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Food in the Middle East

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Notice to our readers: because of circumstances beyond our control, several recent issues of **Aramco World Magazine** have been late in reaching many of our readers. We apologize for the delay.

Front cover by John Feeney
Inside front cover by Catherine Le Roy
Back cover by Nancy Moran

Food in the Middle East: An Invitation

"Tell me what you eat and I will tell you what you are." To no one does the dictum of Brillat-Savarin apply more appropriately than to the Arabs. For Arab cooking is as various as the Arabs themselves. What else would you expect from a people who fish in the Atlantic, the Mediterranean, the Red Sea, the Arabian Gulf and the Indian Ocean? Who farm the slopes of the Atlas, the banks of the Nile, the terraces of Mount Lebanon, below sea-level at Jericho, on the wide plains of Syria and Iraq and in the hot-house oases of Arabia? Who have traded since time immemorial with China, India, the Spice Islands, Zanzibar, Samarkand and the West? Who once ruled over Persia, parts of the Byzantine Empire, Sicily, Spain, the Berbers, Nubians and Kurds, and who were themselves partially conquered by Mongols, Normans, Seljuk and Ottoman Turks, Portuguese, Italians, French and English?

Of course there is a certain unity in the diversity, just as in a good curry each ingredient tastes of the sauce as well as of itself. The ubiquity of rice, imported from beyond the area but so nearly universal that it is called 'aish, *"life," in some places, is one of the ties that bind. Another is the tomato-onion-garlic-olive oil culture of the Mediterranean. Then the kindness of the climate produces the same fruits – oranges, lemons, grapes, apricots, dates, figs – almost everywhere, or at least close by; while the harshness of the terrain forces a reliance on the hardy sheep and goat for meat and milk. A surprising unity in the arts of good living, including cooking, was bequeathed by 500 years of Ottoman rule. And even a negative unity is imposed by religion, which removes pork from the menu and wine from the cooking pot.*

But in food diversity is the spice of life. The change of one ingredient – olive oil for butter, cracked wheat for rice, coriander for parsley – can transform a dish. The many ways of treating chicken – with pickled lemons in Morocco, with onions and sumac in Jordan, with walnuts in the widespread Middle Eastern dish known as Circassian chicken or, most surprisingly, turned into a sweet dessert in Istanbul – show what variations can be played on a single theme.

In North Africa the culinary tradition is Arabo-Berber with a Turkish overlay. The distinctive dish is couscous *– steamed grains of semolina – used as a base for a wide range of dishes from fish and meat stews to spicy fruit-and-nut desserts. Further east, the Egyptians still enjoy simple dishes of the beans, onions, garlic and cabbage that were shown on wall paintings in pharaonic tombs 4,000 years ago, and make a national dish of* mulukhiyah *– a thick, dark-green sauce flavoring chicken, lamb or rabbit.*

Moving northward up the Mediterranean shore, we come to that great network of rivers – the Euphrates, Tigris, Orontes and Jordan – that water the valleys and plains of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Sometimes called the Fertile Crescent, this region is a vegetarian's paradise, with a seasonal procession of fruits and vegetables, cereals, golden olive oil and fragrant herbs growing wild on the hillsides or cultivated in flower pots and gardens.

Complementary to the fertile river valleys, the neighboring deserts have produced a cuisine of necessity, as tasty as a camp-fire cook-out to a hungry Boy Scout. Chunks of meat threaded on skewers and roasted over hot coals, a bird sheathed in clay and left among the ashes, lamb seethed in ewe's milk, succulent desert truffles, a handful of dried dates, and coffee – short, sharp and astringent with the flavor of cardamom. And on the eastern fringes of the Arabian Peninsula, the curried spices of India assail the tongue, brought by the monsoon winds aboard fishing smacks and trading dhows.

And Turkey, brooding over all, has injected its textures, colors and harmonies of taste wherever the Osmanlis penetrated. The Ottoman Empire was cosmopolitan by definition, Constantinople a synonym for sophistication. The French considered that only they themselves, the Chinese and the Turks evolved a truly haute cuisine. *No wonder the Turks left a legacy of dishes, some of a Byzantine subtlety, in Arab cities as far apart as Tunis and Jiddah. Yet they also brought the cleanest taste of all – yogurt, in Arabic* laban *– from their simple Mongol past.*

But most important, the Arabs and the Turks still show an old-world respect for food – for the ingredients, the preparation, the act of eating, and for the eater himself. They search out the best raw materials, each cook having his favorite and often secret source of olive oil, goat cheese, apples or kanafi. *The menu is seasonal, the strawberries or zucchini being all the sweeter for the short time there is to enjoy them. The cook is still willing to take infinite pains and usually follows her/his mother's/grandmother's recipe.*

Then there is the ceremony of eating. Hospitality is one of the Arab's keenest pleasures, whether offered in a Bedouin tent or at a luxury hotel. The host at a table of mezeh *– that vast spread of mixed* hors d'oeuvres *often numbering fifty or more – insists on his guests trying a little of each, divides a tomato into equal segments to the exact number of guests, or if the dish is indivisible – a boiled egg, for example – distinguishes the guest of honor with the lion's share.*

With such a cornucopia of delights to choose from, it is impossible to single out every accomplishment of Middle Eastern cookery. This issue of Aramco World *is like the array of many different dishes spread out in a* mezeh. *And, like the Arab or Turkish host, we hope that you will savor, at least in imagination, a little of every one.*

– THE EDITORS

It all started with the pharaohs.

'...The Good Things of Egypt...'

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED
BY JOHN FEENEY

In a land as ancient as Egypt, the past is always present. The mighty monuments of other times —the Pyramids and the Sphynx, the Mamluk mosques and the citadel of Muhammad Ali—cast their shadows over the hustle and bustle of today, and modern Egypt is just as much a gift of the Nile as it was when Herodotus first coined the phrase. We know a great deal about the ancient Egyptians thanks to the documentary detail in the thousands of miles of wall paintings and stone engravings with which they decorated their temples and tombs. We even know what they ate, how they grew, gathered and prepared their food, even what they flavored it with. And because of the basic conservatism of the Egyptian people, it is possible today to breakfast or dine off the same dishes that the pharaohs and scribes and pyramid-builders ate thousands of years ago.

Of course, since then, new fruits, grains and vegetables have been brought in and domesticated. In recent centuries, the Turks have imparted unmistakable flavors and textures to many dishes. Before that Arabs, Romans, Greeks and Persians made their contributions. But the basic elements of Egyptian cooking—the beans and onions, cereals and bread, the fish from the Nile and the ducks from Fayyoum, the melons and pomegranates and dates, the coriander, cumin, rosemary and sage—remain as they were at the time of Ramses the Great and Ikhnaten.

The tombs abound with pictures showing the making of bread and beer—two jobs conveniently combined by the bakers because of their control of the supplies of yeast. The ancient Egyptians are believed to have been the first people to make leavened bread. Actual examples of bread made 4,000 years ago have been found in sealed tombs that were recently opened. Egypt was one of the main suppliers of wheat and barley to Rome, and wild barley is still found on the shores of the Red Sea, where it was originally discovered by the goddess Isis.

Some ancient Egyptian foods, however, are no longer eaten, at least not in quantity. The lotus and the payrus, the two main flower emblems of old Egypt, are not usually thought of as edible. The green stem of the papyrus, though a little tough, is sweet to chew, while the flowers of the white or blue lotus make a tasty salad. Today people will tell you that the wild lotus, which once grew prolifically in the swamps and lakes of the Nile, has vanished. But recently, one evening at dusk, we were driving along a dusty road beside a small canal somewhere in the northern Delta, when a young boy emerged from the bushes bearing in his arms an immense pile of wild lotus flowers, drooping and top-heavy on their long stems, just as they appear on the walls of the tombs. To see this boy appear, his arms full of lotus, was as if countless centuries had melted and we ourselves were alive and breathing in the distant past.

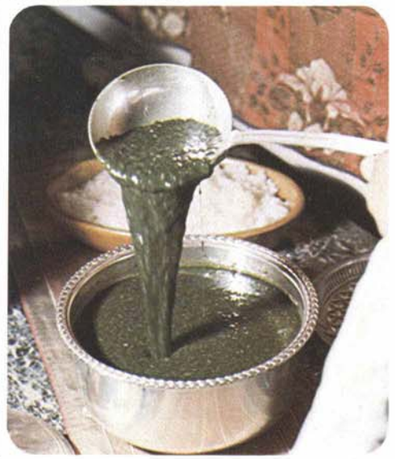
An easier way to get a taste of the past is to eat the onions and beans of Egypt. They are consumed in vast quantities by the modern Egyptians and, according to the pharaonic texts and wall paintings, they were just as popular in ancient times. The onion, and the closely related garlic and leek families, had an almost religious, or at least medicinal, significance in ancient Egypt. Wall paintings show priests holding up bunches of onions; papyrus texts tell of special days for chewing onions, days for tying onions around the throat or stomach, and a day for walking with onions in procession. On the arrival of a new season's crop, onion and garlic festivals were held. To this day, on the eve of Sham an-Nassim, Egyptians put a piece of green onion or garlic under their pillows and on waking the next morning crush the piece and smell it before going out to "sniff the breezes" on the first day of spring.

The fruits and vegetables, cereals and breads, fish and game borne by a palace servant or temple priest 4,000 years ago still appear on the tables of modern Cairo.

Most Egyptians begin their day, every day, with beans—*foul madamis*, if not the national dish, is at least the national breakfast. Dried broad beans are boiled all night in large, cylindrical copper pots, tightly closed, over an extremely low fire. By dawn these pots have been delivered to every kiosk and restaurant in town, including luxury hotels like the Sheraton and Hilton. The *foul madamis* is ladled out into thousands of small pots and plates and simply dressed with olive oil and lemon. *Ta'miyah*, another popular bean dish, is made of peeled broad beans pounded to a paste with the leaves of leeks, parsley, coriander, plus coriander seeds, red pepper and much garlic, then dropped by spoonfuls into boiling oil for a few seconds and eaten hot. Biting into the crisp brown crust of *ta'miyah*—called *falafil* in the rest of the Arab world—reveals a heart that is bright green from all those leaves. A duller, pea-green is *bisara*, a kind of porridge made of dried green beans, boiled with onions, garlic, oil and butter and flavored with leek, mint, dill, coriander and parsley.

Egyptians like their food spicy, and the pharaonic tombs reveal that this is a very old tradition. The tombs contain actual samples of sage, rosemary, anise, fennel, cumin and coriander preserved for use in the afterlife. Coriander was a particular favorite; it was not only a flavoring but considered to have medicinal properties; even today many Egyptians take coriander seeds for heart and liver troubles.

Coriander is also an essential ingredient in what is Egypt's true national dish—and eaten and known as Egyptian throughout the Middle East—*mulukhiyah*. This is made from a spinach-like pot-herb, *Corchorus olitorius* ("Jew's mallow," according to Webster's). The leaves are cut and recut until they become almost a green paste. Chicken or rabbit broth is then poured over the chopped leaves, along with butter, garlic and green coriander. A few minutes of boiling turns the dish a blackish green, ready to be ladled over plates of rice, pieces of dried bread and chicken, lamb or young rabbit. Vinegar is sometimes added. Either you like it or not: it is somewhat slimy and stringy in consistency, but most Arabs find the very name *mulukhiyah* mouth-watering.



A vegetable of similar mucilaginous consistency popular in Egypt is *bamyah*—none other than our old friend from the Deep South, okra, a member of the hibiscus family. In Egypt the dark green pods, containing masses of fine white seeds, are carefully arranged in layers of radial circles, like the spokes of wheel. A little minced meat and garlic is added and the dish given extremely slow cooking for many hours. Just before serving, a few drops of fresh lime juice are added.

Stuffed leaves and vegetables are eaten throughout the Middle East, sometimes with a flavoring of meat, sometimes cooked in oil. In Egypt, grape leaves are picked in March and April, when the vines send forth tender new leaves, and stuffed with a bit of rice and flavoring. Other leaves—lettuce, cabbage, anything as long as it's not poisonous—are also stuffed. Since pharaonic times the humble cabbage has been a favorite. The leaf is first dipped in boiling water to make it pliable, then wrapped round a mixture of rice, minced mutton, a few grains of mastic, and chopped coriander, then arranged in rows in a pot and slowly simmered in broth.

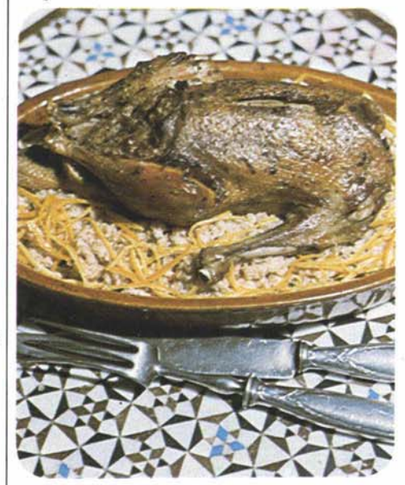
Egypt is blessed with an abundance of fish, fresh-water from the Nile and salt-water from both the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. The giant Nile perch is said by some to be getting bigger and better on the rich food supplies banking up behind the High Dam at Aswan.

Top from left : Breakfast of ful madamis *(baked beans) tastes equally good whether ladled out at a simple snack-bar or a luxury hotel. Okra stewed very slowly with a little meat and garlic is a favorite throughout the Middle East. Egyptian caviar—the eggs of the grey mullet—glows like coral. Opposite page, below :* Mulukhiyah, *a thick green broth, is the national dish of Egypt.*
This page, below : Roast duck from the oasis of Fayyoum.

"Aboukir" shrimp come from the bay where Nelson destroyed Napoleon's fleet in the Battle of the Nile. The Red Sea produces prawns and other crustacea. But, above them all, is the *buri*—a grey mullet from the sea—which is served both fresh and salted and also provides that connoisseur's delight, *batrakh*, or pressed Egyptian "caviar."

"The Shining Virtues of the Good Things of Egypt and Cairo"—written in 1483 by Ibn Zuhayra and mainly quoting an earlier Egyptian writer of about A.D. 900—speaks of the best salted fish as coming from the northern Delta, where it was the special food of weavers and dyers working in the cloth factories of the area. The fish was "sent salted to the horizons," Ibn Zuhayra says. It may well have been the *buri*, which comes from the northern Delta and is sent everywhere.

The *buri* is considered to be at its best in the early spring when it stops eating and becomes known as *buri sayim*, "fasting mullet." At this time of the year, the fish begin to pass in great numbers from the salt marshes of the Delta into the open sea. It so happens that, at about the same time, the Copts of Egypt are beginning their own lenten fasts and are in need of large quantities of fish. The fasting mullet has two advantages: it can be cooked and eaten without cleaning, and—as it is also the breeding season—the female *buri* is filled with eggs. The ovaries are dried in the sun in much the same way as shown on the walls of the Old Kingdom tombs at Saqqara. Dried and pressed, the eggs appear as long amber bars about three inches long, best eaten very thinly sliced on slivers of dry toast accompanied by equally thin slivers of lemon. Unfortunately, unlike most other Egyptian delicacies, but like all caviar, *batrakh* is very expensive.



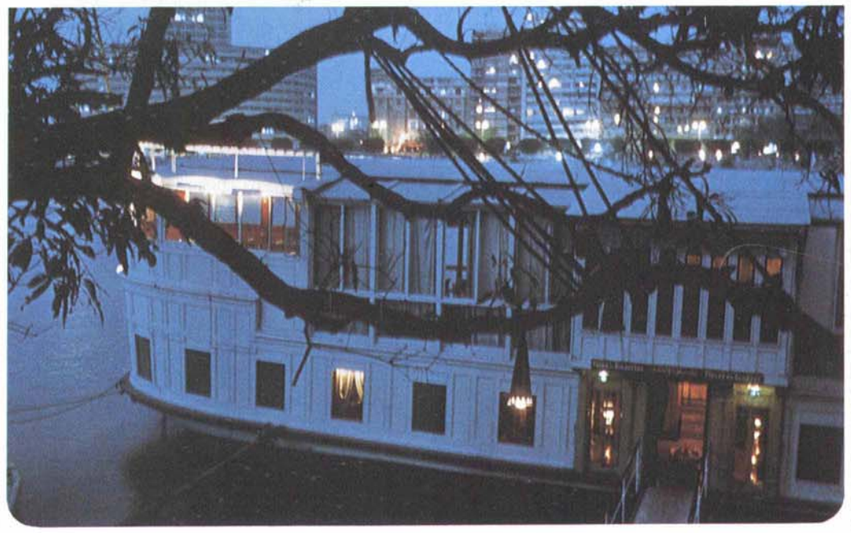
Wild ducks flap their wings or hang in the hands of servitors in many of the tomb paintings. Today the hunting of wild ducks is confined to a few migratory birds alighting in season in the salt marshes of the Delta. But the oasis of Fayyoum, west of the Nile, specializes in raising ducks for the table. Roast Fayyoum duck, stuffed with *fireek* (cracked wheat gathered green and dried), onion, the small, wiry variety of Egyptian celery, and then liberally basted with orange juice, is an Egyptian dish for special occasions.

