

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure

One day, quite some time ago, in the early 1930s, I remember walking in our garden with one of our neighbour’s children on our western Saskatchewan farm where we ended up in our large lentil patch. The plants were teeming with their small flat pods signifying a good yield for us this season.

I was surprised when my friend turned and asked, “What is this stuff?”

“They’re lentils!” I replied.

He stared and then asked inquisitively, “What do you do with them?”

“We eat them by making a whole series of dishes with them and they are delicious!”

My friend shook his head as he walked away, apparently thinking that this poor Syrian immigrant must have nothing to eat except ‘this green stuff’ and could only survive eating this strange plant. In that era in the 1930s the Canadians out west had never heard of lentils.

However, some half a century later things began to change when the North American public became aware of lentils. Oddly enough, this I learned about 20 years ago when I made a trip to the seaside resort of Puerto La Cruz in Venezuela. While there, I took a tour, along with a number of other tourists, to visit a Venezuelan ranch in the countryside. That morning when we left

Lentils – Saskatchewan's Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

in our jeeps, we were shepherded by Pedro, our guide for the day. Pedro, entertained us with some flat jokes yet ones I still remember. "Why do Venezuelans lie in the sun?" He answered himself. "They want to be Gringos." He went on amusing us further. "Are Venezuelan men better than North American men?" A woman piped up, "How would we know?" Pedro roared in laughter, "Marry me and that will give you the answer."

After a nerve-wracking jolting ride through some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in the world, we reached a valley where we transferred from our jeeps to saddled horses.

"This landscape does not look much like that of Saskatchewan," I heard a woman riding next to me tell her husband. My ears perked up and I asked, "Where do you come from in Saskatchewan?"

"I lived near Swift Current when I was younger."

"Swift Current! We had a farm just south of there." The woman was excited. It turned out that she knew my sister who still lived in that city. It was strange, meeting someone in another continent who had a connection with my past.

After some small talk, I asked her if they grew wheat on their farm like most farmers did, at least in my time. "We used to grow wheat but now we grow lentils."

"Lentils?" I said. "What is the best dish you like to make with lentils?" She looked amused and confused at the same time. So I asked her, "Why the sudden smirk on your face?"

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

With a straight face she responded, “What? I thought lentils were only fed to pigs and that’s why we grow them.” Although somewhat disappointed with her concept of lentils, I had to admit that this was actually progress, a proof-positive step forward for lentils. At least she knew what lentils were.

Times have changed and today, the people of Saskatchewan know much more about lentils. Saskatchewan is the largest exporter of lentils in the world. It seems a world away from the time our neighbour on the farm scoffed at the strange plants growing in our garden. Today, Saskatchewan’s lentils are known worldwide.

About twenty years ago, I recall an interview with an American lentil farmer lamenting the scarce number of people who cooked them. Today, with the pressure for healthier eating and a protein-rich diet, the lentil has climbed its way near to the top. They must be good. They’ve been around for a very, very long time.

The lentil was one of the first food plants to be cultivated by man in the Middle East. In that part of the world where civilization began, this legume has been a part of the diet for millennia. As a food, only bread and rice are believed to have been on the human menu longer.

Lentils have been found in ancient Egyptian tombs and have, since the Pharaonic era, been the main staple of the Egyptian and other Middle Eastern peasants. In the Bible Esau sold his

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

birthright to his twin brother Jacob for a bowl of lentils while David received from Sheba a gift of them. This legume formed a part of the bread of Ezekiel while in the Qur’an lentils were a food the Jews in Sinai asked Moses to provide.

A few hundred years before the birth of Christ, lentil cultivation spread to eastern Asia, East Africa and the countries around the Mediterranean basin. They were popular in ancient Egypt and Greece. However, since the Romans never acquired a fondness for them and thus little use for the plant, its cultivation did not spread into Europe. It was only in Spain, and then, only after the Arab occupation, that lentils became a common food.

After the discovery of the Americas the Spaniards introduced the plant into the ‘New World’. As a result, lentils have become an everyday dish in the countries of Central and South America. In North America, on the other hand, the lentil phenomena is today spreading widely. They are cultivated in Canada’s province of Saskatchewan making it a major export for the country. Washington state and Idaho are the main producers in the United States.

