PART 3:

Food and Drink

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This is the third of the author's six collections of eclectic, occasionally irreverent, excerpts from the vast treasure-house of Arabic literature. In each, he samples and comments thematically, seeking that which is insightful, prescient or poignant, as well as the curious, mischievous or wisely satirical. Like the original authors, his goal, and ours, is to entertain, educate and enlighten.

—*The Editors*

ARABIC LITERATURE IS AS RICH AND VARIED in its references to food and drink as the cuisines of the lands where the Arabic language is spoken and written. Arabic-language recipe books reflect that richness over a surprisingly long period—the oldest dates back to the 10th century. Today's food often goes back a long way, too. My usual *suq* (marketplace) lunch in my adoptive city of Sana'a, the Yemeni capital, is the same one that Ibn al-Mujawir wrote of some 800 years ago: "Their diet is wheat bread, fenugreek and meat."

Despite such conservatism, necessity—and occasionally eccentricity—have inspired some people to try more exotic diets. An early culinary adventurer was the pre-Islamic poet, warrior and vagabond Ta'abbata Sharran. His Arabian take on what the Australians call "bush tucker" was to have unexpected consequences. When news of his death in a fight reached his tribe, some of his fellow-clansmen set off and

The fenugreek comes whipped into a frothy topping on a meat stew, saltah, served bubbling hot in stone bowls and eaten with large rounds of wheat bread.

His real name was Thabit ibn Jabir, but he is always known by this extraordinary nickname, which translates "he carried an evil in his armpit." The "evil" is said by some to have been a sword, and by others a ghoul that he had defeated in combat.

Rode to the place where his body lay, meaning to take it away for burial. When they reached the spot they found the body surrounded by the corpses of wild animals, birds of prey and vermin that had gnawed at his flesh.... Al-Asma'i said that the Arabs claimed his flesh was poisonous. He also said, "He lived on a diet of *'ilhiz,* the fat of vipers, and the seeds and fruit of the colocynth. His clan used to roast vipers, and they asserted that if anyone who lived on such a diet were to bite a person whose diet was wheat, normal meat and other kinds of decent food, inflicting a flesh wound with his teeth, then the person bitten would contract leucoderma [vitiligo] or leprosy or would die.

Philologist, antiquarian and expert on all things Arabian, al-Asma'i (born 739) was a favorite scholar of the caliph Harun al-Rashid. This passage is a later addition to The Book of Crowns, one of the earliest surviving Arabic histories.

This is something you'd be unlikely to want to order in a restaurant—camel hair mixed with the blood of ticks, then roasted. It was supposedly eaten in extremis by pre-Islamic nomads.

At the risk of putting readers off with yet more unappetizing appetizers, the next passage concerns another dubious Arabian delicacy: locusts. (I can confirm from personal experience, however, that the insects are both nutritious and delicious.)

Leucoderma is the partial loss of skin pigmentation. Ta'abbata Sharran brings to mind a similarly poisonous character in Samuel Butler's Hudibras: "The Prince of Cambay's daily food/Is asp and basilisk and toad,/Which makes him have so strong a breath,/Each night he stinks a queen to death...."

An old Arabic term for prawns is jarad al-bahr, "sea-locusts." I've found, when eating locusts proper, that it helps to think of them as land- (or perhaps air-) prawns. It's all in the mind, after all.

Colocynth, also known as Sodom apple, belongs to the gourd family. A violent purgative, "even one and a half teaspoonfuls of the powdered seed has been known to be fatal," my Arabian botanical reference book says.

The wonderfully rambling autobiography of a late Yemeni acquaintance of mine, Qadi Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Akwa', gives three recipes for cooking locusts—boiled, grilled and roasted in the *tannur*. In case of any doubt about the permissibility of eating them, he goes on to quote a *hadith*, or Tradition, of the Prophet Muhammad:

A large clay oven, usually barrel-shaped. Cf. Indian "tandoori" dishes.

"Two sorts of carrion have been made lawful for us to eat, and two things containing blood: fish and locusts, and liver and spleen.

