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*Puddings, Cakes and Sweets*

**Muhallabia**

This most common of Middle Eastern desserts can be quite regal when properly made. It is a milk cream thickened by cornflour or ground rice (in the old days this was pulverized with pestle and mortar). I have used a mixture of both. If you like your pudding firmer increase the quantity of starch.

2-3 tablespoons cornflour  
60 g (2 oz) ground rice  
A generous litre (2 pints) milk  
90 g (3 oz) sugar, or to taste

2-3 tablespoons orange blossom  
or rose water, or a mixture of  
the two  
Chopped almonds and pistachio  
nuts, to decorate

Mix the cornflour and ground rice to a smooth paste with a little of the cold milk. Bring the rest of the milk to the boil with sugar and add the paste gradually, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon. Simmer the mixture gently, stirring constantly but being careful not to scrape the bottom of the pan (the milk may burn slightly at the bottom and if it is scraped it will give a burnt taste to the whole pudding). When you feel a slight resistance to the spoon while stirring, and the mixture coats the back of the spoon, continue to cook and when it thickens a little more add orange blossom or rose water, stir and cook for a further 2 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat, allow to cool slightly, then pour the pudding into a large glass bowl or individual dishes. Chill and serve, decorated with a pattern of chopped almonds and pistachios.

Some people pour a syrup made of honey boiled with water and scented with a little orange blossom water over the cold *muhallabia*.

It can also be decorated with crystallized rose petals or violets, available in many Soho shops.

An unusual and pleasant texture is given by stirring in 120 g (4 oz) ground almonds.

For a stiffer cream increase the amount of ground rice to up to 120 g (4 oz), pour into oiled moulds and turn out just before serving, then decorate with nuts.

When a bowl of *muhallabia* is garnished with little mounds of chopped nuts of different kinds (which can be done in gorgeous patterns) it is so rich that it is called, ironically, 'the dish of the poor' *keshk el fu'ara*.