

# Homemade "Tahini"

All my cooking life, I've bought tahini in tins, and almost always during that time, there has been one of these buried in the back of a pantry shelf. The can is always dusty and slightly sticky, and I'm always apprehensive when I open the lid and peek inside. Usually, I take in the dubious smell, the murky contents, admonish myself to use it more often, and proceed with the recipe.

But this time I had those delicately delicious chickpeas, and I wasn't going to inflict *that* on them. I also had a fresh container of sesame seeds at hand — how hard, I asked myself, could it be to make tahini from scratch? After all, it was made of ground sesame seeds; surely grinding up my sesame seeds would result in tahini. There's a certain logic to this argument — it just happens to be completely wrong.\*

In any case, by the time I learned how wrong I was, I had made a very tasty sesame paste in my mortar and pestle. (I couldn't get the food processor to do this; the seeds are too light and just fly over the blade. But our new Cuisinart spice and nut grinder — reviewed on page 7 of the current issue — proved ideal.) The result might not be tahini, but it's an excellent substitute and frees our pantry of that half-empty can with its stale and turgid contents.

## Sesame Seed Paste

[MAKES 1/4 CUP]

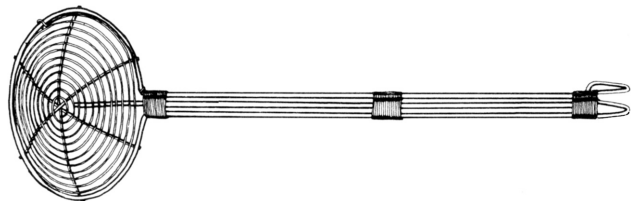
1/4 cup raw sesame seeds

1 teaspoon olive oil (or unroasted sesame oil)

pinch of salt

- Pour the sesame seeds into an ungreased skillet, place over a low flame, and, constantly stirring, heat them gently until they begin to release their aroma. **Don't** toast them: toasted sesame paste is a flavor signature of Eastern Asian cooking; it is too aggressive for tahini. The point here is to liven up the flavor a bit before grinding the seeds.

- When the seeds are warm and fragrant, stir in the teaspoon of olive oil. Its purpose is to encourage the seeds to stick together so that they don't go flying about when you start to pulverize them. Scrape this mixture into a mortar or other appropriate grinding device (see text just above this recipe) and work it into a rough-textured paste. Because of the hulls, it won't be as creamy as real tahini, but — taste it! — it *will* have a fresher and livelier flavor than the canned stuff.



## Variations on a Theme

David Scott, in his not-that-easy-to-find **Middle Eastern Vegetarian Cookery**† offers a chickpea dip that

\*Sometime later, I learned from **The Oxford Companion To Food** that to make authentic tahini you have to soak and then remove the tough outer coating of the seed, using a method much like preparing black-eyed peas for *akara* (see last issue). Except that would be — so far as my own cooking efforts are concerned — impossibly time-consuming, given the tininess of the seeds and the hardness of the bran. No thanks.

# SC•92 Supplement

replaces tahini with an intense cumin-seed presence. Make sure you dry-fry the seeds to release their flavor before pulverizing them — the difference is impressive. Here is my version of his recipe.

[SERVES 4]

8 ounces (1 heaping cup) chickpeas, soaked overnight and cooked as directed in *hummus bi tahini* recipe (issue page 5)

2 teaspoons cumin seeds

4 tablespoons richly flavored olive oil, plus a little extra

juice of 2 lemons • 2 garlic cloves, finely minced

salt and ground hot red chile to taste

**to garnish:** minced mint or parsley leaves to taste

**to serve:** fresh warm pita

- Drain the cooked chickpeas, reserving the cooking liquid. Put the cumin seeds into an ungreased skillet and heat over a medium-low flame until they are lightly browned and begin to release their scent. Watch that they don't burn. When cool enough to handle, grind them into a powder.