"Carrion" here means creatures that have died without ritual Islamic slaughter. With these exceptions, the consumption of carrion and of blood is prohibited for Muslims.

He then tells an anecdote:

My teacher, 'Ali ibn Yahya 'Aqabat, told me that when he moved to Cairo in the early '30's he married an Egyptian woman. No sooner had the marriage taken place than a swarm of locusts, bigger than the sort they are used to in Yemen, appeared and began devastating the local farms. Shaykh 'Ali began catching locusts, then grilling and eating them. When his Egyptian wife saw him doing this, she called for her father to come, and told him that she'd "seen the Yemeni eating locusts." The experience so put her off her husband that she ran away from him, and it all ended in divorce.

The 1330's AH began at the end of 1911 CE. The swarm in the story may well have been part of the great plague of locusts that invaded Egypt and the Levant in April 1915. A witness in Egypt said, "As far as we could see for miles ... there was nothing visible in the heavens above or the earth beneath but myriads of buzzing locusts." The Ottoman authorities in Palestine compelled every adult male to collect 20 kilograms of locust eggs, on pain of a hefty fine.

Many verses have been composed about locusts, but all I can recall at the moment is this one:

A swarm of locusts came and landed on my crops—
"Be off! You'll eat me out of house and home!" I said.
Then one climbed up an ear of corn and lectured me:
"We're on a journey, so we're due our daily bread!"

The locust is alluding to the principle in Islamic law that hungry (human) travelers are allowed to take produce from a field or orchard—enough to keep them going, but no more.

Staying in Egypt for our main course, but turning to more conventional food, here is a recipe for what may be the ultimate pie. It comes from an account of the country written in the late 12th century by the Iraqi physician 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi. Among their unusual dishes is the "tray pie." The recipe is as follows:

In his description of Egypt, 'Abd al-Latif (1162–1231) has some interesting reflections on the esthetics of pharaonic sculpture and—ironically, given the contents of the passage translated here—one of the most harrowing accounts of famine ever written. There is an English version of his book—done, the translators assert, following an encounter with the author's spirit. Intrigued by their claim, the present translator has traced the admittedly curious history of 'Abd al-Latif's manuscript in an extended essay entitled "Ghost Writer."

Raghif is usually a thickish round of bread, but "pie" makes more sense in view of the movable feast to come.

Take thirty Baghdadi pounds of white flour and knead it with five and a half pints of sesame oil, using the same method you would use to knead the dough for *khashkunan*. Divide the dough in two, and use half of it to line a copper tray. The tray should be of the correct type, roughly four spans in diameter and provided with stout handles. Next, take three whole roast lambs stuffed with a mixture consisting of minced meat fried in sesame oil, pounded pistachios and aromatic hot spices (pepper, ginger, cinnamon, mastic, coriander seed, cumin, cardamom, nutmeg and other similar spices may be used). Arrange the lambs on the dough base, and sprinkle them with rosewater in which musk has been infused. Then take 20 chickens, 20 pullets and 50 small fowl, some of them roasted and stuffed with eggs, others stuffed with meat, and the rest stewed in the juice of sour grapes, lemons or similar. Place the birds on top of the lambs and in the spaces in between them. Next, scatter on top of the pile samosas and small round pasties, some filled with meat and others with sugar and sweetmeats. If at this stage you wish to add another lamb, carved into slices, and some fried cheese, feel free to do so.

When all these ingredients have been neatly piled up in the shape of a dome, sprinkle them with rosewater in which musk and aloes-wood have been infused. Now take the other half of the dough, stretch it out into the form of a disc, and use it to cover the piled-up ingredients. Seal the edges of the upper and lower halves of the dough casing, as one does with khashkunan, ensuring that the seal is absolutely airtight. The tray should then be placed on

The weight of the pound has varied over time and place, but the standard Baghdadi measure is said to have been 340 grams (12 oz).

A Persian name for a kind of pasty, stuffed with sugar and nuts, then fried.

