

'The recipes sound so delectable my mouth was watering – their explanations are simplicity itself. I really enjoyed this book!' – Victoria Cosford



# Mezze to Milk Tart

Cecile Yazbek

*From the Middle East to Africa in my vegetarian kitchen*



Wakefield Press

# *Mezze to Milk Tart*

Cecile Yazbek was born into a Lebanese family in South Africa and studied social sciences at Rhodes University in Grahamstown. She was a voluntary community worker in Cape Town and migrated to Sydney in 1986 with her young family. While running Cecile's Vegetarian Kitchen, a cooking school and catering service, she worked as a volunteer coordinator at Mercy Family Centre, Sydney. She has now retired to write, read, garden and cook, not always in that order.

By the same author

*Olive Trees Around my Table: Growing up Lebanese in the old South Africa*

# Mezze to Milk Tart

*From the Middle East to Africa  
in my vegetarian kitchen*

Cecile Yazbek



Wakefield  
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For my children



# Contents

Foreword .....	ix
Introduction .....	1
Welcome to my Kitchen .....	3
Basic Recipes and Ingredients .....	12
A MEZZE TABLE .....	29
COOKING FROM THE GARDEN .....	57
AN AFRO-MEDITERRANEAN CHRISTMAS .....	83
LEBANESE LORE .....	103
A PANTHEON OF AFRICAN COOKS .....	121
TOFU AND LEGUMES .....	137
FOOD FOR THE ROAD .....	171
SWEET DREAMS! .....	189
Bits and Pieces .....	213
Acknowledgements .....	237
Index .....	238

# Foreword

Food is once again getting the respect it deserves. More than just a means of filling our bellies, eating is a way of nourishing our bodies and enriching our souls. Good food allows us to connect with the people and places where we live in the most intimate of ways – through taste.

The backlash against the insanity of industrial food has been nothing short of astonishing. The momentum of the Slow Food Movement has grown much wider than perhaps ever imagined, with more and more people realising that eating is one of life's great pleasures and that it must be more than simply topping up our stomachs at the petrol station. It is something to be savoured and something to be shared.

It's no surprise that the increased interest and popularity in real food is followed closely by gardening as people also yearn to connect with where their produce has come from. For the same reason, people are turning to farmers' markets instead of supermarkets and are choosing to buy organic and locally grown produce. The result is not only better-quality food, but there are environmental benefits too as our consumer choices favour reduced food miles, packaging and chemical use.

Three of my favourite things – gardening, eating and spending time with family and friends – are activities that can all be brought together around a dinner table. These things are intimately intertwined and one intrinsically follows the other. I must confess that it's the gardening that I'm really addicted to. It's more than just a hobby, it's also my main source of exercise and stress relief. Being a keen food gardener, there's always plenty of surplus produce, so it makes sense that we share it, either by giving it away or by inviting others to join us for meals. The result is the same – relationships strengthened by good food.

And this is exactly what *Mezze to Milk Tart* is all about – enjoying simple pleasures, respecting our environment and learning from others to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us. The best way to describe this book is like



sitting at a table sharing a magnificent long lunch with close friends. It's an intermingled combination of delicious recipes, fascinating stories and personal insights shared with generosity and love. Enjoy ...

Josh Byrne

*Organic gardener and food lover*



# Introduction

Vegetarianism is part of many cultures: Hinduism immediately springs to mind. Among Orthodox Christians of the Middle East as far as Iraq, Lent is a forty-day period of fasting when only one light meal is eaten per day, and they abstain from animal products. During this time the food is prepared *b'zeit* – with oil instead of the usual *samneh* (ghee, or rendered butter). It is a classically healthy vegan diet based on nuts, legumes and pulses. In Greece, the expression *sarakostiyana* expresses the absence of animal products in meals served during Lent in Greek Orthodox households. Similarly, the Copts in Egypt eat vegan-style during Lent.

In my cooking school, Cecile's Vegetarian Kitchen, the recipes I taught drew on my Lebanese heritage, southern Europe and the Mediterranean as well as the Indian cooking of my childhood. These were augmented by classes I myself attended. I reduced fats and oils and shortened methods to keep the more traditional recipes alive. We used spices that begin mildly at the Lebanese coast and crescendo in India. So the cooking that I taught was not simple beans and peas: we discovered the history and cultures of many different places – a foreign country in my kitchen. Feeding growing children, I explored the foods we ate – how and where they were produced and transported – and I became convinced that food produced unethically and through suffering would make us ill. Most of my students will say that I never tried to practise an exact science. As Granny so often told me, if you put good ingredients together, you will have a good result.

It all really began when I was a small child – lovingly nurtured by my grandmother and mother, both excellent cooks, expanded by a code of social justice I learnt at home. Combining these elements of my life, I have enjoyed bringing a broad range of people together – people who might never have met, had we not initially shared a common interest in food.

Food is a great part of the nostalgia we share. It anoints our social occasions and takes our memories to families and friends long gone. For years while

the cooking school was running, and now that I have retired from teaching, I have mailed, dictated over the phone and emailed recipes to all corners of the globe, especially to former students, diners at my table and those with whom I have shared seductive food conversations. Now that those favourite recipes are gathered in this collection, I invite you to come and find your own comfort food in this exciting world where Africa meets the Mediterranean in Australia.



