



By Peggy Crum, MA, RD, Health4U Nutritionist

Here we are again, at the intersection of food and culture. Exciting isn't it? Or maybe it feels like trying to speak an unfamiliar language! This time we're traveling to North Africa for a spice blend called ras el hanout (pronounced: rahz-ël-hän-üt). This blend joins the list of others that define the cuisines of the world: Middle Eastern za'atar, Egyptian dukkah, Louisiana creole, Indian curry, and so on. While other spice mixes are on the savory side, some downright pungent, ras el hanout tends to be more floral and sweeter.

The literal translation of ras el hanout is "head of the shop" or "top shelf." In the spice world that means the blend was made up of the best herbs and spices the merchant had to offer. The exact spices in ras el hanout vary depending on the country of origin. Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco have their own blends. Even within a country, mixtures range from simple to complex including anywhere from 10 to 100 ingredients. Some say the blend "must haves" are cardamom, clove, cinnamon, coriander, cumin, paprika, mace, nutmeg, peppercorn, and turmeric. Regional variations include other spices, maybe a few herbs.

If using ras el hanout for the first time, try buying a ready-made blend in a small quantity from a source that sells a lot of it. Like any ground spice, it has a shelf life of only a few months. Keep it in a cool, dry, and dark place. Even following this advice, ground spices lose their aroma molecules to the air in just a few months. Whole spices do better, keeping their flavor for about a year.

Ras el hanout is most famous in tagine recipes, a traditional North African stew featuring meats, fish, or vegetables braised with dried fruits and nuts. Classic Moroccan chicken or turkey pie, b'stilla requires ras el hanout. It's delicious and convenient as a dry rub on fish or chicken. It goes well with lamb as in Chef Kurt's recipe for lamb meatballs. And it makes a tasty addition to couscous and rice.

RECIPE for health

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featured food:

RAS EL HANOUT

North African Spiced Lamb Meatballs

By Corporate Chef Kurt Kwiatkowski, Residential Dining Services
Makes about 20 meatballs

- 1 lb. ground lamb
- 1 T. ras el hanout
- 3 clove garlic, minced
- 3 green onions, thinly sliced
- 3 T. chopped cilantro
- 1 t. berbere*
- ¼ c. panko breadcrumbs
- 2 oz. heavy cream
- 1 egg
- 2 T. diced sun-dried tomatoes
- 2 t. kosher salt
- ½ t. black pepper

Preheat oven to 350°F.

Mix lamb with all ingredients by hand very well until the mixture becomes sticky.

Portion mixture into 1oz. balls and place them on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper.

Roast meatballs in the oven for about 15 minutes, or until internal temperature is 155°F.

*Berbere is an Ethiopian spice blend that includes fenugreek, ginger, garlic, and chili peppers as well as a few spices unique to the region. While not the same, Chef Kurt says you can substitute cayenne pepper and paprika in an amount that works with your preference for heat!