The spices are "hot" in the sense employed by Graeco-Arab dietetics, which classifies comestibles as hot or cold, dry or moist. Mastic is the gum of a shrub native to the eastern Mediterranean region.

A meter, say: about three feet.

top of the tannur until the dough becomes firm and begins to cook through. At this point, the attached handles should be used to lower the tray gradually into the tannur. This needs to be done slowly and patiently, allowing the pastry to become fully cooked. When it has changed color and browned nicely, remove the tray from the tannur, wipe the pie with a sponge then sprinkle it with musk-infused rosewater. It is now ready to serve.

Literally, "blushed pink and turned red." Is the subsequent wiping with a sponge to remove traces of ash?

This is a fitting dish for royalty and lovers of luxury, and may conveniently accompany them to their distant hunting-grounds and remote picnic-spots. It is a varied banquet in itself, easy to transport and hard to spoil, splendid in appearance and a pleasure to experience, and it keeps hot for long periods.

As for the common people of Egypt, they seldom know anything of such dishes.

A century earlier, high-end dining in the Syrian capital held a surprise for the Spanish judge and traveler Abu Bakr ibn al-'Arabi. The later scholar of all things Andalusian, al-Maqqari, wrote that

his travel book includes several extraordinary anecdotes. In one of these, he tells how in Damascus he entered the house of a prominent citizen and saw a stream flowing into it, passing by the place where they were sitting, and then flowing out again in the other direction. "I only understood the reason for this," he says, "when tables loaded with food began to appear, floating toward us on the stream. The servants took them out of the water and placed them before us. When we had finished eating, they put the used crockery and other things in the outward-flowing part of the stream, and the water carried them away to the women's quarters without the servants having to go anywhere near them."

This forerunner of the dumb-waiter might appeal to innovative sushi-bar proprietors. In India, I was equally impressed by the Maharaja of Gwalior's method of delivering dessert and cigars to his dinner guests—via a tabletop model train set made of silver.

Staying in the 11th century and returning to Egypt—but at the hungry end of the culinary scale—here is the scholar Muhammad ibn Tahir al-Muqaddasi, a native of Jerusalem, reminiscing about his days as a penniless student:

I stayed in Tinnis for a period, pursuing my studies.... While I was there I fell on hard times, and the day came when I had nothing but a single dirham to my name. Now, that day I needed bread and I needed writing-paper, and I couldn't decide which to spend my dirham on: If I bought bread, I'd have no paper, and if I bought paper, I'd have no bread. I remained in this quandary for three days and nights, during which I ate nothing. On the morning of the fourth day, I said to myself, "Even if I did get hold of some paper today, I'm so weak from hunger that I wouldn't be able to write anything." So I went out to buy bread, putting the dirham in my mouth—and I swallowed it. When this happened, I got the giggles. Just then, a man came up to me and said, "What's so funny?" I said, "Oh, nothing." He insisted on knowing, but I wouldn't tell him. Finally he swore he'd divorce his wife if I didn't come clean. So I told him what had happened, and he took me by the hand, led me to his house and promised he'd see me fed.

Tinnis is on an island in a lake seven kilometers (4.3 mi) southwest of Port Said. Once a flourishing city, it was the object of Crusader incursions and was largely abandoned in the early 13th century. Muhammad ibn Tahir's travels focused on the collection and study of the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, and took him as far as eastern Iran.

Integral pockets were not a feature of 11th-century clothing.

An extreme but—to this day—not infrequent way of putting pressure on someone.

The disappearing dirham turned out to be a good investment, for at this point in the story the call to prayer sounds, the two men go to the mosque, bump into a philanthropic local magnate—and Muhammad ibn Tahir ends up with a stipend of 30 dirhams a day! As the later traveler Ibn Jubayr assured wandering scholars, "in every village they will shower you with your daily bread."

