

Cauliflower steak with Labneh & grated tomatoes

Serves 4

Along with eggplant, I think cauliflower is one of the “meatiest” vegetables out there. It’s so rich in texture and flavor that I like to glorify it and give it the center stage. Baking it as big steaks helps to keep its natural flavor intense yet bright, and makes the most of that firm, “meaty” texture.

2 small or medium cauliflowers, halved
¼ cup vegetable stock (see p.123 for homemade) or water
2 tbsp butter, melted
salt, to taste
sugar, to taste
pinch of crushed red pepper flakes

For the grated tomatoes

2 ripe tomatoes, grated (discard the skins)
1 garlic clove, finely grated
pinch of cumin seeds
drizzle of olive oil
salt, to taste

For the cured lemon butter

2 tbsp butter, melted
1 tbsp Cured Lemon Paste (see *below*)
1 tsp ground almonds

To garnish

4 tbsp Labneh (see *below*)
1 tsp Za’atar Spice Mix (see *below*)
handful of toasted slivered almonds
handful of chopped parsley
sprinkle of Maldon salt flakes

1. Preheat your oven to 400°F. Place the cauliflower halves, cut-side down, on a baking sheet. Mix the stock or water with the melted butter and drizzle over the cauliflower, then give them a good rub. Season with some salt and sugar and the crushed red pepper flakes. Cover with foil and bake for 45 minutes–1 hour, or until the cauliflower is easy to pierce with a knife but not too soft; I recommend that you check it after 45 minutes.

2. Meanwhile, mix all the ingredients for the grated tomatoes together in a bowl and set aside. Do the same with the cured lemon butter ingredients.

3. Once the cauliflower is ready, take it out of the oven and heat your grill to its highest setting. Rub the cauliflower with the cured lemon butter and grill for 5–7 minutes until golden brown. (The reason we don't add the cured lemon butter from the start is to avoid it becoming bitter.)
4. To serve, place a spoonful of Labneh on each serving plate and season with the Za'atar Spice Mix, then place the cauliflower on top, spoon the grated tomatoes on top of that and garnish with the slivered almonds, parsley and Maldon salt flakes.

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Cured lemons

Makes 7 cups

First off, there is a difference between these tangy, intensely savory cured lemon slices and the more ubiquitous preserved lemons. Ours are cured in olive oil and salt, while the latter are suspended in brine. Switching water for oil eliminates entirely that bleach-y taste preserved lemons can carry. All over the Middle East you can buy the very best-quality cured and preserved lemons, but in London... less so. Once I settled in the UK, I was forced to conquer my reluctance to cure my own. For some reason, many people avoid doing it. Silly, really — it's not complicated and the result is far superior to anything you can buy. The only thing you need is a little patience. I can credit Papi with dispelling my curing fears, and frankly now I can never cure enough. Cured lemons, in slices and as a paste (see right), are an essential part of our cooking: chop the sliced lemons and add them to salads, sandwiches, stews and so on, while the paste version is great for all kinds of sauces or even just served with some bread or Pita (see p.229). To Papi, the curing process is a religious ritual — when the rest of the kitchen is in a frenzy, for Papi it's only: Board. Knife. Lemons.

10 unwaxed lemons, cut into slices ¼ inch thick (discard the end bits)

¼ cup Maldon salt

¾ cup canola oil

¾ cup olive oil

1. Sterilize a 7-cup airtight container or jar by simply pouring boiling water into it, then drying it thoroughly with a clean cloth, or putting it through a dishwasher can also do the job.
2. Arrange one layer of the lemon slices in the container or jar, then sprinkle with some of the salt. Repeat the process until all the lemon slices are used up, making sure not to fill the container or jar all the way to the top.
3. Cover with oil all the way to the top and seal with the airtight lid. The lemon slices will be ready to use after 3 days.
4. From here, there are 3 rules you have to follow (religiously!): Rule 1 Like vampires, cured lemons don't like the sunlight, so always keep them in a cool, dark place. Rule 2 Always make

sure the lemons are fully covered with oil. Rule 3 Always make sure you take your cured slices out of the container or jar with a clean utensil — we don't want the lemons to be contaminated.

5. The lemons can be kept somewhere cool and dry for up to a week, or for up to a month in the fridge.

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Cured lemon paste

Makes 4 cups

This is the final process after you have been so patient waiting for your lovely lemons to cure, and boy oh boy are you going to love the end result. This is the ultimate sour paste, and we use it in the restaurant for so many recipes that it has an honorary place along with salt and olive oil. Once you go paste, you never go back.

1 recipe of Cured Lemons (see *above*)

1 tbsp sweet paprika

½ tsp crushed red pepper flakes

1 tsp toasted and ground cumin seeds

1. Strain the Cured Lemons from the oil and reserve the oil.
2. Place the lemons in a blender or food processor, add the spices and blend.
3. Then while you continue to blend, add the reserved oil gradually until you have a smooth paste — you should use around one-quarter to one-half of the oil.
4. Place the paste in a sterilized 5-cup airtight container or jar and cover with some of the remaining oil. The lemon paste can be kept in the fridge for up to 3 weeks. You can use the leftover oil for a salad dressing — you just need to make sure you balance it with some sugar/honey/date syrup etc.

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Za'atar spice mix

You can buy really good za'atar spice mix these days, but for those of you who can't find one of these or want to go DIY, this is an easy recipe that comes close to the original.

4 tbsp sumac

4 tbsp dried thyme

2 tbsp dried oregano or za'atar

1 tsp Maldon salt flakes
1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds

Blitz all the ingredients except the sesame seeds in a coffee or spice grinder, or grind with a pestle and mortar, then stir in the toasted sesame seeds.

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Homemade labneh with za'atar

Makes 2¼ cups

This sour creamy cheese is so easy to make and the taste is ten times better than any ready-made labneh out there. You can find versions of it throughout the Levant and using different kinds of milk — from goats, sheep and cows. My personal favorite is made with cows' milk, as it's less intense in flavor than the other options and has a bright sourness to it. In the restaurant we use this for so many dishes and recipes, but my favorite is simply served with a bit of extra virgin olive oil, some Za'atar and fresh Pita (see p.229) or other bread (I'm a sucker for carbs).

2½ cups Greek yogurt
2½ cups natural low-fat yogurt

1. Place a double-layered 16-inch square of muslin over a sieve, spoon the yogurts into the middle, then bring the sides together and tie so that you have a nice bundle.
2. Make some space in the fridge and hang your bundle overnight with a small bowl underneath to collect the liquids. Your other option is to hang it outside somewhere (my mama used to hang it over the kitchen sink). Personally I prefer the fridge option, as I like to ensure that the cheese is perfectly chilled. Check it after 5–6 hours — you're looking for it to have stopped dripping.
3. The labneh can be kept in the fridge in a sterilized airtight container for up to 5 days. To serve, spoon into a bowl, make a nice well in the middle, season with the Za'atar Spice Mix and drizzle with olive oil. Grab some bread and...

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