- Put this, the chickpeas, the olive oil, the lemon juice, and the minced garlic into a large mortar, a blender, or the bowl of a food processor set with its steel blade. Adding the chickpea cooking liquid splash by splash, turn all this into a soft purée. Season to taste with salt and the ground chile. Then scrape it into a serving bowl, garnish with the minced mint or parsley, and drizzle over a little more olive oil. Serve with fresh pita as an appetizer.

**East of Orphanides** is an idiosyncratic but highly informative Middle Eastern cookbook, all the better for limiting itself to the food and cooking that George Lassalle personally experienced while working in Greece, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Turkey, and Cyprus, where he eventually settled. The recipes are often introduced with a tale: cooking for workmen on the island of Aghios Nikolaos; wangling recipes from his mother-in-law's cook; living and cooking in Cairo and Istanbul; and learning the best of Lebanese fare from the Three Wise Ones of Nicosia. His recipe for a chickpea soup from Cyprus comes with no such story. Its interest springs from the fact that it is really *hummus bi tahini* turned into a soup! This is an excellent way to take advantage of that delicious chickpea liquor. Just make sure you cook the beans in plenty of water.

## Revithia Me Tahini

[SERVES 4]

8 ounces (1 heaping cup) chickpeas, soaked overnight and cooked as directed in our *hummus bi tahini* recipe (current issue, page 5)

juice of 2 lemons • 2 garlic cloves, finely minced

salt and black pepper to taste

1/2 cup tahini

5 cups of chickpea-cooking liquid

**to garnish:** minced parsley leaves and 2 tablespoons richly flavored olive oil

**to serve:** lemon wedges

- Prepare a simple *hummus bi tahini* following the recipe on page 5 of the current issue, doubling the amount of lemon juice, adding 2 cloves of minced garlic as directed in the preface to the recipe, and omitting the cilantro leaf

† Even harder to find is his **The Penniless Vegetarian** (1992), which is worth snapping up if you find a cheap copy in a used bookstore sidewalk bin — and, given the title, that's where you *should* find it.

and hot chile pepper.

• Bring the reserved chickpea-cooking liquid to a boil, adding chicken stock, if necessary, if the amount of the liquor is less than 5 cups. When it is boiling, remove it from the heat and stir a ladleful into the *hummus bi tahini*. When this is incorporated, scrape it all into the pot, stirring constantly. Gently reheat the soup, taste for seasoning, and sprinkle with the minced parsley. Divide into soup bowls and drizzle each with a half tablespoon of the olive oil. Serve with lemon wedges on the side.

☛ **Cook's Note.** Lassalle says that some cooks stir a tablespoon of tomato purée into the soup as it reheats. I would think diced fresh cherry tomatoes would work very nicely, as well.

## Revithia Fournou

The quotation from Miles Lambert-Gócs' **Greek Salad\*** that kicks off this issue's essay on *hummus* made me curious about the bread-oven-baked chickpea dish he mentions. I was pleased to find it in one of our Greek cookbooks, Rena Salaman's **Greek Island Cookery**. On the isle of Sifnos, she tells us, the chickpeas are cooked in rainwater to ensure their tenderness (and obviate the need of baking soda) and the bakers traditionally cover the pot with leftover bread dough, which holds in the flavor and keeps the dish from cooking dry.† The slow cooking results in a delicious, almost molten mass of chickpeas. The islanders cook the dish in a earthenware casserole called a *skepastaria*, but our old bean pot does the trick just fine. The following recipe follows the original closely, but after making it, I decided to go my own way (see note).

