Tabboulehs of Lebanon Unite!



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Sector : Agriculture **Country :** Lebanon

By Kamal Mouzawak

Lebanon's cuisine has many different kinds of appetizers, yet for the Lebanese there is really only one option to start a meal: with tabbouleh! A Lebanese mezze always starts with a tabbouleh, and so does a festive home meal.

If there is one thing I am nostalgic about when I am away, it is a lemony tabbouleh! And if there is one thing that makes a Sunday meal, it is tabbouleh too! And if there is one thing on which all Lebanese agree, it is tabbouleh again – to such an extent that Ricardo Mbarkho (then a young art student in Paris) in 2001 created the National Tabbouleh Day. On this day, the Lebanese celebrate their national unity through their identification with tabbouleh.



Since 2007, National Tabbouleh Day is celebrated on the first Saturday of every July at Souk el Tayeb, the weekly eco-market in the heart of Beirut. For the first National Tabbouleh Day, Dr. Antoine Daher, a urologist and editor-in-chief of ELLE Oriental, wrote a wonderful essay comparing Lebanon to tabbouleh. If tabbouleh has parsley, lemon, olive oil, burghul, onion, salt and tomato, he argued, Lebanon has Sunni, Shiite, Maronite, Druze, Orthodox, Armenian, Chaldean, Baha'i and Protestant communities – 17 religious minorities no less!

If the mix of different ingredients gives tabbouleh its unique taste, then these different groups together make Lebanon a unique nation. And tabbouleh is a unique mix. It is not like a gazpacho, where all ingredients blend together. Nor is it a salad, in which one can see, and separate, each ingredient from another.

Tabbouleh is a mix in which each part is visible, yet cannot be separated or isolated from the rest. The same can be said of Lebanon: every individual and group exists through its own individual history, beliefs and traditions and yet, together, they build or try to build a nation. Lebanon is like a tabbouleh. You will just have to take it as it is!

For us Lebanese, tabbouleh is sacred and untouchable. Each person or family has his or her own version, but all agree on some common ground. Tabbouleh is made mainly with parsley, a little mint, spring onion (finely shaved rather than chopped), diced tomato, fine burghul, lemon juice, olive oil, salt and pepper. Some dare add some debs el rmein (sour pomegranate molasses), but that is really as far as one can go!



In the old days, there used to be seasonal tabboulehs. For example, a winter tabbouleh with ingredients, such as cooked coarse burghul, blanched cabbage, awarma (meat confit), dried mint and onion, or a "normal" tabbouleh eaten with more seasonal delicacies such as young and tender grape leaves, fresh cabbage leaves or romaine-lettuce leaves.

In general, all of the "permitted" variations differ only in terms of the proportions used of one ingredient compared to another, or the quantity of burghul used and whether to soak the burghul or not.

The "not to do" list starts with a total ban on the use of couscous. There is no such thing as tabbouleh with couscous. The same can be said about the use of seafood, diced cucumbers or melon. Do not get me wrong, you can add whatever you like – we live in a free world, after all – but, please, don't call it tabbouleh!

In short, tabbouleh must be:

- a salad of mainly parsley
- made with flat-leaf parsley
- made with fine burghul (soaked or not)
- never be made with couscous
- and never be made with seafood or other combos

Amen!



Kamal Mouzawak
Founder, Souk el Tayeb market

Kamal Mouzawak is a farmer's son, food and travel writer, and founder of the Souk el Tayeb market, which since 2004 has celebrated local food and traditions to unite communities and promote the culture of sustainable agriculture. In 2009, he helped open the restaurant Tawlet Souk al Tayeb in Mar Mikhael, while a second outlet in the Bekaa Valley in 2012.

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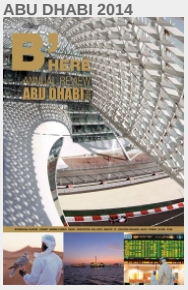
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