If wild ducks are rare, almost every farmhouse has its pigeon tower made of Nile mud. The mud is important, for the pigeons have an intense dislike for modern concrete towers and more than one Delta farmer has found his newly built tower quickly abandoned in preference for the old mud one. In some parts of the Delta there are veritable pigeon cities—lofty skyscraper complexes housing tens of thousands of pigeons—for pigeons are also raised commercially and served in the most sophisticated restaurants as well as the most humble homes.

Few dishes are more Egyptian than pigeon cooked with *fireek*. Pigeon stuffed with *fireek* and basted with liquid swells as the grain inside expands till it has a full, rounded, almost sexy appearance. Alternatively, the pigeon can be completely covered and cooked inside a mound of *fireek*, to which is added fresh cream, a little garlic and butter, and onions. The dish emerges as a brown, crusty mound, with the pigeons moist and succulent inside the steaming *fireek*.

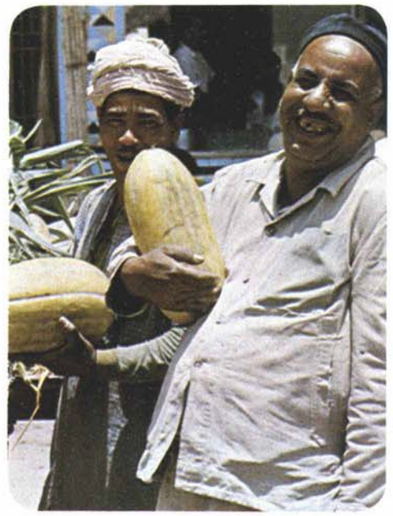
A word about meat in Egypt. The meat most often served in Middle Eastern countries is lamb or mutton, and Egypt produces its full share of sheep, whose meat can be very succulent. However, Egyptian cooking also features a kind of beef—known on the hoof as *gamous*, or water buffalo. Egyptians usually eat

This page : The Egyptians make an art of eating, whether at an elegant hotel dining room, al fresco *in the shadow of the Pyramids or on a house-boat restaurant on the Nile. Succulent melons and meat grilled on skewers over charcoal please the Egyptian palate. Opposite page, top and bottom : Cool drinks are important in a hot climate.* Qamar ad-din *is made from sheets of dried apricots dissolved in water. Other thirst-quenchers include mint tea, tamarind juice, infusions of cinnamon bark, lime and lemonade. Center : Happiness is a ripe Egyptian melon.*



it in made-up dishes, but it can be cooked as steaks or kebabs, and many a Westerner has eaten it under the impression that he is eating beef.

All these dishes—with the exception of the "caviar"—are common, everyday events in many Egyptian households. But as in many lands, it is not always easy to find everyday, local foods in the big international hotels and restaurants. Egyptian fish and shrimp are easily found in most good restaurants. The delightful bean dishes—*ful madamis*, *ta'miyah*, *bisara*—have been admitted to the menus of some leading hotels, or can usually be produced by special arrangement. The Meridian Hotel serves many local dishes at its Saturday night oriental buffet, and the Hilton and Sheraton bring forth a few Egyptian specialties for the adventurous traveler. And nearly all the simple local dishes are to be found at the charming Fil Filla restaurant, to be savored in the courtyard under the dappled sunlight of living vines.



The Egyptians usually end a meal with fruit, and the walls of the tombs give evidence that their ancestors also enjoyed the fruits of Egypt—grapes, guavas, melons and pomegranates in particular. Other fruits, arriving centuries later, have since become Egyptian in every sense—mangoes, oranges, limes, apricots, mandarines. One of the joys of an Egyptian summer is to see these fruits from different parts of the country borne proudly into the city in small woven baskets on the heads of street vendors. In season come grapes from Fayyoum, very sweet dates from the distant oasis of Siwa, green and purple figs from Alexandria and Mersah Matruh, and summer melons from Ismailia and the banks of the Nile. The street vendors chant the virtues of their wares: "Buy my pomegranates . . . like maidens' cheeks " Today the fruit and flowers of the flaming pomegranate are as much sought after for their juice and as decoration as they were when this fruit was celebrated in old Egyptian poetry and used to decorate the tomb of the pharaoh Ikhnaten. In ancient times, figs were often gathered with the help of monkeys; and in every temple in the land were giant stone columns representing the trunk of the date palm. The date was one of Egypt's commonest foods, eaten fresh, dried or pressed into cakes.

But above all other fruits, in a desert land, it is the melon—pale green, salmon pink, creamy white, or bright red—that provides the greatest refreshment. Sweet and succulent, scented with musk, dripping with juice, the Egyptian melon can be sheer ecstacy after an outing in the blazing summer sun. According to tradition, the *batikh*, or watermelon, should be cut an hour or so beforehand to cool by evaporating in the air. Another piece of ancient advice still considered to be true is this: "But it is always wise to watch the melon during this time, lest a serpent should come and poison the melon by its breath or bite; for reptiles are said to be extremely fond of melon and smell it at great distances."

Lucky serpents! Lucky Egyptians!

John Feeney, a free-lance photographer and cinematographer, has lived in Cairo for many years and enjoys the good things of Egypt.

This was Beirut

...memories of delicious meals in Lebanon.

This description of eating out in Beirut was written before the recent tragic events in Lebanon. It is to be sincerely hoped that the good life, including fine restaurants and local delicacies, will soon return to what was once the gastronomic capital of the Middle East.

Not long ago, a Beirut businessman and his guest from California met before dinner in the glass-walled lounge atop the Hotel Le Vendôme. As they munched pistachio nuts and sipped their drinks, sunset turned the mountains a deep rose and flecked the sea with gold. Darkness fell and lights came on aboard the ships at anchor and in the villages, sprinkling the harbor and hillsides with a starry sparkle. The men talked of other lovely views, of Rio and Hong Kong, and the visitor's travel fatigue gently slipped away. "I'm hungry as a bear," he said. "If we were in San Francisco, I'd say let's go to Chinatown for some spare-ribs and *dim sum*."

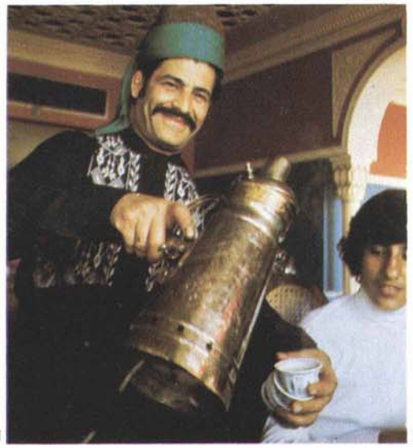
"Nothing easier," the host replied. "We'll go around the corner to the Pagoda." Within minutes the hungry San Franciscan was happily clacking his chopsticks, choosing "Two from List A, One from List B."

The same scenario could easily have been adjusted to cheer a visitor from Paris, London, Madrid, Bucharest, Tokyo, Rome or Riyadh. Fortunate Beirutis! They can dine around the world without leaving home. Few cities are endowed with the range of authentic national cuisines to be found in the restaurants of the Lebanese capital.

There is nothing accidental about Beirut's eclectic gastronomy. Historically, Lebanon has been a crossroads of cultures. Climatically, its range from temperate to near-tropical permits cultivation of an astonishing variety of foods. Economically, it not only caters to an international clientele but also, for lack of other resources, must make the most of service industries and tourism.

Lebanon, like the rest of the Levant, has from earliest times served as a cross-fertilization point between East and West, a fact that is reflected as much in its eating habits as in its great social diversity. The basic culinary legacy of this past is the spectrum of dishes common throughout the former Ottoman Empire, especially the array of various appetizers called *mezeh*, the skewered meats grilled over charcoal and the honey-drenched pastries. The French mandate between the two World Wars firmly established the cuisine of Paris, while the postwar emergence of Beirut as a Middle East headquarters for international banking and trade has added influences from every continent.

One cannot overstate, however, the importance of Lebanon's fresh produce. When asked the secret of his success, French three-star chef Paul Bocuse once replied, "I do not prepare a meal according to a recipe, but according to what is best on the market on the particular day." The *suqs* of Beirut are a chef's paradise. Lebanon's Mediterranean coastline, Bekaa Valley and the cultivated terraces that ridge the steep contours of Mount Lebanon amount to an agricultural phenomenon. Apples and bananas grow within a few miles of each other. Freshness is a fetish: heads of lettuce are "alive" in the markets, their roots still packed in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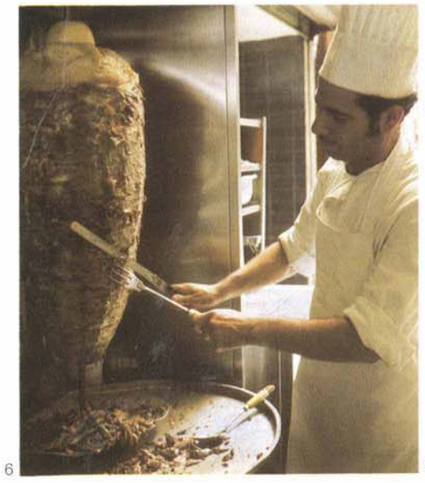
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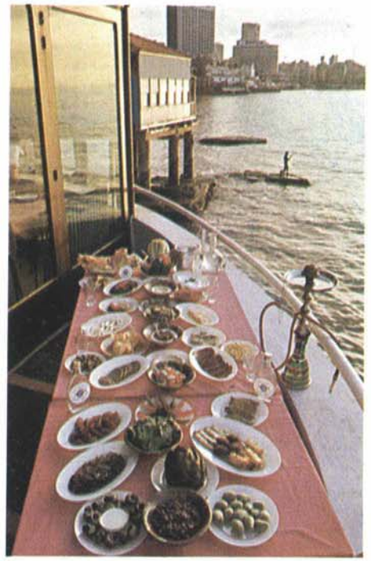
Beirut was a moveable feast.
1. Arab coffee, thin and sharp, was a feature of many restaurants.
2. Fresh fish could be chosen at the table in the old Crusader port of Byblos.
3. The international flavor was Chinese at The Pagoda.
4. An abundance of local produce underlay the wide variety of cuisine.
5. Roast beef carved at the table in the rooftop restaurant of the Phoenicia Hotel, and
6. shawarma*—layered stacks of sliced lamb—carved for sandwiches at sidewalk stands.*
7 and 8. At the early 19th-century palace of Beiteddine waiters in traditional costume carried trays or guests helped themselves in the vaulted hall.

WRITTEN BY DONALD ASPINWALL ALLAN. PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOR EIGLAND



A lebanese mezeh, *or hors d'oeuvre table, like this one by the waters of St George Bay, might contain as many as 50 different dishes.*

clumps of moist earth. In season the colorful Beirut *suq* offers almost any vegetable you can name, from artichokes to zucchini. Covered lanes, each with a specialty, are crammed with fruits, nuts, berries, herbs, spices, seafood, poultry, meat, game, cheeses and confectionery. The abundance of these top-quality ingredients (tough beef, unfattened and fresh-killed, is the exception) forms the solid foundation of Beirut's reputation as the culinary capital of the Middle East.

The best food in Beirut, of course, is Lebanese (or Lebanon's special version of Middle East cookery), and its finest form is the *mezeh*. A *mezeh* can be anything from half a dozen saucers of appetizers to a spread of 50 dishes, a veritable banquet. A basic selection will include crunchy raw carrot sticks, radishes, lettuce hearts, cucumber and green pepper slices, salted nuts, olives, crumbly goat's cheese, green onions, sprigs of mint and mountain thyme, pickled turnips and peppers, strained yogurt (*labneh*) topped with golden olive oil, and the national specialties: *hummus bi tahini*, *baba ghannouj*, and *tabbouleh*. In the center, in reach of all, will be a stack of the puffy hollow rounds of flat Arab bread or sheets of the paper-thin mountain bread. Bread is torn to make scoops for the dips and to enwrap tidbits of meat and vegetables. It can also serve as a plate, table cloth and napkin.

A word about those specialties. *Hummus* is a paste of chick peas flavored with sesame seed oil, lemon juice, and garlic. *Baba ghannouj* is a smoky dip of eggplant that has been charred over a flame and whipped with the same flavorings to a fluffy consistency. *Tabbouleh* is a salad composed of quantities of chopped parsley, onions, tomatoes and mint leaves mixed with softened cracked wheat kernels (*burghul*) and dressed with lemon juice and a little oil. These dips are attractively served, swirled into a saucer and garnished with whole chickpeas, pomegranate seeds, a sprinkling of paprika or sprigs of cress or mint.

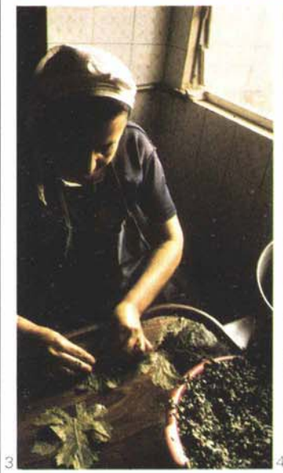
Nutritionally speaking, *mezeh* followed by a dessert of Lebanon's exquisite clementines adds up to a perfect balanced diet. When you're dining out in Beirut, however, it's just for openers. The *mezeh* can be extended almost indefinitely with stuffed vine leaves, flaky *bourik* and *sambousik* (meat-filled pastries), "cigars" of pastry with cheese inside, *kibbeh* (macerated lamb and *burghul*) served raw with garnishes as a Lebanese steak tartare, or shaped into balls or pie wedges stuffed with lamb mincemeat and pinenuts and baked, and tiny roast "fig-pecking" birds you eat bones and all.

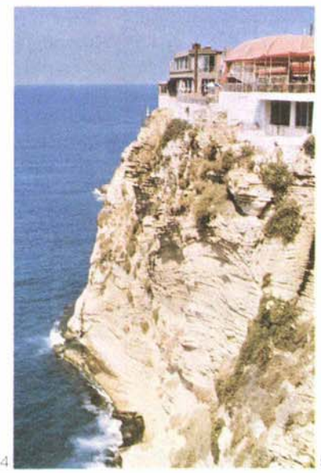
You can enjoy this extended meal in many different settings. At Al-Ajami, a venerable restaurant open twenty-four hours a day in the cloth *suq* district of old Beirut, you can go into the kitchen to make your selection—and a restaurant with an open kitchen has *got* to be good. At Le Grenier on Phoenicia Street you are served in summer in a lantern-lit garden, at Yildizlar in a grand salon overlooking the Ras Beirut headland, at Al-Barmaki in an agreeably oriental setting one flight above the bustle of Hamra Street. At the Sultan Ibrahim on the beach south of the city you buy your fish or shrimps by the pound on the way to your table. All of these establishments have good *mezeh* and excellent grilled lamb, poultry or seafood. To single them out is only to suggest five different settings; the city abounds with first-rate practitioners of Arab cuisine.

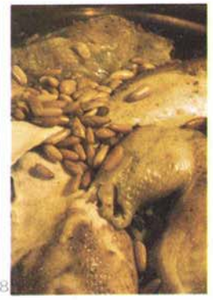
And this is only the top, as the farmer said when he gazed for the first time on the sea. The time comes when the expatriate from Tokyo craves his *sushi*, the Parisian his *escargots*, the Milanese his *osso bucco*, and when it comes Beirut is ready.

There are four Japanese restaurants in Beirut. The Tokyo, under the Ras Beirut lighthouse, has an enthusiastic following of Japanese businessmen who always seem to be eating something special not on the menu. Michiko in a hotel on the Avenue de Paris has Japanese decor and a clientele that includes western women who take Michiko's cooking lessons.

