

'Open sesame' and bring world of taste to your cooking

The magic words, "open sesame," fling wide the door to a world of culinary riches — the varied, sweet and savory dishes made with a flavoring that is at once delicate and memorable — the sesame seed.

In common with so many other condiments the sesame seed seems to have ascended to global popularity from its birthplace in central Asia, and was early discovered by the cunning chefs of ancient Mesopotamia, where the peoples of the Fertile Crescent dined on bread made from sesame seed dough several millennia ago.

The sesame seed was almost certainly cultivated for its fragrant oil by these same residents of the Middle East, for the oil was not only a boon in cooking, but was believed to have medicinal powers as well.

IT HAD its place in the Egyptian pharmacopoeia as far back as the 16th-century B.C., and various peoples in different places and times have attributed to sesame oil such virtues as the ability to cure dandruff, as well as efficacy as a body liniment.

Additionally, the sesame seed was of symbolic importance to various ancient peoples, who utilized it in funerals and other religious ceremonies to purify and to serve as a metaphor for man's immortality.

While sesame oil reached Europe in the first century A.D., traveling from far-off Pakistan and India through the Red Sea, by medieval times a less arduous route had been developed, with sesame plants cultivated in Egypt providing the oil and seeds which were shipped across the Mediterranean to Venice, the spice center of Europe.

SESAME SEEDS and their oil have been popular ingredients in food preparation in Africa since antiquity.

And, it was from Africa rather than Europe that America received sesame seeds — called " benne seeds," they were brought over by the slaves during the 18th and early 19th century, and quickly found a niche in traditional southern cooking, as an ingredient in candies, cookies, savory crackers and even steaks.

Today, sesame seeds and oil are most familiar in Oriental cookery, in European and American baking, in a variety of Middle Eastern delicacies, in which tahine, sesame seed paste, figures strongly; and in such sweets as halvah.

The following are examples of how sesame seeds can add savor to a variety of dishes.

From "The Grass Roots Cookbook" (Times Books) by Jean Anderson, comes the recipe for Benne Cocktail Biscuits, a specialty of Mrs. Mary Sheppard of Middleton Place, in Dorchester County, S.C.

BENNE COCKTAIL BISCUITS

- Makes about 4 1/2 dozen
- 1/2 cup sesame (benne) seeds
 - 2 cups sifted all-purpose flour
 - 2 tsp. baking powder
 - 1/4 tsp. baking soda
 - 1 1/2 tsp. salt
 - 1/2 tsp. cayenne pepper
 - 1/2 cup hog lard or vegetable shortening
 - 1 tbsp. butter or margarine
 - 1/2 cup buttermilk
 - 1/4 cup melted butter (optional)

1. Spread the sesame seeds out in a pie pan, place in a very slow oven (275°) and toast, stirring frequently, until a pale amber color — this will take about 10 minutes. Cool the sesame seeds to room temperature.

2. In a mixing bowl, stir together the flour, baking powder, soda, salt and cayenne pepper. Cut in the lard and butter with a pastry blender until mixture is the texture of coarse meal. Add the sesame seeds and toss to mix.

3. Make a well in the center of the dry ingredients, pour in the buttermilk and stir briskly but lightly with a fork just until dough holds together.

4. Turn dough onto a lightly floured board and knead lightly 7 or 8 times. Roll dough to a thickness of about 3/4-inch, then cut in 1-inch rounds with a small biscuit cutter or the cap of a screw-top bottle.

Cheese ring is pretty and good

Cheese and fruit. This combination of ingredients can take its place on a menu in a variety of forms, from a peasant-like meal served with chunks of cheese, apples and bread to the more elegant cheese trays enjoyed with red and green grapes and wine.

Now this savory mingling of flavors can be enjoyed a new way with this recipe for Bleu Cheese Ring from the Kraft Kitchens. The pungent flavor of blue cheese in chunky bleu cheese dressing makes a tasty mold to accompany chopped apples, grapes and orange sections, or any selection of fruits you prefer. As well as being delicious, molded salads are a showpiece on the table.

To make unmolting easier, brush the inside of the mold with salad dressing or oil before pouring in the ingredients.

Garnish this salad with lettuce and surround it with the fruit sections for added color to your table.

BLEU CHEESE RING

- 2 envelopes unflavored gelatin
- 1 cup cold water
- 1 8-oz. bottle chunky bleu cheese dressing
- 1 cup whipping cream, whipped
- 1/2 cup chopped apple
- 1/2 cup grapes
- 1/2 cup orange sections

Soften gelatin in water; stir over low heat until dissolved. Cool. Gradually add gelatin to dressing, mixing until blended. Chill until partially set; fold in whipped cream. Pour into lightly oiled 1-quart ring mold, chill until firm. Unmold; surround with lettuce. Fill center with combined fruit, 4 to 6 servings.

5. Bake on ungreased baking sheets in a hot oven (425 degrees) for 15 to 20 minutes or until lightly browned. Serve hot. To make the biscuits extra-soft, split them while hot and brush with melted butter. The biscuits may also be served at room temperature — plain or sandwiched together with bite-sized slices of baked ham.

Another southern-style recipe is the one for Benne Cookies, which is reproduced from "American Taste" (Arbor House) by James Villas, an odyssey through American cuisine.

BENNE COOKIES

- 1 cup benne (or sesame) seeds
- 1 1/2 sticks butter, melted
- 1 1/2 cups light brown sugar
- 1/4 cup plain flour
- 1/4 tsp. baking powder
- 1/4 tsp. salt
- 1 tsp. vanilla extract
- 1 egg

Heat oven to 300 degrees and toast benne seeds



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on a cookie sheet 10 to 15 minutes, stirring. Remove from oven and increase heat to 325 degree. In large mixing bowl combine butter, sugar, flour, baking powder, salt, vanilla, egg and cooled seeds and mix thoroughly. Drop batter by 1/4 teaspoon onto a greased foil-lined cookie sheet and space about 1 1/4 inches apart. Bake 15 to 20 minutes or till evenly browned (if pale in center and puffed, the cookies are not ready), watching constantly to avoid burning. Carefully peel from foil and cool on paper towels. Yield: about 65.

Sesame Zucchini Sticks, a delectable appetizer, is reprinted from "Country Food" (Random House) by Miriam Unger.

SESAME ZUCCHINI STICKS

- As one of several herb d'oeuvres, the following amount will serve about 6.
- 3 small, fresh, shiny zucchini (about 1 pound)
 - 1/4 cup flour
 - 1/4 cup white sesame seeds
 - 1 large clove garlic, peeled and lightly crushed
 - Olive oil
 - Salt



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Scrub but do not peel the zucchini. They must be young, firm and fresh (old ones will be soggy and seedy). Trim off the ends and cut the zucchini into 3-inch sticks about 1/4 thick. Dry well. Shake them about in a bag containing the flour, then turn into a dry colander and shake off excess flour. Put the sesame seeds on a tray and roll each stick in them, coating them as well as you can — the seeds won't stick on the unpeeled surface. Sauté the garlic in about 1/4 inch of olive oil in a heavy 10-inch skillet. Discard the garlic.

Fry the zucchini sticks, in several uncrowded batches, for about 2 minutes on each side over fairly high flame. Use a slotted spatula to remove them to paper towels. Transfer them to a paper-towel-lined basket, salt them lightly and serve at once.

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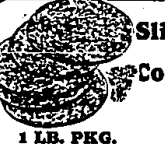
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