool. Toss with some extra virgin olive oil as it cools to keep it from sticking.

3. Using an immersion blender, a regular upright blender, or a sealable jar: combine all the ingredients for the za'atar vinaigrette. Blend or shake until you have a creamy emulsion. If using a jar, grate or press the garlic before adding.
4. In a large mixing bowl combine the cooled pasta, eggplant, cherry tomatoes, feta cheese, red onion, and za'atar dressing and toss to combine. Add parsley for garnish along with any other fresh herbs you like (e.g. thyme, oregano, parsley). Finish off with toasted sesame seeds or additional za'atar to taste.
5. Enjoy immediately or store in the fridge until ready to eat.

Recipe based on <https://www.thecuriouslychickpea.com/zaatar-pasta-salad/>

Tip: This is a really hearty pasta salad! I like pairing it with salmon, but I also totally just eat it as a meal in itself. Also, instead of greasing the baking sheet for eggplant, you can also use waxed baking paper, but don't use aluminum foil.

Grilled Za'atar Chicken with Garlic Yogurt and Cilantro

Ingredients:

6 cloves garlic, pressed or minced (1 reserved)
 2 lemons, zested (half reserved)
 1 cup plain greek yogurt ($\frac{2}{3}$ cups reserve)
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped fresh cilantro
 3 tbsp. Extra-virgin olive oil
 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp. Za'atar, plus more for serving
 1 tbsp. Fresh oregano or marjoram, plus more for garnish
 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp. Salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. Ground black pepper
 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs. Boneless, skinless chicken thighs.



Instructions:

1. In a large bowl or container, stir together 5 of the grated garlic cloves, half the lemon zest, $\frac{1}{3}$ cup yogurt, the cilantro, oil, za'atar, oregano or marjoram, salt and black pepper. Add chicken and toss until well coated. Cover and refrigerate for at least 2 hours or overnight.
2. When ready to cook, light the grill to medium or heat your broiler with the rack 3 inches from the heat source. Remove chicken from bowl, shaking off any excess marinade, and grill or broil on one side until charred in spots, 5 to 8 minutes. Flip the chicken and grill or broil for another 5 to 8 minutes, until just cooked through.
3. While the chicken is cooking, place remaining $\frac{2}{3}$ cup yogurt in a small bowl. Stir in the reserve grated garlic clove and lemon zest, and season to taste with salt and pepper. Cut one zested lemon in half and set aside for serving (save the other zested lemon for another use).
4. To serve, place chicken on a serving platter and drizzle with olive oil and a large squeeze of the zested lemon. Top with cilantro and oregano or marjoram sprigs and serve with yogurt sauce.

Tip: If you decide to bake the chicken, use foil instead of parchment paper.

Recipe from: <https://shorturl.at/kszR>