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Tasty Middle Eastern flavors tweak Thanksgiving table

By Lisa Armony, Contributing Writer

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Hilit Gilat knows her way around the kitchen. For the past two years, the Israel-born chef has built a steady reputation for preparing sumptuous, slow-cooked meats, savory stews and Mediterranean delicacies for families and private events, corporate affairs and even visiting dignitaries.

But when a client hired B-Shool (Hebrew for "cooking"), the Irvine-based boutique catering and private chef service she runs with her husband, to prepare his family's Thanksgiving dinner last November, the sprightly aficionado of fine dining was put to her biggest culinary test.

"Thanksgiving doesn't exist in Israel, and most Israelis have no idea what it's about," said Gilat, 36. "For many Israelis living here, it's just another four-day weekend."

Like scores of their compatriots, Hilit and her husband, Saar, spent their first Thanksgiving four years ago on a family trip with ne'er a turkey in sight.

Subsequent years were spent with friends, but without the holiday trimmings.

"All I was interested in is Black Friday," she said, referring to the day after Thanksgiving, the busiest shopping day of the year.

Her first exposure to the holiday as a historical landmark came two years later, when her daughter, Romi, now 7, recounted tales of the Pilgrims she was learning in kindergarten. And though Hilit learned more each year through Romi and younger daughter, Yarden, 5, she failed to grasp Thanksgiving's significance as a cherished family celebration.

It struck the couple as odd, then, when a client gingerly asked if they would consider catering his family's Thanksgiving dinner for 12, if they didn't already have holiday plans.

"He looked at it like he didn't want to take us away from our family on Thanksgiving," Saar said. "We just looked at each other and thought, 'What the heck.'"

The pair soon realized the knotty task they had taken on.

"I knew about the turkey, mashed potatoes and cranberry sauce, but I had never tasted pumpkin pie and had no idea what else to prepare," Hilit said.

That night, they sent an S.O.S. via e-mail blast to their American friends that simply read, "What do Americans eat on Thanksgiving?"

They looked up traditional ways of cooking yams, brussels sprouts, stuffing and green beans, as their friends had advised. But the couple, accustomed to the piquant taste of their French, Italian and Middle Eastern cuisine, were unimpressed with the traditional meal's relatively bland flavor. They decided to develop a Thanksgiving menu that would reflect their signature style, infusing holiday staples with exotic ingredients like date syrup, wine and dried fruits.

The side dishes proved easy to tackle. The turkey, on the other hand, the centerpiece of the Thanksgiving meal, was a far

greater source of stress.

"I had never cooked a turkey before, and here I was, faced with so many different kinds to choose from," Hilit said. "Organic, self-basted, naturally fed, I didn't know where to start."

There was also the timing issue. The couple usually preooks food in their kitchen and then completes the process at the event site. They feared that roasting the turkey this way might dry it out, ruining an otherwise elegant meal. They decided to bring the raw turkey to the host's home early in the day to roast it and then return later to finish their preparations.

"It was like leaving a baby with a sitter for the first time," Hilit said. "I was so nervous."

The final obstacle was carving the massive bird. Practice runs with a carving knife and scissors came out "less than aesthetic," according to Saar, so they invited the host to do the honors.

It was only the next day, while enjoying leftovers at a friend's house, that they discovered what they affectionately call "the electric saw."

"It will definitely be different next time," he said.

Different, perhaps, but it would be difficult to make it better.

"It is strange to cook food that you're not used to, but it's fun to try new things," Hilit said. "My clients realized it wasn't my usual menu, and I think that made them appreciate it even more."

With a successful Thanksgiving event under their belt, the Gilats no longer feel like outsiders looking in to a Rockwell scene, and they look forward to sharing their new repertoire with clients and friends alike. The experience has also given them a deeper appreciation for the quintessential holiday of their adopted home.

"It gives you a rare chance to reflect on, and be grateful for, the good things in life," Hilit said. "That is a wonderful message you can give to your children."