From Rena Salaman and Linda Smith's **Greek Island Cookery** (1987)

[SERVES 4 TO 6]

☛ **Prepare this dish the day before you plan to eat it.**

**In the afternoon:**

\* Lambert-Gócs is the author of **The Wines of Greece** (Faber & Faber, 1990), which is notable for both its depth of knowledge on the subject and its persistence in tracking down Greek winemakers whose products can only be purchased directly from their own barrels. **Greek Salad**, described only partly in jest as a tour of Greece (both the Aegean Islands and the mainland) viewed through "the prism of taverna wine glasses," provides a journal-entry closeup of this oenological gumshoe at work, querying taxi drivers, seeking out the odd local bottle on the shelves of village tavernas, and knocking on farmhouse doors. This Sam Spade comparison is, of course, a metaphor, but reality makes it almost too easy to apply. On the island of Seriphos, Lambert-Gócs writes of a hotel in the ferry port of Livadi:

[Its] somewhat tatty condition added to the feeling I already had, just from walking down Livadi's shady main drag, of being on the set of a 1940s movie starring Humphrey Bogart .... Even the hotel's operator was perfectly suited to his part, a seedy old guy with a thin but shapeless mustache, slicked-back hair that was unruly at the fringes and sagging pants that had to be hiked up every couple of minutes if he happened to be moving about. And the more the *meltemi* [an Aegean version of the Provençal *mistral*] rustled the reeds outside, the more I thought of the old movies. I half expected a sultry young Greek Lauren Bacall to emerge from a hallway into the lobby. But all that ever actually appeared was a miscast pair of frumpy Polish room maids.

He also makes an effort to seek out local dishes — no easy thing, since tourists demand the "real" Greek stuff wherever they gather, which means moussaka on every plate and retsina in every glass. The journal entries of his travels are evocative, often charming, and sometimes affecting, and I recommend the book highly to anyone curious about back-lane Greek life. Note, however, that Lambert-Gócs is not a food writer. His description of the food he eats is often cryptic, and such recipe gathering as he does is strictly for himself.

† Sifnos is famous for both its clay-pot cookery and its cooks (it is said that Greek sailors would kill for the chance to sail on a ship with a cook from Sifnos). However, the island is also a popular place for outsiders to maintain a second home, so much so that one website I visited said that the island now has to import chickpeas from elsewhere, since so much of its farmland has been built over.

8 ounces (1 heaping cup) chickpeas

• Pick these over, rinse them, put them in a bowl, cover generously with water, and let soak for at least 8 hours.

**Before going to bed:**

2 cloves garlic, chopped

1 large onion, chopped

$\frac{1}{3}$  cup olive oil

1 tablespoon all-purpose flour • 1 bay leaf, broken in thirds

1 teaspoon salt and black pepper to taste

**to garnish:** lemon wedges

• Preheat oven to 235°F. Fill a kettle and set it to boil. When it does, lower the heat but keep it boiling.

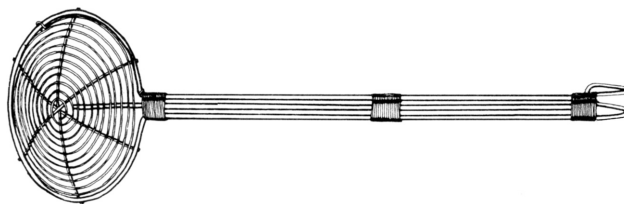
• Drain the chickpeas, place them in a large saucepan, and cover well with fresh cold water (i.e., not from the kettle). Bring this to a boil and cook at a boil for 10 minutes.

• While the chickpeas boil, heat the olive oil in a skillet and sauté the garlic and onion until translucent. Don't let them brown. Then sprinkle in the tablespoon of flour, stirring briskly so that it doesn't lump. Continue cooking, stirring the while, until you have a thin, smooth, garlicky paste.

• Turn the chickpeas with their cooking liquid, the contents of the skillet, and the broken bay leaf into (by preference) an earthenware pot. Add water from the kettle so that the liquid covers the chickpeas by at least 3 inches. Then stir in the salt and plenty of black pepper. Cover with the lid (or aluminum foil if there is no lid) and put it into the stove. Cook all night.

• In the morning, set the oven to its lowest heat and leave the chickpeas in it. Serve them for either lunch or supper (the extra cooking time will only improve them). Stir everything up, taste for seasoning, and ladle it into bowls. Serve with lemon wedges (see below for other possibilities).

