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## A Date with a Pita

The Medjool date originated in Morocco. Today they are grown in warm climates like California, Arizona, Florida, and the Middle East.

**M**Y COUSIN CALLED from San Francisco. She wanted me to find a restaurant in Chicago with a private room for a family gathering. There would be 10 of us; maybe 15. “Sure,” I said. I immediately called my sister-in-law who knows all the neighborhood restaurants on the north side of the city. She had a list, and we drove to check out her choices. I went along for the ride, having no idea at any time where we were.

We looked in Andersonville, Bucktown, Logan Square, Wicker Park. The neighborhoods were diverse and fascinating. What wasn’t diverse was the response to our mission. All the restaurants we visited turned us down. Our group was too small to inhabit a private room and too large to commandeer a private area of the dining room. By now we were tired, crabby, and very hungry.

“I’m going to take you to a spot you’re really going to love,” my sister-in-law said. We walked into a non-descript diner with mismatched chairs, plastic food baskets, and a menu that was as non-descript as its surroundings. “Wait until you see the back,” she said, when she saw the look on my face.

### A CHEF’S DELIGHT

Well, the “back” was a culinary wonder. I was stunned. This was a dazzling Middle East food emporium. I never knew there were so many different types of lentils, of all imaginable colors and shapes, or such a wide variety of grains. I felt like I had fallen down a rabbit hole into some enchanted land. Finally, after an inordinate amount of time spent wandering aisles of unfamiliar foods, I settled on pita. This too wasn’t easy. There were mountains of loaves, all handmade daily—where?—I didn’t know. I bought a package of eight. On the way to the cashier, I spotted dates. Again, stacks of varieties I never knew existed. I settled on Medjool. I’ve bought them at local grocery stores. I thought I knew what I was getting.

That night I tore one of the pitas and was going to swipe it through some hummus I had lurking in the fridge. The pita was so soft and fresh, it would have been a sacrilege to have it paired with that dip of unknown ingredients. And these dates, colossal beauties, must have been picked from a tree minutes before landing in my cart. They were unbelievably sweet, soft, and sticky. Delicious and healthy? These words don’t pair often enough.

Well, the problem arose with my habit of saving such divine bounty. This was insane. I waited so long that the pita was turning crisp, and the dates were shriveling in their package. I was about to toss them when the warning of so many cooking teachers whose classes I had attended in Florence, Sicily, Morocco, Spain, and France came flashing like lightning through my brain. “You never EVER waste food.”


So... a pita and a date walked into a bar... And came out as Fattoush, a most luscious Middle Eastern salad. 



PHOTO: GIRMANTAS URBONAS

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## Fattoush Salad

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### INGREDIENTS:

- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 1 small red onion, thinly sliced
- ½ cup (4 oz) pitted Medjool dates, halved, or quartered lengthwise
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 6 tablespoons olive oil, divided
- 2 pitas, torn into 1 ½ inch pieces (do not separate halves)
- 2 teaspoons ground sumac
- ¼ teaspoon chili flakes
- 1 head romaine lettuce
- ¼ cup mint leaves, chopped
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice
- ¼ pound feta, crumbled, optional

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Place the vinegar, onion slices, and dates in a small bowl. Add a pinch of salt and mix well with your hands. Set aside for 20 minutes, then drain and discard vinegar.
2. Meanwhile heat butter and 2 tablespoons olive oil in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add the pita pieces and cook, stirring, until the pita is golden brown and crunchy. Remove from heat and mix in the sumac, chili flakes, and ¼ teaspoon salt. Set it aside.
3. Tear or chop the romaine into bite size pieces and place in a large bowl with the mint. Add the date mixture. Drizzle the remaining olive oil and lemon juice around the sides of the bowl. Using your hands, combine all the ingredients. Taste and add more olive oil if necessary. Season with a pinch of salt and some freshly ground pepper. Arrange on individual plates or serve from the bowl. Crumble the feta over the top, if using. Serves 6