Growing up in the Depression years on the arid plains of southern Saskatchewan, I remember the countless lentil soups and stews that our family ate almost every day. My parents had brought the seeds with them when they immigrated to Canada, and in the dry dusty soil of the prairies this hardy plant grew and thrived. As emigres from Syria, my father knew that even though

Lentils – Saskatchewan's Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

lentils tolerate a wide range of soil, to flourish they need light sandy soil and a sunny climate. In those homesteading years, my parents used their know-how from what tradition had taught them, that lentils are one of the few plants that enrich the soil. For this reason, farmers in the Mediterranean region when rotating their crops always include lentils. For peasant farmers, the nitrogen-fixing bacteria in the roots of the lentil plant is perfect for cultivation having aided for thousands of years, the revitalization of the soil and keeping the land productive.

But this was the Saskatchewan of the 1930s and no one else in that part of Canada was familiar with lentils and we, like our fellow Arab immigrants, kept them well hidden. Being foreigners with inferiority complexes, we ate the delicious lentil dishes hidden in our home, safe from the prying and judgemental eyes of our neighbours.

Today, as I look back, I think to myself, how foolish we were. Instead of acquainting our friends and neighbours with this ancient food, we were ashamed to mention its very name. Ironically, when our neighbours came for a visit, my mother cooked for them boiled vegetables and meats. Yet, when they left, we ate our delicious lentil stews.

The edible part of the plant are the ovules which come in a variety of colours: brown, grey, green, yellow and other cross shades. Nevertheless, no matter what colour, every shade is tasty and has its own unique flavour.

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

One of the most nutritious foods ever grown by man, lentils are rich in carbohydrates, calcium, iron, vitamin B, and especially protein, making them the ultimate of vegetarian food. Lentils are recommended in cases of low blood pressure, emaciation, anemia and ulcers. Containing a higher percentage of protein than an equal amount of lean meat, they surely have a bright future in a world with an exploding population

As an ingredient in cooking, lentils do not need soaking. However, if one prefers to soak them in water overnight, they only require half the time to cook.

In the lands where lentils have been consumed for centuries, the number of soups and stews made from this pulse are legion. Flavourful and hearty with a meaty taste, countless lentil dishes, prepared with meat or without, are all enticing.

These few recipes each, most of which we enjoyed on our farm, provide an introduction to the versatility of lentils and how a lentil dish can be not only healthy to eat but a tasty one as well.

Lentil and Swiss Chard Soup - *Shawrabat 'Adas Ma' Silq* *Serves from 8 to 10*

From among the various greens my mother would use when preparing this, was Swiss chard, a perfect soup for Saskatchewan’s cold winter days.

**1 cup lentils, rinsed
8 cups water
4 tablespoons cooking oil
2 medium onions, chopped
4 cloves garlic, crushed**

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

1 medium hot pepper, seeded and finely chopped
1/2 cup finely chopped fresh coriander leaves
4 cups chopped Swiss chard
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
5 tablespoons lemon juice

Place lentils and water in a saucepan, then bring to boil. Cover, then cook over medium heat for 30 minutes.

In the meantime, heat oil in a frying pan, then sauté onions over medium heat for 8 minutes. Stir in garlic, hot pepper and coriander leaves, then sauté for further 5 minutes. Add the frying pan content to the lentils, then stir in remaining ingredients, except lemon juice, and bring to boil. Cover and cook over medium heat for 20 minutes, then stir in lemon juice and serve hot.

Lentils with Dumplings - *Haraaq Usba’u* ***Makes 8 to 10 servings***

From the multitude of lentil recipes, is this special one, introduced to me by a woman from Damascus and an excellent addition to a larder of lentil dishes.

1 cup lentils, rinsed
7 cups water
1/2-pound frozen bread dough, thawed
1 teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1/8 teaspoon cayenne
3 tablespoons lemon juice
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
vegetable oil for deep-frying
1/2 cup finely chopped cilantro
4 garlic cloves, crushed

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

seeds of 1 pomegranate

In a saucepan, on high bring lentils and water to a boil. Cover and cook on medium heat for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, roll dough 1/8 in thick, then cut into 1/2-in squares. Add half the squares, salt, pepper, cumin, and cayenne to the lentils then cook for 15 minutes or until dough becomes a soft bread. Add lemon juice and stir. Set aside and keep hot.

In a frying pan on medium, heat 4 tbsp olive oil then sauté onion until light brown. Stir onion into lentils.

In the same frying pan, add vegetable oil to 1-in, or enough to deep-fry remaining dough squares on medium heat and deep-fry the squares for 2 minutes or until they are light brown. Remove squares with a slotted spoon and set aside.

In a bowl, combine cilantro and garlic and set aside.

Serve lentils in soup bowls. Each diner may add fried bread, cilantro-garlic mixture, and pomegranate seeds to taste.

