

Luxe lentils

Tara Duggan, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Talk to anyone who grew up in the 1970s with well-meaning parents roused by Frances Moore Lappé's "Diet for a Small Planet," and they probably have a complicated relationship with lentils.

"My mom would always make a big pot of lentils that were mushy and watery. I thought they had to be that way," a friend told me recently, clearly traumatized by the memory.

That was before she tried a soup made of French green lentils. Simmered in a broth rich with aromatic vegetables and greens, the small, firm lentils held their shape and offered up their deep, nutty flavor.

This time of year, the Bay Area's many Mediterranean-inspired chefs turn to these kinds of lentils for salads, pastas and side dishes that evoke the hearty styles of French and Italian provincial cooking. Originating in Central Asia, lentils are popular throughout the Mediterranean, Middle East and South Asia, and are pretty much a basic food group in India, which has a large vegetarian population.

Unlike other dried legumes, lentils don't need to soak before simmering, and can take as few as 20 minutes to cook. They are also high in fiber, protein, iron, folates and other important nutrients.

More chefs are seeking out lentils with a unique provenance, such as France's lentils du Puy or Italy's Castelluccio lentils, both of which have special geographic designations in their home countries, similar to wine appellations. American home cooks now have more access to these specialty lentils, which can result in quick-to-prepare but homey winter dishes that bear little resemblance to the soggy, dishwasher-brown lentils of the past.

Still, Gayle Pirie and John Clark, who use lentils extensively at their San Francisco restaurant, Foreign Cinema, have found that lentils can still be a tough sell.

"As a menu writer you might have to say, 'French caviar beluga lentils with Champagne beurre blanc and roasted monkfish.' If you have the word 'stewed' and the word 'lentil' on the same line, that dish isn't going to sell," says Pirie. "People are used to the domestic lentils that are kind of ugly and cheap."

Pirie and Clark use lentils du Puy, which they call caviar lentils - small, firm and green, with steely blue speckles. The chefs cook them slowly in a minimal amount of liquid.

"It's nice when each little lentil has integrity. Toothsome but not crunchy at all," Pirie says. "Glossy. Integral to its own shape. They do look like fish eggs."

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Pirie and Clark braise lentils in red wine or with pig trotters, and have been known to deep-fry them. They also use them in delicate salads, such as the French Caviar Lentil, Arugula & Celery Root Salad (see recipe, [this page](#)) or in a silky puree for fish. Pirie's favorite combination is with duck, such as duck cracklings with lentils, mache and duck liver toast.

"We love 'em. They're a nice backdrop with things as varied as grilled squid to steak. Or to add to autumnal pasta. It gives the pasta a little more body and a restorative nature," she says.

Other chefs, including Robbie Lewis of Bacar and Staffan Terje of Perbacco, both in San Francisco, gravitate toward Castelluccio lentils from a mountainous region in Umbria. These are green-brown in color and slightly larger than the du Puy lentils.

"The flavor is just fantastic," says Terje. "It has that kind of nuttiness to it. It works with so many things."

Terje likes to put them into a salad or a stew, such as Castelluccio lentils braised in Barbera wine and served in their reduced cooking sauce with cotechino sausage, a rich pork sausage that he makes in-house.

"When you make a lentil salad or a lentil stew with the Castelluccio lentils, they have more substance to them so they're not mush," says Terje.

In Italy, lentils are traditionally served on New Year's Day for good luck, similar to the black-eyed pea tradition in the American South, but there's no reason you can't prepare them throughout winter.

Pirie's and Terje's recipes start with the same basic method of boiling the lentils with large pieces of onion, carrots and celery to flavor the liquid. Pirie adds olive oil and Terje uses wine to cook the lentils. Before serving, they remove the large chunks of boiled vegetables, then sometimes add diced fresh vegetables to cook briefly. The lentils can then be drained and dressed for a salad, tossed with olive oil and other seasonings for a side dish, or combined back with the cooking liquid for a soup. Occasionally Terje combines the Castelluccio lentils with softer-cooking green lentils to vary the soup's texture.