French traditions pervade both public and private cuisine in Lebanon's capital. They range from the formal elegance of Le Vendôme Hotel's La Reserve and the spectacular setting of Lucullus on a penthouse overlooking the port to the red-checked tablecloths and *bistrot* atmosphere of Le Relais de Normandie. Diplomats, politicians and business executives like to lunch at Le Vendôme, Lucullus, the Hotel Saint Georges' terrace or the Bristol Hotel. They can afford it. They'll get oysters and mussels flown twice a week from France, Charolais beef and Scotch salmon (smoked *and* fresh), imported milk-fed veal and Belgian endive. At Chez Temporel white arches set off the blue sea beyond and the brightly colored fashions of a more swinging







The variety of Beirut dining reflected in 1. a fruit stall displaying such exotics as the grenade-like custard apple, 2. Italian spaghetti, 3. the stuffing of grape leaves by hand, 4. a cliff-top restaurant at Pigeon Rocks, 5. the classic French cuisine at Chez Jean-Pierre, 6. bouillabaisse at Lucullus, 7. the modern decor of Chez Temporel, 8. chicken and pine-nuts at Al-Barmaki, 9. the view across the bay from the dining room of the Hotel Saint Georges.

Two ways with Ground Meat

Kibbeh, *made of ground lamb and cracked wheat, can be served in a variety of ways. As shown above, it can be baked in a flat loaf, moulded into hollow balls and stuffed with onions and pine-nuts, or served raw as an hors d'oeuvre.*

Here are two classic ground meat dishes as prepared by Chef Badia Chaia of Al-Barmaki Restaurant, Beirut.

Kibbeh bi Sanieh

(Baked Kibbeh loaf)

½ kilo lean lamb from the leg
½ kilo cracked wheat
1 medium onion
1 tsp. salt
½ tsp. allspice
1 cup butter
bowl of water with ice

Kibbeh stuffing

14 oz. ground lamb from neck
2 medium onions
¾ cup pine nuts
1 tsp. salt
¼ tsp. pepper
¼ tsp. cinnamon

Wash cracked wheat and squeeze out the water. Put the lamb through the fine blade of meat grinder and then pound it to a paste. Chop onion very fine and pound with salt and allspice. Put onion and meat through the grinder once together. Knead meat mixture with cracked wheat, dipping hands in ice water to keep meat smooth. Put mixture through grinder, adding ice water as required for smoothness. Set aside and prepare stuffing.

Stuffing: grind lamb once and mix with minced onions and spices. Sautee in skillet with vegetable oil. Sautee pine nuts until brown. Butter a large round baking pan and pat in a smooth layer of kibbe about half an inch thick. Spread stuffing in a second layer over the kibbe. Shape a second slightly thicker layer of kibbe on a large plate and place layer on top of stuffing. Score surface of top layer with a knife to make a diamond pattern. Poke a hole with finger in middle of loaf. Run a knife around the edge of pan and pour melted butter around sides. Dot surface with butter, place in hot oven for about 20 minutes, or until browned. Garnish with pine nuts. Serves six.

Kiftah Yoghurtliya

(Meat balls in yogurt sauce)

2 pounds coarsely ground lamb
1 large onion, finely chopped
½ cup minced parsley (flat leaf)
1 tsp. salt
¼ tsp. hot pepper
½ tsp. allspice
2 pounds yogurt
2 cloves garlic, mashed
4 sprigs mint, minced
1 tsp. cornstarch
¾ cup pine nuts
points of toasted Arab bread (optional)
3 tbls. butter
1 beaten egg

Mix meat, onion, parsley and spices and form into walnut-sized meatballs. Sautee in butter. Keep hot. To make sauce, mix cornstarch in a little water until smooth and add to yogurt with the garlic, mint, egg and salt. Put on fire and stir clockwise until it bubbles. Let it sit for a few minutes while you arrange meatballs on individual plates ringed with toast points. Pour sauce over meatballs and garnish with toasted pine-nuts and a little chopped mint. Serves six.

crowd, but none the less demanding when it comes to the *steak au poivre vert* or the salad of Syrian truffles. Chez Jean Pierre is for intimate dinners by the fireside surrounded by the *patron's* collection of antique firearms. Two generations of the family maintain a reputation for a classical approach to such delicacies as partridge, trout and *gratin de fruits de mer*.

Italian restaurants rank among the city's finest. Quo Vadis on Phoenicia Street imports its beef, veal and clams for *vongole* sauce and uses Italian pasta for its *fettucine al Alfredo* and other delights. Romano's, up the street, has excellent *scampi* and *spaghetti alla carbonara*.

If there weren't other good reasons, the United Nations, which has many regional offices of its agencies in Beirut, might have selected the city for the international flavor of its dining rooms. Want a runny fondue laced with kirsch? Try the Swiss Cellar or La Taverne Suisse. Hanker for a slab of Kansas City rib roast? Head for the Hotel Phoenicia's top floor. Can't live without *paella* and *sangria?* La Taberna Espanola has the real thing. One of the capital's most attractive restaurants is the venerable Dimitri's, where the Greek proprietor-chef inspects you behind a locked door before deciding whether to admit you to his fireplace room or garden. Eccentric and well worth it. Hungarian delicacies and gypsy music are a nighttime innovation at the Saint Georges. Russian *piroshki* and *shashlik* are featured at Kalinka. Armenian friends can lead you astray after midnight to try tripe stew in the boisterous kitchens of little places in Bourj Hammoud.

At the moment "British" pubs are in vogue in Beirut (as in New York and even Paris) so one does not have to go far for a Scotch egg, steak-and-kidney pie or fish-and-chips. The Rose and Crown and The Green are among the better rivals for the dartboard set. Rumanians relish their *mititei* (a spiced meatball) at the Bucarest. Devotees of German sausages, North African *couscous*, Danish open-faced sandwiches and herring, Mexican *tacos* and Brazilian *feijoada* all have outlets for their passion in Beirut. The curries and tandoori chicken of India and Pakistan, already a favorite of Arabs in the Gulf, are well established at the Serena Restaurant and the Taj Mahal in the Manara district.

Parallel to this serious dedication to the pleasures of the table, is the more or less continuous munching that goes on in the streets and offices of Beirut. Ladies interrupt shopping to nibble pastries; secretaries have a second breakfast of buns or *manouche*, an herb-filled, puffed and toasted bread; merchants duck out of their shops for a quick *shawarma* sandwich between deals, and after the movies, everyone has a snack at one of the hamburger joints or ice cream booths nearby.

The ancient Lebanese role of cultural exchange is still at work. Menus may be printed in three languages—Arabic, English, French—while diners chatter in a dozen tongues. East meets West; *hummus* meets hot dog. And in anybody's gastronomic guide Beirut rates three stars.

Donald Aspinwall Allan was an editor of The Reporter *and has written about food in the Middle East for* Gourmet Magazine.

I. Monroe

Meats and Sweets of Syria

Khalil Abou El-Nasr

WRITTEN BY JOHN MONROE

Most Westerners approach Syria via Lebanon, landing first in Beirut and sampling the pleasures of the most occidental of Arab countries before traveling eastward—both geographically and culturally. By the time he has crossed the Lebanese-Syrian frontier, the traveler has probably sampled Levantine cooking—*hummus*, a rich dip made from ground chickpeas and sesame oil; *baba ghannouj*, a smoky mixture of mashed eggplant, sesame oil, lemon juice and garlic; *tabbouleh*, a finely chopped salad of parsley, onions, mint, tomatoes and cracked wheat; *kibbeh*, ground meat mixed with cracked wheat, and either molded round a generous pinch of pine nuts or served as a huge baked sandwich of meat and pine nuts; and the whole family of skewered meats, lamb or chicken cut into cubes (*laham mishwi* and *shish tawuk*), or ground with onion and parsley (*kiftah*, or plain *kabab*).

But Syria is not just a hinterland, gastronomically or in any other way. Many of these dishes may have come from there—it's anyone's guess just where most Middle Eastern dishes originated—and to the discriminating palate the regional differences are just as important as the resemblances. For example, the famous Lebanese *mezeh*, a multiplicity of *hors d'oeuvre*, is rarely served in Damascus, and Syrian salads are less likely to contain lettuce as their basic ingredient than *baqli*, or purslane, a small plant with reddish stems and light green, slightly tart, fleshy leaves. Damascus green olives are also different from those of Lebanon, much larger and purged of their oil by being soaked in lye.

Within Syria itself there are two major gastronomic poles—Damascus in the south, and Aleppo in the north. The cooking of the south is more akin to that of Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan, while the cooking of Aleppo is influenced by its proximity to Turkey and by the large Armenian community in the town. Aleppan food is more heavily seasoned than that of Damascus, especially with red pepper. Many of the vegetable dishes are soaked in yogurt, and the Aleppans tend to be highly carnivorous, serving a variety of meat dishes, both raw and cooked, at one meal.

Moving eastward from the Lebanese-Syrian border, heading for Damascus, the road touches the Barada river about 20 miles from the frontier, and follows its course into the Syrian capital. Behind are the barren slopes of the Anti-Lebanon range; in front a fertile plain. It is a striking contrast, and the dusty, sun-baked traveler is readily attracted by the many open-air restaurants which line the road, enticing him to bask in the dappled shade of the oasis created by the river on the outskirts of the city. Most of these restaurants are good, all specialize in Syrian cooking, and even where the food is indifferent, the shaded calm and the murmur of the river compensate for any lapses in the cuisine. One of the most popular restaurants in this area is the aptly named Green Valley; here you can sit under trellises of vines, surrounded by jasmine and bougainvillea, and enjoy a leisurely meal to the gentle lapping of a fountain or, not infrequently, to lilting Arabic music provided by a group of impromptu entertainers who have dropped in for a couple of hours' relaxation.

Gastronomes in search of quality Damascene cooking may choose from a number of good restaurants, among them Abu Kamel, situated at the top of Port Said Street, and Ali Baba in Yousuf al-'Azm Square. One of the best is the Orient Club, patronized by Henry Kissinger on his recent shuttles to Damascus. Here, during the season, you may sample their truffle stew (*yakhnit al-kama*), a delicately spiced dish, which by the way you should order at least a day in advance. The truffles come from the Syrian desert near the ancient city of Palmyra, where, it is said, the wild desert storms give these round edible fungi their special delicacy. Truffles are either dark or light in color, the former being regarded as superior. Before being cooked they should be thoroughly soaked to clean the sand out, and then peeled. To make truffle stew, they are added to fried meat cubes with onions, then simmered and flavored with lemon juice, before being eaten with boiled rice.

But undoubtedly the best known of all Damascene delicacies are the sweets. These have been much appreciated since ancient times, and even the Caliph Haroun al-Rashid, although he reigned in Baghdad, is reported to have had his sweet pastries fetched from Damascus. Today most of the best confectioners—Mehenna, Hamra, Baghdash—are situated either along Port Said Street or on Marji Square, where massive flat

trays of layer pastry filled with creamy cheese or crushed walnuts (*baqlawa*); pistachio-filled ropes of crisp brown pastry (*kanafi*); mounds of sugar-dusted semolina pastry filled with ground pistachios (*ma'moul*); and bowls of little pancakes (*katayif*), turn the shop windows into an epicure's delight. All are very sweet and, with the exception of *ma'moul*, very sticky.

One of the most common flavorings used by Damascus confectioners is rose-water, and this is also a popular ingredient of the soft drinks dispensed by ambulant peddlers or served from colorful street stalls. From them you may order a thirst-quenching glass of pleasingly acidulous light brown tamarind water (*tamar hindi*); wine-dark mulberry juice (*tout shami*); pomegranate juice; licorice water; or *jallab*, a sweet tasting mixture of mulberry and lemon juice topped with a sprinkling of pine nuts and raisins, and occasionally flavored with carob molasses.

After quenching his thirst, our greedy traveler, moving northward, will come upon some intriguing variations on the themes he has already ingested. In Homs, for example, their *kibbeh* is molded into flat pastries, rather than the oval balls of Damascus and Beirut, wrapped round a piece of lamb's fat flavored with garlic and red pepper before being skewered and broiled over charcoal. In Latakiya some home cooks roll their *kibbeh* into balls and then boil them for a while before baking them in the oven with a mixture of meat stock, crushed walnuts, lemon juice, sesame oil, olive oil, garlic and red pepper (*kibbeh arnabiyeh*).

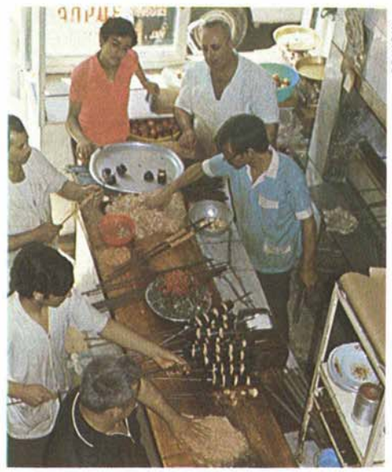
Already our traveler is in the region of red pepper, red meat and assertive seasonings. In Aleppo this gastronomic tradition bursts into full flower. Aleppans will tell you that they have more than a score of different recipes for kababs alone, each reflecting the influence of either the traditional Arab or the Turkish cuisine. Their pounded meat kabab may be flavored predominantly with one or more of the following: parsley, marjoram, garlic, thyme, sage, mint, saffron, cinammon, hot or sweet peppers, nutmeg, lemon or cumin. They may be charcoal broiled or baked in the oven, and when skewered preparatory to being cooked, the balls of meat may be interspersed with onions, tomatoes, egg plant, green peppers, or small green zucchini.

Aleppan salads are likely to be liberally laced with onion rings, parsley and red pepper, while many of the attendant side dishes will contain vegetables in yogurt. Particularly tasty are zucchini boiled and allowed to cool, covered with a mixture of sesame oil, garlic, mint and salt. Sliced cucumbers soaked in yogurt and sprinkled with mint are also common. Cooks from Aleppo make frequent use of egg plant, and a popular dish which

John Feeney

Stuffed vegetables—here zucchini, tomatoes, eggplant, green peppers—are a tasty change from Syrian meats.

has this vegetable as a main ingredient is *imam bayaldi*. This is made from small egg plants, partially peeled into lengthwise strips, inside which are inserted two or three cloves of garlic. The vegetables are then deep fried in hot oil until soft and brown, then simmered in a mixture of pomegranate juice, sugar, tomato paste, pepper, cinammon and water, before being allowed to cool.



Monroe

Meat for grilling at Hagop's restaurant in Aleppo.

Visitors to Aleppo in search of authentic local food should drop in at Hagop's, located around the corner from the Baron Hotel. Here the food is good and inexpensive, but the crowds who flock there can scarcely be accommodated in the small eating area, so it is hardly the place to linger. More conducive to leisurely eating is the Sahara, an open-air restaurant where the tables are ranged around a tall fountain set in a pool on which three plump ducks cruise, amiably snapping up morsels of bread thrown to them by diners.

Aleppo also has its own confectionary delicacies. Most famous is perhaps *karabeej*, round balls of sweet semolina dough stuffed with crushed almonds, flavored with rose water, and served with a white, creamy syrup. During the Muslim feast of Ramadan one of the main confectioners in Aleppo, Moussattat, prepares a delicacy pleasingly called "girls' spinning" (*Ghazl al-banat*), crumbly snowballs covered with soft sugary down, and filled with a pinch of Aleppan pistachios, generally regarded as the best nuts in the Arab world. Sweets similar to those sold in Damascus are also available in Aleppo, and on the streets vendors hawk jellied candy, made from sugar, lemon and gum arabic, molded around pieces of string, a Turkish delicacy called *jorbilbil*, which one finds only in the northern part of the country.

John Monroe is professor of English literature at the American University of Beirut and writes frequently for Aramco World.

Breakfast in the Middle East

WRITTEN BY JOANNE BATES

Olives and cheese are featured in most Arab breakfasts.
Khalil Abou El-Nasr

Breakfast is usually the most relaxed—and often the best—meal of the day. People are still in pajamas and hair curlers, half dressed, or fresh from a morning shower. They eat what is well-known and familiar, avoiding the unexpected or pretentious. Here is what generations of Arabs have eaten, and are still eating, to help them face the day.

