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# AFTERTASTE

## THE SEARCH FOR LOOMI

By Eugene Wyatt



I have a recipe for lamb sausage calling for loomi that I must absolutely have made. But please, now that I'm having my lamb made into sausages by a local butcher for my Greenmarket clientele, don't assume my errant little sheep dog Poem has ended up in hot dogs. As you may know, the frankfurter was renamed the hot dog at Coney Island in the early 1900's. If your pooch went missing on the boardwalk, you didn't eat at Nathan's...but I'm not that Brooklyn and besides, I hate franks.

Speaking of Brooklyn, if I can't find loomi, a rare Arabic spice, in Manhattan, I'll visit the spice purveyors on Atlantic Avenue. I come from another time, when poets and whores could afford to live in Manhattan. We kept our noses up about crossing the bridge. Now I wonder if I could I keep my chin up if I had to slither under the river on the IRT? If I must go to Brooklyn to find loomi, I will see myself as Marco Polo astride a camel (not just another straphanger) jostling along the Spice Route to Cathay.

Loomi is made from whole limes that have been salted, left to blacken in the sun, and ground into a powder. The best loomi comes from Iran, or so I've been told. It's hard to get through customs as it looks like gun powder, or plutonium, to entry-level patriots of the Department of Homeland Security. Contrary to Slow Food rumors, I doubt Mr. Bush's reason for the impending invasion of Iran is the loomi shortage; he is known to like franks.

*De gustibus non est disputandum.* Loomi is a key ingredient of the baharat (spice in Arabic) found in the Gulf states. Every region



of the Middle East has its own baharat with differing blends of black pepper and allspice and some have cardamoms, nutmegs, cinnamons or cumins; a Tunisian baharat has rose petals too. Baharat is used to counterpoint the flavorful mutton Arabs enjoy, from sheep older than a year.

I tried whatever it took to stay out of Brooklyn. I called spice importers in the Manhattan yellow pages, nothing. I walked up Lexington to Kalustyan's on 28th St and asked the clerk for loomi. "Loony?" he said. I gave him a tender smile. Defeated but proud, it looked like Marco would have to go to Brooklyn; but should I pack lunch or a gun?

Origins are the destinations of history. The lamb sausage recipe calling for loomi came from a shadowy woman who happened into my stand in Union Square. She was tall; she wore dark glasses and spoke with a voice that knew Pernod. We talked about the differences of merguez in Marrakech and in Fez. She said she dealt in real estate in Afghanistan, "back and forth all the time." Real estate in Afghanistan?

"For the hotels," she said. Her smile silenced me.

"Here," she pressed a crumpled scrap of paper in my hand, "this comes from a Shiite butcher in Tehran." Then she disappeared into the sunlight. □

*Eugene Wyatt raises sheep and sells lamb & yarn at the Union Square Greenmarket on Saturdays; he writes a weekly newsletter to which you can subscribe, wyatt@catskill-merino.com*