Za’atar’s Long History, From Medieval Medicine to the Modern Kitchen



A Herb of Many Names: What Exactly is Za'atar?

Commonly transcribed as za'tar, za'atar, or zaatar (زعتر), this name can refer to both the well-known spice mix ubiquitous in Levantine cooking and to several different plants, most of them related in some way. Depending on who you ask, they would tell you that za'atar is what is referred to in English as thyme, marjoram, oregano, or even hyssop, some of which are illustrated below in images taken from Omar Tesdell's book *Palestinian Wild Food Plants*.



These pictures show all the different plants that are today referred to as some kind of za'atar, some with a qualifier such as "wild" (Arabic: بري), "domesticated/garden" (بستاني), or "Persian" (فارسي). The variety most common in the Levant today has the Latin name *Origanum syriacum L.*, usually also the main ingredient in the spice mix za'atar.

The ambivalence of the name za'atar is something that the people of the Mediterranean have long been aware of, centuries before European botanists like Carl von Linné attempted to classify all existing plant species into a hierarchical taxonomy.

Botanist Ibn al-Baytar, for example, was born in Malaga in 1190, but moved to the Levant in his thirties. He compiled information from more than 250 sources in his *Comprehensive Book on Simple Medicines and Foods* (كتاب الجامع لمفردات الأدوية والأغذية). For za'atar, he says: "It has many varieties which are known to the people who live where it grows." Za'atar's history has always been highly localised, and the very definition of what za'atar is depends on who is picking it. Identifying and using za'atar has therefore always been a highly vernacular activity. Ibn al-Baytar goes on to mention some of the varieties; they include wild, garden, and mountain za'atar, long-leaved, round-leaved, fine, and broad za'atar, black za'atar which is known among people as Persian za'atar, white za'atar known as hawar za'atar or shawa' za'atar.

He explains that there are many other varieties, but that "all are similar and well-known among locals."

A Herb for Healing: Za'atar in Medieval Arabic Medicine

Today, we know za'atar predominantly as a culinary ingredient. In the past, it was first and foremost a medicinal herb, part of both learned and vernacular knowledges of how to use what grew on the land to heal and treat diseases or injuries. One of the earliest mentions of za'atar as a medicinal plant in Arabic is in a book from the 10th century CE, written by a certain Muhammad b. Sa'id al-Tamimi, who lived and worked in Jerusalem. While his book is only preserved in fragments, many later authors quote his advice regarding za'atar and other plants, among them Ibn al-Baytar.

In the medieval Arabo-Muslim world, the fields of cooking and medicine were much more closely intertwined than for us today. The first and most important way of preserving health and curing disease was to eat foods appropriate for a person's

individual temperament. People made sense of their bodies and their relationship to nature through the framework of the four humoral juices, established and systematised by the Greek physicians Hippocrates and Galen. This system's basic idea is that the human body is made up of four humours, the vital juices blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile. These need to be balanced according to the individual patient's constitution, which can be achieved by eating specific foods and taking specific medications, as well as avoiding harmful substances and even living in particular places. The humours map onto the qualities hot and cold, moist and dry, the four seasons of the year, seasons of life, parts of the earth, the four elements, and certain planets.

Within this system, the herb za'atar was considered a heating plant and useful as an antidote. We find, for example, recipes that recommend drinking it with wine or syrup to help against insect bites, or with boiled grape juice to cures hemlock or black poppy seed poisoning. Generally, za'atar was believed to be useful against poison not just for humans: In this entry

from al-Qazwini's encyclopaedia *Wonders of Creation* (غ ج ئ ب ا ف خ ك ن ^ ا ت), written in the 13th century CE, he says the following:



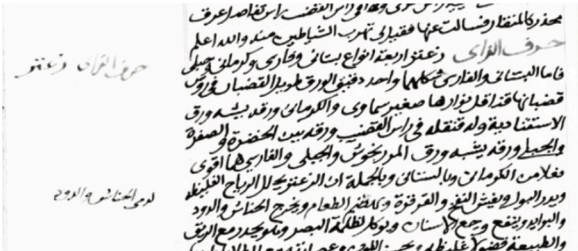
(Detail from a digitised manuscript now in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod.arab. 464, fol. 137v).

"Ṣaʿtar: If it is chewed, it helps against toothaches and kills worms and ringworm. Wild ṣaʿtar help against snake bites, and it is said that hedgehogs and weasels treat themselves by eating wild thyme if they are attacked by snakes or vipers."
In some versions, the author even clarifies the spelling he has chosen (ر ت غ ص) in order to avoid accidental confusion with other plant names, but until today, za'atar can be spelled in several different ways in Arabic (ر ت غ ز! ر ت غ ص! ر ت غ س).





Apart from curing hedgehogs, za'atar was also attributed with several other properties which are called khawass in Arabic (خاص)—a term that has often been translated as "occult" or "sympathetic property", but which simply means that the underlying causal relation between a substance and its effects are unknown. In the 14th century, the Egyptian alchemist and natural scientist Aydamur al-Jildaki wrote a book he called *The Diver's Pearl and the Distinction's Treasure, On the Science of Sympathetic Properties*, an encyclopaedia of different natural substances and their sympathetic properties.