Although maintaining lentils' firm shape is important in American and European preparations, the opposite is true in most Indian recipes, where the idea is to cook the lentils until soft, then recombine them with their cooking liquid and puree until creamy. The bland legumes are a blank canvas for spice mixtures of all varieties.

Whether cooked into a stew, ground for a flat bread or sprouted for a salad, dal are woven into Indian life, says Kirti Pant, executive chef of Junnoon restaurant in Palo Alto.

"Lentils are the biggest source of protein for Indian people," says Pant. "In average Indian families, lentils are the main dish in every meal."

The sheer variety of lentils available to Indian cooks can be overwhelming - in color alone, they range from white to orange to black.

Also, what are called lentils both in English and Hindi aren't always lentils in the European sense, in that they aren't legumes of the *Lens culinaris* species. "Dal" is the Hindi word for dried lentils but also refers to

other dried beans and peas. It's also the name for a stew made from these products. One of the best known dals, channa dal, is made from a type of skinned and split chickpea.

One of the standard side dishes at Junnoon is the black lentils. Pant and his staff boil black urad lentils until soft, then add tomato puree, butter and ginger-garlic paste, and reduce the mixture slowly for six hours. The final dish is flavored with garam masala.

Lentils are used as a grain in India for breads such as crisp, paper-thin pappadam. In the south, lentils do double duty in the classic dish of dosas, crepe-like pancakes made of ground lentils and rice, served with sambhar, a spiced lentil stew.

Lentils also feature prominently in Northern Africa and throughout the Mediterranean in dishes like Ethiopian lentil stew simmered with a berbere spice mixture; harira, a Moroccan or Algerian soup that combines lentils with chickpeas and grains; and Middle Eastern mujadarra, an addictive lentil and rice dish topped with caramelized onions.

Yet, the United States still has a bit of evolving to do before lentils become more universally beloved. If you decide to serve lentils, no matter how delicious, remember to be creative with the nomenclature.

"Lentil soup will never sell here," says Pirie of her restaurant, Foreign Cinema. "I'd have to call it lentil minestrone with foie gras - something outrageous - or it will be a dud."

Where to find lentils

Here are restaurants mentioned in the story and a selection of stores that sell specialty lentils. You can also look for them at specialty supermarkets like Andronico's and Draeger's. Most lentils from Umbria are from Castelluccio stock, but usually aren't labeled that way.

Restaurants

Bacar. 448 Brannan St., San Francisco; (415) 904-4100 or *bacarsf.com*. Lunch Friday, dinner nightly.

Foreign Cinema. 2534 Mission St., San Francisco; (415) 648-7600 or *foreigncinema.com*. Dinner nightly; brunch Saturday and Sunday.

Junnoon. 150 University Ave., Palo Alto; (650) 329-9644 or *junnoon.com*. Lunch Monday-Friday; dinner nightly.

Perbacco. 230 California St., San Francisco; (415) 955-0663 or *perbaccosf.com*. Lunch weekdays; dinner Monday-Saturday.

Stores

A.G. Ferrari. Several Bay Area locations; *agferrari.com*

Avedano's. 235 Cortland Ave., San Francisco; (415) 285-6328 or *avedanos.com*.

Bombay Bazaar. 548 Valencia St., San Francisco; (415) 621-1717.

Bombay Spice House. 1036 University Ave, Berkeley; (510) 845-5200.

Boulettes Larder (also a restaurant). Ferry Building Marketplace, The Embarcadero at Market, San Francisco; (415) 399-1155 or *bouetteslarder.com*.

Lucca Deli. 2120 Chestnut St., San Francisco; (415) 921-7873.

Pasta Shop. 1786 Fourth St., Berkeley, (510) 528-1786 or 5655 College Ave., Oakland, (510) 547-4005 or *markethallfoods.com*.

- Tara Duggan

Lentil glossary

Because all dried lentils, beans and peas are called dal in India, the word doesn't necessarily refer to actual lentils, which are legumes.

Pink lentil, or skinned and split masoor dal. This vibrant lentil cooks to a creamy consistency.

Split and skinned white urad beans, or urad dal. Very low in fiber so they also cook up to smooth texture.

