

Meze Platter Notes

Dates

- The date palm was domesticated in the Middle East by 4000 BC. It is one of the earliest cultivated fruits (another is pomegranate), which makes determining the plant's exact place of origin difficult. Archeologists, scientists and historians agree that date palms are probably native to an area of the Fertile Crescent located in what is now Iraq.
- The Date Palm thrives in oases because its roots need constant access to water and its fruit requires a hot, dry climate. An Arabian proverb says that the date palm must have "its feet in running water and its head in the fire of the sky".
- Dates were popular with ancient people of the Arabian Peninsula because the fruit kept well for long periods of time, due to its high sugar and low moisture content. Date palms were very important; every part of the tree was used. They ate the fruit and fed the pits to their camels, drank the sap, used the trunks and leaves to build homes, wove the tree fibers into rope, hollowed out the trunks for irrigation and grew other food in the shade of these trees.
- We eat the ripe fruit of the date palm, the seed is the pit inside the fruit. Plants grow fruit to reproduce: they entice animals to sow their seeds.
- Dates are high in sugar and a good source of minerals. They are consumed as a staple food in parts of the Middle East, North Africa and Western Asia. Dates are eaten as sweets, used in jams, curries and stews.
- The fruit's English name comes from the Greek word for finger, *daktylos*. Here it is in Greek: δακτυλος.
- Today both wild and cultivated date palms are found in desert regions of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and Asia. They are also cultivated in Mexico and California.

Wheat

- Wheat was one of the first crops to be domesticated, around 7000 BCE. This occurred in the Fertile Crescent, in what is now Turkey.
- Wheat grows in places where the winter is wet and the summer is dry. It has adapted to grow all over the world.
- Wheat was popular with ancient people because it stores well and is versatile: it can be ground and made into a variety of different foods. Wheat grain can be ground and used to make many things: flat bread, leavened bread, pasta, noodles, couscous, breakfast cereal, cookies and cakes.
- Wheat is a cereal (along with rice and corn), which means it is a grass. We eat the grains, which are small, dry, single seeded fruit. There are two distinct types of wheat. Bread wheat has a lot of gluten, which allows bread to rise when yeast is added. Durum wheat has less gluten and is used for pasta, couscous and bulgur.

- Whole wheat grains are good sources of energy (carbohydrates), vitamins, minerals, protein and fiber. Processing strips the bran and the germ from the wheat (this prevents spoilage), which removes most of the vitamins, minerals, protein and fiber. Sometimes flour is “enriched” by having vitamins and minerals added back in after processing.
- The word *cereal* comes from the name of the Roman goddess Ceres, who was the protector of agriculture.
- Today, durum wheat is grown commercially in all temperate parts of the world. Almost every culture in the world eats wheat regularly: bulgur in Mediterranean countries and Turkey, couscous in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, noodles in Asian countries, pasta in Italy, the US and many other countries.

Pomegranates

- The pomegranate was first cultivated in the Middle East around 3000 BCE. The plant may have originated in the Fertile Crescent and is probably native to Iran.
- Pomegranates grow well in the rocky soil and warm climate of the Arabian Peninsula’s mountain region.
- The tree’s large, jewel-like fruits have been a popular food and meaningful symbol in many cultures. The prophet Mohammad connected the pomegranate with paradise, the tree of knowledge visited by Eve in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden is thought to have actually been a pomegranate, and Spaniards loved the fruit so much that they named the city of Granada after it.
- Juice from the aril that surrounds each of the fruit’s many seeds, and the seeds themselves, are eaten fresh and cooked. Pomegranate is most often found in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean food.
- Pomegranates have lots of phosphorus and potassium and few calories. They are known for their antioxidant properties and have had medicinal uses since ancient times.
- The English word for hand-grenade originates from the French word for pomegranate, *grenade*.
- Today pomegranates are grown throughout warm climates around the world, including the Middle East, Egypt, India, China, the Mediterranean, Africa, Mexico and California.

Chickpeas

- Chickpeas were one of the earliest foods to be domesticated, first cultivated in the Fertile Crescent around 3500 BCE. The plant is native to Turkey.
- Chickpeas require a warm climate, fertile soil and are able to tolerate relatively drier conditions than other food plants.
- Dried chickpeas store well, and the plant is suited to the climate of the Mediterranean, Arabian Peninsula, and South Asia, where they have been used in soups, sauces, stews, and salads for thousands of years.

- Chickpeas belong to the botanical family of legumes, or pulses, and are commonly called “peas” or “beans”. The fruit of the plant is the pod, and the seed is the part people eat. They are eaten boiled, roasted and fried.
- Like most pulses, chickpeas are high in protein. They are particularly high in lysine, which is an essential amino acid. “Essential” means that this is something the human body needs but cannot make itself. Chickpeas are also high in fiber, folic acid and other important minerals.
- Garbanzo bean, ceci bean, chana, Indian pea, sanagalu Indian pea, and Bengal gram are alternate names for the chickpea. In Arabic, the word for chickpea is hummus: حمص.
- Chickpeas are still a very important food today in India, Pakistan, Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries. They have even become popular in the United States: as Hummus, falafel and in salad bars. In addition to being delicious, chickpeas are used as a meat substitute, and there is evidence that they can help reduce cholesterol and regulate blood sugar.

Lentils

- Lentils are another of the first foods to be domesticated. They are believed to have originated in the Fertile Crescent between 7000 and 5000 BCE.
- Lentils are able to grow in difficult agricultural environments, and can tolerate relatively drier conditions than other food plants.
- Dried lentils store well, and the plant is suited to the climate of the Mediterranean, Arabian Peninsula, South Asia and parts of Africa, where they have been eaten for thousands of years.
- Lentils belong to the botanical family of legumes, or pulses. The fruit of the plant is the pod, and the seed is the part people eat.
- Lentils are exceptionally high in protein, and are also a good source of iron, fiber, folic acid, B vitamins and other important minerals. The only plants that contain more protein per pound than lentils are soybeans and hemp seeds.
- The name *lentil* comes from the word lens, because of the shape of the seeds of the plant.
- Today lentils are an essential source of inexpensive and vegetarian protein in many parts of the world, especially South Asia and West Africa. They are widely eaten in soups throughout Europe and the US.