(Detail from a digitised manuscript now in Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Arabe 2340, fol. 76r)

Again, we see that actors of the time were well aware of the ambiguity surrounding the term "za'atar", as al-Jildaki begins his entry by listing four different kinds known to him, and what they look like. He goes on to say that all kinds of za'atar are good for relieving heavy winds (i.e., flatulence), easing urination and breathing, getting rid of worms, benefitting the teeth, and fighting cataracts of the eyes. A paste made with its juice was to be applied in the hammam to soothe hip pain and fight jaundice. Finally, al-Jildaki says that "the wild zaatar is the strongest of them all."

A Herb for Hearty Dishes: Za'atar in the Kitchen

As mentioned above, medicine and food were inseperable in the medieval Arabo-Muslim world, and the herb za'atar is ubiquitous throughout medieval Arabic cookbooks. It features in particular in recipes for fish, chicken and other meats, sausages, yoghurt and fermented or vinegar-based foods. It is common to find za'atar used in combination with sour ingredients including sumac, which is also often a part of

today's za'atar blends. It seems to have been used fresh in many dishes, which would indicate regular access, for example through foraging or kitchen gardens. Many other recipes, however, also specify the use of dried za'atar.

For those looking for precursors to today's spice, there is indeed a medieval recipe for making a za'atar salt mix that is surprisingly similar to what many people today would recognise as the herb blend za'atar.

It is found in the earliest surviving Arabic cookbook, written by the Baghdadi writer Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq in the 10th century CE (see here for a nice summary by food historian Charles Perry). This cookbook was compiled in the context of the Abbasid court and features many recipes created by palace cooks or attributed to members of the caliph's household itself. The recipes show Persian and other influences, as well as a desire to prove that the cuisine of the Abbasid court—which was still in the process of establishing its dominance—was highly refined.

The recipe appears in the chapter on "Making vinegar and seasoning salt for table use", quoted

here from Nawal Nasrallah's excellent translation (p. 144):

Another recipe for delicious (ṭayyib) salt:

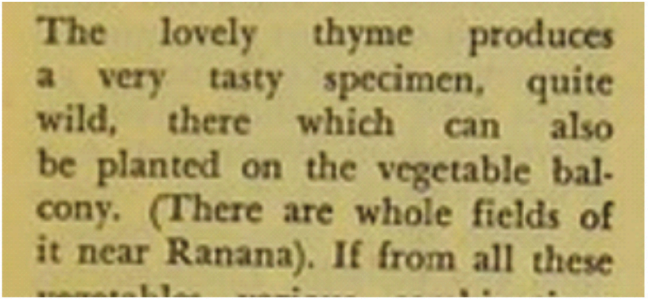
> Macerate for one day and one night [dried] sour pomegranate seeds in sour wine vinegar along with asafoetida leaves (*anǧuḏŌn*). Then [strain the seeds,] toast them, pulverize them until very fine, and sift them. Add them to the salt along with thyme (*ṣaʿtar*), toasted sesame seeds, toasted hemp seeds (*ahdŌnaǧ*), and pounded (dried) bread, God willing.

The recipe includes za'atar, toasted sesame seeds, and a souring agent in the form of pomegranate seeds soaked in vinegar, which would presumably achieve a similar flavour profile to sumac, which is commonly used today.

A Contested Herb: Contemporary Struggles Surrounding Za'atar

Za'atar's long history of being foraged by the people and used in medicine and cookery alike turned the herb into a bone of contention from the

early 20th century onwards. A cookbook written in 1936 by recent émigré to Palestine Erna Meyer, is titled "How to cook in Palestine = Wie kocht man in Erez Israel?" Trilingual, in German, English, and Hebrew, it was intended for new settlers to acclimatise to local ingredients and cuisines and includes this small tidbit on thyme, or za'atar, being grown in Palestine and co-opted into the settler-colonial project.


The lovely thyme produces a very tasty specimen, quite wild, there which can also be planted on the vegetable balcony. (There are whole fields of it near Ranana). If from all these

In 1977, the picking of za'atar was criminalised under Israeli law, leading to the subsequent arrests and convictions of many Palestinian foragers. As Rabeah Eghbaria has written, "picking of za'atar

[…] nonetheless, continues while many regard it as an act of resistance." In the face of Israel's ongoing invasion and occupation of Lebanon and Palestine, the growing, harvesting, and foraging of za'atar and other indigenous herbs have become more difficult and dangerous. Yet, as Palestinian poet Zeina Azzam says in a poem written for the cook and cookbook author Reem Kassis, za'atar endures and moves, making homes far from home:

> Even zaatar, she says,
> breathes between cultures,
> travels thousands of miles
> to bring nafas
> to new homes,
> kitchens in exile.

(Quoted from *Making Levantine Cuisine. Modern Foodways of the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Anny Gaul, Graham Auman Pitts, and Vicki Valosik, p. 214.)

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