The basic, everyday breakfast is sharply tasty, nourishing, and the same in most Arab countries. On hotel menus it is listed along with Continental *and* American, *under the misleading title,* Oriental. *But visions of sticky rice and raw fish are dispelled when the waiter arrives bearing the classic favorites of the Arab world. Fragrant stacks of freshly baked flat bread assail the nostrils when the napkin is lifted. Surrounding the loaves are small bowls of salty, white goat cheese, glistening black and green olives, and* labnah, *a thick cream cheese made by draining yogurt through cheesecloth, and then drizzled with olive oil. The eater attacks the bowls with pieces of bread ripped from the hot loaves and eats the tangy mixture between sips of Turkish coffee or sweet tea.*

Egypt has its own national breakfast, the famous ful madamis *—although city sophisticates will assure you that nowadays, except for an Eastertime celebration, it is eaten only by the* fallahin. *Yet all over Cairo the lowly fava beans simmer throughout the night in huge copper pots over low charcoal fires. By dawn thousands of* ful madamis *bean pots have been delivered to small kiosks and restaurants—including the Hilton and the Sheraton Hotels. The cooked beans are ladled into millions of small pots and plates, dressed with olive oil, lemon juice and garlic, or less frequently, with melted butter and pine nuts. Lentils are often cooked with the beans, giving them a dark reddish color.*

In Central Arabia, a winter morning favorite of the Najdis is a sort of porridge called hunayua; *a hearty dish of ground dates mixed with butter and semolina, flavoured with cardamom and simmered over a low fire till nearly stiff.*

In Syria and Lebanon breakfast is likely to consist of arous labnah, *rolled sandwiches of flat Arab bread filled with* labnah, *along with whatever the eater chooses of olives, tomato and mint. Or pieces can be torn off the bread and dipped in* za'tar, *a mixture of thyme, salt, sumac and sesame seeds. If there is a bakery nearby,* manoushah *can be delivered, hot and oily, with* za'tar, *already baked on top of the bread. At the same time, from the bakery, it is a temptation to buy* laham bi 'ajin, *a sort of pizza made with minced meat, tomatoes, and onions sprinkled with spices, parsley, and pine nuts.*

Meanwhile, chunks of raw liver sprinkled with chopped onion, mint, and mutton fat have appeared on the table—considered a great delicacy.

It is said that festive breakfasts in the mountain villages of Lebanon begin in the early morning and continue on through the afternoon. Mutton pieces, fried in the autumn and preserved in large crocks for winter use will be served up with fried eggs. Druze villagers dip their bread in kishk *—dried laban mixed with water—a distinctive salty, sour mixture quite unlike fresh laban. Jams made from the bountiful harvest of the countryside—quince, apricot, orange petal, or dried figs cooked with cinnamon, walnuts, and sesame seeds—still grace the mountain table.*

And then there are the sweets common to most of the Arab world. Kanafih bi jabn *is a sticky delight so rich that the most intrepid eater can manage it for breakfast. It is made of finely shredded wheat cooked in* ghee *over a slow fire. When the fat is absorbed, half the mixture is pressed into a huge flat pan and covered with white unsalted goat cheese and sesame seeds, and topped with another layer of shredded wheat. After it has bubbled in the oven until crusty it is cut into squares and served at once, before the cheese turns to rubber. A jug of hot thick sugar syrup stands ready on the table for each participant of the feast to drizzle as much over the confection as his or her conscience will allow.*

And, so it seems, there are few faint-hearted breakfasters in the Middle East. But one must stop somewhere. After all, lunch will invariably follow and, if it is cooked in the Arab way, it will require a hearty appetite.

Simple Perfection: Food from the Bosporus

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBERT ARNDT

The Turks can claim one of the great cuisines of the world.

In 1975, a young French chef, Paul Bocuse, was awarded the Légion d'honneur by the President of France for his introduction and development of what has come to be known as *la nouvelle cuisine française*. Though the honor had already been outshone by the Michelin star—his third—that had risen over Bocuse's restaurant the year before and started the culinary wise men on their travels, it did count as an official recognition of a new trend, a new style of making burnt offerings to one of the Western world's minor and now declining deities.

Bocuse's new French cuisine was based on the notion that the main point of a dish or a meal must no longer be the artistry of the chef, expressed in elaborate preparation of exotic ingredients and masking sauces. Henceforth, the chef would no longer be the star performer on the culinary stage, but a skilled and invisible director; the ingredients themselves would play the central role: their quality and freshness, their simplicity and appropriate combination.

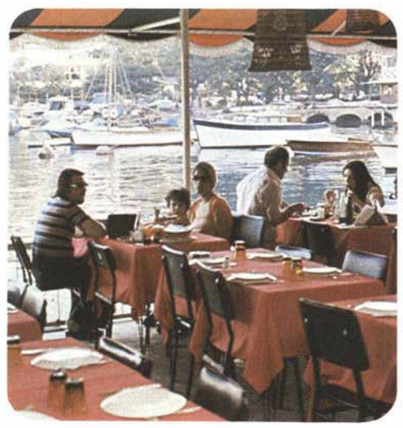
Over 900 years ago, in 1071, the Turks had the same idea. Because they were busy with the Battle of Malazgirt and the subsequent conquest of Anatolia, no one won a decoration on the strength of the new principle, but that idea and that date nonetheless marked the beginning of the great Turkish cuisine that now, almost a millennium later, is as inventive and as delicious as ever.

Three elements came together at its beginnings; the first of these was what the Turks ate themselves. Wanderers from the central Asian sea of grass, the Turks had a style of cooking and a diet appropriate to the way they lived. It was almost entirely a diet of animal protein: meat and milk, consumed in the forms in which their roving herds supplied them. The milk was either drunk fresh or made into yogurt—but never cheese. The meat was roasted or grilled over an open fire within a few days of being killed. Hard riders—warriors, scouts or raiders—might lay a cut of mutton or beef under their saddle, where the pounding would compact it and the horse's salt sweat preserve it for use as a kind of field ration.

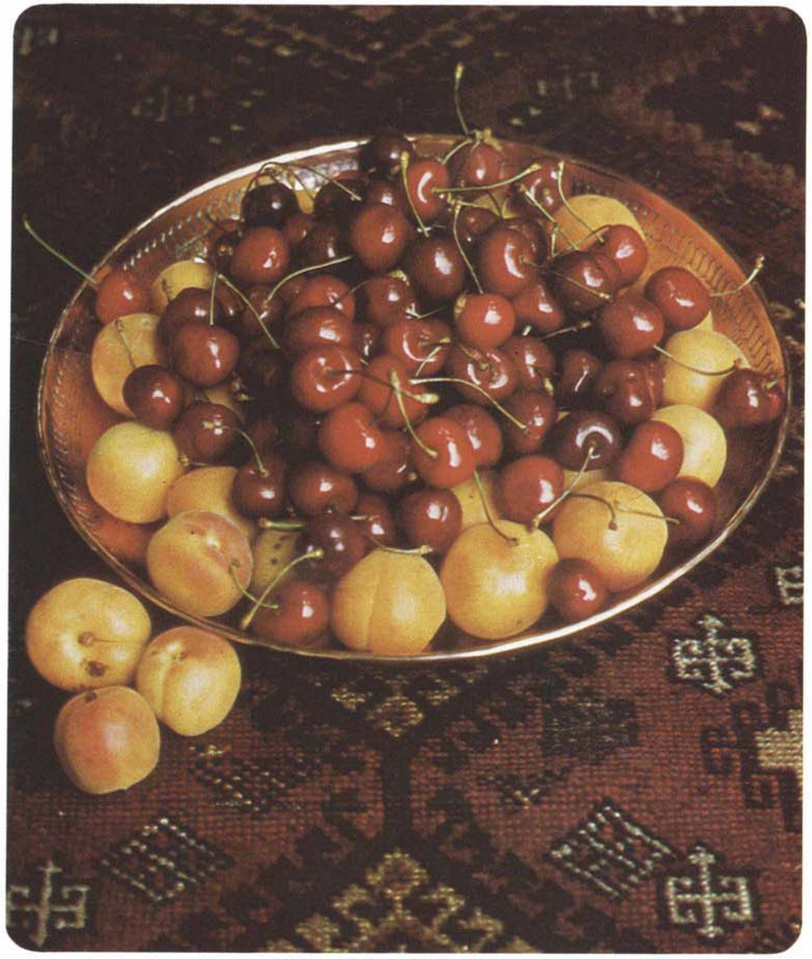
The second element of the conjunction was the Turkish conquest of Persia in 1055. With their long and stable history and their predilection for elaboration, the Ghaznavid Persians had evolved a complex and delicate rice-based cuisine of their own. Some aspects of this cuisine the Turks took over as they took over the country, and rice soon became nearly as central to Turkish cooking as it had been in Persian.

Then came 1071 and the Battle of Malazgirt that opened Anatolia, their future homeland, to the Turks. This was a landscape quite different from the broad central Asian plain. The Turks found a rich but narrow coastal margin that produced lush crops of vegetable and fruits, including those brought along from Persia. In the Anatolian plateau they found patches of plain separated by low mountain ridges or occasional high ranges: good pastureland, plentifully wooded and productive. Anatolia's gifts to the Turks included the tiny sour white grapes, whose wine once had been the exclusive prerogative of the Roman emperors. They included the olive tree, which gave the Turks a new technique of cooking. And they included the riches of its coasts and the three surrounding seas.

The Anatolian gifts, the Persian experience and their own culinary heritage provided the Turks with a rich and inter-reactive range of culinary raw materials. And as their habits grew more settled, their natural inventiveness acted as a leaven that worked this variety of ingredients into one of the three great cuisines of the world.



A Turkish delight is dining by—and from—the sea.



Anatolian fruit makes the perfect end to a Turkish meal. Cherries, first brought into Europe by Roman army veterans returning from Asia Minor, are said to derive their name from the Black Sea port of Cerasus, now Giresun.

Unlike the French and Chinese cuisines, though, the Turkish is underrepresented, and thus underappreciated, outside its native land. So it is to Turkey, and specifically to Istanbul, that one must travel in order to explore it. Turkey's most populous and sophisticated city, Istanbul draws to its teeming wholesale markets produce from the furthest corners of the country. Its appetite for meat is such that preferred cuts are airfreighted in daily from other cities; seafood from the Black Sea, the Marmara, the Mediterranean and even the Bosporus is so abundant that the typical Istanbullu can tell at a glance if the fish on the slab is more than six hours out of the water—and won't touch it if it is. Of the always fabulous Turkish fruits and vegetables, the earliest, the finest and the most fabulous find their way to Istanbul. For a Turkish restaurateur whose goal is quality, Istanbul is the place to be—and so it is for the questing diner.

Diner and restaurateur are most likely to meet in Emirgan, one of the city's northerly Bosporus suburbs, where Istanbul's best restaurant perches on the hills above the water, in the middle of 35,000 square yards of flower beds, fruit orchards and greenhouses. A near-invisible, two-by-twelve inch sign announces that this is Abdullah's. In its 87-year history of acknowledged excellence, the house has never advertised; a visit there shows why it has never needed to.

It is best to eat at Abdullah's in a group of at least six, both to facilitate sampling of the menu's wide variety and because one wants to have someone to exclaim to. Manager Necati Usta is likely to start the group off with the restaurant's unusual approach to the famous Turkish *hors d'oeuvre* dishes, called *meze*: first a plateful of pink and white petal-thin slices of smoked sturgeon and smoked non-pork ham, accompanied by another dish of quartered tomatoes and cucumber fingers. The tomatoes smell of sun and garden and the meat and fish were smoked on the premises. Abdullah's own variety of garlic vinegar pickles are available as nibbles, but they cannot compete with the *dolmas* served next. *Dolma* means "stuffed" in Turkish; tomatoes, bell peppers or, more rarely, other vegetables, are stuffed with a special rice mixture that involves currants, pine nuts, bits of liver, and at least four spices. *Dolmas* of this type are steamed and served cold with a delicate touch of olive oil, and are much harder to make well than the meat-stuffed variety that is served hot. Abdullah's serves pepper and eggplant dolmas in which the *ic pilav* rice stuffing perfectly complements the unimpaired flavor of the fresh vegetables.

Hot *mezes* follow, and again they are not quite in the usual run. One dish is of thin slices of green summer squash, breaded and lightly fried, a method that is what Necati Usta calls "respectful" of the ingredients. The other dish is *manti*: the Turkish version of Italian ravioli and in fact probably a borrowing—but lifted on wings of garlic beyond mundane speculation. Both the crisp squash and the hot spicy *manti* would normally be served with yogurt, but here they are complemented even better by the heavier consistency of cool bland sour cream—an un-Turkish touch, but culinarily an intelligent choice. Both for decoration and for flavor, a fresh mint leaf tops the cream.

The restaurant raises its own chickens, but not by battery methods: an Abdullah chicken is a hunt-and-peck chicken with flavorful meat and worth a careful diner's consideration. Fish, as always in Istanbul, is fresh and good and well-selected, and the restaurant has been patronizing the

same wholesale butcher for 82 years and has good reason not to change.

If one's fancy leans to fish, the cryptic menu notation "Abdullah style" is the way to have it: seabass (or sturgeon, or shrimp) boiled, covered with a fish-stock Bechamel sauce, then lightly sprinkled with cheese and browned. The result is unmistakably a fish dish, but better than any other. If one prefers chicken, the restaurant often serves it in a style invented for Sultan Murat IV and called, no doubt with a touch of relief, *hünkâr beğendi*, "the ruler liked it." The dish involves a lightly spiced eggplant puree that beautifully complements the broiled chicken. Or one can elect another of the restaurant's own inventions, in which the chicken breast is nestled in a four-inch artichoke heart. The vegetable is simply boiled in salted water, the chicken is grilled and basted with its own juice and a little butter; and the two are joined with a small amount of chicken-based Bechamel sauce. Equally simply and successfully prepared are the meat dishes. French cuts are standard in Turkey, and a slice of "bonfilet" grilled makes a superb steak; lamb, especially in *siskebab*, is unlike any meat one can find in Europe or the United States: one American insisted that Turkish lamb must be "a different species."

Abdullah's has a range of beautiful and elaborate desserts available, but a fruit dessert—or simply fruit as dessert—is more in keeping with Turkish culinary principles. Then Turkish coffee—lightly sugared, foamy from its triple boiling in the narrow-necked *cezve*—makes a most satisfactory ending to a meal of somewhat grave and formal tone.

But other restaurants of the city's thousands serve their guests very different meals in varying atmospheres. The Bosporus is lined with places that specialize in fish and a small selection of *mezes*, served outdoors when the weather allows it. Begin with a canoe-shaped slice of Turkish canteloupe, juicy, sweet and almost overpoweringly fragrant. A slice of lightly salty, mild white cheese—a Turkish staple—is the perfect complement to the melon. Then, piping hot, cheese *börek*: paper-thin dough filled with a mixture of white cheese, egg-yoke and chopped parsley, folded flag-fashion into triangles, and rapidly deep-fried. Then the fish: perhaps a pair of blue-and-silver mottled mackerel, grilled over charcoal and served on a parsley bed with lemon wedges and onion shavings, firm-fleshed and almost sweet. Or a cross-sectional slice of (male) turbot (called *kalkan*, "shield," in Turkey), floured and deep-fried; or a filet of seabass (*levrek*), all boneless, tender, almost milky meat, dipped in eggs, then floured and pan-fried. Choose a table near the restaurant's laurel hedge, and let the fragrance of the fresh bay leaves be dessert.

Also genuine and picturesque is a tiny fish restaurant located under the Galata Bridge across the Golden Horn, on the Karaköy side. (The bridge floats on pontoons, and the restaurant fits between the pontoon surface and the elevated roadway.) Technically a club open only to members, the operation is run by a fishermen's cooperative, and has, chalked on its blackboard menu, the city's widest daily choice of fish types, often as many as 12 or 15. Nothing else but bread is served; on request, the waiter/manager may run to the fruit stands at the head of the bridge to buy grapes or a melon for dessert. On warm evenings the restaurant moves its tables outside to the water's edge so diners can watch the sun set behind the Suleymaniye Mosque. The basic principle of quality in simplicity could hardly be better exemplified.

Above: Ferry passengers crossing the Golden Horn can lunch off fresh-caught fish fried aboard a fishing boat. Right: Diners in the Covered Bazaar of Istanbul have a choice of all the fresh produce of the city's markets.

