Zaatar – the Taste of the Earth



Zaatar is a simple dish, yet complex in taste. Originated from Lebanon and Palestine, it consists of only three to four ingredients. Recipes and styles vary not only from region to region, but even from family to family. It is a staple of everyday cuisine—eaten for breakfast, packed into school lunches, and used in countless recipes.

Rather than understanding this herb mixture merely as a symbol of indigeneity, we can approach it as a gateway into the plants that grow in the region of South Lebanon, their nature, and the land-based practices formed through people's relationships with the land. The kitchen, as a social space, becomes an extension of this relationship and, in a way, an archive of the nature and history of the herb itself.

Foraging herbs is a practice that evolved from generations of co-evolution between a land and a people. Cultivating, drying, grinding and mixing the gathered plants are not neutral operations but gestures shaped by local ecologies, seasonal rhythms, inherited stories, and community practices.

They express a worldview in which the cosmic order—weather, soil, plants, spirits, ancestors—is inseparable from everyday acts of live.

Since ancient times, people in the Mediterranean region of the Middle East have used Zaatar to eliminate internal parasites and for the treatment for a number of health issues.

In Palestine and Lebanon, a traditional belief holds that Zaatar enhances concentration and it is often given to children for breakfast before school exams. The phrase "open ya sesame" in *One Thousand and One Nights* might be even linked to sesame's association with heightened mental clarity.

Colonial rule often relies on separating people from their land—eroding the intricate web of social relations and alienating communities from ecological knowledge, economic self-determination, and a sense of belonging rooted in place. Yet when we taste Zaatar, we immediately feel reconnected: to the land, to village stories, to the smell of the herbs, and the spirited landscapes.

We carry it across borders and we taste the Zaatar of our friends' mothers and aunts.

Every spring when my Lebanese father comes to visit and to sell his Olive Oil we make Zaatar together. The kitchens of the diaspora shape continuities and local adaptions.

The little bakery at the Underground station "Brandenburger Tor" in Berlin sells *Laugenstange* topped with Zaatar – a very particular new variety I never came across anywhere else.

When I asked for "Laugenstange with Zaatar" the guy behind the counter didn't know what I was referring too, because he never heard the word "Zaatar" before.

And in this moment when I tried to order with the name I always knew for this herb mixture, I became aware how it embodies the simultaneity of continuation, loss and change. The herb mixture became a trace of a previous tradition, marking a continuity in its original composition and shaped into new form at the same time.
The Chinese Philosopher Yuk Hui has introduced the term "cosmotechnics" to propose that technical practices are not merely instrumental or neutral but embedded within cosmological and ethical orientations. Technologies, in this view, are shaped by cultural values, spiritual beliefs, and historical contexts—they are never universal.
This approach invites a return to mythologies, ancestral practices, and local knowledge systems to explore how different cultures have conceptualized and related to technics.
Through the lens of cosmotechnics, agriculture emerges as a powerful example. It is not simply a technical domain but a cosmological one—every farming practice encodes a philosophy of how we live with the world.
By approaching Zaatar through the framework of cosmotechnics, we can attend to the entanglement of knowledge, landscape, and ritual that this seemingly simple mixture entails. It becomes a gateway through which we can sense and taste the continuities between technical practice and cosmological orientation that have shaped life in Lebanon and Palestine and across the region.

Zaatar, then, becomes more than a herb mixture. It is a crystallization of a cosmotechnical relation to land: a practice that binds taste to terrain, memory to plant life, and technique to cosmology. How the herb grows on a hillside, when it is picked, how it is dried, who prepares it, which stories accompany it—each of these details carries an understanding of how humans belong within a larger context. The making of Zaatar is thus not only culinary but cosmological; it encodes a philosophy of living with the land that has persisted despite displacement, modernization, and colonial attempts to sever these relations.

The person that taught me how to make Zaatar is my aunt Fatme. She is the one to turn to in the family when it comes to questions on recipes, plants, gardening practices and traditions in and around the kitchen.
Growing up between the southern Lebanese mountains and the suburbs of Beirut during the time of the Israeli occupation and the Lebanese war, she inherited the knowledge of the land under the conditions of war and fragmentation. Fatme learned to harvest the olives, while being shot at by the Israeli occupation forces, to tend the families kitchen garden in their village in the south, despite the inability to be have a continuous presence throughout the seasons – every act of engagement with the land, such as feeding the chickens, bore the potential danger of violence.

Fatme though does not only hold these knowledges, but she embodies the practice of shaping forms of continuity of these knowledges in the urban contexts of the city - whilst becoming a witness to the destruction of the entangled web of life and agricultural infrastructure in the South from afar.



Fatmes Zaatar Recipe:

Ingredients:

500g Dried Zaatar (Oregano)

300–350g Sumac

700 g Sesame Seeds (preferably unpeeled for better flavor)

Salt (Himalayan salt recommended)

2 Tablespoons Olive Oil

1. Prepare the Base
   Place the 500g of dried Zaatar in a large mixing bowl.
2. Add the Sumac
   Add 300–350g of Sumac.
   Sumac quantity depends on how much citrus flavor you prefer.
   Mix lightly to combine.
3. Roast the Sesame
   In a large pan, add the 700 g of unpeeled Sesame Seeds.
   Roast on medium heat, stirring continuously so they do not burn.
   The Sesame is ready when it begins to pop like popcorn, and releases a warm, nutty fragrance.
   Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil while roasting.
   (Only the sesame is roasted — not the Zaatar.)
4. Combine
   Once the sesame is roasted, add it to the Zaatar and Sumac mixture.
5. Add Salt
   Add Salt to taste.
   (Himalayan salt is used in the family recipe due to blood pressure concerns.)
6. Mix Well
   Mix everything thoroughly until the Sesame, Zaatar, Sumac and Salt are evenly combined.





