

## Ethnic flatbreads go mainstream

By Tanya Bricking Leach | The Associated Press | January 24, 2008

In Mexico it's a tortilla. In Ethiopia it's injera. It's nan in India and pita in the Middle Eastern countries.

By whatever name you call it, flatbread is a staple almost everywhere. And in the United States, it is a quickly rising part of the nearly \$14-billion bread industry that is crowding shelves from Wal-Mart to Whole Foods.

Not bad for a product that can count its age in centuries.

"It's a 2,000-year-old recipe," says Mike Stimola, president of Sandella's Flatbread, a cafe founded in 1994 in West Redding, Conn., that now has 125 locations. "It's the original bread." It wasn't long ago that the only flatbread found in most grocery stores were pita pockets and tortillas. Today, dozens of varieties compete, with such flavorings as sun-dried tomato, different grains and shapes, even low-carb options.

In fact, flatbread has become so popular that new product launches in the United States went from 12 in 2005 to 51 in 2006, says Joanna Peot, spokeswoman for Chicago-based market research firm Mintel International Group.

Cookbook author Naomi Duguid isn't surprised. When she co-authored "Flatbreads & Flavors" in 1995, flatbread was still seen as something "a bit marginal" and ethnic, she says. But as chefs began to put flatbread in their bread baskets, it became far more common.

"Now you can go into any grocery store, and there's going to be a whole group of breads you could call flatbread," she says. "We've moved from the conception that bread has to be a loaf."

Healthy eating trends explain most of the growth, Peot says. And, unlikely as it may seem, fast-food chains have helped, with wraps and other flatbread sandwiches appearing on numerous menus, including Quiznos and Arby's.

Versatility also makes a difference, says Anissa Helou, a Lebanese baker who recently published a cookbook with many flatbread recipes.

Americans are discovering that flatbreads work across cultures and eating styles.

"It's all about the usage," says Dan Malovany, editor of *Snack Food & Wholesale Bakery* magazine. Flatbread makers are finding success marketing a whole menu for "grab-and-go" hungry shoppers, he says.

Flatbread handles a turkey sandwich as easily as a smear of hummus, baba ghanoush or other Middle Eastern spreads. It also works for numerous Hispanic dishes, and even as a base for the all-American pizza.

"It's more than a backlash to Atkins," Jim White, a partner in the Concord, Ontario-based FGF Brands, which makes Fabulous Flats Naan, says of the low-carb diet that caused consumers to shun loaf bread.

When FGF began shipping to the United States in 2006, it sold nan in about 200 stores. Now it's available in more than 5,000 and is keeping up with orders for more than 1.5 million nan a week.

"Back in the '70s and '80s, the usual ethnic breads available to the masses were bagels or pita," White says. "Today, however, there is huge interest in Indian foods. Anything Indian or Asian is hot." And at King Arthur Flour Co. in Norwich, Vt., introductory flatbread classes offered to the public became so popular that the company went from holding two a year in 2002 to teaching them every month.

The flour company even built a wood-fired oven in 2005 for use in the courses. "The simplicity of it appeals to many people," says Susan Miller, director of the company's Baking Education Center. "The classes always fill up." Alisa Rosenbaum is one of the many Americans fueling the flatbread industry growth. She says she realized she was hooked on the stuff when she made pizza with it nearly every day for a week.

"It really gives you options," says Rosenbaum, a 27-year-old economics development consultant from Washington. "It really is like a comfort food, but you can do it in a healthy way."

## **Mini Turkish flatbreads**

### **Ingredients**

1/3 cup unbleached all-purpose flour, plus extra for kneading and shaping  
1/3 cup bread flour  
3 Tbsps. whole-wheat flour  
1/2 tsp. kosher salt or sea salt

1. In a large bowl, combine all ingredients and make a well in the center. Gradually add 1/3 cup plus 2 tsps. warm water, and knead until you have a rough ball of dough.
2. Transfer the dough to a lightly floured work surface. Knead for 3 minutes. Invert the bowl over the dough and let the dough rest for 15 minutes. Knead for another 2 to 3 minutes, or until the dough is

smooth and elastic.

3. Divide the dough into 10 equal pieces. Shape each into a small ball, rolling the dough between your palms.
4. Sprinkle a tray, or part of the work surface, with flour and place the balls of dough on the floured surface. Cover with a damp kitchen towel and let the dough rest for 30 minutes.
5. Roll out each ball of dough, sprinkling with more flour every now and then, to a circle 7 or 8 inches in diameter. Place the circles of dough between dry kitchen towels.
6. Heat a large, nonstick skillet over medium. When the pan is very hot, cook the breads, one at a time, for about 1 minute on each side, or until they are lightly golden and small, lightly burned spots have bubbled up.
7. As the breads cook, stack them between clean kitchen towels. Use immediately or let harden and stack in a dry place, where they will keep for weeks. Makes 10 breads.

Note: To refresh the breads, sprinkle each with a little water, fold in half and wrap in a clean kitchen towel. Let rest for 30 minutes, or until the bread becomes soft and pliable.

This fragrant, yeasted flatbread from Morocco is studded with aniseed and sesame seeds. Anissa Helou says it traditionally is used to mop up the sauce of tagines, but would be equally good with any stew.

## **Moroccan bread**

### **Ingredients**

2 1/4 tps. active dry yeast  
2 1/2 cups semolina flour  
1 tsp. kosher salt or sea salt  
1/2 Tbsp. aniseed (optional)  
1 Tbsp. white sesame seeds (optional)  
All-purpose flour, for kneading and shaping

1. In a small bowl or cup, dissolve the yeast in 1/4 cup warm water and stir until creamy.
2. In a large bowl, combine the semolina and salt and, if using, the aniseed and sesame seeds. Make a well in the center. Add the yeast to the well. Gradually add 1 cup warm water, mixing in the flour as you go. Knead to make a rough ball of dough.
3. Remove the dough to a lightly floured work surface. Knead for 3 minutes, then invert the bowl over the dough and let it rest for 15 minutes.

4. Knead the dough for another 2 to 3 minutes, or until the dough is smooth and elastic. Shape the dough into a ball, cover with a damp kitchen towel and let it rest for 15 minutes.

5. Flatten the dough by hand into a circle about 3/4 inch thick.

6. Transfer to a baking sheet lined with parchment paper or a silicone pastry mat. Cover with a damp kitchen towel and let rise in a warm, draft-free place for about an hour, or until the dough has doubled in volume.

7. About 20 minutes before baking, preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Bake for 35 to 40 minutes, or until golden all over. Transfer to a wire rack to cool. Makes 1 medium loaf.