☛ **Cook's Notes:** The original recipe calls for that chopped onion, but I found it made the resulting dish too sweet and too much like baked beans (which, of course, is just what *revithiaournou* are) for my taste. I decided the next time to sauté the onions at the last moment and sprinkle them over the dish. Also, instead of the lemon, I garnished the potage with pieces of roasted red pepper, which added a citric note along with their own pleasing mellow flavor. The flour, naturally, serves as a thickener, producing a result that is something more than (or at least different from) plain oven-baked chickpeas — and you might translate "*revithiaournou*" as "baked chickpeas in their own gravy."



Edouard de Pomiane was born in Paris in 1875, the son of Polish émigrés. One of the twentieth century's greatest food writers, he lectured at the Institut Pasteur and wrote a number of classic books, including **Cooking with Pomiane, Cooking in Ten Minutes**, and the two-volume **Radio Cuisine** ("*Alo! Alo!*"), a collection of transcripts from his popular radio show. **The Jews of Poland: Recollections and Recipes**, written in 1929, deserves a brief explanatory note. It is quite different from his other books, a cookbook that is also an ethnographic treatise — the only extensive piece of writing on Jewish cooking in Poland before it was destroyed by the German invasion in 1939 and the subsequent Holocaust. The clarity and range of the recipes are such that the book would be much better known were it not for its unfortunate

and largely unintended anti-Semitic tone. De Pomiane himself was not anti-Jewish — quite the opposite. But he came from a fervently patriotic Polish family and naively absorbed the strong undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the information that respectable and well-educated Poles provided him about their Jewish neighbors. So the book is torn by the tension between what he himself observed and what he was told to be plain fact. The result is less unpleasant (although it can be that) than very sad. Even so, the recipes are priceless.

## Pickle Soup

From Edouard de Pomiane's *The Jews of Poland* (1929)

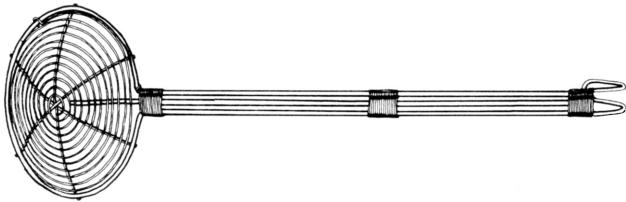
[SERVES 8]

4 kosher dill pickles

2 quarts beef bouillon or stock

3 eggs

- Peel the pickles and chop them finely. Put them along with the beef bouillon or stock in a soup pot and cook for 60 minutes. Strain the soup through a round sieve, pressing with the back of a spoon to work the cucumbers through, while leaving their seeds behind.
- Proceed to bind the liquid with the eggs. Break the eggs into a bowl and whisk them with a wire whisk. Gradually pour the soup, while still hot, into the eggs, whisking constantly.
- If the soup is not sufficiently acidic, add a tablespoon or two of the pickling liquid from the jar of pickles.



## Homemade Half-Sours

*Since I was ten years old I have been in the pickle business. My brother-in-law painted old whiskey barrels to age the pickles in. These days they are used as flower pots. We made three kinds of pickles — dill, sweet, and half-sour. Half-sours are unfermented pickles made daily with garlic, mustard seeds, peppercorns all put at the bottom of a jar in a salt brine to absorb the flavors of the spices for about a week. A garlic pickle has been fermented and then fresh spices added before refrigeration. It makes you pucker up. As it ages the skin turns brown through fermentation.*

— Jessie Eisenberg, pickle maker, the Bronx, New York (quoted in Joan Nathan's *Jewish Cooking in America*)

Although our recipe for “Dill Pickle Soup” allows for the use of any salt-cured pickle, our own preference is to make it with homemade ‘half-sours’ — which offer the presence of both cucumber *and* pickle. What do I mean? Read the quotation above. Half-sours are not, as many assume, pickles fished from the barrel before they’ve reached the mystical state of “full-sour” but a quickly cured salt-brine pickle meant to combine the crisp sweetness of a fresh cucumber with the salt-sour, spice-edged tang of a kosher dill. If you leave them in their brine too long, they’ll just become dull and soggy and inert. So it’s best to make them in small batches and eat them up.