Lentils in Yogurt - 'Adas Ma' Laban

Serves 6

During the hot July Saskatchewan days, this was a refreshing dish that Mother often made to invigorate us from the stifling heat.

1/2 cup lentils, rinsed

3 cups water

1 quart plain yogurt, chilled

2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint or 1 teaspoon dried

1 clove garlic crushed

1/2 teaspoon salt

1/4 teaspoon black pepper

1/4 teaspoon chili powder

Place lentils and water in a saucepan then bring to boil. Cover, then cook over medium heat for 30 minutes or until the lentils are tender but not mushy.

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

Drain lentils then allow to cool. Place in a serving bowl with the remaining ingredients, then mix well before serving.

Lentil Cabbage Rolls – *Malfouf Siyaami*

Serves 6 to 8

Swiss chard and other vegetable leaves or grape leaves may be substituted for the cabbage.

- 1 large head of cabbage**
- 1 cup white long grain rice, rinsed**
- 1 cup lentils, soaked for 4 hours, then drained**
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped**
- 1 small bunch green onions, finely chopped**
- 2 large tomatoes, finely chopped**
- 1/2 cup finely chopped parsley**
- 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh coriander**
- 1/2 cup finely chopped fresh mint**
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt**
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper**
- 1 cup olive oil**
- 6 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped**
- 2/3 cup lemon juice**

Core the cabbage; then place in a large saucepan, cover with water and boil until the leaves soften. Separate the leaves and cut out the thick ribs and set aside. Cut the large outer leaves in half; then cover the bottom of a saucepan with the reserved ribs.

To make the filling, in a bowl, mix together the remaining ingredients except the garlic and lemon juice.

Place a heaping tablespoon of the filling on the bottom (stem end) of the leaf; then roll, tucking in the ends. Squeeze the rolls gently and place compactly in the saucepan on top of the ribs. Sprinkle the garlic between the layers and any of the leftover juices from the filling.

When the leaves are all rolled and placed in the saucepan, place an inverted dish on top of the rolls to keep them from separating; then add water barely enough to cover the rolls, and

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

bring to a boil. Cover and cook over medium heat for 30 minutes; then turn the heat to low, add the lemon juice, re-cover and simmer for 15 minutes. Serve either hot or cold.

Lentil Pottage - *Mujaddara*

Serves 4 to 6

In the eastern Arab world, mujaddara was and remains the most popular dish made from lentils.

When the Arab immigrants came to North America, they not only brought with them their love for *mujaddara* but also a habit of not serving it to guests. Perhaps the few cents it cost to make made the immigrants think that it could not possibly be good enough to serve to their visitors.

**1 cup brown or green lentils, rinsed
6 cups water
6 tablespoons olive oil
2 large onions, finely chopped
1/4 cup rice or coarse burghul, rinsed
3/4 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1/2 teaspoon ground coriander seeds**

In a saucepan, bring the lentils and water to a boil; then cover and cook over medium heat for 30 minutes. In the meantime, heat the oil in a frying pan; then add the onions and sauté over medium heat until golden. Add the onions with their oil and the remaining ingredients to the lentils; then cover and cook for a further 20 minutes or until the lentils and rice or burghul are soft but not mushy, stirring occasionally. Remove from the heat then serve.

Lentils with Rice - *Mudardara*

Serves 8

***Mudardara* is a drier version of *mujaddara* and best enjoyed with a dish of plain yogurt on the side.**

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

6 sweet onions, sliced thinly
Vegetable oil for deep-frying
8 cups water
2 cups brown lentils, rinsed
2 1/2 teaspoons salt
1 1/2 teaspoons black pepper
2 cups basmati or any other long grain white rice, soaked for 30 minutes then drained
2 tablespoons butter

Heat about 3 inches deep oil on medium-high and deep-fry the onions until golden and crispy, about 8 minutes. Drain on paper towels. Measure out 2 cups of the onions and 1/2 cup of the oil and set aside.

In a large saucepan, bring water, lentils, 1 teaspoon of the salt, and 1/2 teaspoon of the pepper to boil on high, then reduce heat to medium-high and cook uncovered for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Stir in the remaining salt and pepper, the reserved 2 cups of deep-fried onions, rice, the reserved 1/2 cup of the oil and butter. Bring to boil then cover and cook on low heat for 10 minutes. Remove from heat, uncover and let sit for 15 minutes. Transfer to a serving platter then garnish with remaining deep-fried onions.

Serve with salad and yogurt.

Lentil and Meat Stew - *Yakhnat 'Adas*

Serves 8

A unique type of nourishing and tasty stew.