At the other end of the Galata Bridge lies the 17th-century spice bazaar, part of the *külliye*, or ancillary complex, of the New Mosque. Just inside the huge wooden doors of the Bazaar's north entrance is a discreet, steep staircase whose walls are covered with blue and white Turkish tiles, and which leads up to a suite of rooms that was once the banking center and strongrooms of the market. Here, under filigree-painted domes, the bazaar's own judge heard disputes among the merchants and tested their weights and measures. When the rooms were restored in the early 1930's, the Turkish government asked a convivial restaurateur of the nearby market area to open a new restaurant there, and the result is Pandeli's.

Now run by the founder's son and a partner who began his career there as a dishwasher, Pandeli's goes by the principle of doing the minimum of advance preparation and cooking to order as much as possible. With the city's largest wholesale markets on his doorstep, manager Cemal Biberci chooses the best and freshest wherever he finds it, and prepares the day's menus only after spending two or three hours shopping. That menu thus features far fewer "made" dishes than are available in other restaurants,

A feast for the eye as well as the palate, Turkish meze *range from salty white cheese to sweet melon wedges, stuffed vegetables and grape leaves to fried cheese pastries,*

and more examples of simple preparations of perishable ingredients. Many neighborhood businessmen come in for a meal of rice and *döner kebab*, which Pandeli's, in common with only a few Istanbul restaurants, still cooks over charcoal.

Döner kebab is meat roasted on a vertical spit, but differs from the Arab version of the dish—*shawarma*—in its preparation. In Turkey, the spit is prepared with successive disks of different lean meats: hamburger and cuts of lamb and beef, some marinated and some not, all interleaved with paper-thin layers of suet. As the assemblage turns slowly and bastes itself in front of the racks of glowing coals, thin layers are shaved off with a long flexible knife, and the exposed surface turned to cook further. The shavings of meat are crusty and smokey on one side, tender and almost pink on the other (the Turks are generally not fond of rare meat), and Pandeli's serves them on a bed of rice, decorated with a long, twisted fiery-hot green pepper. A favorite drink with this meal is *ayran*: yogurt beaten to liquid consistency and slightly thinned with water to make a tart and refreshing thirst-quencher.

But given a free hand to compose a less everyday meal, Cemal Bey brings out first a small collection of cold seafood *mezes*. Most impressive is a pair of four-inch Marmara mussels whose warmly-spiced rice stuffing complements their own cool seafood flavor. Beside them lie several slices of *lakerda*, mini-steaks of sturgeon or other white fish soaked for a very long time in a very mild briny marinade, and served raw and tender with the obligatory contrast-garnish of sweet raw slices of purple onion. Small pink curls of shrimp are next, served without sauce of any kind: their texture and flavor stand alone. Then come slices of turbot caviar, smoked and preserved with a wax coating. The texture is grainy-waxy and the flavor unique.

Pandeli's most famous dish, in the true spirit of Turkish cuisine, is both the best-tasting and the simplest. It is *levrek kâğitta*—seabass *en papillote*. "The secret is that there is no secret," says Cemal Bey, "except the best of everything." "Everything" includes an inch-thick, five-inch square fish filet, firm, boneless and as fresh as the market can supply, plus a slice of firm but ripe tomato, a pat of butter (always unsalted in Turkey and usually made from a mixture of cow and water-buffalo cream), salt and a little freshly-ground black pepper. The butter is placed on the filet, the salt and pepper sprinkled, and the tomato slice balanced on top. The whole is then wrapped in baker's parchment, sealed tight, and baked in a hot oven for 20 minutes. The results are magic: the fish is both baked and seethed in its own juices and those of the tomato, and the simple spicing comes fully into its own without overpowering the delicate flavor of the filet. Tearing open the heat-crisped paper package reveals the fish in its own buttery sauce and releases a cloud of fragrant steam that is both overture and promise.

Before they came to Anatolia, the Turks' national sweet tooth had to be satisfied with milky desserts: rice puddings and milk puddings, generally with an oven-browned top surface. Persian and Anatolian fruits and sweet compotes made from them provided another range of ways to end a meal—and the fruits now available in Turkey must be seen and tasted to be believed. The desserts now considered most typically Turkish, however, may have been adopted from the Byzantine repertoire: the rich pastry concoctions called *baklava*, of which the Turks have produced dozens of variations, many with their own graphically descriptive names.

In general, *baklava* is made up of a dozen or more layers of paper-thin unleavened dough called *yufka*, interspersed with a spread of chopped nuts and honey or syrup. Made in large round or rectangular trays, the confection is cut into small squares or rhomboids before baking and sprinkled with decorative pistachio powder or coconut shreds afterwards, often with the addition of a further quantity of thinned honey or syrup. Walnuts and pistachios are the nuts most commonly used; hazelnuts are rare but approved by connoisseurs.

Another type of *baklava* is rolled instead of layered; the rolls are sometimes baked as little cylinders—somewhat crisper than layered *baklava*—or formed into rings to make *bülbül yuvasi*—nightingale nests. An alternative to *baklava* altogether are the varieties of deep-fried sweet batter shapes, also soaked with as much syrup as they can hold, but still crisp on the outside. The type shaped like small fluted cylinders are called vizier's fingers because of their admonitory look, and the round ones with a deep dimple in the center are *hanim göbĕgi*: lady's navel. Of all the Turkish pastry desserts, however, the best is *sekerpare*. They are simple sweet cookies made from dough, not batter, and moistened—usually not soaked—with syrup. Plump to the point of being hemispherical, they are topped with a single sweet almond and have a marvellous elusive taste like buckwheat pancakes. There is no better prelude to a cup of unsweetened Turkish coffee.

Of all the curious culinary blossoms that opened in the slightly hysterical hothouse of the Ottoman court, the strangest that has survived to our day is a delicious dessert called *tavuk gögüsü*. It is a form of stiff pudding served as a rectangular slab on a plate, usually bright white but sometimes—and better—browned on its top surface under a broiler. It is smooth in texture, resilient in consistency and of a positively fraternal adhesiveness that has defeated more than one diner. Those who prevail, however, enjoy it very much, and are astonished to learn that it is made of white meat of chicken, ground, pounded and reduced to a paste, and mixed with sugar.

slices of smoked sturgeon to green and black olives.

One of the widest ranges of Turkish desserts of all types is available at Konyali Restaurant, across the street from Istanbul's main train station. It is one of the city's oldest eating places and was always one of the best; for an explorer of Turkish cooking it is no less than a landmark. Queen Elizabeth II is the most recent addition to a list of nearly 50 crowned heads, chiefs of state and heads of government who have eaten well in Konyali's pleasant but unluxurious surroundings.

Of Turkey's more than 50 varieties of kebab—roast meat and roast meat dishes—a changing selection of eight or more is on Konyali's dense full-page menu every day; of the 40 ways Turks prepare eggplant, some five choices are available every day of the season. Because Konyali serves no alcohol it is a good place to learn about the fruit drinks and juices that the Turks are so fond of. Orange juice and grape must are staples; in season, pomegranate, strawberry, plum, cornel cherry and other juices and nectars are all available, and they make surprisingly good accompaniments to, say, a *yogurtlu kebab*: chunks of roasted meat on a bed of the flat spiced bread called *pide*, decorated with a few tomato wedges and a green pepper, and covered with a ladleful of yogurt. After being assembled, the whole dish is broiled just long enough to make the yogurt bubble up and invade the meat sauce and is served sizzling.

Imam bayildi—"the imam fainted"—is another picturesquely-named main dish that has spread far beyond Turkey's boundaries. As Konyali makes it, it is a marvellously juicy marriage of meat and eggplant, so good that the *imam* for whom it was invented fainted at the first taste. Konyali has also developed its own style of making eggplant kebab, by wrapping the roasted lamb chunks in thin, long strips of eggplant and cooking the resulting package further to soften the vegetable and let the flavors blend.

In the Covered Bazaar, Bursali Restaurant serves its overflow clientele at tables set in the busy street; the waiters sprint, the place is full of din and tintinabulation, and anything on the menu has a 50–50 chance of being unavailable—but the food that is is good. Kale Restaurant, on the very edge of the Bosporus at Anadolu Hisar, serves a few Arab *meze* dishes along with the Turkish ones, has the best view in the city of the floodlit fortress of Rumeli Hisar, and buys 80 percent of its fish through the windows from passing fishermen's boats. The *Cicek Pasaji* is a boisterous alley full of restaurants that serve good hot *mezes* on tables made of marble slabs set on upended barrels; customers pass dishes over each other's heads from kitchen to consumer in a dizzying atmosphere of gypsy fiddlers, bellowed orders, drum-and-*zurna* groups and assorted hustlers.

The proprietor of Yak serves equal quantities of food and conversation, the former Italian, and the latter a remarkable *zuppa di pesche* of French, English and Turkish. The Chinese Restaurant—its name—does very well despite the disadvantage of a menu without pork. And Rejans, already a monument when Ernest Hemingway ate there, is still run by the group of White Russian lady refugees who founded it in the early twenties, and still serves fine borshch, piroshky and vodka with lemon.

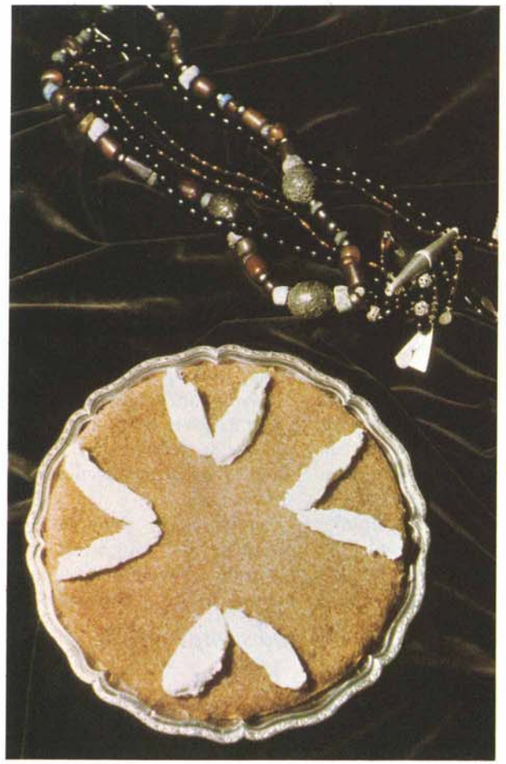
In all these places, and in Turkish homes by the millions, there exists an interest in food and a dedication to quality in its preparation that is the main reason that the character and excellence of Turkish cuisine has been preserved from the 11th century till now. The same concern is also the source of the continuing development of Turkish cookery in the hands of Necati Usta of Abdullah's and others like him. The sad and infuriating concept of the restaurant as fueling station is still a long way away while Turks feel about food the way Orhan Kutbay, headwaiter of the Divan Hotel's fine restaurant, feels about his job. "I do this work the way a violinist plays his instrument," he said, "with feeling."

Fish abound in the waters of the Turkish Peninsula.

Robert Arndt, who has lived and worked—and dined—in Istanbul for several years, writes frequently for Aramco World.

Sugar and Spice

Sweets in the Middle East are apt to strike the Western palate as excessively sweet and bland. But they are rarely served after a meal, being reserved for special occasions– a religious feast, a baptism or circumcision, a wedding or a party for an honoured guest. They range from candied fruits to nut-filled baqlawa, *from flower-scented custards to pancakes served with cream cheese and sugar-syrup. Middle Eastern housewives rarely make them at home but buy them from the "best" confectioner.*



John Feeney

In Amman they all send out for Adel's chicken and sumac.

Jordan's Legendary Musakahan

WRITTEN BY ISOBEL FISTERE.
ILLUSTRATED BY PENNY WILLIAMS

To people with a desert heritage, the idea of cooking on or in earth, by the heat of the sun, a twig fire, or hot stones, is the natural way to a meal. From Aqaba to Baghdad, the bread baking in the ashes, tea bubbling on hot rocks, the bird roasting in a jacket of mud, this has been cookery through the millennia.

Not that that Dior-dressed lady over there is going home to fashionable Jabal Amman to poke up a fire among hot rocks. She may not even turn on her electric stove if she's having people in to dinner. She'll probably send out for that legendary Jordan Valley specialty, *musakhan*—literally "heated"—a succulent concoction of chicken, bread, onions and sumac baked in a *tabboun*.

The *tabboun* is the mud igloo once found in the back yards of old Jordanian homes. Its dome, over a mud-and-stone baking surface, over a fire trench, builds up and holds an intense, even heat which demonstrably adds a different flavor to baked bread, roasted meat. This venerable institution is sometimes found today even in cities, where neighborhoods have hung onto their ancient communal *tabboun*, the local bakery. After the baker has finished his day's allotment of loaves, the oven stays hot for hours, and in it will be found the dinners of his neighbors—a whole lamb at the back, a stuffed chicken, a casserole of eggplant.

Musakhan, the dish the lady on Jabal Amman sends out for, is, basically, a round of Jordanian bread, lavished with onions in oil, crowned with chicken, flavored with sumac, and garnished with toasted pine nuts. Put together, it's a dish to gladden Jordanian hearts. The bread, baked in a *tabboun*, is pure Arab, made of Madaba wheat, which positively shouts WHOLE GRAIN, with its color like old wood, its fluffy texture, its nut-brown flavor. And it must be mill ground, then kneaded by hand, never touched by machine. It must then be coaxed and punched into eight and ten inch rounds, with fat, raised rims to hold what's coming. This bread is so good that Jordanians doggy-bag the remains of *musakhan* home for the children, order it specially to take abroad.

So much for the bread. The profligate use of onions—half as much in weight as chicken—betrays richer origins than the desert. There, the onion—one at a time—is prized and carried about as flavoring. To use kilos of them bespeaks the lushness of the Jordan Valley hothouse, rows of their spears in serried ranks.

Then there's the sumac . . . "genus Rhus, esp. R. Coriaria, indigenous in Southern Europe" (Oxford English Dictionary). The word is of Arab origin, but the edible Jordanian sumac—which grows in desert wadis, the backyards of Amman, and the hillsides of Lebanon—is not to be confused with the poison sumac of America.

This dish is company dinner to half the aristocracy of Amman. And it all comes from a hole in the wall, about 6 × 10 feet small, up on Jabal Luweibdah, into which have been squeezed three stoves, a refrigerator and two tables. Here reigns Adel Yanis, a man too big for the place, moving sideways and gingerly between the stoves, bubbling pots of onions and chickens, and mountains of fresh Arab bread. Adel is going all the time, chopping onions, splitting chickens, stirring pots, turning over birds, slapping them onto loaves, spreading with onions, drizzling on more oil, powdering with sumac. And answering the phone. "*Aywah, aywah*, pasha, twelve *musakhans* . . . not until 12 o'clock. No I'm sorry, not until 12." ("Picnics!" Adel snorts.) "Yes, yes, *Ahlan*, Excellency. *Aywah*, four *musakhan*. At 12." Stir the onions, turn the chickens . . .

The idea for send-out *musakhan* came from Ghazi, Adel's friend at the Hotel Intercontinental, who knew how often the call for proper *musakhan* stumped the kitchen there. Too much work—too time-taking—and no *tabboun*. So, when Adel was building his establishment seven years ago, he ordered, not a flamboyant infra-red oven, not a glamorous electric range, not even a wood-burning iron stove. But a mud *tabboun*—four walls of clay and chipped flint, just like grandmother used. Mud must be so thick, flint chips in such proportion to clay. But no specifications, no measurements, explain the *tabboun*. As Adel's grandmother said, "You need it in the house like a son." It is the nest, security—generations of warmth.

As business boomed, Adel added another top-of-stove fire for bigger and bigger pots. And then another, in case of crisis. So cheek by jowl with the *tabboun* now stand two little iron old timers, nested into the heat of the mud walls between them.

Now the gospel of *musakhan* according to Adel is: 24 chickens, young and fat! 17 kilos of red onions; four litres of oil—purest of the pure, from the hills around Jerusalem, "holy oil." Sumac powder, fresh. Salt and pepper if you like; more acidity with lemon if you like, but "not necessary with my *musakhan*."

The recipe is a time table, or rather two: the baker's and Adel's coordinated to come out together at high noon:

5 A.M. Baker and Adel start fires in their separate *tabbouns*; fire starter, chaff from Madaba wheat; firewood, olive or oak.

