tunisian meatballs

In France, meatballs are called *boulettes* (sounds better than "meatballs," *non*?), and by far the most popular versions are the spice-scented North African type. In Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, former French colonies, that's also what meatballs are called, at least on tourist menus. They are simmered in a spice-laden, saffron-scented sauce, with just enough hot pepper to keep it interesting. Served with steaming-hot buttered couscous, these nearly bite-size, tender *boulettes* make a warming, comforting meal. Fear not: although the ingredients list is long, this is really a very simple recipe, parts of which can be prepared in advance. SERVES 4 TO 6

FOR THE SAUCE

2 tablespoons olive oil
1½ cups finely diced onions
3 garlic cloves, minced
2 tablespoons tomato paste
A 1-inch piece of cinnamon stick
Large pinch of saffron, crumbled
Salt and pepper
3 cups chicken broth, vegetable broth, or water

FOR THE MEATBALLS

1½ cups cubed day-old firm white bread
1 cup milk
1 pound ground beef or lamb
1 large egg, beaten
4 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon pepper
2 teaspoons paprika
1 teaspoon ground ginger
1 teaspoon turmeric
½ teaspoon ground cumin
¼ teaspoon cayenne
¼ teaspoon ground cloves
¼ teaspoon ground coriander
⅛ teaspoon grated nutmeg
2 tablespoons chopped parsley, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish
2 tablespoons chopped cilantro, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish
2 tablespoons finely chopped scallions, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish
All-purpose flour for dusting
Olive or vegetable oil for shallow-frying

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FOR THE COUSCOUS

1 cup giant couscous, medium couscous, or m'hamsa

2 tablespoons butter

½ cup golden raisins, soaked in hot water until softened, then drained

Salt

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

To make the sauce, heat the oil in a wide heavy saucepan over medium-high heat. Add the onions and cook, without browning, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic, tomato paste, cinnamon stick, and saffron and stir well to incorporate. Season generously with salt and pepper and allow to sizzle for 1 minute. Add the broth, bring to a simmer, and simmer gently for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat. The sauce can be made up to a day in advance and refrigerated.

To make the meatballs, put the bread cubes and milk in a small bowl and let the bread soak until softened, about 5 minutes, then squeeze dry and transfer to a medium bowl.

Add the ground meat to the bread and mix gently with your hands, then add the egg, garlic, salt, pepper, paprika, ginger, turmeric, cumin, cayenne, cloves, coriander, and nutmeg, and mix well to distribute the seasonings. Add 2 tablespoons each of the parsley, cilantro, and scallions and knead for a minute. The meat mixture can be prepared up to a day in advance and refrigerated.

With your hands, roll the meat mixture into small balls about the size of a quarter. Dust lightly with flour. Heat ¼ inch of oil in a wide heavy skillet over medium-high heat. Fry the meatballs, turning once, until barely browned, about 2 minutes per side. Drain and blot on paper towels.

Add the meatballs to the sauce, bring to a simmer over medium heat, cover, and cook for about 20 minutes, until the sauce has thickened slightly and the meatballs are tender. Taste the sauce and adjust the seasoning, adding salt or cayenne as necessary.

Meanwhile, cook the couscous according to the package directions, then fluff gently and stir in the butter and raisins. Season with salt and the cinnamon and toss well.

Spoon the couscous into shallow bowls and top with the meatballs and plenty of sauce. Garnish with the remaining parsley, cilantro, and scallions.

NOTE: Regarding the browning of the meatballs, dusting them in flour before lightly frying helps keep them tender and thickens the sauce, but they can be browned without flour if desired. Or, instead of frying, they can be briefly broiled before simmering. And if you don't want the sauce, just finish the cooking in the skillet and serve the panfried meatballs crisp and hot.