*Welcome to my table.*

*May we continue to share our joy and our food, always mindful in thought and action of those who lack the bare means of survival.*

## SWEATING

Most vegetables have a high water content, mushrooms and eggplant, for example, contain well over 70 per cent water. Slow cooking or sweating evaporates some of that water and helps to concentrate the aromas, rounding and enriching the flavours of vegetarian dishes.

Of course, some vegetables, like mushrooms or okra, also do well tossed in a wok on a high heat, but here I want to show how a busy person can make a string of dishes from the same base. I use onion, carrot and celery; if there's turnip, parsnip or leek around, they can be added. I prepare a large quantity and freeze in two-cup portions for a quick start to a winter dinner.

This was always a favourite in the classes, especially with those who feared that vegetarians have to spend hours cooking. In a three-hour class we began by making the sweated vegetable base and then, in very short order, produced, from that base, half a dozen dishes, each with a distinctive flavour. Aside from these we also made three or four other dishes: lunch was a feast of ten different courses!

## SWEATED VEGETABLE MIX BASE

### Eight Cups

6 large carrots, peeled  
1 large onion, peeled  
6 large sticks celery, leaves removed  
2 bay leaves  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
½ teaspoon salt

Grate all vegetables and tip into a large saucepan with oil, salt and bay leaves. Cover and leave on lowest heat for up to 45 minutes, if necessary, to reduce and soften somewhat.

### One Cup

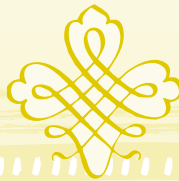
1 large carrot, peeled  
1 medium onion, peeled  
3 sticks celery, leaves removed  
1 bay leaf  
2 tablespoons oil  
pinch of salt

Grate all vegetables and tip into a saucepan with oil, salt and bay leaf. Cover and leave on lowest heat for up to 20 minutes, if necessary, to reduce and soften somewhat.

# A Mezze Table

*You cannot consume beyond your appetite.  
The other half of the loaf belongs to the other  
person and there should remain a little  
bread for the chance guest.*

– Kahlil Gibran



# Nuts

We are fortunate in Australia to have a great variety of fresh seeds and nuts: Tasmanian walnuts are especially sweet, South Australian almonds are fleshy and crunchy, pecans from the New South Wales north coast are addictive. At Lebanese celebrations, serve walnuts for longevity and almonds for fertility, and this is not a surprise as nuts, high in omega-3 oils, are a great health food.

## SOAKED ALMONDS

*Follow exactly the same method for walnuts.*

1 cup almonds, skin on

Wash the nuts and put them into a glass bowl, cover well with water and refrigerate. They are ready to eat after 24 hours. Serve on a *mezze* table or with breakfast. Change the water daily for use within 3 days.

---

## SALTED ALMONDS (LOHZ)

*Nuts are an intrinsic part of the Lebanese diet – salted, plain, roasted and sweet, they feature from the beginning to the end of a meal or a day.*

1 cup almonds, skin on

½ teaspoon sea salt

1 tablespoon water

Mix salt and water and moisten all nuts. Place in a microwave bowl and zap on high for 1 minute. Stir and cook for another minute, then stir and test one on the top to see if they are cooked. Leave to cool.

# Pickles

A few pickles in the pantry can be served anytime, for lunch, drinks or dinner. Indeed, a plate of colourful pickles is a good digestive aid for the heavier food to follow. The process is simple. Pack vegetables of your choice into a clean glass jar, fill with pickling solution, seal and store until ready to use.

## PICKLING SOLUTION

250 mL cider vinegar  
100 mL olive oil  
1 teaspoon salt  
12 pimento (allspice) berries  
6 whole cloves  
100 mL boiling water

Mix all together.

---

## CABBAGE

1 white cabbage  
pickling solution

Cut a white cabbage in quarters and pickle in the solution. Beetroot may be added for colour. Ready after 1 week.

---

## CAPSICUM

1 green capsicum  
pickling solution

Make a few small holes in the capsicum and bottle whole.

# Index

## A

- Afelia with Tofu 145
- Almonds
  - Almond and Orange Slice without Egg 195
  - Nut Pastry Rolls 184
  - Salted Almonds (*Lohz*) 35
  - Soaked Almonds 35
- Almost Niçoise Salad 153
- Amasi
  - Crumbly Cornmeal (*Pokkoquo/Krummelpap*) 127
  - Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk (*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126
- Amchur
  - Okra with Potatoes and Amchur 76
- Apple
  - Parsnip and Apple Curry 132
  - Wintry Apple Compote 178
- Artichoke
  - Artichoke Soup 62
  - Artichoke and Tomato Soup 62
  - Broad Bean and Artichoke Bake 63
  - Corn and Artichoke Fritters 63
  - Lemony Artichokes 64
  - Mushroom and Artichoke Bake 64
  - Olive and Artichoke Salad 65
  - Pea and Artichoke Bake 65
  - Tapenade of Artichoke 66
- Asma's Spicy Pea Soup (*Groenertjie Sop*) 133
- Auntie's Pine Nut Sauce with Garlic (*Taratoor b'snobar*) 45
- Avocado
  - Avocado and Lime Spread 178
  - Avocado Soup 179
  - Avocado with Tahini 179
  - Avocado Vinaigrette 178

