

Oatmeal-Date Bars

1½ pounds pitted dates
½ to ¾ sugar
1¾ cups water
1 cup chopped walnuts
½ teaspoon salt
3 cups oats

1 cup brown sugar
1 cup unsalted butter
½ cup vegetable shortening
2¼ cups flour
1½ teaspoons baking soda

Preheat the oven to 400°.

With a scissors, snip the pitted dates into small pieces and place them in a medium saucepan. Add the 1¾ cups of water and ½ to ¾ cups of sugar. Use the lesser amount of sugar if you have Medjool dates. Boil the dates until they form a thick paste. (You will still have some intact pieces of dates). Remove from the heat and stir in the chopped walnuts.

Whisk together the flour and salt in a large bowl, and cut in the butter and shortening with a pastry blender until coarse crumbs are formed. Add the brown sugar and continue to combine with the pastry blender. Do not let the mixture form a paste.

Stir in the oats until evenly distributed. Dissolve the baking soda in about 1 tablespoon of warm water and sprinkle it evenly over the crumbs. Gently mix.

Spread one half of the crumb mixture in the bottom of either two 8- x 8-inch baking pans or one 9- x 13-inch pan. Spread all the date mixture over this layer and smooth out with a spatula or palette knife. Then spread the remaining crumb mixture on the top, patting it lightly.

Bake at 400° for about 15 minutes. Lower the oven to 325° and bake for about another 15 minutes, until lightly browned on top. Let cool. Cut into small bars. If you baked two pans, one can be unmolded from the pan when cooled, wrapped in foil, and frozen for later use.