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Keep eye on balance when teaming savory with sweet

BY DAVID HAMMOND December 11, 2012 8:56AM

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Sitting at the kitchen table in the Ourika Valley of Morocco's Atlas Mountains, my fellow Americans and I were appalled.

The first dish we'd prepared in our Moroccan cooking class at Kasbah Omar was chicken pastilla. A product of centuries-old Berber culture, this Moroccan classic is a filo-dough shell filled with shredded chicken, eggs, almonds, cinnamon, orange blossom water — and about four cups of sugar.

Sugar is revered in Morocco. In some Berber communities, sugar is powerful currency in marriage negotiations and it's believed to have supernatural powers. Traditionally, sugary spice balls are placed around the homes of newborns to curry favor with djinns, supernatural spirits.

Maybe it shouldn't have shocked us that our pastilla tasted like a meat-filled candy bar. Still, around the table I heard surprised comments such as "Wow, that's sweet" and "I can't eat all this sugar in an entree."

Sweet-savory combinations are characteristic of Moroccan cuisine. During our stay in North Africa, we had syrupy stews of prunes and beef, as well as fragrant couscous tagines of sweet onion, chicken, raisins and sugar. Almost everything contained loads of sugar.

Not that Americans have a problem with a little sugar in main courses.

For Thanksgiving, turkey is paired with sweet potatoes often punched up with brown sugar and marshmallows (Moroccans probably would consider that equally appalling). For Christmas, there's honey-baked ham.

Fruit is one way to add sweetness to a savory plate. At a recent Foods from Chile dinner at Boka (1729 N. Halsted) prepared by local chef Julius Russell, we had strawberries with salmon. This touch of sweetness with savory worked just fine.

While eating fast food with his daughters, Chef Phillip Foss of El Ideas (2419 W. 14th) was inspired to develop his signature sweet-savory dish of French fries with ice cream.

Foss explains that "sweetness stimulates the mouth and lifts the whole dining experience, but it's all about the balance between sweetness, acidity and spice. In sweet-savory preparations, a little vinegary heat helps make sweetness more soft."

You can sample chicken pastilla, also called bastilla, at Shokran (4027 W. Irving Park). If the sweetness gets a little too intense, add a spoonful of harissa, lemony-peppery Moroccan salsa, to balance sweet with slightly sour heat.

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