

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:

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.

Philologist, antiquarian and expert on all things Arabian, al-Asmai (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.

At the risk of putting readers off with yet more unappetizing appetizers, the next passage concerns another dubious Arabian

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-Asmai 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.

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...."

"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

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.

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.

delicacy: locusts. (I can confirm from personal experience, however, that the insects are both nutritious and delicious.)

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.