## B

- Banana
  - Banana Sambal 181
  - Curried Bananas 134
- Bangalow Fruit Salad Flan 196
- Barberries
  - Persian Pilaff with Barberries 100
- Basil
  - Basil Pesto 18
  - Basil for Winter 18
  - Eggplant Lasagne with Tomato Basil Sauce 72
  - Macadamia Basil Pesto 182

## Beans

- Beans with Lemon and Oil 157
- Bean Taco Mix 157
- Black-eyed beans
  - Spinach and Black-eyed Bean Bake 167
- Bobotie with Beans 91
- Borlotti beans
  - Borlotti Bean Salad 168
- Broad beans
  - Broad Bean and Artichoke Bake 63
  - Broad Bean Dip 42
  - Broad Bean Patties (*Falafel*) 40
- Brown beans
  - Bobotie with Beans 91
  - Corn and Bean Soup 126
  - Lentil Soup with Beans and Rice (*Maklouta*) 162
- Butter beans
  - Butter Beans with Cinnamon 158
  - White Bean Salad 169
- Canellini beans
  - Canellini Bean Salad 169
- Cooked Bean Salad 167
- Corn and Bean Loaf 8
- Green beans
  - Curried Bean Salad 94
  - Farm-style Beans and Potatoes (*Boereboontjies*) 127
  - Green Beans with Caramelised Onions (*Luby b'zeit*) 110
  - Okra with Potatoes and Amchur 76
  - Onions in Mustard Sauce (*Urwe in Mosterd Sous*) 96
- Kidney beans
  - Katrina's Cracked Corn Somp and Beans (*Ngqush*) 126
  - Saucy Bean Salad (Sousboontjies) 94
  - Chilli Con Tofu 146
- Lima beans
  - Lima Bean Loaf 164
  - Lima Bean Salad 168
  - Lima Bean Soup 9
- Mixed Bean Soup 163
- Mung beans
  - Sprout Spread 44
- Split mung beans
  - Mung Dhal 164



- Beetroot
    - Beetroot Dip 41
    - Beetroot Soup 90
    - Beetroot with Tahini 309
    - Harissa with Beetroot 97
    - Lebanese Couscous Salad 119
  - Biscuits
    - Bertha's Speculaas Biscuits 195
    - Chocolate Fudge Slice 198
    - Frozen Christmas Pudding 201
    - Ginger Biscuits (*Gemmerkoekies*) 202
  - Besan flour
    - Corn and Artichoke Fritters 63
    - Curry Muffins 180
  - Black Olive Tapenade 41
  - Bobotie
    - Bobotie with Beans 91
    - Bobotie with Carrots 93
    - Bobotie with Nuts 92
  - Borlotti Bean Salad 168
  - Breadcrumbs
    - Christmas Pudding 200
    - Eggplant Lasagne with Tomato Basil Sauce 72
    - Lima Bean Loaf 164
    - Mushroom Patties with Dipping Sauce 99
    - Sweet 'n' Sour Tofu Rissoles 156
    - Tofu Balls (*Kafta*) 147
  - Broad Bean Dip 42
  - Brandy Tart (*Brandewijn Tert*) 197
  - Broad Bean and Artichoke Bake 63
  - Broad Bean Patties (*Falafel*) 40
  - Burghul
    - Burghul Salad 108
    - Burghul Salad (*Tabbouleh*) with Vine Leaves 47
    - Cabbage Pilaff with Burghul 109
    - Kibbe for a Monk (*Kibbit Roheb*) 117
    - Kibbe Noodles 111
    - Kibbe Paté 112
    - Kibbe of Potatoes 113
    - Kibbe of Potatoes with Herbs 114
    - Kibbe of Pumpkin 115
    - Kibbe of Red Lentils 116
    - Kishk (*Trahanas*) 17
  - Butter Beans with Cinnamon 158
  - Butter Flake Pastry 198
- C**
- Cabbage
    - Cabbage Braised with Pumpkin (*Gesmoorde Kool met Pampoen*) 128
    - Cabbage, pickled 37
    - Cabbage Pilaff with Burghul 109
    - Cabbage Salad with Lemon 109
    - Tofu Salad with Cabbage and Cashews 154
  - Canellini Bean Salad 169
  - Capsicum
    - Capsicum and Garlic Purée 68
    - Capsicum, pickled 37
    - Eggplant Roulade with Walnut and Capsicum Filling 100
    - Grilled Capsicum 68
    - Harissa with Beetroot 97
    - Harissa Paste 43
  - Carrot
    - Bobotie with Carrots 93
    - Carrot Dip with Dill Seed 44
    - Sweated Vegetable Mix Base 7
    - Oat Patties with Celery, Carrot, and Onion 10
  - Cauliflower with Lemon (*Arnabeet b'hamoud*) 108
  - Celery
    - Oat Patties with Celery, Carrot, and Onion 10
    - Sweated Vegetable Mix Base 7
  - Chat masala
    - Sweet Potato Chips with Chat Masala 186
  - Chickpeas
    - Chickpea Balls with Aglione Flavours 98
    - Chickpea Filling 113
    - Chickpea Hotpot with Couscous and Relish 160
    - Chickpea and Pumpkin Patties 159
    - Chickpeas with Tahini (*Humous b'tahini*) 42
    - Chickpea and Yoghurt Breakfast (*Fatteh*) 158
    - Lentil Soup with Beans and Rice (*Maklouta*) 162
    - Spinach Rolls 51
    - Stuffed Zucchini (*Koosa Mahshi*) 80
  - Christmas pudding
    - Christmas Pudding 200
    - Frozen Christmas Pudding 201
  - Chilli
    - Chilli Con Tofu 146
    - Chilli Refresher 41
    - Harissa with Beetroot 97
    - Harissa Paste 43
    - Yoghurt with *Accelerant* 188
  - Chilli labne
    - Eggplant Pies (*Borek*) 75
  - Chives
    - Labne with Chives 53
  - Chocolate
    - Chocolate Fudge Slice 198
    - Self-saucing Chocolate Fudge Pudding 209
    - Sweet Potato Chocolate Cake 210
  - Choko Loaf 180
  - Christmas cake
    - Mrs Mulholland's Christmas Cake 199
  - Cooked Bean Salad 167
  - Cordial
    - Lemon and Lime Cordial 205