We make ours in a quart-and-a-half-size former *kimchi* jar which, being squat and wide, is ideal for pack-

ing in the cucumbers (and fishing them out later). The best pickling cukes (often called Kirby cucumbers) for this process are taut, dark green, and stubby. Otherwise, the only fixed rule is the proportions of the brine: one and one-half tablespoons of fine sea (or pickling) salt for every quart of water.

The seasoning possibilities are nearly infinite, and can be as simple as the short list used by Jessie Eisenberg in the quote above. In the recipe that follows, I give the flavorings I usually put in — none are mandatory. You can make it easy for yourself by just using garlic cloves, dried dill leaf, and pre-mixed pickling spice.

[MAKES 1 BATCH HALF-SOURS]

1/2 teaspoon each black peppercorns, coriander seeds, hot red chile flakes, brown mustard seeds, juniper berries, and allspice

1 tablespoon dried dill weed

1 large glass jar with a lid

enough pickling cucumbers to fill same, any remaining stem carefully snipped off

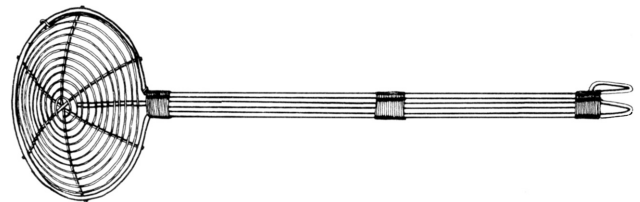
2 or 3 large garlic cloves, peeled

1 large bay leaf, broken into thirds

1/2 tablespoon dried onion flakes (optional)

fine sea (or pickling) salt • filtered (if possible) water

- Put the mixed spices and seeds in a mortar or the bowl of a food processor/spice grinder and pulverize them into coarse bits.
- Wash the jar and rinse well — no need to dry it. Sprinkle in the ground spices and the dried dill weed, then pack in as many cucumbers as will fit. There must be room at the top of the jar for the brine to cover them.
- Crush the garlic cloves with the flat blade of a knife or some other appropriate instrument. Cut these in half and insert them in the crevices around the cucumbers, followed by the bits of bay leaf and optional dried onion flakes.
- Mix up enough brine to generously cover the cucumbers, at a ratio of 1 1/2 tablespoons of fine sea (or pickling) salt to 1 quart of water. Better to throw some away at the end than not have enough. Pour this into the pickle jar until it is nearly full. Gently shake the jar to free any air bubbles, then fill it almost to the rim. If any of the cukes float up to the surface, fill a small plastic bag (such as a ziplock sandwich type) with brine, seal it, and fit this over cucumbers to keep them submerged.
- Cover the jar loosely and set it in a cool place (a basement is ideal; we use the floor of a closet) for two days. Then screw the lid tight and refrigerate another two days before sampling them. They will continue to mature, so if you find the first taste insipid, give them more time. (On the other hand, if they smell spoiled or have turned squishy, discard them and try again.) They are best when eaten within three weeks from the time they go in the jar.



## Breakfast Cereal Breads

My success in creating a delicious oatcake from Macroom Oatmeal naturally led to the notion that this might revolutionize my breakfast eating — the banner headline for which might be: No More Porridge! Cake for Breakfast Every Day! I immediately went out and bought



a bunch of hot cereals and started testing.

The fact that this part of the story has been relegated to the supplement should suggest that the results were not nearly as spectacular as the oatcake, but they weren't entirely shoddy, either ... just not quite ready for prime time. Two cereals produced the most promising results: Erewhon Organic Brown Rice Cream Hot Cereal and my old childhood buddy, Wheatena Toasted Wheat. The Erewhon cereal, essentially Cream of Brown Rice, made into a batter and baked in the large griddle, produced a lovely griddle bread with a crisp crust and a delicate flavor. (Made with regular Cream of Rice cereal, it had almost no flavor.) I liked it best when I stirred a handful of fresh raspberries into the batter. If you like Cream of Wheat or Cream of Rice for breakfast, I'm sure you'd like this bread. To give it a try yourself, just follow the oatcake directions, substituting this cereal for the Macroom.