CRUNCHY YAM CASSEROLE

7 medium-sized yams
1/2 stick salted margarine, cut into cubes
1 egg white, whipped
1/4 cup nondairy heavy cream (optional)
1/4 cup fresh squeezed orange juice
1 tablespoon white granulated sugar
1 teaspoon good quality vanilla extract
2 tablespoons brown sugar
1 cup chopped sweetened pecans

Preheat oven to 400 F.

Wrap yams individually in aluminum foil and place on baking pan. Bake for 45 minutes, or until completely soft.

Peel yams and mash into lumpy texture (do not over mash). Add margarine and stir until completely melted and dissolved. Fold in the whipped egg white, nondairy heavy cream, juice, white sugar and vanilla.

Pour mixture into heat-resistant dish. Mix pecans with brown sugar and sprinkle on top of yam mixture.

Bake in pre-heated oven for 20 to 30 minutes, or until sugar caramelizes and pecans are brown and crispy.

Makes six servings.

FESTIVE RICE-STUFFED TURKEY WITH SAGE, DATE SYRUP AND WINE

Cooking time: 4 hours

1 organic turkey (12-14 pounds), cleaned, washed and dried
1 tablespoon kosher salt
1 tablespoon fresh ground pepper
1 tablespoon sweet paprika
handful finely chopped sage
1/2 cup margarine or olive oil
1/2 cup date syrup (found in Mediterranean food stores) or honey
1/2 cup sweet red wine
3/4 tablespoon unsalted margarine (if desired)
Oranges, lemons and limes cut to eighths; 1 cup pitted dried fruit (apricots, prunes, etc.) for garnish

Preheat oven to 325 F.

In mixing bowl, work spice mix into softened margarine or olive oil. Liberally season inside of turkey with kosher salt and pepper. Massage turkey with spiced mixture inside and out, and between skin and flesh.

Fill turkey with prepared rice and close cavity with toothpicks or needle and thread.

In a bowl, mix date syrup and wine. Place turkey in baking pan. Baste with some of the date/wine sauce. Cover well with aluminum foil and place in hot oven.

Cook turkey for 3 1/2 hours, basting every 30 minutes. Remove foil and let brown for 30 minutes or until juices run clear.

Remove turkey from oven and let stand 20 minutes. Transfer juices from bottom of pan to small pot and reduce over medium flame. Add knob of margarine, if desired, to thicken.

Transfer turkey to serving dish. Pour gravy over turkey and garnish with citrus and dried fruits.

Makes 12 servings.

Festive Rice

2 medium onions, chopped
1/2 cup canola oil
3 carrots, grated
1 handful each: white raisins; pine nuts; toasted, peeled pistachio nuts
Pinch salt and fresh ground pepper
1/4 teaspoon turmeric
2 tablespoons orange marmalade
1 tablespoon soy sauce
2 cups long grain rice, well rinsed
2 1/2 cups boiling water

Sauté onions in pan over medium-high heat until lightly golden brown. Add carrots and continue cooking for five minutes. Add remaining ingredients except rice and water; stir well. Fix seasoning to taste.

Add rice and continue to sauté for 2-3 minutes. Add boiling water; bring to a strong boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for 20 minutes until all liquids are absorbed (rice will not be fully cooked). Cool.

BUTTERNUT SQUASH PIE

(To simplify your Thanksgiving preparations, I replaced my homemade pie shell with a store-bought one.)

1 large butternut squash, cut into cubes
1/2 cup unsalted margarine, melted
4 tablespoons all-purpose flour
3/4 cup white/brown sugar
3/4 cup mayonnaise
3 large organic eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
Pinch nutmeg
1 store-bought pie shell

Preheat oven to 350 F.

Place squash cubes in pan. Cover with foil. Bake 30 to 40 minutes or until softened. Mash butternut squash to smooth texture. Add remaining ingredients and stir well.

Pour into pie shell and bake for one hour.

Makes eight servings.

For more information about B-Shool, call (949) 705-6425.

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