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Food Detective: In Egypt, favas are for breakfast

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'Oh, is that the breakfast 'dish' I've heard about?' my brother-in-law semi-sneered, looking at my sizzling pan of garlic and black beans.

Some years ago, spicy beans were, indeed, my preferred breakfast food. Admittedly, it's a little odd, at least in these parts, to have legumes first thing in the day, when most of the family is eating the routine half-grapefruit and cereal.

In Egypt, however, what's for breakfast is a platter of foul (pronounced "fool," and sometimes spelled "ful"): lightly mashed fava beans, olive oil, cumin, garlic, a few herbs and lemon juice.

At the Fairmont Nile City in Cairo, Egypt, I was drowsily perusing the buffet when I spotted a steaming tureen of foul. I started to prepare a bowl for myself, randomly drawing upon several condiments from small saucers on the side. As I doctored my dish, a server came up and asked, "Would you like some 'Egyptian' foul?"

I'm guessing the nice man was concerned that through my naive misapplication of ingredients, I would desecrate a national treasure. The foul he brought me was an excellent blend of oil-enriched legumes and perky spices popping with bright lemony tang.

During lunch with Ahmed Bekheet, a Caireen Egyptologist, I mentioned the foul I'd eaten earlier in the day. He said this traditional preparation, which goes back to pharaonic times, is usually eaten only at breakfast.

"In Egypt, you would never have foul at lunch or dinner," he said, "because it's so simple. People would think you have no money."

Eating foul later in the day would be like having Wheaties for lunch or dinner; a little odd and suggesting, perhaps, that yours was a desperate existence.

Foul is a favorite during Ramadan, when it can be eaten later in the day. When eaten after sundown, this "belly cement" helps sustain the devout during their annual month of dawn-to-dusk fasting, Bekheet said.

Fava beans also are the primary constituent in falafel, though in the United States, chickpea flour has become the common ingredient in these fried street snacks - which Egypt also claims as its own.

You can enjoy foul at a number of places in Chicago, including the Lebanese restaurant Kan Zaman, 617 N. Wells, and Dawali, 1625 N. Halsted, which describes its cuisine as Mediterranean. You can usually order foul throughout the day at these restaurants. At least once, though, try it first thing in the morning. You'll taste what it's like to breakfast like an Egyptian.

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