Channa dal. A type of skinned and split chickpea used in Indian cooking, channa dal have a high protein content and rich flavor.

Black beluga or baby beluga lentils. These tiny black lentils have a glossy appearance when cooked.

Common brown lentils have a khaki color. These are the lentils you'll see in supermarkets everywhere.

Umbrian lentils. These green-brown or dark brown lentils stay firm with cooking and have a nutty flavor.

Lentils du Puy. These speckled green lentils from France are similar to Umbrian lentils but are smaller and take less time to cook.

- Tara Duggan

French caviar lentil, arugula & celery root salad

Serves 4-6

In this delicious winter salad from Gayle Pirie at Foreign Cinema in San Francisco, the lentils delicately coat the greens. The dish will make 4-5 cups lentils, enough for leftovers to use in the Seared Fish with Glazed Lentils & Root Vegetables or the Warm Lentil Dinner Salad, below.

- The lentils:
- 1 1/2 cups French caviar, or du Puy, lentils

- 1 bay leaf
- 1 small carrot, peeled
- 1 small piece celery stick
- 3/4 teaspoon kosher salt, or more to taste
- 1 to 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil (optional) + more for drizzling
- The salad:
 - 1/2 cup pecan halves
 - 1 small head celery root
 - 1/2 pound loose arugula leaves, or three bundles of bunched arugula, cleaned and dried
 - 3 ounces fromage blanc, crumbled
- The vinaigrette:
 - 2 teaspoons sherry vinegar
 - 1 1/2 teaspoons red wine vinegar
 - 2 teaspoons honey
 - 1/2 teaspoon kosher salt + more to taste
 - 6 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
 - -- Pepper, to taste

For the lentils: Place the lentils in a small stainless steel pot and add 3 cups cold water. Add the bay leaf, carrot, celery, salt and olive oil, if using, and bring to a simmer over medium heat. When the mixture comes to a light boil, reduce heat to low and cook uncovered for approximately 30-35 minutes, stirring a few times to ensure even cooking. The lentils should be firm but not crunchy, and the interior should be smooth. Check the lentils as they cook to make sure they do not dry out - depending on the lentils you buy, they may cook differently and require a little extra water.

Once the lentils are cooked, place in a storage container and allow to cool. Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil, and adjust the seasonings to taste.

For the salad: Preheat the oven to 400°. Scatter the pecan halves on a baking sheet and bake for 8-10 minutes, or until the nuts are fragrant but not too dark. Allow to cool.

Meanwhile, peel the celery root and rinse under cold water. Pat dry with a paper towel. Slice into 1/8-inch thick planks, then slice the planks into 1/8-inch wide matchsticks. If the sticks are long, they can be cut in half. Cut roughly 1/2 cup of sticks.

For the vinaigrette: Combine the vinegars, honey and salt in a small bowl. Whisk in the olive oil slowly, until the dressing is thick and emulsified. Season the dressing to taste with salt and pepper.

To assemble the salad: Drain the lentils of any excess moisture. Combine the arugula and celery root sticks in a large bowl. Toss slightly, add the vinaigrette and 3/4 cup of the cooked lentils, and toss again until thoroughly combined. Divide the salad equally among the serving plates, and garnish each portion with the toasted pecans and fromage blanc.

Per serving: 265 calories, 6 g protein, 15 g carbohydrate, 22 g fat (3 g saturated), 5 mg cholesterol, 244 mg sodium, 4 g fiber.

Castelluccio lentils braised in red wine

Serves 4-6

Chef Staffan Terje at Perbacco in San Francisco serves these lentils with boiled cotechino sausage, a fresh pork sausage that is available from Molinari and sometimes from A.G. Ferrari stores

- 1 1/2 cups Castelluccio or Umbrian lentils, or French du Puy lentils, washed and drained
- 2 cups red wine (Barbera or Dolcetto)
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken stock (or poaching liquid from cotechino sausage)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 onion, peeled and quartered + 1/2 cup small-diced onion
- 1 carrot, halved lengthwise + 1/2 cup small-diced carrot
- 1 rib of celery + 1/2 cup small-diced celery
- 2 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt or to taste
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper
- 1/2 cup good extra virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup chopped Italian parsley

Instructions: Place lentils, wine, stock, bay leaf and large pieces of onion, carrot and celery in a large pot with 2 cups water. Bring to a boil, then turn down to a simmer. Simmer, covered, until lentils are almost tender and not starchy, about 40-50 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. Remove from heat, remove vegetables and bay leaf and discard.