Back now to conspicuous consumption. Planning her pilgrimage to Makkah in the 1320's, Tughay Khatun, favorite wife of the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir, decided she couldn't do without her comfort food. So the official in charge of logistics

provided her with fresh greens growing in earthenware containers carried on the backs of camels. He also brought dairy cows, and these stayed with her for the whole journey so that she could have fresh milk and a supply of cheese.

But al-Maqrizi, the historian who recorded the anecdote, was unimpressed by the sultana's food-to-go:

She had fried cheese every single day, for lunch *and* dinner—and what more can one say about someone whose daily diet is greens and cheese, the two vilest things one can eat? What, pray, might the consequences be?

The consequences weren't fatal. Tughay Khatun lived another quarter century and died in the Black Death of 1349, having founded a khanqah, or religious hospice, and emancipating in her will 1000 slave girls and 80 eunuchs.

To round off her mobile lunches (for, as an old Arabic proverb says, "On lunch and a pudding, you can raise a high building"), the cheese-loving sultana might have enjoyed *mujabbanah*, a type of cheese-filled confection lovingly described by a Spanish contemporary of hers:

Abu 'l-Barakat al-Balafiqi, a distinguished judge of Granada.

You sweetie-pie with yellow cheek,
Whose inmost parts conceal ripe cheese,
I fear your outlook may be bleak—
Your jaundiced look suggests unease.
Quite right, too, for your yellow face,
As lovely as the rising sun,
Is doomed to set, and set apace—
Deep in the darkness of my tum!

The word may have gone through a copyist's version of the game of "Chinese whispers" or "Telephone," in which misunderstandings accumulate. My guess is that sakh, is a mistake for shaj, and that it arrived via a Persian form, sha, which is about as close as Arabic script gets to the Chinese cha.

But perhaps the overdose of fried cheese and greens (not to mention the rest of this motley banquet from my bookshelves) is better followed by a digestive beverage. Tea, though it wasn't to become widespread in the Arab world until long after Tughay Khatun's time, was mentioned in an Arabic book 700 years before its first appearance in European works. According to Sulayman the Merchant in his mid-ninth-century *Accounts of China and India*, the ruler of China

has a monopoly on a plant which they drink with hot water. It is sold in every city, and huge sums are spent on it. It is called "*sakh*". It is leafier than alfalfa and a little more aromatic, and there is a bitterness to it. They boil water, then sprinkle it on, and it serves them as an antidote to all ailments.

Then again, to quote the concluding decision on a whimsical literary sparring-match, *The Cheering and Consoling Tale of a Disputation Between Coffee and Tea*, "Coffee is the sultan of the drinking-places, tea its prince and deputy." So what better way to end than with a verse on *Coffea arabica*, from its home in the mountains of southern Arabia?

Given that the author was a Hadrami (Ahmad ibn 'Abdallah Barakat, d. 1929), the decision is surprising—the people of Hadramawt are famously fond of tea, and few households lack a well-used samovar.

How fine they look, these coffee beans, when first
They ripen on the leafy bough! Red hung
Among the green, as if, with emeralds strung,
We see bright beads of coral interspersed.

Quoted without ascription in a 19th-century work on coffee by a native of the Yemeni coffee-growing region of 'Utumah.

"Treasure," as a homelier folk-song puts it, "on a tree."

Even the best efforts at translation often entail some loss. However, the pleasing sound of the original Arabic title of this series, Tarjuman al-Kunuz, makes up for some of the literary shortfall when it becomes the syntactically accurate but less euphonious English "Interpreter of Treasures." Tarjuman is the root of the English word "dragoman," which refers to an interpreter serving in an official capacity. The full title echoes Ibn al-'Arabi's early-13th-century collection of poems, Tarjuman al-Ashwaq (Interpreter of Desires).

Tim Mackintosh-Smith (tim@mackintosh-smith.com) recently appeared in *Newsweek*'s list of the top dozen travel writers of the last 100 years. Following his award-winning trilogy of travels in the footsteps of Ibn Battutah, he is working on a history, a thriller set in 14th-century Spain and the translation from Arabic of an early collection of travelers' accounts from around the Indian Ocean.

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