



FOOD FROM ISRAEL

A New Dish for the New Year

Susie Fishbein

Few foods go further back in our history than *silan* – date honey. *Silan*, a current belle of the culinary world ball, is a staple of Iraqi, Persian and other Middle Eastern cuisines. It is the honey made from boiling down dates.

According to Gil Marks, noted food historian, date seeds from the 3rd millennium BCE were found in the Royal Cemetery at Ur Kasdim, making it an almost certain part of Avraham Avinu’s diet.

Dates are amongst the *Sheva Minim* – seven species of Israel – and the frond of the date palm tree is one of the *Arba’a Minim* – four species of the Sukkot rituals.

The honey described in the verse, “The Land of milk and honey,” is not the golden bee honey; it is this date honey. The *charoset* from Talmudic times was dates boiled into this syrup.

When the Dead Sea scrolls were uncovered at Qumran in 1947, a 2,000-year-old date-honey press was found. *Silan* was a beneficial ingredient in times before refrigeration as it could be stored for much longer than its mother fruit and the syrup was easily portable.

It is a natural sweetener whose caramel notes add a fantastic depth and sweetness to recipes for today’s cooks, as in the recipe below.



Roasted Eggplant with Silan Techina

Yields 6 servings

Eggplant, in some form or another, can be found on every restaurant menu in Israel. Halved roasted eggplant is the ambassador of these appetizers. Gorgeous, simple, and healthy, it is the perfect starter with its smoky aroma and smooth-cooked center. Roasting the eggplants on the open flame adds so much flavor but can be a bit messy; make sure to cover the grates with foil to catch the charred skin – or follow this recipe for an oven-baked version.

Silan Techina

- 1 cup raw tahini (*sesame paste*)
- 1/3 cup fresh lemon juice
- 4 cloves fresh garlic, *minced*
- pinch kosher salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground white pepper
- 1/2 cup warm water, *plus more as needed*
- 1/4 cup silan (*date syrup*)

Roasted Eggplant

- 3 large, long eggplants
- 1/3 cup olive oil
- salt
- pepper
- pomegranate seeds, *for garnish*
- radishes, *sliced paper-thin on a mandolin, for garnish*
- scallions, *thinly sliced, for garnish*

Prepare the *silan techina*: In the bowl of a food processor fitted with the metal “S” blade, purée the tahini, lemon juice, garlic, salt, pepper, 1/2 cup warm water, and *silan*. You may need a bit more warm water to thin to desired consistency. Set aside.

Prepare the roasted eggplant: Preheat the oven to 400°F (205°C). Cut the eggplants in half lengthwise, cutting straight through the green stalk. Using a small sharp knife, make 3–4 “X” marks to score the eggplant flesh without cutting through to the skin.

Place the eggplant halves, cut-side up, on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper. Brush them heavily with olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Roast for 35–40 minutes; the flesh should be soft, flavorful, and nicely browned. Remove from the oven; allow to cool.

Transfer the roasted eggplant to a platter or plate for serving. Drizzle on the *silan techina*; garnish with pomegranate seeds, radish slices, and scallions.

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