

## AN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN MEAL

(Demos, with students' participation)

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### THE ORIGINAL BABYLONIAN RECIPE (Translation by Jean Bottéro)

(Comments highlighted in yellow are mine)

**Tuh'u [= red]-Beet.** [In addition,] lamb meat is used. Get the water ready. Add fat [chopped sheep-tail fat]. Peel the vegetables. Add salt, beer, onion, rocket/arugula [Akk. *egengeru*, cf. Arabic *girgeer*], coriander, *samidu* (?), according to *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, it may mean 'bunch', cumin, and the beets.

Assemble all the ingredients in a cooking pot. Then pound leek and garlic together, and add. Let all blend and reduce. Sprinkle the cooked dish with coriander and [raw] *shuhutinnu* (?), according to *Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*, *shuhuru* 'very small, tiny'; so probably the cilantro is chopped finely, to garnish the dish].

### COOKING THE BEET AND LAMB STEW IN OUR MODERN KITCHENS:

(4-5 servings):

8-12 ounces lamb, cut into 1-inch cubes  
2 tablespoons oil  
2 tablespoons butter

1 small onion, chopped  
8 ounces beets, peeled and diced  
1 cup chopped watercress or arugula  
¼ cup chopped cilantro  
1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds  
¾ teaspoon cumin

½ cup chopped leek leaves  
1 clove of garlic

1 cup mild-tasting beer (non-alcoholic) [if not bitter]  
1 cup water  
¾ teaspoon salt

For garnish: finely chopped cilantro

1. Put the oil and butter in a wide pot (wide enough for the lamb cubes to spread in one layer). Add the washed and drained lamb cubes. Cook on high heat (the lamb will release some of its juices), until all moisture evaporates. Fold several times. Fold in the onion, and keep cooking until it is almost transparent.

2. Fold in beets, watercress, cilantro, crushed coriander and cumin. Keep on folding until moisture evaporates and ingredients emit a pleasant aroma.
3. Pour in beer and water, and give the pot a light stir. Bring the pot to a good boil.
4. Coarsely chop the leek leaves, skin the garlic clove, and pound them together into paste in a mortar and pestle. Add to the pot.
5. Reduce heat and let pot simmer until sauce nicely thickens (about an hour).
6. Ladle the stew into plates and sprinkle it with chopped cilantro.

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**SERVE THE BEET AND LAMB STEW WITH STEAMED BULGUR (CRACKED WHEAT):**

(Makes 6 servings)

2 tablespoons oil  
 2 cups bulgur, coarse grind #2 or #3, washed and drained  
 ½ cup cooked chickpeas, drained  
 1 teaspoon salt  
 4 cups water

Put all the ingredients in a medium, 4-quart heavy pot, and mix well. Boil, covered, until most of the visible moisture is absorbed, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for 20 minutes, or until grains are cooked. Gently fold twice while simmering to allow grains to fluff.

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**THE BEET AND LAMB STEW CAN ALSO BE SCOOPED WITH  
 SUMERIAN-STYLE TANNOUR BREAD:**

(Makes 20 breads)

3 tablespoons dry yeast  
 10 cups (2.25 liters) warm water

20 cups (5 pounds) flour (A good combination will be 2 pounds whole wheat and 3 pounds bread flour)  
 2 tablespoons salt

Wheat bran for sprinkling on work surface  
 Cut out circles of parchment paper, a little bigger than the bread size  
 Preheat oven 420°F

Dissolve dry yeast in warm water. Mix the flour with salt, make a well in the middle, pour the water, and stir the mix to let the flour absorb the liquid. Knead for 5 minutes, until dough pulls away from the sides. Cover, and let rise at a warm place for 45 minutes. The dough is flattened on parchment paper (it is handled with wet hands). To be baked (as will be demonstrated).

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## FOR DESSERT

### 1. Date Syrup with Tahini/sesame paste

To make this sweet dip: put some date syrup in a bowl and drizzle it generously with *tahini*.

Proportions depend on your personal preference.

This dip is scooped with the Sumerian-style *tannour* bread.

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### 2. MERSU: ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN DATE CANDY

(Makes about 38 small pieces)

½ cup whole-wheat flour

2 cups pitted dates (= 12 ounces)

½ cup tahini

1 teaspoon cardamom

¼ teaspoon ground aniseeds or fennel

½ teaspoon ground coriander seeds

½ teaspoon cinnamon

¼ cup walnut halves

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1. Dry toast the flour by putting it in a heavy skillet and stirring it constantly until it starts to change color and emit a pleasant fragrance and a bit of smoke starts to show, about 5 minutes on medium heat. Let it cool down. (This can be done ahead of time)

2. In a food processor, put the toasted flour along with dates, tahini, cardamom, aniseeds, cinnamon, and coriander. Process until mixture forms a ball, 2 to 3 minutes.

3. Make small balls with it, and press a piece of walnut in the middle of each.

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#### DRINKS:

This meal will be washed down with plain water or non-alcoholic beer.

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#### NOTE:

Amounts given in these recipes are basic. They will be multiplied for the cooking session.