

Branch out with homemade falafel

MIDDLE 'EATS' CHICKPEAS WEAR THEIR BEST DISGUISE

Falafel is great stuff. A traditional dish that originated in Egypt, it's now known the world over for being simply delicious.

However, the ground chickpea balls, or patties, are one deep-fried food that's actually good for you—being low in fat and high in fiber and protein.



And they're a great vegetarian or vegan or gluten-free option (because you don't need to use egg or breadcrumbs to bind them, just the moisture from the vegetables and herbs you add, plus a squirt or two of lemon juice).

Unlike other bean fritters, falafel is made from uncooked beans, which reduces prep time. And falafel is nothing if not versatile. Either fried or baked, it will still feature a nice crispy exterior and fluffy interior. And you can put it in a sandwich, in a salad or eat it by itself, as an appetizer, snack or main course.

Falafel—arguably the national food of Israel—seems like the only thing that folks in the Middle East can all agree on.

And some think falafel can even be used to broker peace between Israel and Palestine. Well, at least movie actors James Franco and Seth Rogen do. Their recent satire "The Interview" included a scene, before it found its way onto the cutting-room floor, where famous American chef Guy Fieri brings the Israeli prime minister and Palestinian president together, in

“Flavortown,” over falafel sandwiches topped with fiery chipotle sauce.

And falafel shops are popping up all over the place, not just in New York City, where falafel stands have been a familiar sight for years. There might even be a falafel-themed restaurant in our region’s future. Amsterdam Falafelshop, which is looking to rebrand falafel for the modern age, is currently seeking a franchisee for the Fredericksburg area.

My own association with falafel doesn’t extend very far back at all, probably because I’m not descended from Mizrahi Jews of the Middle East but from Eastern Europe’s Ashkenazi Jews. If my people were going to fry up patties, they were going to be potato patties, also known as latkes.

I don’t think I’d ever tried falafel until ordering it right here, at Sammy T’s restaurant. And then it was on top of a salad. I’ve since learned it can be even better on sandwich pita, topped with chopped red onions, cucumber and tomatoes, as well as lemon-tahini dressing.

I first thought about making my own falafel when it was my turn to host the men’s book group I belong to. Sure, I could have just followed suit and served bowls of nuts or chips, or a cheese tray, but I wanted something a little heartier, a little different—something that might appeal to and even impress the group’s 10 carnivores and vegetarians alike, not to mention something that would go well with the requisite beer and wine.

And falafel, with just a little planning, cooks up quickly, in just a few minutes really, and can be served hot or at room temperature. And it isn’t very messy for a fried finger food. Just totally addictive. Falafel really fit the bill.

In preparation, I scoured my cookbook collection for recipes, where I found half a dozen likely suspects. One recipe, from the chef with the most cooking bona fides, recommended using a falafel mix, since that’s what everyone expects anyway, he reasoned. Besides, why reinvent the wheel? Plus that would save you time to focus on dressing up the falafel with things like house-pickled vegetables or lemon–mint yogurt.

Another recipe called for using pre-cooked garbanzos, which was my inclination anyway, from making hummus with canned chickpeas and never having gotten any complaints.

However, all of the other sources, without exception, recommended making falafel from scratch from dried chickpeas, soaked for at least 24

hours, in order to attain the best taste and texture—crunchy outside and fluffy inside.

I decided to put the three techniques—using a mix or canned chickpeas or dried beans—to the test. I had to see which one resulted in the best falafel.

First was the mix. I simply followed the instructions on the package and voilà. Very appetizing falafel. It gave me a big confidence boost, which would evaporate the moment I tried making falafel from a recipe that espoused the use of canned chickpeas. That's because the balls fell apart almost as soon as they hit the hot oil.

There had been too much moisture in the mix, a problem that often plagues those who use already-cooked beans to make falafel.

Finally, I went with the dried beans method, from a Mark Bittman recipe. It resulted in a fine-grain mix, just short of a paste, that formed balls quite easily. They fried up crisp and golden brown, and light and fluffy inside. The texture was incomparable, and the flavors were deeper and more authentic than with the mix.

There was simply no comparison with the other methods. I hate to say it, but there are really no shortcuts to be taken with falafel.

Some other keys to making falafel that I found: Follow whichever recipe you use to the letter; this is not the time to get inventive. Let the beans drain thoroughly after soaking to reduce moisture. If your mix ends up as a paste or purée, you've blitzed the beans too long. Let your mixture rest in the fridge for at least an hour to blend flavors and absorb moisture before forming into balls. Use a Dutch oven filled with 3 inches of neutral cooking oil. Don't crowd the pan. And, last but not least, remember the old adage from the falafel industry: "Damp hands make smooth balls."

I don't know if my falafel—since it's the traditional variety accompanied by an old standby, a garlic-infused lemon-tahini sauce—is likely to bring peace to the Middle East, but it's sure to bring smiles to people's faces.

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