



# Ras el hanout – a touch of the Middle East for local dishes



Tipp von Esther Kern



Spice mixtures from foreign lands enhance our dishes: the most famous of which being curry. However, other spice mixtures have also made a name for themselves in the last few years – like za’atar from the Middle East. This spice mixture became popular in Swiss kitchens primarily thanks to Yotam Ottolenghi and his bestselling cookbooks, and comprises mainly herbs and sesame seeds. Ras el hanout from the Maghreb region of north Africa has also become increasingly popular.

And like with all spice mixtures, there’s more than just one recipe. Each family has their own way of making it. “Ras el hanout means ‘head of the shop’”, says Michael Morskoi from the Chalira organic spice mill in Aarau. In other words, when it comes to the ingredients, ras el hanout is unique to the chef. One thing is for certain, though: the mixture is more complex than a za’atar, for instance, which tends not to comprise more than a dozen ingredients. Ras el hanout, on the other hand, can contain up to 30 different spices and herbs.



The basis for the mixture includes cumin, caraway seeds, aniseed, fennel seed, coriander, chilli, paprika, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger and turmeric. A good ras el hanout also contains various peppers. Michael Morskoï's ras el hanout was primarily inspired by memories from a trip to Morocco. The spice miller notes the importance of the basic ingredients. Chalira sources almost all of its exotic spices from suppliers and farms in Asia with whom it has a personal relationship. "This way we can guarantee a high quality", says the spice expert.

Herbs and spices that also grow in local climes are scouted out by Morskoï himself. He buys caraway seeds and fennel seed from a gardener in Austria. "They contain far more essential oils than when spices travel halfway around the world", he says. Naturally, he also grinds the spices on site in Aarau – this also guarantees a more intense, fresh flavour.

Morskoï doesn't only enjoy ras el hanout in tagines, as is the custom in Morocco. "In summer, the spice mixture tastes great simply sprinkled on top of diced tomatoes", he says. "Or a little of the mixture will add a Middle Eastern touch to a tomato sauce."

It's important not to buy spice mixtures in too large a quantity. Where possible, they should be ground and mixed fresh. So, you're best off keeping away from the big packs when on holiday and instead buying small portions from your favourite spice trader or spice miller.

When it comes to packaging his spices, Morskoï uses special violet jars that reflect the light. "Spices and spice mixtures will easily keep for two years in these jars. Earthenware containers are also ideal for storing spices." If you don't have special jars or earthenware containers, be sure to store the spices in a dark place, where possible. Ideally at 20°C. So, definitely not right next to an oven or cooker.

For more information and to order ras el hanout, visit Chalira's website: <http://www.chalira.ch>