Corn  
 Corn and Artichoke Fritters 63  
 Corn and Bean Loaf 8  
 Corn and Bean Soup 126  
 Corn Pudding (*Mieliepoeding*) 127  
 Katrina's Cracked Corn Samp and Beans  
 (*Nggush*) 126

Cornmeal  
 Crumbly Cornmeal (*Pokkoquo/Krummelpap*) 127  
 Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk  
 (*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126

Cottage cheese (*Labne*)  
 Cottage Cheese and Thyme 68  
 Cottage Cheese and Tomato 68  
 Eggplant Pies (*Borek*) 75  
 Labne with Chives 53  
 Labne and Mushroom Pizza 54  
 Labne-stuffed Mushrooms 55  
 Labne Pie 53  
 Labne Pizza 54

Cottage Bake 159

Couscous  
 Couscous for Hotpot 160  
 Lebanese Couscous (*Moughrabieh*) 119  
 Lebanese Couscous Salad 119  
 Chickpea Hotpot with Couscous and Relish 160

Cracked corn (*Samp*)  
 Katrina's Cracked Corn Samp and Beans  
 (*Nggush*) 126

Crumbly Cornmeal (*Pokkoquo/Krummelpap*) 127

Cucumber  
 Cucumber Cooler 95  
 Cucumber, pickled 38  
 Cucumber in Yoghurt, with Mint 110  
 Sweet 'n' Sour Cucumbers 89  
 Tzatziki 188

Curried Bananas 134  
 Curried Bean Salad (*Ingelegde Groenboontjies*) 94  
 Curried Vegetable Bake 135  
 Curry Muffins 180

## D

Date  
 Date Loaf 201  
 Dodo's Date and Tamarind Relish 130  
 Brandy Tart (*Brandewijn Tert*) 197  
 Vegetable and Date Steamed Pudding 208

## E

Egg  
 Choko Loaf 180  
 Christmas Pudding 200  
 Egg Baked with Spinach and Feta 181  
 Egg Baked in a Tomato 181  
 Ice Cream from the Farm (*Smitsrivier Roomys*)  
 203

## Egg cont'd

Japie's Favourite Citrus Delicious (*Japie se  
 Gunsteling*) 197  
 Katie's Saturday Omelette with Garlic 132  
 Loula's Eggplant Omelette 73  
 Malva Pudding (*Malva Poeding*) 203  
 Milk Tart (*Melk Tert*) 206  
 Mrs Mulholland's Christmas Cake 199  
 Omelette with Sweated Vegetables 8  
 Onions in Mustard Sauce (*Urwe in Mosterd  
 Sous*) 96  
 Rusks (*Egte Boeretroos*) 207  
 Sweet Potato Chocolate Cake 210  
 Zucchini Omelette (*M'farkie*) 79

Eggplant  
 Eggplant Bake (*Masbahat'a Darwish*) 70  
 Eggplant Braise (*Gesmoorde Brinjal*) 70  
 Eggplant Casserole with Nuts 75  
 Eggplant Caviar 74  
 Eggplant Dip (*Babbaganouje*) 42  
 Eggplant Lasagne with Tomato Basil Sauce 72  
 Eggplant Patties 39  
 Eggplant Pickle Salad 95  
 Eggplant Pies (*Borek*) 75  
 Eggplant Ragout (*Buttenjen Ata*) 73  
 Eggplant Roulade 67  
 Capsicum and Garlic Purée 68  
 Cottage Cheese and Thyme 68  
 Cottage Cheese and Tomato 68  
 Grilled Capsicum 68  
 Red Onion Jam 69  
 Grilled Eggplant Salad 69  
 Loula's Eggplant Omelette 73  
 Middle Eastern Caviar Salad 74  
 Plain Fried Eggplant Salad 67  
 Plain Fried Eggplant Slices 67  
 Simple Lebanese Caviar 74  
 Stuffed Eggplant (*Buttenjen Mahshi*) 71

