

38. **Tbeet** (sometimes, “*Tinoori*”) (Chicken and chicken skin with stuffing and rice)

Tbeet, whose name comes from the verb meaning “to remain”, is the Iraqi variant of the slow cooked Shabbat (Sabbath) lunch meal. Because the laws of Shabbat prevent the initiation of any cooking, every Jewish community has its own “*hamin*”, or long-cooked dish. Just as *chulent* is the *hamin* of Jews from Eastern Europe, *Tbeet* is the Iraqi version, and many members of the community would consider no Shabbat complete without it.

Aside from its religious and familial significance, this is a stunning dish in its own right. The flavors are marvelous – red rice rich with the flavor of chicken stock, tender chicken meat, crisped chicken skin, and a rice-based stuffing fragrant of cinnamon, cardamom, and rose petals. And if done correctly, the appearance is no less impressive: A wreath of crisped rice frames both a roasted stuffed chicken and a stuffed chicken skin that has expanded to itself resemble a chicken.

The remarkable flavors and impressive appearance of this dish have caused it to become one of the exemplars of Iraqi Jewish cuisine, and a cause for non-Iraqis to beg for Shabbat lunch invitations from their Iraqi friends.

3 ½ cups long grain, white, basmati rice
1 large, whole chicken, not skinned, having good skin that is not torn
1 lbs. lean stew meat, cut into small chunks ($\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{1}{2}$ inch cubes)
3 medium size tomatoes, preferably very red, diced into small pieces
1 small tomato
1 small onion
3 teaspoons tomato paste
2 teaspoons salt
1 teaspoon pepper
 $\frac{1}{2}$ - 1 teaspoon cayenne
4-5 tablespoons oil
5 tablespoons *Bharat*

Special Equipment:

Heat diffuser for gas burner (or an electric element)
Needle, white thread, and a thimble

Preparation of the Chicken:

Carefully skin the chicken, taking care not to tear the skin and leaving the wings together with the skin. This is a difficult process, and the best way to do it is to begin from the neck (which should be removed, if it is still attached). Using a sharp knife, cut

through the cartilage of the joint between each wing and the body of the chicken. Once the wings are separated from the body of the chicken, gradually peel away the skin from the underlying flesh, moving further and further down the body of the chicken. Use a sharp boning or pairing knife to separate the skin in those places where it is firmly attached to the meat, for example, down the back of the chicken. Upon reaching the thighs, separate the skin from the thighs, and then wrap a closed hand around the base of the leg and slowly pull outward, using considerable force, toward the foot of the drumstick. The skin should peel away as it turns inside out. At the very bottom of the chicken, toward the back of the bottom opening, is a fatty triangular "tail". When completing the removal of the skin from the chicken, leave that triangular tail attached to the skin. (Incidentally, the Iraqi Catholics used a term of great endearment to refer to that quaint triangle: "*khashmil-Papa*" – "the nose of the Pope".)

When the chicken is completely skinned, turn the skin inside out and wash it well in a bowl of water. Pull any loose fat and transparent membranes from the inside of the skin. After several rinses, lay the skin on a board (still inside-out). Cut off and discard the very tips of the skin on the leg (by the foot), which is usually yellowish in color and tough. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of *Bharat* over the skin. Rub the *Bharat* into the skin, using the coarseness of the spices to sand away some more of the membranes and fat. Turn the skin over and do the same on the other side, with another $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of *Bharat*. Remove any excess *Bharat* and let the skin sit for a while, during which the *hashwa* may be prepared. Also rinse the skinned chicken well, both the inside cavity and the outside. Take $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon of *Bharat* and rub it thoroughly throughout the inner cavity of the chicken.

Hashwa:

Wash and soak $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups of the rice (leaving the other 2 cups aside) in water for at least $\frac{1}{2}$ hour. After soaking, drain the rice so that no water remains and put the rice in a large mixing bowl. Add the diced meat, the diced tomatoes (not the other small tomato), 1 teaspoon salt, $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon pepper, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne. Mix everything together. Add 3 tablespoons of *Bharat* and mix well. If the *Bharat* is weak, you may need to add more, but too much will make the *hashwa* bitter.

