

## Shortbread filled with dates and walnuts

### *Menenas*

Dates are one of the symbolic foods presented on the Sephardic New Year celebratory table. Delectable date-nut-filled shortbread cookies, *Menenas*, are a *Rosh Hashanah* favourite in my household - try these moreish treats!

#### ***For the dough:***

½ cup fine semolina

2¼ cups plain (all-purpose) flour

½ tsp baking powder

2 heaped tbsp icing (confectioner's) sugar

250g (9oz) unsalted butter, at room temperature

1 tbsp whole milk

1 tsp vanilla extract

#### ***For the filling:***

170g (6oz) walnuts or unblanched almonds

200g (7oz) dried dates, pitted

¼ cup hot water

50g (2oz) unsalted butter

½ tsp ground cinnamon

¼ tsp ground cloves

1 tsp finely grated orange zest

1 tsp orange blossom water

#### ***For dusting:***

Icing sugar

**Prepare the dough:** Combine the semolina, flour, baking powder and sugar in a large mixing bowl. Add the butter and, with fingertips, rub into the flour to a grainy texture. Add the milk and vanilla extract and combine until the dough begins to hold together. Using the palms of your hands, knead for 1 minute. Roll into a ball, wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 15 minutes.

**Prepare the filling:** Pulse the walnuts or almonds in a processor until finely chopped, but not ground, to give the filling more crunch. Finely chop the dates with a sharp knife. Place the dates, hot water and butter in a heavy-based frying pan over a medium heat. Mash with a fork for 2 minutes until soft and paste-like. Stir in the ground cinnamon, cloves and orange zest. Remove from the heat, add the nuts and stir in the orange blossom water. Remove the paste from the pan and let cool on a plate. Take 1 heaped teaspoon of cooled date paste and roll into about 30 small balls. Set aside on a large plate.

**Preheat** the oven to 160°C (325°F). Line 2 baking trays with baking paper.

**Fill** the dough: Divide the dough into about 30 walnut-sized pieces and roll with your hands into balls. The pastry balls should be twice the size of the date balls. Pierce a hollow into the centre of each pastry ball with your fingertip. With the index finger and thumb work around the inside and outside of the dough until you form a 5mm (¼in) thick shell. Push in one prepared date ball and mould the edges of the pastry together over the top. Gently pinch to enclose and seal in the filling, reshaping into a ball. The date filling should be enveloped in an even layer of dough. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling.

**To shape the traditional way:** Form the filled dough into oval shapes and arrange on a baking tray with smooth side on the top. To make a pattern on the surface of the shortbread, pinch a feathered design with tweezers or press with the tines of a fork.

**To shape with a mould:** Using a decorative wooden mould, dust the mould lightly with flour and gently press the filled dough-ball into the mould, unpinched side down, with your palm. Flip the mould, then tap against a work surface and the *menena* will pop out. Place decorated side up, 1.25cm (½in) apart, on the prepared baking tray. Repeat with the rest of the filled pastry balls.

**Bake** on the middle shelf for about 30 minutes until firm and pale in colour. Take care that the *menenas* do not over bake as they quickly become too hard and golden. Let stand on the baking trays for 1 minute, then carefully transfer to a wire rack. Sprinkle liberally with icing sugar while still warm.