## F

Falafel  
 Broad Bean Patties 40  
 Farmer's Salad with Croutons (*Fatousch*) 46  
 Farm-style Beans and Potatoes (*Boereboontjies*) 127

Feta  
 Egg Baked with Spinach and Feta 181  
 Tzatziki with Feta 101

Flan  
 Bangalow Fruit Salad Flan 196  
 Freekeh Patties with Rich Mushroom Sauce 11  
 Fried Lettuce Salad (*Hindbeh*) 47  
 Frozen Christmas Pudding 201

Fudge  
 Chocolate Fudge Slice 198  
 Macadamia Fudge 204  
 Self-saucing Chocolate Fudge Pudding 209

## G

### Garlic

- Auntie's Pine Nut Sauce with Garlic  
(*Tarator b'snobar*) 45
- Capsicum and Garlic Purée 68
- Dodo's Date and Tamarind Relish 130
- Green Beans with Caramelised Onions  
(*Luby b'zeit*) 110
- Harissa Paste 43
- Harissa with Beetroot 97
- Katie's Saturday Omelette with Garlic 132
- Pumpkin Curry with Peas 134
- Renee's Greek-style Garlic Paste  
(*Skorthalia*) 14
- Spicy Tomato Tofu 155
- Ginger Biscuits (*Gemmerkoekies*) 202
- Green Beans with Caramelised Onions  
(*Luby b'zeit*) 110
- Green Salad with Haloumi Cheese 110
- Grilled Eggplant Salad 69
- Grilled Mushrooms 149

## H

- Half-green or Jumbo Spanish Queen  
Olives 21
- Haloumi  
Green Salad with Haloumi Cheese 110
- Halva  
Ice Cream with Halva 202
- Harissa  
Harissa with Beetroot 97
- Harissa Paste 43

## I

- Ice cream  
Frozen Christmas Pudding 201
- Ice Cream from the Farm (*Smitsrivier Roomys*) 203
- Ice Cream with Halva 202

## J

- Japie's Favourite Citrus Delicious (*Japie se Gunsteling*) 197
- Jericho Tofu 145

## K

- Katie's Saturday Omelette with Garlic 132
- Katie's Slow-baked Lentil Curry (*Gesmoorde Lensieskerrie*) 131
- Katrina's Cracked Corn Samp and Beans  
(*Ngqush*) 126
- Kebabs of Tofu 148
- Kibbe  
Kibbe for a Monk (*Kibbit Roheb*) 117
- Kibbe Noodles 111
- Kibbe Paté 112

### Kibbe *cont'd*

- Kibbe of Potatoes 113
  - Chickpea Filling 113
  - Onion Filling 113
  - Walnut Filling 113
- Kibbe of Potatoes with Herbs 114
- Kibbe of Pumpkin 115
- Kibbe of Red Lentils 116
- Kishk
  - Kishk (*Trahanas*) 17
  - Kishk Porridge 118
- Koeksusters 204
- Kofta
  - Vegetable Koftas 186

## L

- Labne (cottage cheese)
  - Cottage Cheese and Tomato 68
  - Eggplant Pies (*Borek*) 75
  - Labne with Chives 53
  - Labne and Mushroom Pizza 54
  - Labne-stuffed Mushrooms 55
  - Labne Pie 53
  - Labne Pizza 54
- Lasagne
  - Lasagne with Red Lentils 10
  - Lasagne with Tofu 149
- Lebanese Couscous (*Moughrabieh*) 119
- Lebanese Couscous Salad 119
- Leek
  - Pea and Leek Soup with Lemongrass 165
- Lemon
  - Cabbage Salad with Lemon 109
  - Cauliflower with Lemon (*Arnabeet b'hamoud*) 108
  - Beans with Lemon and Oil 157
  - Lemon and Lime Cordial 205
  - Lemony Artichokes 64
  - Mint and Lemon Tofu Slices 149
  - Pickled Lemons 38
- Lemongrass
  - Pea and Leek Soup with Lemongrass 165
- Lentils, brown
  - Cottage Bake 159
  - Lentil and Rice Paté (*M'jadra*) 119
  - Lentil Soup with Beans and Rice (*Maklouta*) 162
  - Lentil and Spinach Soup (*Shorba b'addas*) 163
- Lentils, green
  - Katie's Slow-baked Lentil Curry (*Gesmoorde Lensieskerrie*) 131
  - Lentil Salad 162
  - Rice with Peas (*Biryani*) 130

Lentils, red  
Kibbe for a Monk (*Kibbit Roheb*) 117  
Kibbe of Red Lentils 116  
Lasagne with Red Lentils 10  
Lasagne with Tofu 149  
Lentil Lasagne with Ricotta 161  
Lentil Pottage on Toast 161  
Pasta with Red Lentils 9  
Red Lentil Soup with Spices and Tomato 166