6 A.M. Baker is mixing his "soft" Madaba flour into dough. Adel starts chopping onions, after putting huge pot of olive oil on slow fire.

7 A.M. Baker is hand kneading dough. Adel starts onions simmering in olive oil, just enough heat to turn over the flakes. Four hours to go, until oil takes on a deep purple, aided by color from a few added skins.

8 A.M. Baker is punching out loaves. Adel attacks 24 young chickens, cleaning and splitting. Puts pot of broth from yesterday's chickens on slow fire to bring to boil.

9 A.M. Baker has 50 loaves lined up outside *tabboun*. Adel starts simmering chicken halves in burbling broth, eight at a time. Each half gets half an hour, at end of which, out, into *tabboun* oven, where clay fire does its work crisping a crust, leaving insides juicy and tender.

10 A.M. More chicken halves to simmer—more to cover those in *tabboun*.

10.30 A.M. Kilo of pine nuts in a litre of olive oil goes into oven with chickens to slow roast.

11 A.M. Baker delivers bread, warm, redolent, still pulsating. Working like lightning, Adel lays out table full of puffy loaves, ladles liberal doses of purple onion and oil, once, twice over each. Chickens out of oven, squashed, ribs up, onto onion beds. Now more oil and onion, then judging customers' tastes, sumac. The Prime Minister likes it sharp and sour—half a fistful. The judge's wife prefers it milder, so fat pinches. (Customers at the window are watching anxiously.)

11 A.M. Snatch pine nuts from *tabboun*—the nuts an even shiny copper, hissing and crackling. Sprinkle over all and fling *musakhan* back into *tabboun* to meld, toast a bit. The crowds now queuing outside begin to beat on the door. "Ten minutes," Adel pleads with his bunched fingers. "You have to wait. Call my son! He must start delivering . . . Five minutes more, please." Now he is wrapping packages, heavy cardboard, wax paper . . . "Hold them straight, PLEASE!"

After all that, if you want to give it a go—even without a *tabboun*—a perfectly reasonable facsimile can be arrived at. Start your oil boiling first, then the pot of broth (which may even be bouillion cubes), have your pine nuts ready to go, and above all, use a little clock timer which goes off with a ping: Ready?

4 chickens split in two . . . about 6 lbs.
8 cups of chopped onions
1 pint of best olive oil
½ cup of pine nuts
8–12 tablespoons of sumac
salt, pepper, lemon if desired
4 large Arab loaves, or semi-baked roll dough, if there's no Arab community nearby.

Follow Adel's method. Be profligate with the oil and onion, bedding and covering with thick layers, the more the better if your bread isn't superb. Sprinkle with sumac, cap with pinenuts, toasted in oil in the oven, roast it all again for five minutes in your own oven.

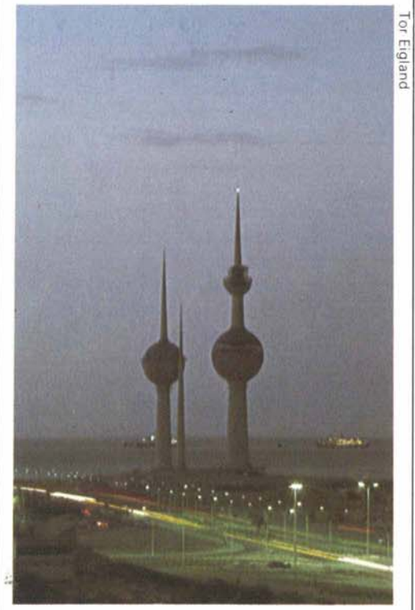
Serve piping hot. *Sahtain!*

Isobel Fistere has written cooking articles for McCall's, contributed recipes for Arab dishes to Craig Claiborne's column in the New York Times.

Dining Out in the Gulf

Kuwait has put on weight. That was an obvious observation after a lengthy absence. So has the rest of the Arabian Gulf. Along with money, cars, air conditioning and other comforts has come a tidal wave of foreign foods flash-flooding the Gulf shores. The food is Persian, Indian, American, French, English—even Chinese. Some of these culinary influences have been around for a long time. Persian pilau was brought from across the Gulf by seafarers and settlers. Indian curries made their way aboard the merchantmen that plied the Arabian Sea. In fact the spices of India have crept into many of the dishes made by fishermen and sailors from Arabian Gulf ports. The cooking of other Arab countries has also been naturalized for some time, brought here by footloose Syrians, Palestinians, Jordanians, Lebanese, or brought back by equally footloose Saudi, Kuwaiti, Bahraini students, businessmen and vacationers.

But international cuisine—the kind now found in restaurants and hotels the world over—is something new to the Gulf. It is largely based on imported foodstuffs, frozen, canned or fresh. But more and more of the raw materials are being produced locally. Gulf fish and shrimp are as good as any in the world, and meat is raised locally—sheep, that is, for when an Arab talks about meat he normally means mutton and lamb. Saudi Arabia is also rapidly developing its agriculture and now exports products such as watermelons, tomatoes and cucumbers to other Gulf states. Dates, bananas and pomegranates are grown in the oases, and the desert itself produces a local delicacy, white and brown truffles, which are dug out of the ground, boiled and served with meat.



Tor Eigland

A spectacular view of the harbor adds spice to eating out in a restaurant high atop a water-tower, Kuwait.

The "Barbecue" has become the trendy style in the international type restaurants and hotels in the Gulf these days. But "barbecue," locally has a special meaning, signifying, really, a buffet. Apparently the whole trend started with someone doing a real barbecue cook-out; then it came to mean any big feast served out of doors, which was usually a buffet prepared by one of the big hotels. And now the word is used for a buffet meal served indoors or out. Hugo Langer, Director of the Kuwait Hilton, explains how the popularity of the buffet came about. Gulf customers do not particularly like to be served individually. The food should all be on the table. This conforms to the local custom of putting everything down in front of the guests all at once. Besides, says Langer, "it eliminates a lot of menu, language and staff service problems."

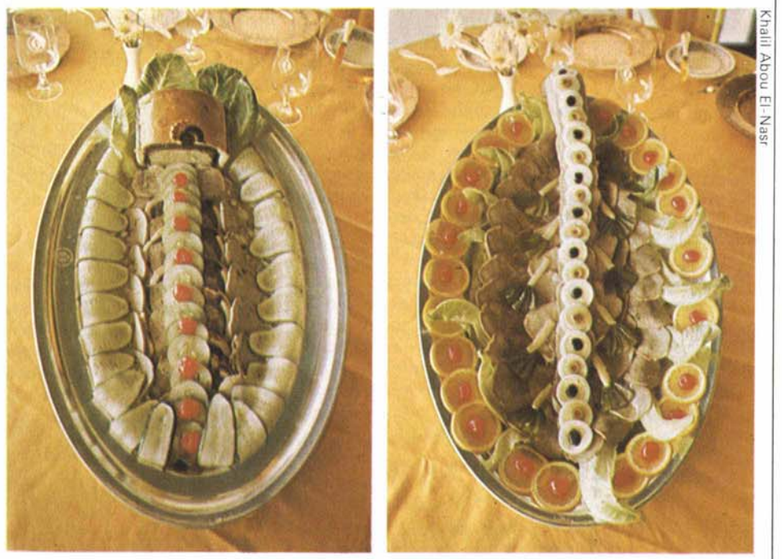
While surveying a typical "barbecue" at the huge new Hotel al-Gosaibi at al-Khobar in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, I asked Richard Robinson, the impressively rotund, food-loving English manager, "What have we here?" "God knows! Let's start here," said Robinson, pointing to about a quarter of a mile of dishes artistically displayed by the Egyptian chef. "There's Gulf shrimp cocktail, smoked Scotch salmon, fresh Scotch salmon, cold *hamur* (a delicious Gulf grouper with meat like a sea bass) decorated with stuffed eggs. Here we have turkey, meat loaf, some cold lamb cuts, tomatoes stuffed with Russian salad, salami, sirloin of beef, saddle of lamb, artichoke hearts filled with cheese, *suprêmes* of chicken in aspic, legs of chicken"—Robinson drew a colossal breath and carried on—"There's any kind of salad you can think of, all the very Lebanese things like *hummus*, *tabbouleh*, *baba ghannouj*, and so on, loads of fruit and vegetables, delicious cream buns and about another dozen Arab and European desserts. In the hot foods, we have—WHOOPS!" He almost dropped the hot lid that covered *kebab halla*, a meat stew. Then there was chicken curry, *kufta*, *kebab*, etc., etc.

This is the style in all the international hotels throughout the Gulf. A few minutes flight away over shallow turquoise waters on the island of Bahrain, the menu of the Gulf Hotel promises *foie gras truffé*, Beluga caviar, shrimp cocktail, smoked Scotch salmon, terrine of duck . . . And that's just for starters in the cold *hors d'œuvre* section of the menu.

But when I asked Hugo Langer of the Kuwait Hilton which were the best places to eat in Kuwait, he might have been speaking of the whole area. "There is no outstanding place. Our big hotels, the Sheraton and Hilton, are the best value for money. None of us is a gourmet restaurant. The raw materials are missing. We have to use a lot of frozen food. All the foodstuffs here are imported, except for fish and shrimp. But I like to think we have improved. What was acceptable only two years ago is no longer acceptable." Robinson of the al-Gosaibi Hotel agreed. "I don't think we can ever achieve any international standards for cuisine. We can establish a good standard for cooking and that's as far as we can go. Yet," he added hopefully, "the most extraordinary things can be achieved without some of the essential ingredients. Our pâté, for instance, is very, very good."

The following is not meant to be a complete guide to eating out in the Gulf, but here are some places that I know personally or have had recommended by others, in addition to the big international hotels already mentioned.

In al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, the Kaimik Glass is a small Lebanese-run restaurant with Arabian Nights decor. In addition to the usual Lebanese specialties, you can dine there on pizza, onion soup, *sambousak* (spicy, triangular meat-filled pastries). For desert there is *crème caramel*, chocolate mousse, and "pyjama" ice cream (a French version of a banana split). At al-Khobar's Sunset Beach the fare is appropriately fishy—fried shrimp, crayfish, and *hamur* baked and grilled. In nearby Dammam, the Oasis Restaurant serves a mixture of Lebanese and European food in a mixture of American and Chinese decor.



Khalil Abou El-Nasr

International cuisine as practiced in the Arabian Gulf is as much a branch of the art of decoration as it is of gastronomy. The Intercontinental Hotel in Dubai produced these elaborately camouflaged platters.

Tor Eigland

Roast lamb of a Bedouin feast is glorified at Gulf hotel.

In Bahrain, Keith's restaurant has the most personal flair of any in the Gulf area. Into an old Arab house and garden, Keith, an Englishman long resident on the island, has fitted three separate restaurants, each with its own menu and ambiance—the Red Room, the Fondue Room and the Bistrot. An intimate, Bohemian atmosphere is created by a profusion of plants, copper ware, local antiques, wood carvings, watercolors tapestries, samovars—and Keith himself. The fare is truly international—a cold yogurt-based soup and salade niçoise were two I tried—and Keith swears that nothing he serves is precooked or frozen.

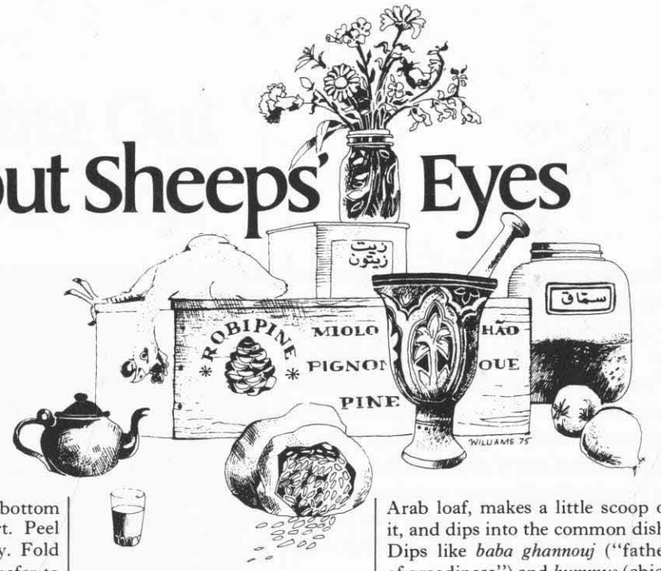
Also in Bahrain you will find good food attractively served at the Dilmun Hotel, the Lebanese-run Pearl Restaurant, and the Omar Khayyam, which specializes in Indian and Chinese dishes.

In Kuwait another Pearl Restaurant on top of the Kuwait Airways Tower spices its food with a spectacular view. The al-Marzouq has oriental decor and food to match. The Universal Hotel goes a long way to justify its name by serving Chinese food. At the Sheraton Hotel's Coffee Shop and its attached Strawberry Hut we are back in the land of hamburgers, cole slaw and strawberry shortcake.

Tor Eigland, a photographer long acquainted with the Middle East, now works in and out of Spain.

WRITTEN BY TOR EIGLAND

Cooking without Sheeps' Eyes



Not all Middle Eastern dishes require several days to prepare, mysterious ingredients found only in the suqs of Baghdad, or equipment resembling a rebec or an iron maiden. Here are a few recipes from Turkey and the Arab world that can easily be whipped up in a split-level kitchen with ingredients from the corner supermarket, or at least the nearest Syrian, Greek or Armenian grocery.

AYRAN
Yogurt Drink

The Turks are said to have brought yogurt from the Asian steppes to the Arab world, and hence to the West. If so, they deserve a hearty thanks for providing one of the few adult meal-time drinks of the world—not alcoholic like wine or beer, not a stimulant like tea or coffee, not sweet like coke or milk shakes, not childishly bland like plain milk. A fine invention. The Arabs call it *laban shrab*, the Persians *musd*, the Indians *lassi*. The preparation is simplicity itself: for each person, beat one cup of yogurt with ¼ cup of iced water and add a little salt to taste. Some people like a hint of garlic.

KHIYAR BI-LABAN
Cucumbers in Yogurt

A simple, refreshing salad on its own, or a cooling sauce with hot meat or stuffed vegetables. White and pale green, like new grass under snow, it is served in summertime in Turkey, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon.

3 cucumbers
2 cups of yogurt
1 clove of garlic
½ teaspoon of salt
pinch of dried mint

Mash garlic with salt in bottom of a bowl. Mix in yogurt. Peel cucumbers and slice thinly. Fold them into the yogurt. Transfer to a clean bowl and chill. Just before serving, crumble a pinch of dried mint between your fingers and sprinkle on top. (Dry your own mint by spreading the leaves on a plate and leaving them several days in a dry place till crisp.)

MUJADDARA
Lentils and Rice

Nutritionists in the West have recently discovered that lentils and rice eaten together are good for you; each helps the other to do its best by the human digestive system. The Arabs knew this all along. Mujaddara is a dish for the poor, especially in Palestine and Jordan; but even those who have made it big like to eat it too.

1 cup of lentils
¾ cup of rice
½ cup of olive oil
5 or 6 onions
1 tablespoon of salt

Soak lentils overnight. Drain, boil in two quarts of fresh water without salt until tender (about half an hour). Add washed, uncooked rice and the salt and boil another 20 minutes. Brown the sliced onions in olive oil. Add onions and half the oil to lentil-rice mixture and cook another 15 minutes over low flame until water is absorbed. This can be cooked ahead and is eaten at room temperature.

CHAKCHOUKAH
Vegetable Hash with Eggs

A heart-warming supper-dish served from Tunisia to Saudi Arabia. Similar to a Basque piperade.

6 onions
2 green peppers
3 potatoes
4 tomatoes
½ cup of olive oil
1 clove of garlic
4 eggs

Heat oil in saucepan with garlic. Throw out garlic. Brown thinly sliced onions lightly in the oil. Then add half a cup of boiling water and the rest of the vegetables cut into bite-size pieces. (The potatoes can be par-boiled, or omitted entirely. In fact, almost any vegetables can be used in this dish, such as carrots, cauliflower, green beans, though onions, peppers and tomatoes are basic. The proportions don't matter either. A very accommodating dish.) Add salt and pepper to taste, cover and simmer until vegetables are half done. Break four eggs on top of the mixture, spacing them evenly as if frying them sunny-side-up. When the eggs are cooked, serve each person a portion of the vegetable hash with one egg on top.

