

# Spice up one-pot meals with a Moroccan tagine

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What first draws your attention to a Moroccan tagine is the somewhat striking terra cotta pot, with its wide, shallow base and tall, conical-shaped lid. But it's what's inside that you'll remember: moist, tender pieces of chicken, lamb or fish, cooked with seasonal fruits and vegetables, and a fragrant mix of spices, lemon, olives, and fresh herbs.

The word tagine refers to both the distinctive cooking vessel — which has been used for centuries — and the food inside. These aromatic one-pot dishes are the heart of Moroccan home cooking.

Moroccans eat tagines daily and most families own up to four different-sized pots, says Younes Rouzky, who, with his two brothers and sister-in-law, recently opened Argana, a Moroccan-Mediterranean style restaurant in Inman Square, Cambridge. "With tagines, it's who we are. It's part of our daily food. It's like an everyday feast."

The chicken tagine at Argana highlights some of the traditional spices and ingredients typically used, and the ease of preparation. The chicken is marinated in a bath of onions and garlic flavored with olive oil, ginger, saffron, cumin, cinnamon, paprika, along with fresh parsley and cilantro. With the addition of lemon juice and water — never stock — the chicken simmers until tender. "It's very much like a stew," says Rouzky. "You put everything in at once and cover it." The chicken dish at Argana is finished with preserved lemons and olives, a classic Moroccan combination.

Tagine ingredients change with the seasons. Winter tagines are made with root vegetables. Carrots, fresh peas, and artichoke hearts fill it in the spring. Eggplant, tomatoes, fennel, peppers, almonds, and chickpeas are also used with chicken, lamb, or fish.

## Moroccan chicken

Serves 4.

3 medium onions, chopped  
4 cloves garlic, chopped  
2 tablespoons salt  
1 tablespoon ground ginger  
1 teaspoon saffron  
½ cup olive oil  
1 tablespoon mixed parsley and cilantro  
½ teaspoon ground cumin  
½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
½ teaspoon ground turmeric  
½ teaspoon paprika  
½ cup lemon juice  
2 Cornish game hens (1½ pounds each) or 3 pounds whole chicken legs and breasts  
2 cups water  
1 tablespoon black pepper  
1 preserved lemon, if available  
1 cup black or green olives

1. In a large tagine or flameproof casserole, combine the onions, garlic, 1 tablespoon of salt, ginger, saffron, olive oil, parsley, cilantro, cu-

min, cinnamon, turmeric, paprika, and lemon juice.

2. Add the hens or chicken, and marinate at least 1 hour or overnight.

3. Pour in the water, the remaining 1 tablespoon salt, and the black pepper. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, cover the pan and simmer for 40 to 50 minutes or until the hens or chicken are cooked through. During cooking, spoon the juices in the pan over the poultry once or twice.

4. Meanwhile, in a separate saucepan, combine the preserved lemon, if using, with the olives. Cook over low heat for 10 minutes. (If not using the preserved lemon, skip this step.) Drain the mixture and sliver the lemon.

5. When the chicken is almost cooked, add the lemon and olives and cook 5 minutes more. Taste for seasoning, add more lemon juice, if you like, and serve at once.

*Adapted from Argana Restaurant*

The primary spices of ginger, saffron, cumin, turmeric, cinnamon, paprika, black pepper, cayenne, coriander, and aniseed are used in abundance.

Lamb is the typical meat and the long simmering is a perfect vehicle for cooking the tougher cuts, such as shoulder and shank. Lamb is flavored with lemon and olives, or often sweetened with dried fruit such as apricots, prunes, cherries, figs, apples, or honey. Honey is another important tagine ingredient.

Ana Sortun, chef and owner of Oleana in Cambridge, served a lamb tagine sweetened with honey when she cooked at Casablanca. She used lamb shoulder

braised with onions, carrots, saffron, cinnamon, coriander, wine, tomatoes, ginger, garlic, and harissa, a popular condiment made with dried chili peppers. To this aromatic and spicy mixture, honey is added to play against the heat and balance the flavors swirling around the butter-tender lamb. It can be served with steamed couscous, additional vegetables, and chickpeas.

Tagines keep fish moist and add flavor. At Oleana, Sortun offers a colorful seafood tagine made with monkfish, shrimp, and crab cooked in a saffron-ginger broth.

Gary Strack, chef at Central Kitchen in Central Square, serves

swordfish tagine with lemons and olives in a base of fennel, carrots, tomatoes, and chickpeas.

Strack learned about tagines three years ago, when he spent three months in North Africa, traveling by motorcycle and learning about the region's food traditions. He is planning to open The Enormous Room upstairs from Central Kitchen to feature Moroccan and Turkish food with tagines, roasted meat platters and other traditional dishes.

Strack thinks Moroccan food is easily adaptable and that tagines can be cooked in a covered pot or casserole dish. He doesn't think he'll be serving dishes in the tagine pots because they'll break easily in a restaurant kitchen.

But when food is brought to the table in a covered tagine, as it is done at Argana, it seems as if something exciting is about to be revealed. The pots come in various sizes, with bases ranging in diameter from 9 inches to 16 inches. A tagine with a 12-inch base is big enough to cook a meal for 4 people. The tight-fitting conical lid, with its small knob, helps trap steam and keeps all the flavor and moisture in the dish.

Traditionally, the tagine is placed over a charcoal or wood fire, where ingredients cook very slowly — sometimes overnight. You can really notice the flavor, says Rouzky.

More decorative tagines are meant for serving only. Before they can be used, the terra cotta pots have to be seasoned by soaking in water overnight. The insides of the pots are then rubbed with olive oil. They're heated in a 250 degree oven for one hour. Then they're ready to be filled.

At Argana, the cooks use three huge tagines that were made in Morocco. Rouzky and his brother, Rachid, begin their tagines at 9 a.m. A long, slow tagine is ideal, but you don't need to start that early.