Lentils  
Lentil Curry Pies (*Pasteie*) 131

Lettuce  
Fried Lettuce Salad (*Hindbeh*) 47

Lima Bean Loaf 164

Lima Bean Salad 168

Lima Bean Soup 9

Lime

Avocado and Lime Spread 178

Lemon and Lime Cordial 205

Louisa's Stewed Water Hyacinth (*Waterblommetjie Bredie*) 128

Loula's Eggplant Omelette 73

## M

Macadamia

Macadamia Basil Pesto 182

Macadamia Fudge 204

Macadamia and Pumpkin Soup 183

Macadamia Satay Sauce 182

Noodles with Tofu and Nuts 148

Nut Pastry Rolls 184

Potato and Macadamia Curry Pies 184

Malva Pudding (*Malva Poeding*) 203

Mango

Rice Salad with Mango 185

M'finu

Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk  
(*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126

Middle Eastern Caviar Salad 74

Mieliemeel

Crumbly Cornmeal (*Pokkoquo/Krummelpap*) 127

Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk  
(*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126

Milk

Bangalow Fruit Salad Flan 196

Ice Cream from the Farm (*Smitsrivier Roomys*)  
203

Macadamia Fudge 204

Milk Tart (*Melk Tert*) 206

Rice and Milk Dessert (*M'hallabeevee*) 205

Sago Soup (*Boeboer*) 208

Yoghurt (*Laban and Labne*) 24

Mint

Cucumber in Yoghurt, with Mint 110

Mint and Lemon Tofu Slices 149

Mixed Bean Salad 169

Mixed Bean Soup 163

Mrs Mulholland's Christmas Cake 199

Mulligatawny Soup 183

Mung Dhal 164

Mushrooms

Freekeh Patties with Rich Mushroom Sauce 11

Grilled Mushrooms 19

Labne and Mushroom Pizza 54

Labne-stuffed Mushrooms 55

Mushroom and Artichoke Bake 64

Mushroom Patties with Dipping Sauce 99

Mushrooms Grilled and Dried 19

Mushroom Tofu Snack 150

Mustardy Mushrooms with Tofu 150

Mustard

Onions in Mustard Sauce (*Urwe in Mosterd Saus*) 96

## N

Ngqush

Katrina's Cracked Corn Samp and Beans  
(*Ngqush*) 126

Corn and Bean Soup 126

Niçoise Salad, Almost 153

Noodles

Kibbe Noodles 11

Noodles with Tofu and Nuts 148

Nuts

Almonds

Almond and Orange Slice without  
Egg 195

Salted Almonds (*Lohz*) 35

Soaked Almonds 35

Bobotie with Nuts 92

Cashew

Tofu Salad with Cabbage and Cashews 154

Eggplant Casserole with Nuts 75

Macadamia nuts

Macadamia Basil Pesto 182

Macadamia Fudge 204

Macadamia and Pumpkin Soup 183

Macadamia Satay Sauce For Dipping 182

Nut Pastry Rolls 184

Potato and Macadamia Curry Pies 184

Noodles with Tofu and Nuts 148

Nut Pastry Rolls 184

Pine nuts

Auntie's Pine Nut Sauce with Garlic 45

Basil Pesto 18

Pine Nut Filling 114

Tamari Nuts 89

Walnuts

Eggplant Roulade with Walnut and

Capsicum Filling 100

Walnut Filling 113

Walnut Spread 43

## O

### Oats

- Oat Patties with Celery, Carrot, and Onion 10

### Oil Pastry

- Labne and Mushroom Pizza 54
- Labne Pie 53
- Labne Pizza 54
- Spinach Pie 52
- Vegetable Pies 101

### Okra

- Broad Bean and Artichoke Bake 63
- Okra with Potatoes and Amchur 76
- Okra Ragout (*Bami Ata*) 77
- Okra Ragout using Tinned Vegetables 77
- Okra Relish 76

### Olives

- Black Olive Tapenade 41
- Half-green or Jumbo Spanish Queen Olives 21
- Olive and Artichoke Salad 65
- Pickled Black Olives 20
- Salt-cured Black Olives 21
- Tapenade for Feasting 98

### Olive oil

- Pickled Lemons 38
- Pickling Solution 37

### Omelette with Sweated Vegetables 8

### Onions

- Fried Lettuce Salad (*Hindbeh*) 47
- Green Beans with Caramelised Onions (*Luby b'zeit*) 110
- Oat Patties with Celery, Carrot, and Onion 10
- Onion Filling 113
- Onions in Mustard Sauce (*Uirve in Mosterd Sous*) 96
- Red Onion Jam 69

### Orange

- Almond and Orange Slice without Egg 195

## P

### Parsnip and Apple Curry 133

### Passionfruit Tart (*Grenadilla Tert*) 202

### Pasta with Red Lentils 9

### Pastry

- Butter Flake Pastry 198
- Filo pastry
  - Labne Pie 53
- Milk Tart (*Melk Tert*) 206
- Oil Pastry
  - Labne and Mushroom Pizza 54
  - Labne Pizza 54
  - Spinach Pie 52
  - Vegetable Pies 101