BABA GHANNOUJ
Eggplant Dip

Dips are an Arab specialty. When it is said that the desert Arab eats with his fingers, what is often meant is that he tears a bite-size piece of bread off a flat Arab loaf, makes a little scoop of it, and dips into the common dish. Dips like *baba ghannouj* ("father of greediness") and *hummus* (chick pea dip) are ideal for cocktail snacks.

1 large round eggplant (not the long kind)
2 cloves of garlic
4 tablespoons of tahini (sesame seed oil; can be bought in small cans from Arab grocers)
4 tablespoons of lemon juice
salt
olive oil
chopped parsley

Char the eggplant in a hot oven or on a fork over the flame of a gas stove. When the skin is blackened, douse in cold water and peel. Mash two or three cloves of garlic to a paste with about the same volume of salt. Mix *tahini*, lemon juice and garlic paste. Mash eggplant pulp to a smooth consistency and blend in the garlic sauce. Serve in a bowl with a little olive oil on top and garnish with chopped parsley or a dusting of red pepper. Serves five.

BURGHUL MFALFAL
Cracked Wheat Pilaf

Burghul—bulgur, cracked wheat—can be found at Arab or Greek grocers or in health-food shops (it's very healthy). It is par-boiled, so can be eaten uncooked in salads or cooked alone or with ground meat. Alone it makes a nice change from rice.

1 cup of burghul
2 tablespoons of butter
salt
boiling water

Wash the burghul. Heat butter till it bubbles, stir in cracked wheat and cook till butter is absorbed. Pour 2½ cups of boiling water over burghul, add salt, and allow to simmer in covered saucepan for about 20 minutes, or until grains are tender and liquid is absorbed.

TABBOULEH
Parsley and Cracked Wheat Salad

A Lebanese dish. Green as a wet springtime, but better for you (think of all that niacin!)

½ cup of burghul
4 bunches of parsley (about 3 cups chopped)
1 bunch fresh mint (about ½ cup chopped)
3 green onions or 1 small onion
1 big tomato
6 tablespoons of lemon juice
4 tablespoons of olive oil
salt
1 Romaine lettuce (optional)

Wash burghul and squeeze out water. Wash and chop parsley, mint and green onions *very* fine. Dice tomatoes. Combine all ingredients including burghul. Add salt to taste, lemon juice, olive oil and mix. Serve in bowl lined with lettuce leaves and stick the heart of the lettuce upright in center of the salad. This can be eaten with a fork, but the traditional way is to scoop up a bite of the mixture in a lettuce leaf and pop it into the mouth.

KIBBEH NAIYEH
Raw Lamb

The Arabs' answer to steak *tartare*. That's all right—lots of Arabs won't eat it either. Very popular among the mountaineers of Syria and Lebanon. In Aleppo they add as much red pepper as the human palate will bear—perhaps on the principle of counter-shock.

½ pound of lean lamb
½ cup of burghul
½ teaspoon of salt
¼ teaspoon of allspice
1 small onion
bowl of water with ice

Wash burghul and squeeze out water. Grind lamb with finest blade of meat grinder, then pound it in a mortar to a fine paste. Chop onion very fine and pound it with salt and allspice. Put onion and meat through grinder together. Knead mixture with burghul, dipping hands in ice water as needed for smoothness. Mould into a cake on a plate, garnish with sprigs of parsley and serve with Arab bread, radishes, green onions, hot peppers, etc.

KUSSA MAHSHI
Stuffed Zucchini

This is one of those stuffed vegetable dishes that are served as a main course and make the Fertile Crescent a vegetarian's paradise. Other vegetables stuffed in the same manner are tomatoes, green peppers, onions, potatoes, or the leaves of lettuce, cabbage or grape-vines. For those with carnivorous tendencies, ground meat can be added to the stuffing, or the whole can be cooked in meat stock instead of water.

8 zucchini
1 cup of rice
salt and pepper
water to cover
3 tablespoons chopped parsley
2 tomatoes medium size
1 onion medium size
3 tablespoons of olive oil
½ tablespoon allspice (optional)

Choose medium size zucchini. Wash, cut off stem but do not peel. Core with apple-corer or short knife. (Don't throw away the cores, they can be used in Leila's "Falafil", below.) Make stuffing by mixing uncooked rice, chopped tomato, chopped onion, parsley, pine nuts, salt and pepper and spices. Stuff each zucchini loosely as the rice will swell. Lay stuffed vegetables in pot, cover with water, drizzle a little olive oil and bake in 350 degree oven for an hour. Serve with plain yogurt on the side.

LEILA'S "FALAFIL"
Zucchini Croquettes

Real *falafil* is made of ground fava beans and is usually bought from street vendors. This dish is made from the cores left over from *kussa mahshi* and is much lighter than the bean *falafil*.

12 cores of zucchini
2 heaped tablespoons of flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 egg
3 tablespoons of chopped parsley
1 tablespoon of chopped mint
2 cloves of garlic, chopped
1 medium sized onion, chopped
salt, and pepper to taste

Boil the zucchini cores in salty water (you can start with whole zucchini if you like). Drain, squeeze, and chop. Add the rest of the ingredients and mix thoroughly. Drop by spoonfuls into about one inch of cooking oil. Remove when golden brown. Serve hot or cold.

MISBAHAT AD-DARWISH
"The Rosary of the Dervish"

2 big onions
6 potatoes
1 pound ground lamb
6 zucchini
1 teaspoon of butter
6 long eggplant
4 tomatoes
water
1 teaspoon tomato paste

Slice all the vegetables rather thinly. Fry each separately till half done. Make small balls or patties of the ground lamb and fry until brown. In a large saucepan, lay down a layer of onions, then a layer of potatoes, then of meat, zucchini, eggplants, tomatoes in that order. Pour in water to cover, add salt and pepper and butter. Place in medium oven and allow to cook just below boiling point for one hour.

DRIED FIG JAM

The Arabs make many kinds of jam, all more or less resembling those in the West. This one is different and well-worth trying. The mastic, or gum arabic, is available at drugstores or Arab grocers.

5 pounds of dried figs
5 pounds of sugar
1 tablespoon of aniseed (powdered)
½ teaspoon of cinammon
1 tablespoon of mastic (pounded)
5 tablespoons of lemon juice
½ cup of sesame seeds
2 cups of water

Clean, chop, wash and drain figs. Put sugar and aniseed with the water on heat, add lemon juice and stir till sugar is dissolved. Add the figs and boil over high heat for ten minutes; lower heat and boil another half hour. Brown sesame seeds lightly in frying pan without fat. Add sesame and cinnamon to figs while still over heat. Mix in mastic and take off heat. Put up in clean jars.

Flavored with Tradition:
Food from Saudi Arabia

Just over 50 years ago, Maj. R. E. Cheesman, British army officer and field naturalist, arrived on the eastern shore of the Arabian Peninsula to investigate the unmapped coastal area along the Bay of Salwa. Stowing part of his equipment aboard a fishing boat ordered to rendezvous with him each evening, he headed south from the village of al-'Uqair in the company of camel-driving Bedouins fresh from the interior. Early one morning the fishermen, thrashing about with sticks in shallow water, produced a catch they offered to share with the men on shore. The Bedouins, offended, said that they would rather eat a snake—for never having seen a fish before, how were they to know if in the law of the Koran the unfamiliar creature was *haram* or *halal*, forbidden or allowed?

Cheesman reported that the Bedouins ultimately relented, convinced, no doubt, that a fish was just a fish after all, and he considered the matter resolved. Yet, as recently as 10 years ago, sports teams from the Eastern Province along the Gulf coast had the words "*Akkalat samak! akkalat samak!*—fish eaters! fish eaters!" thrown at them when Najdis from the central regions were rooting for the home team.

In the land the explorers called "unknown Arabia," traditions die hard. But historically, tradition has been one thing to the eastern fishermen who roamed the Gulf, quite another to Bedouins of the central plateau of Najd, geographically isolated from alien contamination. And both stood apart from the customs of the more cosmopolitan Arab of the western cities beyond the tortuous rising mountains of the Hijaz, literally the "barrier."

Loyalty to custom and tradition is the virtue of all Middle East cooking, and many of the finest dishes of the Arabs' heritage are centuries old. Some are mentioned in pre-Islamic Arabic literature. Arab poets of the Middle Ages celebrate others—many of them relished today—in detailing the lavish banquets of the caliphs at Baghdad. Both peasant food and court cuisine spread with the marching armies of Islam, presumably adopting a herb or two along the way, and by now paternity claims are hard to prove. A dish one authority claims the Syrians took from Egypt, another is convinced the Greeks took from the Turks. Part of the table of present-day Saudi Arabia comes from this common culinary pool; part developed from the eastern, western, and inland traditions of the Peninsular Arabs themselves.

Nomads all over the Arab world speak proudly of their ancestors, the dignified old tribes of central Arabia renowned for their strength, courtesy and the selfless hospitality they introduced into a way of life otherwise austere. For centuries they clung to the food of the desert and the oasis: milk and meat, dates and imported rice. With this food the Bedouins of Najd structured their means of survival and their rituals. The Bedouins of today are members of the generation of change; Toyotas park beside their

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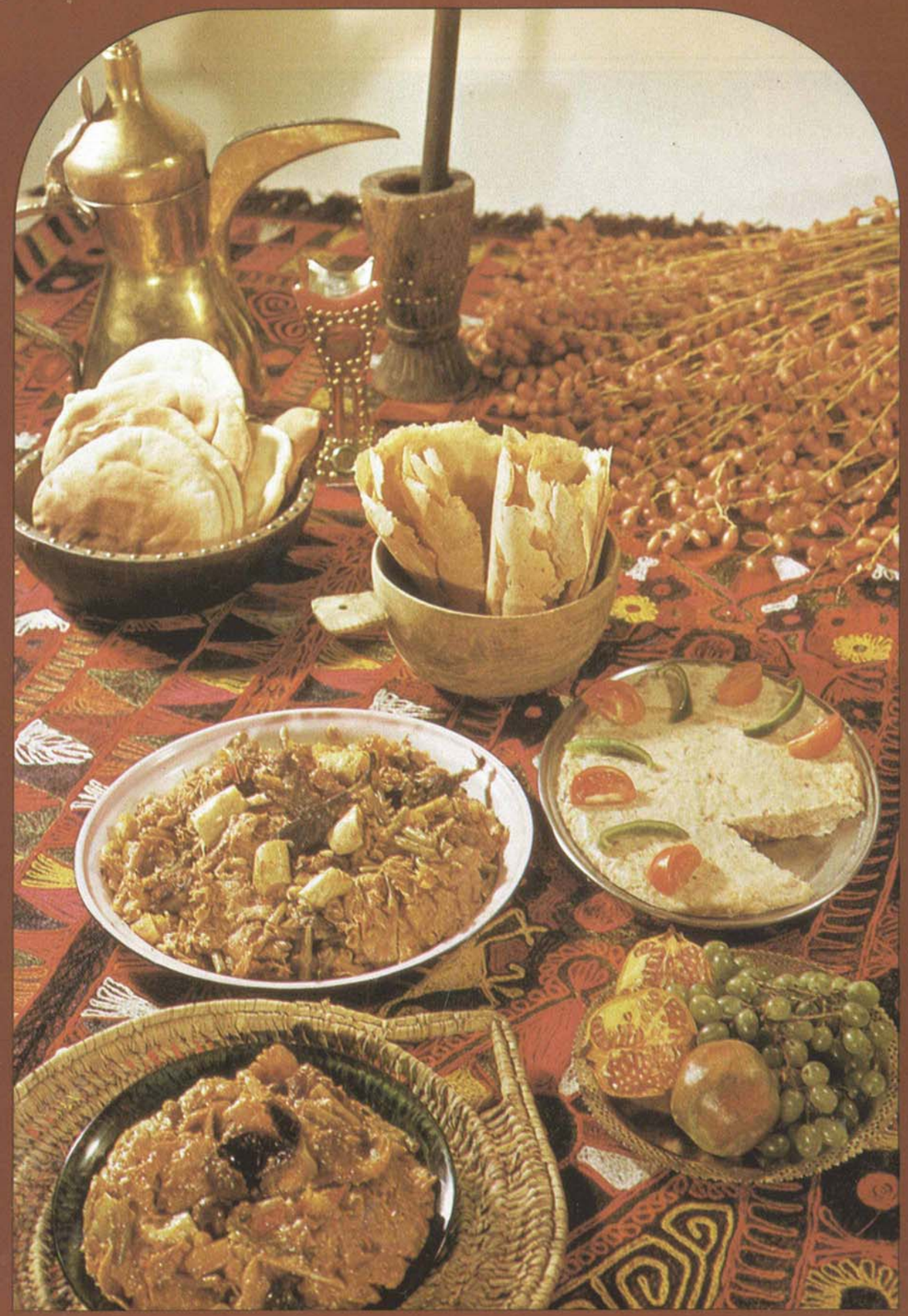

Roast lamb is traditional fare for all festive occasions. Here Saudi Oil Minister Shaykh Ahmad Zaki Yamani entertains his guests, Senator and Mrs Edward Kennedy.

tents. But they respect and still often follow the traditions of their people, and they recall with honor the way their fathers lived.

A Bedouin always had milk—milk from his camels, drunk fresh, or milk from his goats, made into buttermilk and curds. He always had dates, abundant and easily transported. If he was well-to-do he had rice, some flour, even coffee. And should a visitor of some standing arrive, the Bedouin host was obliged to slaughter a sheep and honor his guest with the classic Arab feast: trays heaped high with rice, succulent mutton, and flat rounds of unleavened bread. Sometimes there would be extra bowls for dates and for butter to dip them in, and little murmurs of satisfaction would greet this added richness. But in general the meal would be taken in silence, a sign of politeness to the host's food.

In the home of a settled town Najdi, the feast would likely be the more luxurious *kharuf mahshi*: baby lamb stuffed with rice, nuts and raisins, rubbed outside with a paste of onion crushed with cinnamon, cloves and cardamom and browned all over in bubbling *samn*, clarified cow or goat butter, before roasting. Rice might be the expensive *'ambar* variety, prized for the fragrance it exuded when aboil. All around the great center tray would be small plates of tomato, cucumber, cooked pumpkin, apricots and cuts of melon. At the end would come the coffee and the incense.

Foremost of the obligations of hospitality in Arabia is the preparation and serving of *qahwah 'Arabiyah*, Arab coffee, unsweetened but flavored with cardamom. Today the process is relegated to the kitchen, but in the old tradition it was man's work and something of a ceremony

whether conducted over Bedouin campfire or town hearth. For each occasion a handful of beans was roasted fresh, and the ring of the brass mortar and pestle with which they were pounded to powder was music to the ears of expectant guests. Pots of several sizes stood ready. Into one went the remainder of yesterdays batch, fresh water and, when that reached a boil, the fresh coffee. Lifting the pot from the fire just as it threatened to froth over, the host dropped a few crushed cardamom seeds into the brew to make it digestible, then quickly poured it into a smaller, polished pot where a piece of palm fiber stuffed into the spout served as strainer. The tiny, handleless Arab coffee cup is smaller than the Chinese teacup, and is only partly filled with a few steaming sips. Good manners prevent the guest from taking more than three servings. He signals when finished by shaking the empty cup with rapid little movements of the wrist, and he knows it is time to go when the host passes the *mabkhar*, or hand censer, trailing the filmy smoke of frankincense or scented wood.

The Bedouins have a saying that translates to . . . "he makes coffee from morn till night." It is a way of describing a generous man, and no greater praise can be given.

The date is the Arabs' universal staple. Nutritious and high in caloric value, it was the very means of survival for nomadic tribes when times were lean, and it is still the food with which the Bedouin or townsman is likely to begin and end his day. Dates and coffee are the traditional offering to a caller; dates stuffed with almonds are a popular confection; dates baked into tiny, sugared cookies known as *ma'mul* are essential to the proper celebration of 'Id al-Fitr, the festival that comes with the close of Ramadan, the month during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. And as it was the Prophet Muhammad's practice to break his fast with dates, so the Muslim of today will do so because, as he will say, "It feels more religious."

