

THE CHEF

Diane Forley



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EVEN though people are trying to bring more grain into their diets, few of us actually cook with millet. It's still a grain that most people encounter as birdseed. But millet has a lot going for it.

Millet has a mild, cornlike flavor, and it's packed with nutrients — the only grain that has more protein than millet is quinoa. Millet also soaks up the flavor of a broth, which makes it ideal for this dish.

The other unfamiliar actor here is zaatar (pronounced ZAT-are), a mixture of powdered spices used widely in the Middle East to season grain salads, rub on fish or sprinkle over flat breads with drizzlings of olive oil. Its formulation varies but usually includes thyme, hyssop, sesame seed, oregano and sumac, with the sumac lending a distinct lemony tang. Here I use the zaatar in an unusual way, as the flavoring for a poaching broth, which turns a light olive green from the spices. I wanted to use it a little more subtly than rubbing it directly on the meat.

This is the seventh of eight columns by Diane Forley, the chef and owner of the Manhattan restaurant Verbena. Her collaborator on these columns is William Grimes.

Millet-stuffed chicken, Middle Eastern spices.

At the restaurant I use a saddle of rabbit, which is sautéed rather than poached, but the dish also works perfectly well with chicken. This adaptation is very light, almost a spa dish, with practically no fat at all. The poaching performs two functions: it imparts flavor and it helps keep the chicken moist. To reduce the fat even further, chicken stock can be substituted for the cream.

The main thing to remember in working with the mousse is to keep all the ingredients chilled; otherwise, the fat and the protein can separate, and the mousse can take on a grainy consistency. The same thing can happen if the poaching liquid is allowed to boil.

You can prepare the mousse up to a day in advance, and assemble and cook the dish at the last minute. Leftover mousse can be formed into a patty and sautéed in olive oil, or dropped into a broth to make soup dumplings.

CHICKEN STUFFED WITH TOASTED SESAME-MILLET MOUSSE IN ZAAATAR BROTH

Time: 1 hour 15 minutes

- 1 cup dried millet
- ½ pound ground chicken
- 2¼ cups chicken stock or canned broth
- ¼ cup heavy cream
- 1 egg
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped chives
- 1 cup finely chopped parsley leaves
- Pinch ground cloves
- Pinch nutmeg
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons toasted sesame seeds
- 4 whole boneless chicken breasts
- ¼ cup zaatar spice (available in Middle Eastern markets)
- Juice of 2 lemons
- 2 tablespoons butter (optional)
- 1 pound fresh spinach, washed and trimmed of thick stems.

1. In a small saucepan combine the millet and 3 cups water. Place over high heat and bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Simmer, partially covered, until millet is tender and water is absorbed, about 25 minutes. Set aside.

2. While millet is cooking, prepare mousse: Place the ground chicken in a food processor and process until smooth, about 1 minute. While machine is running, add ¼ cup chicken stock, heavy cream and egg. Transfer mousse to a bowl, and add chives, parsley, cloves and nutmeg, and salt and pepper to taste. Add millet and sesame

seeds, and mix well. Refrigerate until chilled, 15 to 30 minutes.

3. Lay a chicken breast on a cutting board, cover with plastic wrap, and pound with a mallet until it is ¼ inch thick. Repeat with remaining breasts. Place ½ cup chilled filling toward one end of each breast, and roll the breasts until closed. Tie with string at 1-inch intervals to create a sausage shape.

4. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. In a large (6 quart) casserole, combine the remaining chicken stock, zaatar spice and 2 cups water. Bring to a boil over high heat. Remove from heat, place chicken rolls in casserole and cover. Place casserole in oven, and bake until a meat thermometer placed in the center of a chicken roll reads 160 degrees, about 12 to 15 minutes.

5. Remove chicken to a platter, remove strings and keep warm. Add lemon juice to broth in casserole, and mix in butter, if desired. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Strain broth through a chinois or fine sieve, and keep warm.

6. In a large pot over medium heat, combine spinach with ¼ cup water. Steam just until wilted, 5 to 7 minutes; drain well. To serve, slice the chicken into rounds, set on top of a bed of steamed spinach and spoon broth over the top.

Yield: 4 servings.