Add diced vegetables to lentils and put back on the stove, adding more water if necessary to cover fully. Finish cooking until lentils and vegetables are tender, about 10-15 minutes. Taste and add more salt if needed. Lentils should be moist and juicy, but not soupy.

Drain the lentils, reserving stock. Return the stock to the pan and simmer over medium-low heat until reduced to a saucy consistency, another 15-30 minutes. Add the sauce to the lentils.

Add olive oil and parsley and serve.

Per serving: 395 calories, 13 g protein, 32 g carbohydrate, 19 g fat (3 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 923 mg sodium, 8 g fiber.

Warm lentil dinner salad

Serves 4

The lentils can be marinated up to two days ahead in this main-dish salad from Tara Duggan. It's also good cold, but serving the lentils warm can be welcome in winter.

- 3 cups cooked and thoroughly drained lentils (see French Caviar Lentil, Arugula & Celery Root Salad recipe)
- 1/2 to 1 teaspoon finely minced garlic

- 3 tablespoons finely minced shallots
- 2 tablespoons sherry vinegar
- -- Kosher salt and pepper to taste
- 1/4 cup + 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons minced flat-leaf parsley
- -- Separated leaves from a head of butter lettuce or hearts of Romaine (1 handful leaves per serving)
- Optional add-ons:
 - 1 cup halved cherry tomatoes or 1/4 cup diced roasted red peppers
 - 1/2 cup crumbled feta or goat cheese

Instructions: Warm the lentils gently if cold either in the microwave or over low heat in a small saucepan, stirring occasionally.

Meanwhile, whisk together the garlic, shallots, vinegar and salt and pepper to taste. Slowly whisk in the olive oil until you have an emulsified dressing. Adjust seasoning or the amount of oil or vinegar to make a tart, peppery vinaigrette.

Toss the warm lentils with all but 2 tablespoons of the dressing and the parsley, and adjust the seasoning. If using the cherry tomatoes or roasted peppers, add them to the lentils.

Place a handful of leaves on each plate, drizzle lightly with the remaining dressing, and top with a scoop of lentils. Sprinkle with the optional cheese and serve immediately.

Per serving: 310 calories, 14 g protein, 32 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (2 g saturated), 0 cholesterol, 8 mg sodium, 14 g fiber.

Lentil & vegetable stew (dhansaak)

Serves 12-14

This wonderful Indian dish comes from "American Masala," by Suvir Saran (Clarkson Potter, 2007). The recipe originates in the Parsi Zoroastrian community in Gujarat on India's West Coast. It takes some time to prepare, but you can make it ahead. It's actually at its best a couple days after cooking, when the spices have had a chance to come through.

- The spice blend:
 - 1-inch piece cinnamon stick
 - 6 green cardamom pods
 - 1 tablespoon coriander seeds
 - 2 teaspoons cumin seeds
 - 1 teaspoon fennel seeds
 - 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
 - 1 teaspoon turmeric
 - 1/2 teaspoon whole black peppercorns
 - 1/4 teaspoon fenugreek seeds

- 1/4 teaspoon whole cloves
- The herb paste:
 - 1/2 cup loosely packed fresh cilantro
 - 1/2 cup loosely packed fresh mint leaves
 - 3-inch piece fresh ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
 - 1 jalapeno (cored and seeded if you prefer a milder flavor), roughly chopped
 - 3 dried red chiles
 - 5 garlic cloves, peeled and roughly chopped
- The stew:
 - 1/4 cup + 3 tablespoons canola oil or extra virgin olive oil
 - 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
 - 2 red onions, finely diced + 1 red onion, chopped
 - 1 tablespoon + 2 teaspoons kosher salt, or to taste
 - 1/4 pound chopped turnips
 - 1/4 pound halved radishes
 - 1 1/4 pounds chopped sweet potatoes or sugar pumpkin
 - 2 1/2 cups mixed lentils, such as whole brown masoor dal, salmon-pink washed masoor dal, yellow split peas (channa dal)

For the spice blend: Grind all the ingredients in a coffee grinder or small food processor until powder-fine and set aside.