A look into the family album tells a story that so many people of the South of Lebanon share alike. My grandmother, Raufe Hamdan, was born in the South sometime in the 1940s—the exact year is unknown. Like many at the time, she never went to school. Together with my grandfather, Mohammed Hamdan, she had eight children. During the Israeli invasion in 1979, the family fled to Beirut, to the southern suburbs known today as Dahiye. At the time, Dahiye consisted of farmland and village-like structures. During the civil war and the Israeli occupation of the South, the influx of refugees created an urgent demand for housing and people built without permits, shaping the dense suburbs we know today.

My grandmother had inherited a number of olive groves from her mother, and the family would continue to harvest the olives despite the Israeli occupation, oftentimes under fire from the Israeli military.

These groves were part of a larger ecology of food security, and seasonal knowledge that defined life in the South. During the 1980s, the family moved back and forth between Beirut and their village in the South, seeking safety from either the civil war in the city or Israeli Bombardment in the South. Not being able to implement a live sustaining income under these conditions my grandparents sold my grandmothers land bit by bit over time.





My aunts and uncles learned how to forage Zaatar along the hillsides, harvest the olives and tend the kitchen gardens that most of the people in the village had at the time.

In the 1990s, after the Lebanese Civil War, a major economic restructuring took place under a new ruling class that prioritized rapid postwar reconstruction, real-estate speculation, and the expansion of service and banking sectors.

Agriculture—long a backbone of rural life in regions like the South and the Bekaa—received minimal investment. State subsidies dwindled, irrigation systems and rural infrastructure deteriorated, and agricultural expertise was neither supported nor renewed. Instead, Lebanon increasingly relied on cheap agricultural imports to feed its population. Imported wheat, tomatoes, citrus fruits, and even olive oil gradually replaced locally produced crops.

This shift created a cycle of marginalization: as imported goods undercut local prices, farmers could no longer sustain themselves from their land; younger generations left rural areas for cities or emigrated; agricultural practices and the cosmotechnical forms of knowledge embedded in them began to erode.

In the 2006 war the family home in the South was bombed, and the surrounding land was covered in landmines, cutting off yet another generation from these everyday ecologies.

White phosphorus has become a defining feature of the Israeli military campaign since the 1980s.

Since 1982, white phosphorus has been repeatedly used in South Lebanon. It was confirmed in the 2006 war, and during the 2023–2024 and 2026 wars. Many communities were affected, including Beirut's Dahiye suburb. The toll includes the destruction of over 4.5 million square meters of forest, 812 fires, 60.000 olive trees lost, and Phosphorus levels in soil samples hundreds of times above normal.

The attacks represent a systematic targeting of Lebanon's agricultural lifeline. South Lebanon produces a third of the country's olive oil and its poisoned fields represent not just environmental destruction, but also the collapse of food security and rural livelihoods.

Antoine Kallab, Associate Director of the Nature Conservation Center at the American University of Beirut, explains: *"White phosphorus isn't like a bullet*

or targeted ammunition — it's made to make land uninhabitable." Israel's strategy seems aimed not only at displacing people but at eliminating any possibility of return.

To look at local knowledges systems such as the making of Zaatar under these conditions, foregrounds how the kitchen can become a political space. A space where we not only prepare meals but enable knowledge transfers in reflection to its ongoing material conditions.



When I asked my aunt Fatme if she would like to speak on Zaatar in the Workshop at Spore, she answered "Yes, I want to talk about the South". And from there we had long conversations on the phone, talking about the history of South Lebanon. We talked about how she grew up there, what she learned from her mother and grandmother on the conditions of the South before 1948, on the years of the occupation, on how she learned to collect Zaatar along the hillsides, on when its in season for picking, and when its most delicious. We talked about how the village neighbor hid the rifle under the sofa that one time when the Israeli occupation forces raided the my family's house once again, how the tanks moved in when Fatme fed the chickens – on which trees where native to the area and on the natural occurrence of fires in the summer. We talked about the kitchen gardens, the stuffing of sheep intestines, the one time when we were all at the new house up the mountain - we talked about my grandmother, how her children could hardly visit the school because of the war, and on how she wasn't a very good cook – we talked about how my grandfather loved green almonds with salt, how I put my grandmother to bed in her senior years – we talked about the invasion and about those that cooperated with the occupiers - tobacco fields, neighbors in the village, the donkey that stood next door, freshly squeezed orange juice in the morning,

coffee on the terrasse, the sonic backdrop of bombardment, neighbors coming to visit all the time, my grandfather being the village mayor briefly – and at one point my other aunt Abir, who was sitting next to Fatme on the sofa as we spoke, said to me "you know, and everything speaks to you, when you walk through the landscapes, the trees, the stones – everything talks, you just have to listen – that is what the people in the villages say".

Today, one day in May 2026, the new house that my grandparents build with the help of my family has been bombed as well. It is too dangerous to drive out there and have a look. Large parts of the village are gone, and one can only rely on reports from village neighbors that are shared over the phone, but little is known for certain.



And in this uncertainty a recipe becomes a landscape that we inhabit as we taste.

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