

TABOON



SWEET & SAVOURY
DELIGHTS FROM THE
LEBANESE BAKERY

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Zalabye

Spiced fried dough for Epiphany

These fried dough rings are a speciality that Palestinians prepare on the night of Epiphany (5 January), the night where we commemorate the baptism of Christ in the River Jordan. They are lightly seasoned with anise, mahlab, and sesame and nigella seeds. We make the dough and let it rise, but before starting to fry the dough, we wrap small portions of it and place them outside on a tree that's not a fig or mulberry. The dough portions will sit there throughout the night with a candle or a light on it in the belief that Christ passes around midnight, with trees bowing to Him, to bless the dough that people will use for the coming year. To me that sounds like a basic sourdough starter – a blessed one though.

Many traditions and blessings are linked to the feast of Epiphany at the beginning of the year. My mom makes zalabye every year and we all gather to share the blessing of the holiday. The streets fill with the aromas everywhere you go and we've been gathering an audience every year to come and enjoy them fresh out of the fryer. We serve zalabye with plates of labneh drizzled in olive oil and with bitter green olives. Lebanese people make zlebye (same thing; slightly different pronunciation) with fewer spices or aromatics and dust them with powdered sugar or a drizzle of molasses. I prefer the savoury style.

In a large bowl, mix all the dry ingredients, then gradually add the water and knead until the mixture comes together into a soft dough. Cover with cling film (plastic wrap) and leave to rise for 1–2 hours.

Before starting to work with the dough, fill a large saucepan with a 5 cm (2 in) depth of oil for deep-frying and heat until hot.

With wet hands, pinch a piece of the dough and roll it into a ball. Set aside on a damp surface to prevent sticking.

Take another, larger pinch and roll it into a ball, then stretch it, hollowing the centre to form a ring just larger than the first prepared ball. Place it around the ball and continue to form larger rings until you reach the size you want.

Start the frying by carefully dropping the small ball into the hot oil, then carefully add the rings around it, one by one. Have someone next to you with a skewer or a pair of tongs to keep the rings in place. Fry until golden in colour, then carefully flip, holding the whole disc with a large pair of tongs, and fry until golden all over.

Remove and drain on kitchen paper. Serve with either labneh or molasses.

SERVES 4

500 g (3½ cups) plain (all-purpose) flour
1½ teaspoons ground mahlab
1 tablespoon ground aniseed
1 tablespoon sesame
1½ teaspoons nigella seeds
1 teaspoon white granulated sugar
½ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon instant dried yeast
1–1½ cups water
neutral oil, for deep-frying
labneh or molasses, to serve