4 tablespoons butter
1/2 lb beef, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
2 medium size onion, chopped
4 cloves garlic, crushed
1 small hot pepper, seeded and finely chopped
1 cup lentils, rinsed
6 cups water

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

**2 medium potatoes, peeled and diced into 3/4-inch cubes
4 medium tomatoes, chopped
1 1/2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon turmeric**

Melt butter in a saucepan then sauté beef over medium/low heat for 5 minutes. Add onions, garlic and hot pepper, then stir-fry for further 10 minutes. Add remaining ingredients then cook over medium heat until meat and lentils are well-done, adding more water if necessary. Serve hot with cooked rice.

Lentils and Spinach

Serves 8

Another great dish in which greens add to the flavour of lentils.

**4 tablespoons butter
1 cup rice, rinsed
7 cups boiling water
1 teaspoon salt
1 cup lentils, rinsed
4 tablespoons olive oil
1 10 oz pkg spinach, thoroughly washed and chopped
4 cloves garlic, crushed
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh coriander leaves
1 teaspoon oregano
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1/2 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon sumac**

Melt butter in a frying pan, then stir-fry the rice over high heat for about 2 minutes. Add 2 cups of the water then bring to boil. Stir in 1/2 teaspoon of the salt, then cover and turn heat to low. Cook for 15 minutes, stirring and re-covering a few times to ensure that the rice is not sticking to the bottom of frying pan,

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

then turn heat off then allow to cook in its own steam for 30 minutes. Set aside.

In the meantime, place the lentils and the remaining 5 cups of water in a saucepan then bring to boil. Cover and cook over medium heat for 30 minutes or until the lentils are cooked but not mushy, adding more water if necessary, then drain and set aside.

Heat oil in another frying pan, then add the spinach and garlic and stir-fry over medium heat until the spinach wilts. Add the lentils, remaining salt, coriander leaves, oregano, pepper and cumin, then sauté for a further 8 minutes, stirring once in a while. Place the frying pan contents on a flat serving platter, then spread the rice evenly on top and sprinkle with the sumac, just before serving hot.

Lentil Pies – *Fataayir bi-'Adas* *Makes 24 pies*

Lentil pies are an unusual type of savory pie

2-pounds frozen dough, thawed, or an equivalent amount of handmade dough

1 cup lentils, rinsed

4 cups water

3 medium onions, finely chopped

4 cloves garlic, crushed

1 small hot pepper, seeded and very finely chopped

1 can (5.5 oz) tomato paste

4 tablespoons butter

4 tablespoons lemon juice

1 teaspoon ground coriander

1 teaspoon salt

1/2 teaspoon black pepper

1/2 teaspoon cumin

Form dough into 24 golf sized balls then cover and allow to rest for 1 hour and 30 minutes.

In the meantime, place lentils and water in a saucepan then bring to a boil. Cover, then cook over medium heat for 40 minutes

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

or until the lentils are soft. Drain lentils and allow to cool then mash and combine with remaining ingredients to make a filling.

Roll each dough ball into 4- to 5-inch circles, then place, 2 heaping tablespoons of the filling on the centre. Fold the dough over and press the edges firmly to seal, in the process shaping the pie into a triangle, then continue until all the balls are finished. Place on well-greased trays, then bake in a 400° F preheated oven for 20 minutes. If needed, brown under the broiler for a minute or two.

Remove from oven, then brush with oil or butter and serve hot.

Syrian Lentil Loaf

Serves 8 to 10

If one enjoys meatloaf, try this vegetarian version. You will not be disappointed!

2 cups lentils, rinsed

6 cups water

2 medium onions, chopped

5 cloves garlic, crushed

1 hot pepper, seeded and finely chopped

4 tablespoons finely chopped fresh coriander leaves

1 cup bread crumbs

1 can (5.5 oz) tomato paste

4 tablespoons butter

3 eggs

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon thyme

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon cumin

2 tablespoons olive oil

Place lentils and water in a saucepan then bring to boil. Cover and cook over medium heat for 40 minutes or until the lentils are soft but still whole. Drain then place in a food processor and process until the lentils turn paste-like. Remove

Lentils – Saskatchewan’s Hidden Treasure/ Salloum

and place in a mixing bowl, then place the remaining ingredients, except the oil, in the same food processor and process for 2 minutes.

Transfer to the mixing bowl then thoroughly mix with the lentils. Form into a loaf and place in greased bread pans. Sprinkle with the oil, then cover with aluminium foil. Bake in a 350°F preheated oven for 35 minutes then remove the aluminium foil. Bake uncovered for a further 10 minutes, then allow to somewhat cool. Serve hot or cold, but preferably hot.