

Christmas Breakfast from Ancient Lands

by Habeeb Salloum

I enjoyed what was to me the “mother of all Arab breakfasts” during my first trip in the early 1960s to Damascus, Syria’s capital. In my many following trips to the Middle East, I was to relish many similar breakfasts. However, I have never forgotten that first early-morning meal in the world’s oldest continuously inhabited city.

It felt like a dream as I relished the best of morning dishes eaten for thousands of years in that part of the world.

From among these were: hot Arabic bread, za’tar (thyme condiment), baba ghannooj (eggplant puree) and piping hot fattat hummus (chickpea and yogurt platter), manaqeesh (both cheese and thyme pies) as well as ‘aysh as-saraaya (bread of the palace) and half a dozen other dishes. As I gazed at the delicacies before me, I thought to myself, “This is, indeed, a royal morning spread.”

These two dishes that I enjoyed during that first Damascus trip often form the core of the foods I serve as part of a Middle East breakfast.



Chickpea and Yogurt Platter – Fattat Hummus

Serves 6

In Damascus, this dish is usually served as a part of a hearty breakfast.

2 medium loaves Arab bread (pita), toasted; then broken into small pieces
1 can chickpeas (540 ml - 19 oz), drained
1 1/2 cups plain yogurt
2 cloves garlic, crushed
salt and pepper to taste
seeds of one pomegranate
2 tablespoons lemon juice
1 tablespoon tahini
1 tablespoon butter
4 tablespoons pine nuts or slivered almonds
1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley

Spread bread evenly on a platter; then

spread chickpeas evenly over top and set aside.

Thoroughly combine yogurt, garlic, salt, pepper, pomegranate seeds, lemon juice and tahini; then spread over chickpeas. Melt butter in a frying pan; then saute pine nuts or almonds until they begin to turn golden. Spread nuts over yogurt mixture; decorate with parsley and serve.



Bread of the Palace – ‘Aysh as-Saraaya

Serves 8

‘Aysh as-Saraaya, a Middle Eastern dish, once only prepared in the homes of the wealthy, has been brought by Arab immigrants to North America. This my own version of this famous dish.

1 cup honey
4 tablespoons butter
1/2 cup water
1 teaspoon almond extract
1/4 teaspoon ground cloves
8 slices white bread toasted, crusts removed
2 1/2 cups half and half cream
7 slices white bread, crusts removed and cut into tiny pieces
4 tablespoons sugar
4 tablespoons ground pistachios

Make a syrup by placing the honey, butter and water in a saucepan and bringing to a boil. Stir in almond extract and cloves and boil for 2 minutes then let cool.

Lay the toasted bread side-by-side on the bottom of a 9-by-13 inch pan; then set aside.

Place cream, bread pieces and sugar in a saucepan; then, stirring constantly, bring to boil. Continue stirring over medium heat until mixture thickens. Remove from heat.

Pour syrup evenly over toast in pan; then spread warm cream mixture evenly over top. Sprinkle pistachio evenly over top; cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 12 hours. Cut into 8 pieces and serve for breakfast or as a dessert.



University of Guelph professor Gary Grewal (left) joins code-writer Andrew D'Angelo in celebrating the success of an app they developed to treat the iron ailment called hemochromatosis. Susan Bubak photo

World Wide Welcome

Guelph prof receives thanks from around the world after developing app to treat own iron ailment

By May Warren

A few years ago, University of Guelph computer science professor Gary Grewal began to get very sick and didn't know why.

He underwent test after test, but doctors couldn't figure out what was wrong with him.

“I was extremely ill and I just felt awful. I actually said to my doctor, ‘I feel like I’m going to die here,’” he recalls.

Finally, in 2010 he was diagnosed with a genetic disorder called hemochromatosis, a condition where too much iron collects in the body.

It can lead to diabetes and even death if left untreated.

Now, Grewal, 48, has used that experience to develop a popular medical app that's raising awareness of the little-known condition, and helping people who suffer from the disease keep track of their health on their smartphones.

With a treatment called phlebotomy, where blood is drawn regularly, and constant monitoring with blood samples, his iron levels started to drop and he slowly started to feel better.

“It was a very important psychological thing for me to actually see that these treatments were working,” he said.

He started keeping track of his iron levels using an Excel spreadsheet. But it was complicated. “I would go in sometimes and I wouldn't have a pencil or paper with me and then I would forget to ask. So I started missing

points,” he said.

“And it just dawned on me that it would be really great if I could just plug my numbers in on a smartphone.”

He started working with Andrew Hamilton-Wright of Mount Allison University and three U of G students on the app.

They knew it could help people living with hemochromatosis around the world keep better track of their treatment.

Released in mid-September, the app has already been downloaded thousands of times.

Dubbed Iron-Tracker, it lets people keep track of all the results from blood tests, and graphs iron levels over time. It includes a scheduling feature to make sure people don't miss appointments. Users can also note which arm blood samples are taken from so the same one isn't used over and over again.

The Canadian Hemochromatosis society is also promoting the app. President Bob Rogers said it has already made a huge difference in the lives of people living with the disease.

U of G computer science student Andrew D'Angelo, who wrote the code for the Android version, said the app accounts for about 30 per cent of all medical downloads from the Apple Store.

Grewal said the app is especially popular in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States. “I've had about half a dozen phone calls of people just phoning out of the blue and saying, ‘Hey I've got this, thanks for the app.’”

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