For the herb paste: Combine all the ingredients in a food processor. Add 1/4 cup water and blend until smooth. Set aside.

For the stew: Place 1 cup of water next to your stovetop. Heat 1/4 cup oil and the cumin seeds in a large pot over medium-high heat until the cumin is toasted and browned, about 2 minutes. Add the finely diced onions and all of the salt and cook until the onions are deep brown, 12-15 minutes. Stir often and splash with water, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot when the onions begin to stick. Add whatever water remains from the cup and cook until it evaporates, about 3 minutes.

Add the turnips, radishes and sweet potatoes and cook 3 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium, add the lentils and 3 tablespoons of the spice blend and cook for 2 minutes, stirring often. Add an additional 8 cups of water, bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, cover and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring often.

Meanwhile, heat the remaining 3 tablespoons of olive oil in a medium skillet over medium-high heat for 30 seconds. Add the herb paste and cook it for 2 minutes while stirring. Once the lentils have cooked 30 minutes, add the cooked herb paste and the chopped onion to the pot. Bring everything to a boil and add the remaining spice blend. Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover and cook until the vegetables are soft, about 30 minutes, stirring every 10 minutes. Taste for seasoning and serve.

Per serving: 200 calories, 9 g protein, 27 g carbohydrate, 7 g fat (1 g saturated), 0 mg cholesterol, 781 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.

Seared fish with glazed lentils & root vegetables (online-only recipe)

Serves 4

This easy dish from Tara Duggan also would be wonderful with pan-seared chicken or pork chops.

- The lentils
- 1 tablespoon olive oil or canola oil
- 3 to 4 tablespoons minced shallots
- 1/2 cup peeled and finely diced parsnips (2-3 parsnips)
- 1/2 cup peeled and finely diced turnip (1 turnip)
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced
- 1/2 teaspoon finely minced fresh thyme + more to garnish
- -- Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- 1/2 cup dry red wine
- 2 cups cooked drained lentils (see French Caviar Lentil, Arugula & Celery Root Salad, F4)
- 1/2 cup low-sodium vegetable or chicken broth
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh Italian parsley
- -- Pinch finely chopped marjoram (optional)
- -- Extra virgin olive oil to finish
- The fish
- 1 1/2 pounds skin-on white fish, such as sole or halibut
- 1 teaspoon finely minced fresh thyme
- 2 tablespoons olive oil or canola oil

For the lentils: Heat the olive oil in a saute pan over medium heat. Add the shallots and saute until tender and lightly golden, stirring often, about 2 minutes. Add the parsnips and turnips and cook until tender, 3-5 minutes.

Add the garlic and 1/2 teaspoon thyme and saute until fragrant, then season with salt and pepper. Add the wine and bring to a simmer, then reduce the wine by about half, for about 5 minutes.

Add the lentils and broth and cook, stirring occasionally, until the lentils have absorbed the flavors and the liquid is almost completely reduced, about 5 minutes. Add the parsley, marjoram, if using, or a pinch of fresh thyme, extra virgin olive oil and salt and pepper to taste, if needed. Keep warm.

For the fish: Season the fish with salt and pepper and sprinkle with the thyme.

Heat the oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. When very hot, carefully add the fish, flesh-side down. Allow to brown thoroughly, about 3 minutes. Flip, then cook on the skin side until it flakes, about 2 minutes for sole and 3-5 minutes for halibut. Remove from the pan and serve immediately with the lentils. **Per serving:** 440 calories, 46 g protein, 26 g carbohydrate, 15 g fat (2 g saturated), 54 mg cholesterol, 119 mg sodium, 10 g fiber.

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/02/06/FDP4UOVFA.DTL>

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