



Non-traditional platter for Shab-e-barat

It's that time of the year when the house is redolent with the warm scent of ghee as suji halwa, boot halwa, neshesta, or a range of your favourite sweets are prepared. Shab-e-barat arrives half a month before the onset of Ramadan and prepares us for the coming month of sharing food, caring for others and an air of festivity in the kitchens. This year I share with you some desserts from around the world that you could try for that off-beat Shab-e-barat platter.

WEST AFRICAN PEANUT BALL

Peanuts are a very integral part of West African cuisine and along with the yams and cassava and okra that came out of this region, a lot of cuisine involves peanuts.

Ingredients

½ cup peanut butter (you can simply blend peeled peanuts until thick and creamy)
1 cup honey, slightly warm
1 cup powdered milk
½ cup finely grated coconut

Method

Place peanut butter and honey in bowl and blend well. Add 1 cup powdered milk and blend into a stiff dough, adding more powdered milk as needed. Cup the mixture into small 1-inch balls or patties. Put coconut in flat pan. Roll balls or patties in the coconut to coat them. Place these balls on a dish covered with wax paper then cover it with another wax paper sheet, and refrigerate.

Serving

Serve as a sweet snack treat when guests come around

MAFROUKEH

A very traditional Lebanese dish served on a plate or in bakeries by the kilo, the name of this dish derives from the term "to knead". This is however a simplified version, with ingredients meant to be slightly less on the heavy side.

Ingredients

2 cups shredded thin filo pastry available at stores
1 cup water
1 cup sugar syrup (You can use brown sugar to make this - 1 cup sugar, ½ cup water, 2 tsp lemon juice)
1 tbsp rosewater
1 tbsp orange zest or you may use lemons
2 cups ashta (boil milk and keep scooping off the cream formed on top of it continuously)
For toppings -
½ cup almond boiled, peeled and fried to light golden.
¼ cup pistachio nuts crashed in tiny pieces
Apricot jam (optional)

Method

Preparing the Mafroukeh mix - Blend the shredded filo dough well, until you get a dough of very tiny grains.

Stir the dough in a non-stick casserole, over medium heat, until yellowing, then bump up the heat, stirring continuously.

When the dough starts darkening, add the liquid ingredients (water, orange zest and rosewater), and ½ the cup of sugar syrup.

Keep stirring for the dough to absorb all the liquid, and mix well. When the mixture turns into a dark golden brown colour, remove from heat.

Pour the mixture into the glass serving pan, and spread it well, dabbing it with the dampened palm of your hand. Allow it to cool for 10 minutes.

Pour the Ashta cream all over the Mafroukeh mixture. With a spoon, spread it well all over, then press gently for an equal level. Wet the spoon with fresh cold water and smooth a little the surface.

Garnish and cool -

Sprinkle the pistachio all over the Ashta layer then follow it with a rich layer of almonds. Place the serving plate in the fridge until coolness.

Pour the remaining ½ cup of syrup in a serving bowl. Cut the Mafroukeh into 15 equal pieces.

If you have opted for the jam, use a tsp to place a small dose on each piece.

Umm Ali

Literally meaning the mother of Ali, this dish can transport you back to era of harem pants, a sprinkling of amber essence and the streets of Baghdad from the Thousand and One Nights! However, here yet again is my version of this decadent dish. It also uses puff pastry but I gave it a deshi twist!

Ingredients

250 puff pastry
1 bowl cooked milk vermicelli (doodh shemayi)
½ stick cinnamon
7-8 cardamom pods
¼ cup slices almonds
¼ cup walnuts
¼ cup pistachio
¼ cup raisins
¼ cup shredded coconut
¼ cup pure ghee (deshi ghee)

Method

Prepare the milk vermicelli first. In a wok, warm the ghee then add the vermicelli strands and fry for about 2-3 minutes (go for the brand that sells brown coloured vermicelli). At this point it has browned even more so add 5 cups of milk, cardamom and cinnamon and stir it. Let it thicken and add 1 cup brown sugar towards the end. Once it is thick enough (it should have consistency of thick cream), take it off the fire.

In a baking dish, grease the base with a bit of butter then lay 4-5 filo pastries and stick it in the oven for 2 minutes. They will have puffed up a bit then take it out and let it cool for a bit then sprinkle half the nuts

on it and add half the vermicelli. Place a few more filo sheets and add a final layer of the vermicelli then sprinkle nuts on top. Stick it into the oven for another 2-3 minutes then take it out.

Serving

Cut it up into small pieces and if the vermicelli oozes out then let it.

ANDRASSA

A popular dessert enjoyed in Pakistan, andrassas are a one bite affair and are regularly popped during festivals or especially, at the markets while tired shoppers relish the burst of sweetness and energy that comes with sugar and sesame!

Ingredients

½ kg rice flour
¼ tsp baking soda
400g sugar
½ cup water
½ cup sesame seeds
1 cup oil for frying

Method

Prepare a sugar syrup, take it off the fire and then slowly stir in the rice flour. Mix it till it becomes a dough. Set this aside for about 1 hour so the dough hardens. Once this happens add the baking soda and mix well again. After kneading it for a few minutes, break off small balls and roll them in the sesame seeds. Once this is done fry them in the oil.

Serving

Serve these as bite sized sesame delights but a statutory warning: they finish real quick!