### Pastry *cont'd*

#### Puff pastry

- Eggplant Pies (*Borek*) 75
- Lentil Curry Pies (*Pasteie*) 131
- Nut Pastry Rolls 184
- Pastry with Tofu 151
- Potato and Macadamia Curry Pies 184

#### Paté

- Kibbe Paté 112
- Lentil and Rice Paté (*M'jadra*) 119

#### Pat's Tofu Dip 187

#### Peas

- Broad Bean Patties (*Falafel*) 40
- Pea and Artichoke Bake 65
- Pea and Leek Soup with Lemongrass 165
- Peas with Tofu 151
- Pumpkin Curry with Peas 134
- Rice with Peas (*Briyani*) 130
- Split peas
  - Asma's Spicy Pea Soup (*Groenertjie Sop*) 133

#### Pepitas (*Bizr*) 36

#### Pepper Tofu 152

#### Persian Pilaff with Barberries 100

#### Pickled Black Olives 20

#### Pickling Solution 37

- Pickled Cabbage 37
- Pickled Capsicum 37
- Pickled Cucumber 38
- Pickled Lemons 38
- Turnip Pickles (*Kabees el Liff*) 38

#### Pilaff

- Cabbage Pilaff with Burghul 109

#### Pine Nut Sauce with Garlic (*Taratoor b'snobar*), Auntie's 45

#### Plain Fried Eggplant Salad 67

#### Plain Fried Eggplant Slices 67

#### Pomegranate Molasses (*Dibs Romaine*) 22

#### Potato

- Farm-style Beans and Potatoes (*Boereboontjies*) 127

- Freekeh Patties with Rich Mushroom Sauce 11

- Kibbe Paté 112

- Kibbe of Potatoes 113

- Kibbe of Potatoes with Herbs 114

- Okra with Potatoes and Amchur 76

- Potato and Macadamia Curry Pies 184

- Quince and Potato Curry (*Gesmoorde Kveper*) 136

- Renee's Greek-style Garlic Paste (*Skorthalia*) 14

- Sweet Potato Chips with Chat Masala 186

- Tofu Loaf 147

#### Pudding

- Christmas Pudding 200

- Corn Pudding (*Mieliepoeding*) 127

- Frozen Christmas Pudding 201

Pudding *cont'd*

- Japie's Favourite Citrus Delicious (*Japie se Gunsteling*) 197
- Malva Pudding (*Malva Poeding*) 203
- Self-saucing Chocolate Fudge Pudding 209
- Vegetable and Date Steamed Pudding 208
- Pumpkin
  - Cabbage Braised with Pumpkin (*Gesmoorde Kool met Pampoer*) 128
  - Chickpea and Pumpkin Patties 159
  - Kibbe of Pumpkin 115
  - Macadamia and Pumpkin Soup 183
  - Mulligatawny Soup 183
  - Pumpkin Curry with Peas 134
  - Pumpkin Scones 185
- Pumpkin seeds
  - Pepitas (*Bizr*) 36
- Purslane
  - Purslane Salad (*Ba'lie*) 46
  - Tomato Salad with Purslane 78

Q

- Quiche
  - Quiche with Tofu and Herbs 152
- Quince
  - Quince and Potato Curry (*Gesmoorde Kweper*) 136

R

- Red Lentil Soup with Spices and Tomato 166
- Relish
  - Chickpea Hotpot with Couscous and Relish 160
  - Dodo's Date and Tamarind Relish 130
  - Okra Relish 76
- Renee's Greek-style Garlic Paste (*Skorthalia*) 14
- Rice
  - Lentil and Rice Paté (*M'jadra*) 119
  - Lentil Soup with Beans and Rice (*Maklouta*) 162
  - Persian Pilaff with Barberries 100
  - Rice and Milk Dessert (*M'hallabeeeye*) 205
  - Rice with Peas (*Briyani*) 130
  - Rice Salad with Mango 185
  - Vermicelli with Rice 118
  - Vine Leaves with Herbed Rice (*Warra Einab*) 49
  - Vine Leaves with Tomato 50
  - Yellow Rice with Raisins (*Geelrys met Rosyntjies*) 96
- Ricotta
  - Lentil Lasagne with Ricotta 161
  - Zucchini with Ricotta Topping 181
- Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk (*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126
- Rusks (*Egte Boeretroos*) 207