Filling and Cooking:

Using a needle and white thread (not doubled up), sew closed either the top (neck) or bottom opening of the chicken. Also sew closed any tears or holes in the skin – there should be few of these, if a good chicken was selected. Using a tablespoon or serving spoon, scoop the *hashwa* into the chicken skin until the skin is full. (Do not force *hashwa* into the leg openings.) There should be enough *hashwa* in the skin so that it has some integrity, but there must be some room for expansion of the rice during cooking. The intention is that when the *hashwa* expands, the skin will blow up and appear to be like a whole chicken. When enough *hashwa* has been stuffed into the skin, sew closed the remaining opening. Lay the skin on its stomach, and bring the loose skin of the legs over the back and toward each other. Sew the two flaps together (it is likely the

flaps are too short to reach each other, in which case it is fine to have the thread strung across a portion of the back, between the ends of the leg flaps). Using a tablespoon or serving spoon, scoop *hashwa* into the inner cavity of the chicken (use the bottom opening). Fill the cavity completely – it is fine to stuff it well – and then pinch together the two fleshy flaps on either side of the bottom opening. Make a few passes with needle and thread through the flaps so that they remain closed.

Use a very large, thick-walled, non-stick pot. Dice the onion finely and add it to pot, together with 2 tablespoons oil, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper, and $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cayenne. Sauté on medium flame until the onions are soft and golden. Dice the small tomato and add that to the pot, sautéing further for a brief time. Place the stuffed skin in the pot on its stomach, and place the chicken in the pot on its side. Leave on medium flame, gently agitating the pots contents every once and a while, until the chicken and the skin brown. The skin should turn a rich brown color on its stomach, but not too dark. Carefully turn the skin over so that it sits on its back (it is now fragile and can tear, so do this gently), and turn the chicken over so it sits on its other side. Dissolve 2 teaspoons tomato paste in 2 cups of water. When the skin and chicken have had an opportunity to brown lightly, add the water and tomato paste to the pot. Cover, bring to boil, and lower flame to low. Cook for 45 minutes. Every so often, perforate the skin with a fork having long and thin teeth (do this twice during the time the skin is cooking). After 45 minutes, test to make sure the *hashwa* is cooked – poke a fork into the skin to check that the *hashwa* is soft. When it is cooked, shut off flame, whether or not all the liquid has evaporated. Allow to cool and refrigerate until at least a few hours before ready to serve.

Cooking the Rice and Serving:

Wash and soak 2 cups of rice for at least 15 minutes. With utmost gentleness, remove the chicken from the pot and place it in a plate. (Unless the pot is big enough to do the following without removing the chicken.) Dissolve 1 teaspoon tomato paste in 2 cups of water. However, if there is liquid remaining in the pot, reduce the additional water by the same amount. Slide skin to one side of pot and add the water and tomato paste to the other side. Add 1 teaspoon salt. Set on medium flame, cover, and bring to boil. Drain rice, add it to the boiling liquid, stir, and cover pot. When the liquid evaporates, lower flame to very low. After 15 minutes, check rice to make sure it is ready. If so, push it aside slightly and place chicken back in pot so that is sits on its back. (Or, if the pot is big enough and the chicken was not removed, simple turn it very gently so that it sits on its back.) Remove the thread from the flaps of the chicken (but do not remove any thread from the skin). Set pot on top of heat diffuser or on electric element at very low heat and leave for at least an hour.

When ready to serve, invert over a large serving platter. If the chicken has been sitting on top of the rice, remove the chicken before inverting pot and then set chicken next to *hkaka* cake. Before inverting pot, make sure to loosen the contents with a spatula – *tbeet* tends to stick even to non-stick surfaces and must first be freed from any adhesion or the skin will tear when the pot is inverted. At the dinner or lunch table, the server should ensure that each guest is given a little taste from each component of the *tbeet*.

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The rich, flavorful exterior rice with *hkaka*, the chicken and its stuffing, and the crisp chicken skin and its stuffing. Take care not to allow any thread to make its way onto a guest's plate.