The Wheatena bread was something else. Since the cereal is made of toasted whole-grain wheat and wheat bran, turning it into a bread was like reinventing the bran muffin — or at least something very coarse-grained and chewy. In truth, it was more like a bran muffin than most versions of the real thing, which tend to be “bran-flavored” rather than densely grainy. If you favor a breakfast loaded with complex carbohydrates, and like the idea of a chewy breakfast bread with an intriguing sweet-sour savor, this might become a favorite.

## Wheatena Skillet Bread

Because of its particulate nature, this bread works better when made in a 9-inch skillet; baked in the griddle, pieces tended to break in half when lifted. The raw sugar was added not to make the bread more like a muffin but to heighten the natural sweetness of the cereal. Whole-wheat cereals can all too easily give the impression that you're eating sawdust; this addition keeps that well at bay. So, of course, does the dried fruit. I had some dried golden plums in the cupboard, so used them, but diced dried apricots would be very tasty, as well as the traditional raisins.

[MAKES A SKILLET BREAD BREAKFAST FOR 2]

1/2 tablespoon peanut or other cooking oil

4 ounces (2/3 cup) Wheatena cereal

1/4 cup diced dried fruit (apricots, prunes, raisins)

scant 1 teaspoon **each** baking soda and cream of tartar

scant 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt

1 egg • 3/4 cup (6 ounces) *filmjölk* or buttermilk

1 tablespoon organic raw sugar (Turbinado by preference)

• Preheat the oven to 425°F. When it is ready, pour the cooking oil into a 9-inch skillet and set this in the hot oven for 5 minutes.

• Meanwhile, put the Wheatena and chopped dried fruit into a mixing bowl and sift in the baking soda, cream of tartar, and salt. Break the egg into a second, smaller bowl. Whisk in the *filmjölk* or buttermilk, then the raw sugar, blending everything well.

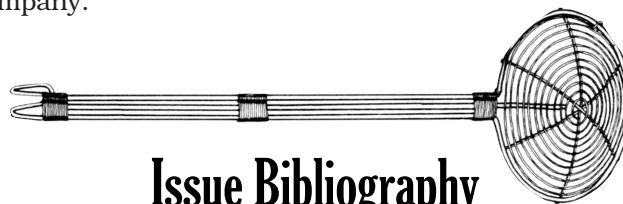
• After the 5 minutes, remove the skillet from the oven, tipping it gently so that the oil covers its entire surface. Quickly turn the liquid ingredients into the dry ones, whisking them just enough to blend. Because of the cereal's particulate nature, this takes no time at all. Then immediately turn the batter into the skillet, using a flexible spatula to clean out the bowl.

• Put the skillet back in the oven and bake for 18 minutes. The surface of the skillet bread should spring back when lightly pressed with a finger. Flip it onto a cutting board, so that the bottom, crusty side faces up. Cut it into wedges and serve with loads of butter.

## ... a note on Bob's Red Mill Oatmeal

Because of space constraints, I had room enough only to diss the *Cook's Illustrated* tasting panel's oatmeal ratings for its low ranking of McCann's Steel-Cut Irish Oatmeal — see the footnote on page 3 of the current issue. This isn't to say, however, that I refused to even try their highest rated brand, Bob's Red Mill Organic Steel-Cut Oats. What if — for once — the panel was *right*? Didn't honor demand that I pulp the new issue of *SC* and retire to a monastery? Fortunately, they were true to form and opted, as usual, for Ms. Congeniality.

I prepared the oatmeal in my usual way, substituting milk for two-thirds of the water and adding a bit more salt than called for in the package cooking directions. The resulting oatmeal was pleasingly chewy, and the flavor, though faint, was toasty and clean. But it wasn't even remotely interesting — either in depth of taste or in the complex play of flavor notes. In sum: the Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery will have to wait a bit longer for my company.



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