

What to Buy at an Armenian Market.

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What to Buy at an Armenian Market

Explore the abundant offerings of this Middle Eastern cuisine

Armenian cuisine is all about celebrating abundance. The food is plentiful, simple, and packed with vegetables. It's also surprisingly familiar, since Armenian culture ' which was scattered after hundreds of thousands of Armenians were deported by the ruling Ottoman government in the early 20th century ' has extended into the Middle East, North America, Europe, and many other lands.

Many basic Armenian ingredients ' such as tahini, flat breads, bulgur, and specialty olives ' can be found in supermarkets around the country. But if you're having trouble finding any Armenian items, try ordering from Kalustyan's, in New York City (www.kalustyans.com); Sunnyland Mills (www.sunnylandmills.com); and even Amazon's gourmet food section (www.amazon.com/gourmetfood). Here, Barbara Ghazarian, author of *Simply Armenian* (Mayreni Publishing, \$18, www.amazon.com), names the building blocks of Armenian cuisine and tells how to enjoy them.

Lavash

This thin, pliable flat bread goes with just about anything. 'I put peanut butter and jelly on lavash yesterday and rolled it up,' Ghazarian says. 'My husband puts Armenian string cheese with cucumber on it. You can roll absolutely anything up in a lavash bread.'

Cracker Bread

Similar to matzo, cracker bread is crispy and not exactly bursting with flavor, though you can buy it with sesame seeds on top to liven it up. Use it as you would any other cracker. 'On Sunday nights when I was growing up,' Ghazarian recalls, 'we would get a variety of cold cuts and cheeses and eat them on Armenian cracker bread.' She also notes that if you run cracker bread under the faucet for a second, it will become pliable, and you can eat it that way, too.

Yogurt

The American tendency to load yogurt with sweet toppings, like fruit, candy, and granola, is not echoed in Armenian cuisine (however, the Colombo yogurt company was started by an Armenian family). 'Armenian yogurt is tangier,' says Ghazarian. 'The longer you keep it in the refrigerator, the tangier it gets.' So instead of adding sweet mix-ins, try it the Armenian way: as a base for soup, a topping for lamb or eggplant, or even as a refreshing drink call tahn, which is yogurt mixed with club soda and salt. (Whisk a cup of plain yogurt with a cup of cold seltzer water until the mixture is frothy. Then drop in a 1/4 teaspoon of salt and some ice cubes.)

Quince Jam

Rose, fig, and sour cherry jams are typical Armenian spreads, and you'll find them at any Armenian market, but Ghazarian's favorite is quince. 'It's a cross between a pear and an apple,' she says. While

the cream-colored fruit is grainy and astringent if eaten raw (which it rarely is), it turns ruby red and sweet when cooked. 'You make jams and jellies out of it,' says Ghazarian. 'My favorite thing is to put it over goat cheese and serve it with table crackers.'

Spreads

Salads and spreads such as hummus and baba ghanoush are as integral to the Armenian table as they are to other Middle Eastern cuisines. 'Anybody can walk into an Armenian market and go to the section of prepared salads ' and that's the best part of the shopping experience,' says Ghazarian. 'Select three of them, grab a flatbread, then serve them all on the same plate so the juices mix. You can sop up the juices with the flat bread or roll the sauces in the flat bread ' it is so wonderful tasting.'

Tourshi

This Armenian word means 'pickle,' and you can find just about any vegetable pickled in an Armenian market. 'We pickle eggplant, cauliflower, red cabbage, garlic,' says Ghazarian. 'That was how we kept things for the winter.' The process, which requires sterilized and airtight jars, involves soaking the vegetables in a brine of vinegar, salt, and water for about 10 days, after which they take on a zesty flavor ' or a spicy one, since Ghazarian adds a sliver of hot pepper to her mixes. The pickles generally last about a month and are served on their own or with hummus.

Eggplant

'There are many varieties of eggplant, and the Armenians eat every variety they can find, whenever they're in season,' says Ghazarian. 'We don't really care what the variety of eggplant is ' white, purple, striped. We'll eat 'em all. What we care about is the size.' That's because the size determines how the eggplant will be used. A medium to large specimen might be pureed with tahini into baba ghanoush, fried then topped with yogurt, or sliced and grilled with olive oil. The narrow, smaller kind can end up stuffed or pickled.

Olives

'Unlike at a western table, you will never sit down at an Armenian table that doesn't already have food on it,' says Ghazarian. That food includes hummus, flat breads, cheeses, and, always, olives. 'Armenians tend to like the darker olives, similar to the Greek varieties, like kalamata,' she says. In addition to being an appetizer staple, olives are often a breakfast item, eaten with bread and cheese. Ghazarian loves a kalamata-olive spread made with walnuts, tomato paste, cayenne, and cumin, as well as a black-olive and yogurt-cheese spread. Of course, you can also just pop olives in your mouth like candy.

Sumac

'The most common spices in Armenian cuisine ' black pepper, cayenne pepper, cumin, sesame seeds, and black caraway seeds ' are well-known and used throughout the United States,' Ghazarian says. But the one spice you need to make your meals truly Armenian is sumac, she says. 'Everybody in the U.S. thinks of poison sumac when you say that. Let's get past that now.' Sumac is actually a wild bush that grows throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East, and its berries (which are not poisonous) are pulverized into a burgundy-colored spice that has a tangy, zesty, lemonlike flavor. You can sprinkle it on

steamed vegetables, on top of hummus, or as a garnish for a yogurt-based or squash soup. 'I defy you to find sumac spice anywhere in the United States other than in an Armenian market ' it's distinctive to this cuisine.'

Paklava

Known as 'baklava' in Greek, this is a layered dessert made of walnuts, sugar, and cinnamon stuffed between layers of phyllo dough. It's baked and served in triangles.

Bourma

This is the same thing as paklava, but in a different shape ' a tube. 'It's the same recipe,' says Ghazarian. 'It's rolled around a wooden dowel and then crunched during the cooking process so that it looks like those dogs with all the wrinkles in their faces, and then the dowel is pulled out. It's sold in finger-length tubes.'

Fried Dough with Sugar Syrup

This is exactly what it sounds like. 'It's sinfully sweet ' hurt-your-teeth sweet,' Ghazarian warns. 'It's an acquired taste.'

Halva

Essentially, blocks made of tahini, sugar, and flour, this dessert can be eaten on flat bread. 'You can put sliced bananas on top, or sometimes it comes with pistachio nuts on it,' says Ghazarian. 'Or you can eat it plain.'