S

- Sago Soup (*Boeboer*) 208
- Salsa Verde from my Garden 18
- Salt-cured Black Olives 21
- Salted Almonds (*Lohz*) 35
- Sambal
  - Banana Sambal 181
- Samp
  - Katrina's Cracked Corn Samp and Beans (*Ngqush*) 126
- Saucy Bean Salad (*Sousboontjies*) 94
- Self-saucing Chocolate Fudge Pudding 209
- Shangleesh Salad 48
- Silverbeet
  - Silverbeet Stalks in Tahini Sauce 50
  - Spinach and Black-eyed Bean Bake 167
  - Spinach Rolls 51
- Simple Lebanese Caviar 74
- Soaked Almonds 35
- Sour cream
  - Tofu Sour Cream 146
- Sour milk
  - Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk (*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126
- Spicy Tomato Tofu 155
- Spinach
  - Egg Baked with Spinach and Feta 181
  - Lentil and Spinach Soup (*Shorba b'addas*) 163
  - Rosie's Cornmeal with Spinach and Sour Milk (*Mieliemeel, M'finu and Amasi*) 126
  - Spinach and Black-eyed Bean Bake 167
  - Spinach Galette 51
  - Spinach Pie 52
  - Spinach Rolls 51
- Sprout Salad with Sesame 165
- Sprout Spread 44
- Stuffed Eggplant (*Buttjen Mahshi*) 71
- Stuffed Tomatoes (*Bannadoora Mahshi*) 102
- Stuffed Zucchini (*Koosa Mahshi*) 80
- Sweated Vegetable Mix Base 7
  - Corn and Bean Loaf 8
  - Freekeh Patties with Rich Mushroom Sauce 11
  - Lasagne with Red Lentils 10
  - Lima Bean Soup 9
  - Oat Patties with Celery, Carrot, and Onion 10
  - Omelette with Sweated Vegetables 8
  - Pasta with Red Lentils 9
- Sweet potato
  - Sweet Potato Chips with Chat Masala 186
  - Sweet Potato Chocolate Cake 210
- Sweet 'n' Sour Cucumbers 89
- Sweet 'n' Sour Tofu Rissoles 156
- Sweet Wheat Berry Dessert 209

## T

### Tacos

Bean Taco Mix 157

### Tahini

Avocado with Tahini 179  
Beetroot with Tahini 109  
Chickpeas with Tahini (*Humous b'tahini*) 42  
Silverbeet Stalks in Tahini Sauce 50  
Tahini Sauce 24

### Tamari Nuts 89

### Tapenade

Black Olive Tapenade 41  
Tapenade of Artichoke 66  
Tapenade for Feasting 98

### Tart

Brandy Tart (*Brandewijn Tert*) 197  
Milk Tart (*Melk Tert*) 206  
Passionfruit Tart (*Grenadilla Tert*) 202

### Tofu

Afelia with Tofu 145  
Chilli Con Tofu 146  
Jericho Tofu 145  
Kebabs of Tofu 148  
Lasagne with Tofu 149  
Mint and Lemon Tofu Slices 149  
Mushroom Tofu Snack 150  
Mustardy Mushrooms with Tofu 150  
Noodles with Tofu and Nuts 148  
Pastry with Tofu 151  
Pat's Tofu Dip 187  
Peas with Tofu 151  
Pepper Tofu 152  
Quiche with Tofu and Herbs 152  
Spicy Tomato Tofu 155  
Sweet 'n' Sour Tofu Rissoles 156  
Tofu Balls (*Kafta*) 147  
Tofu Loaf 147  
Tofu Salad with Cabbage and Cashews 154  
Tofu Sour Cream 146

### Tomato

Artichoke and Tomato Soup 62  
Egg Baked in a Tomato 181  
Eggplant Lasagne with Tomato Basil Sauce 72  
Red Lentil Soup with Spices and Tomato 166  
Semi-dried  
Cottage Cheese and Tomato 68  
Spicy Tomato Tofu 155  
Stuffed Tomatoes (*Bannadoora Mahshi*) 102  
Tomato Salad with Purslane 78  
Tomato Salsa with Cumin 187  
Tomato Slices with Spicy Juices 78  
Tomato Stew 129  
Vine Leaves with Tomato 50

Turnip Pickles (*Kabees el Liff*) 38

Tzatziki 188

Tzatziki with Feta 101

## V

Vegetable and Date Steamed Pudding 208

Vegetable Koftas 186

Vegetable Pies 101

Vegetable Soup 9

### Vine leaves

Burghul Salad (*Tabbouleh*) with Vine Leaves 47  
Vine Leaves with Herbed Rice (*Warra Einab*) 49  
Vine Leaves with Tomato 50

## W

### Walnut

Eggplant Roulade with Walnut and Capsicum Filling 100  
Walnut Filling 113  
Walnut Spread 43

### Water hyacinth

Louisa's Stewed Water Hyacinth (*Waterblommetjie Bredie*) 128

Watercress Salad (*Jarjer*) 48

### Wheat

*see* Burghul  
*Freekeh*  
Freekeh Patties with Rich Mushroom Sauce 11  
Sweet Wheat Berry Dessert 209  
White Bean Salad 169  
Wintry Apple Compote 178

## Y

Yellow Rice with Raisins (*Geelrys met Rosyntjies*) 96

Yoghurt (*Laban and Labne*) 24

Chickpea and Yoghurt Breakfast (*Fatteh*) 158

Cucumber in Yoghurt, with Mint 110

Kishk (*Trahanas*) 17

Tzatziki with Feta 101

Yoghurt with *Accelerant* 188

## Z

### Za'ater

Za'ater Breads (*M'naish*) 56  
Za'ater Crisps 56

### Zucchini

Stuffed Zucchini (*Koosa Mahshi*) 80  
Zucchini Bites (*Kousa b'beid*) 79  
Zucchini Omelette (*M'farkie*) 79  
Zucchini with Ricotta Topping 181