

THE CHEF

Diane Forley

AS I start my series of eight columns, I want to turn to a dish that not only is one of the most popular in my restaurant during zucchini season but also illustrates a technique that I find invaluable: the toasting of pastas and grains, like pastina, barley or even rice.

The dish I present here is a soup that got its start in my mind when my eye fell on some particularly fine looking zucchini (that's how a lot of my dishes begin, with a single vegetable prompting a cascade of associations). That beautiful zucchini pointed me in the direction of the Mediterranean — and couscous.

The classic couscous of North Africa, the south of France or the Middle East revolves around zucchini and also carrots or string beans. These are soup vegetables, too, of course, and in reaching for a twist of my own, I decided to invert the idea of couscous, making it a garnish for a vegetable soup rather than the base for other ingredients, which it usually is. To one experienced in Mediterranean cuisines, all the flavors of this soup would be familiar and in harmony and yet also entertaining in a somewhat surprising reformulation.

For this dish, Israeli couscous is the key. Couscous is pasta — semolina — although because of its tiny shape, it doesn't usually look like it. Its pastalike characteristics are most apparent in Israeli couscous, which is atypically large, almost the size of a BB pellet, and works much better here than finer varieties, which are apt to turn mushy in soup.

Now, here's the key: the toasting, which seals in the starch and reinforces the exteri-



Richard Bowditch for The New York Times

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

or, allowing the couscous to absorb liquid without falling apart. Toasting also caramelizes the starch for a sweeter, nuttier flavor. Actually, this is a second toasting, as Israeli couscous, which is lightly oven-dried, is usually sold as "toasted." If you can't find Israeli couscous, you can substitute angel-hair pasta, cut into half-inch lengths.

Turmeric is sweet and spicy, with an almost mustardlike bite, and really brings out the sweetness of the zucchini. It can be overpowering, so it has to be used carefully. Rosemary, also a traditional Mediterranean flavor, is zucchini's frequent companion, and I rely on it here.

This is a versatile soup. You could make it with a vegetable stock instead of chicken, or even with water. It could be served cold, too, but in that case, I'd leave out the couscous and add yogurt, with the liquid drained. You just add a dollop, like sour cream. But indulge me the first time, and try it with the couscous; it will be a revelation.



Daniel Pelavin

ZUCCHINI SOUP WITH TOASTED ISRAELI COUSCOUS

Time: 1 hour

- 2 allspice berries
- 8 coriander seeds
- 10 black peppercorns
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 large onion, coarsely chopped (about 1½ cups)
- 4 medium zucchini cut into 1-inch dice (about 6 cups)
- 5 cups chicken or vegetable stock
- ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
- Salt and pepper to taste.

1. Make a sachet: place allspice, coriander, peppercorns and rosemary in center of 6-inch-square cheesecloth. Fold to make triangle, roll folded side, and tie ends together. Set aside.

2. Heat olive oil in 4-quart saucepan. Add onion, and sauté over medium heat until translucent, about 8 minutes. Add zucchini, and cook until softened, about 10 minutes. Add sachet to saucepan, and cover with 4 cups stock. Simmer until vegetables are quite soft, about 15 minutes. Let cool slightly. (As soon as stock starts to simmer, begin making Israeli couscous.)

3. Remove sachet from saucepan. Purée stock and vegetables in blender in batches. Season with nutmeg, salt and pepper. If soup is too thick (if it is like potato soup), dilute it with remaining stock. Add couscous, stir and serve immediately.

Yield: 4 to 6 servings.

TOASTED ISRAELI COUSCOUS

- 1 tablespoon butter
- 1 tablespoon finely chopped shallot
- ½ cup Israeli toasted pasta (couscous)
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1 cup chicken stock or water.

1. Melt butter in 2-quart saucepan. Add shallots, stirring so that they are coated with butter. Cook over low heat until soft-

ened, about 5 minutes.

2. Add couscous, and brown lightly, stirring with wooden spoon to keep couscous from burning, about 5 to 7 minutes. Add turmeric, let mixture cook for 1 minute, and then cover with stock or water. Bring liquid to boil, reduce heat, and cover. Cook for 15 to 20 minutes. Remove from heat, and let sit for 10 minutes.