Hunayni, a date concoction prepared especially for wintertime breakfasts, is a classic dish of Najd. Pitted, ground dates are mixed over the fire with great quantities of butter; the mixture is thickened with flour of semolina, seasoned with cardamom, simmered and stirred until nearly stiff. The result is a rich dish sure to suffice until suppertime and prescribed for pale children and pregnant women. If the house and traditions were of "older days," the thickening agent would be bread taken fresh from the charcoal oven found in every kitchen and the dates from a big, square bin built into the corner to hold a year's supply. *Dibs*, the thick, sticky syrup that collected at the bottom, was drawn off by a spigot. *Dibs* from the bottom and fresh dates from the top made a combination considered absolutely ambrosial.

Habb, the Arabs' wheat, grows in the central highlands and the oases areas of Saudi Arabia. Just as the Lebanese and Turks have their *burghul*, the Saudi Arabs have *jarish*: wheat kernels, soaked, dried and crushed—much favored in Najd and the al-Hasa oasis of the Eastern Province as a rice substitute. *Jarish* may be simply boiled and served with a topping of chopped hot pepper and onion, or it may be browned in butter or oil and then cooked into a sort of pilaf with chunks of meat, chopped onion and tomato for the richly flavored dish called *mufallaq*.

Wheat country is also bread country, and unique to Najd are three dishes that might be labeled bread-fortified stews. All begin with lamb and a mixture of vegetables. The lamb is first braised with onion, salt, pepper and pinches of cinnamon and turmeric; then tomatoes, eggplant, beans, chunks of big, yellow-fleshed squash, *qar'*, and pieces of the little pale green zucchini, *kusah*, are added. The dishes are assembled for baking by alternating layers of the meat-vegetable mixture with thin layers of bread—circles of bread baked especially for the dish called *qursan*, layers of unbaked dough for *marquq*, and little, flat rounds of dough to simmer and float about, dumpling-like, in the sauce of the more liquid *mataziz*. Despite the similarity, each has its own staunch advocates, and they're hearty fare, all three.

Unless the month is Ramadan, elaborate sweets are not considered essential by the rather conservative Najdi, whose preference is more likely to be fruit—local apples, apricots and quinces, or succulent grapes, figs and pomegranates shipped from the fruit growing area of Tayif in the Western Province. There is, however, a regional "candy," and it's made from the strange, misshapen citrus called *utrunj*, a lumpy, overblown and rather grotesque lemon. The thick, cotton-like inner rind is cut into finger-length strips, and then simply marinated for about two hours in the juice of the fruit plus sugar and water.

The common denominator of the country's bread basket is the flat, round, barely leavened *khubz 'Arabi*, much the same whether a product of commercial bakers or the domed, charcoal-fired village ovens: hollow, with an inner pocket good for stuffing, and soft and chewy, good for absorbing sauces. In the east one also finds *tamis*: bigger, crustier, and punched with holes; in the west, *shurayk*, golden, lozenge-shaped, very light and soft, and *'aysh samuli*, a skinny loaf. In the Central Province is the variety known as *khubz ruqaq*, "worked bread," a Ramadan specialty elsewhere but in Najd made the whole year round. It's made of flour, salt, water and date syrup, *dibs*, and it's baked on a large, slightly convex black iron griddle. Starting with a ball of the somewhat gummy dough at one corner, the cook works it all across the surface with fast little sweeps of the heel of her hand—an amazingly dexterous procedure considering that the bread, if properly made, is the thickness of a cornflake. Quickly, as the bread heats through, she checks over the surface, picking off any lumps that might mar the complexion of the finished produce. Then, working fast, she loosens the crusty edges with a knife and flips the golden sheet free with a flourish. The bread is crisp and fragile when cooled, but while hot it is soft and easily folded. Small portions of hot *khubz ruqaq* are sometimes made into little egg-filled packets. The name for this savory, usually prepared for children, is *hinnuwah*. The word comes from "sympathy," and surely it is the cook, not the child, who deserves it.

When Major Cheesman landed on the Gulf coast to begin his first expedition, he stepped ashore where civilized man had lived 4,000 years before the beginning of the Christian era. Trade routes through the Gulf later linked the Indus Valley with the Tigris-Euphrates river plains, and caravans from the southwest corner of the Peninsula bore spices and incense to the eastern shore. Somewhere along this coast middlemen grew rich in the famed Chaldean port of Gerrha, whose ruins Cheesman dearly wished to find, as men still do. But the ancient cities vanished into time, and for centuries eastern Arabia knew little of the world beyond the Gulf, little food beyond the food of Gulf waters and the rice and dates of nearby oases.

The Arabian Gulf swarms with food fish. A few that once were highly prized are now seldom eaten: *na'ud*, shark, reputedly delicious if boiled for hours, and *lukhmah*, sting-ray, beaten with rice into a sort of puree. But the fat-fleshed grouper, *hamur*, the porgy, *shi'ri*, and king mackerel, *kan'ad*, are daily food up and down the coast, either made into a stew as humble or rich as the larder allows or fried and taken with rice. The rice might be *makbus*, pink from the addition of tomato paste, or *muhammar*, slightly ruddy and a bit crusty from either *dibs* or carmelized sugar with which it is cooked. More elegant is the dish *mashkhul*, made with tender, trout-sized gray *subayti*. The fish is slit open and filled with onions that have been sauteed in oil with ground cumin, cinnamon, turmeric and black pepper, a blend called *buharat* the Saudi housewife buys ready-mixed. Then fried whole in the same spice-flavored oil, the fish is presented with a garnish of limes atop a bed of rice.

The Gulf yields a skinny but succulent crab, *qubqub*, small catches of a variety of lobster locally called *'um ar-rubiyan*, "mother of the shrimp," and huge nets full of the fat, pink *rubiyan*, among the best shrimp in the world. With a bit of word play and a few spices one arrives at *murabyan*, a shrimp-rice casserole in which the shrimp is first fried with onions, garlic, chopped coriander, and a dried, black lime, *laymun aswad*, pierced to release its flavor. The black limes, hard as a rock and almost weightless, are important to cooks from Iraq to Iran and down to Oman, the source of most of those found in Saudi Arabian markets. Piquant, tart, used either whole or ground, they are to housewives of this area almost as indispensible as the onion.

Other regional favorites are *kubbat maraq*: balls of rice spiced with turmeric, pepper, cumin and dried lime are shaped around a center of fried ground meat, onion and parsley and set to simmer in a sauce flavored with tomato; and *fi qa'atah*: a three-layered dish served as rice on the bottom, meat in the middle and almonds on top. It's cooked, in fact, top side down, for the name literally means "at the bottom." The meat is very spicy: thick slices of lamb, occasionally veal, first rubbed with cumin, allspice, garlic, salt and pepper are hours later braised in water with cinnamon, cloves and cardamom. The rice is delicate, with only a touch of rose water infused with saffron sprinkled over the fine-grained Peshwari rice from Pakistan.

Street vendors in the Eastern Province offer a fried version of *mutabbaq*, a filled, hot savory more likely to be baked if made by a housewife in Hijaz, where it originated. In either case, *mutabbaq* has many, many layers of tissue-thin pastry, all folded around a filling of ground meat, chopped onions, minced *kurrath*, a long green leaf of the garlic family, and beaten eggs. There's also a banana-filled *mutabbaq* which Malaysian Muslims took back to their homeland after discovering it during their pilgrimage to Mecca.

Yellow split-pea flour is the basis of a tasty snack called by the simple and obviously borrowed name *kabab*. Yeast, grated potato, a small tomato, onion, hot green pepper, garlic, a bit of dried lime and a touch of dried coriander seed and cumin all add up to a very spicy dough. It sits for two hours

1. Kubbat maraq, *balls of rice flavored with turmeric and cumin, wrapped round a ground meat center and simmered in tomato sauce. The black object is dried lime, widely used for flavoring.*
2. Mashkhul, *trout-sized* zubayti, *filled with onion and spices, fried in oil and served with fresh limes.*
3. Qatayif, *pancakes stuffed with chopped nuts or cheese and served with syrup.*
4. Mufallaq, *pilau of crushed wheat with chunks of meat, chopped onion and tomato.*
5. Bedouin children help themselves to lamb and rice.

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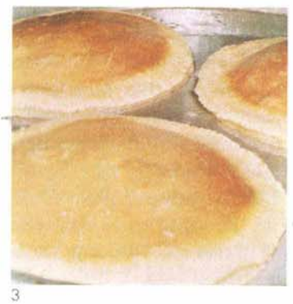

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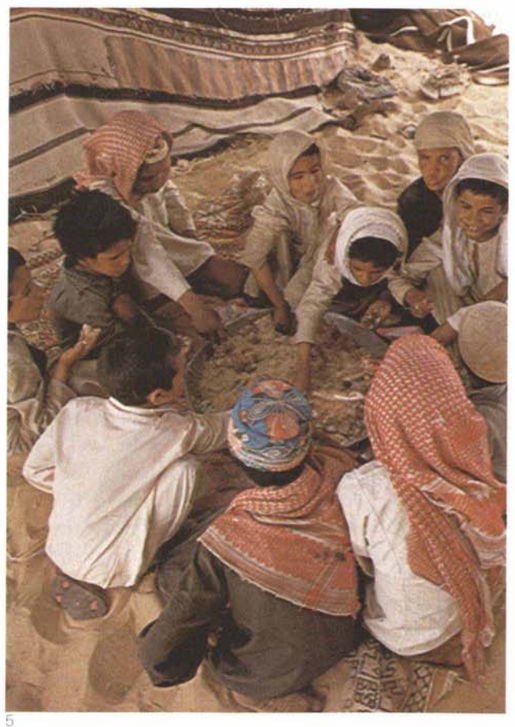

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and then is fried by teaspoonsful dropped into hot oil; the golden balls are a marvelous blend of flavors and positively featherweight.

Saliq, a simple, bland dish, is the best known of all the rice dishes of Saudi Arabia. It's almost like a hot rice pudding, the rice first half-cooked in meat or chicken broth and then with milk, stirred and simmered for about an hour until soft. It must be flavored with cardamom and absolutely must be scented with a hint of *mustaka* (gum arabic), the aromatic resin of the mastic tree. *Mustaka* is more expensive and far more delicate than *luban*, frankincense, but like it recalls the days of the incense trade. *Saliq* is most typically served with meat or fowl and the universal Arab salad: parsley, onion, hot green pepper—all finely chopped, lemon juiced and salted.

Finally *harisah*: an ancient dish and one that is almost a cult food on the eastern shores of Saudi Arabia. Elsewhere the name is also applied to a sweet, but in the Eastern Province it's wheat and meat and it suffers no lukewarm opinions. It takes on character when described as made in a tiny Gulf village 30 years ago! The wheat was beaten until finely crushed in a hollowed-out section of palm-tree trunk used especially for this purpose. Then sifted free of husks, the grain would be placed in a large cooking pot with water, salt and chunks of mutton, and the pot nested among large stones heated by a fire in the sand—and left from morning to sundown. The cooking done, a soupy liquid was removed from the top and the thick mix beaten with a flat paddle, over and over, slapping again and again against the side of the vessel. Hard, steady work—at least a half-hour—the beating would cease only when the *harisah* was com-

KABSA
Made with Chicken

1 lb. American rice
1 frying chicken, cut into eight pieces
¼ cup corn oil
2 medium onions, sliced
5 cloves garlic, pounded to a pulp
1 can tomato puree (2½ ozs.)
2 medium tomatoes, chopped
2 medium carrots, grated
grated rind of one orange
6 cloves
6 cardamom pods
4 sticks cinnamon
4 tbsps. raisins
4 tbsps. almonds, soaked and split

Wash the rice and cover with water to soak for at least 15 minutes before cooking. Sautee the onion in oil until it begins to brown. Add the chicken pieces, tomato puree, chopped tomatoes and garlic and stir for about five minutes over low heat. Add three cups hot water, the spices, salt and pepper to taste, the grated carrot and orange rind. Cook about 20–25 minutes, until the chicken is done.

Remove the chicken and keep warm. Add the rice to the sauce and cook slowly over low heat for about 15 minutes, or until cooked dry. Arrange the chicken on top of the rice on a platter, and decorate with the raisins and almonds. Serve hot.

MUFALLAQ

3 cups jarish *(crushed wheat)*
4½ cups water
1 lb. lamb or beef cut into large chunks
2 onions, chopped
salt and pepper to taste
2 tomatoes, chopped, or 1 small can (2½ ozs.) tomato puree

Wash the wheat and soak for two hours in water to cover. Brown the meat in oil or shortening, add the chopped tomato, salt, pepper and 1 cup of the water. Simmer until the meat is tender and set aside. Drain the wheat and fry it gently in oil or shortening, stirring constantly, until it begins to turn color. Add the meat mixture and the remaining 3½ cups of water to the wheat, cover, and cook until all the water is absorbed and the wheat is fluffy. Fry the onion and place it in a depression in the center of the wheat. Cover and allow the *mufallaq* to steam over a very low flame for about ½ hour. Stir the onion into the wheat and turn the mixture out onto a platter, picking out the biggest of the meat pieces to place across the top.

KABSA

'AYSH ABU LAHAM

Bread:
1 lb. flour (half all-purpose, half unbleached)
5 rounded tbsps. shortening
2 eggs, beaten
1 tsp. dried yeast
½ cup water
1 tsp. salt
1 tbsp. fennel seeds
1 tsp. black caraway seeds
Filling:
½ lb. ground mutton
½ cup chopped kurrath
Sauce:
4 tbsps. tahina
1 tbsp. vinegar
⅓ cup water
4 cloves garlic, mashed

Blend the flour, salt and shortening until the mixture resembles pie crust, then pour over it the yeast softened in water and the beaten eggs. Grind the fennel seeds in a blender and add them along with the black caraway, left whole. Mix the dough well with the hands, knead briefly and place in a bowl, greasing the top of the dough with shortening. Place the bowl in a warm spot for about four hours, until the dough doubles.

Knead the dough briefly a second time, then roll out and shape into a 12-inch round pan, building up the edges to make a rim. Dough should be about an inch thick in the middle. Bake in a 350-degree oven about 45 minutes.

Fry the mutton, drain off the fat, and add salt and pepper to taste. Turn off the heat and add the chopped *kurrath*, allowing it to cook in the steam. (The tops of spring onions may be substituted.)

Blend the sauce ingredients and season with salt and pepper. Place the cooked meat in the center of the bread and pour the sauce over the meat. The sauce recipe may be doubled and half used to pass as a side dish.

pletely blended, amorphous, somewhat glutinous. Nothing remained now but to spread the stiff porridge about an inch deep on a platter and place a small portion of oil in a slight depression at the center. Saudi Arabs either love *harisah* or leave it. And in the Western world there's nothing quite like it, except maybe haggis, without the bagpipes.

Mecca has for centuries been the most cosmopolitan city of Arabia. Even before the time of the Prophet it was an important center of the caravan trade, bringing supplies from India and the Far East up from the port of Aden to Suez and the Mediterranean world. With the coming of Islam, Mecca and the other cities of the Hijaz rose to world significance just when the rest of the Peninsula was beginning to slide behind the veil of mystery. Turks, Afghans, Syrians, Egyptians, Indians, Berbers and Indonesians on the annual pilgrimage gave Mecca a cosmopolitan air—and they lent new varieties and flavors to the food of the Hijaz.

Paradoxically, the best time to sample Hijazi cuisine is during Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and the evening meal is lavish.

At the end of the long day of hunger and, more trying, thirst, the Ramadan fast is broken with a few sips of water. Meccans drink water from Zamzam, the well revealed to Haggar by the angel Gabriel according to tradition, eat a few dates, and sip *qamar ad-din*, a thickish drink prepared from sheets of dried, pressed apricots, chopped and pureed with water. The meal itself begins, always, with a thick, nourishing soup made from soaked wheat and meat stock, rich with chunks of lamb, sharpened with a bit of fresh tomato, and spiced with cinnamon, cardamom and, indispensible here, the dry, curled, grayish leaf of tree wormwood, *shaybah*, "old man." Then come the brown Egyptian *ful*, beans cooked with tomato, onion and oil, and next the beloved *sambusak*, paper-thin pastry made up in triangular shapes stuffed with ground meat, onion, and hot with the pungent leafy coriander, *kuzbarah*, or the long, spike-like green of the garlic family, *kurrath*. So much for starters.

The meal may continue with *shakshukah*, eggs gently cooked on a bed of fried onion, green pepper and tomato, followed by one or two main dishes. There might be *kabsah*: chicken or lamb sauteed with onion, garlic, fresh tomato, tomato puree, grated carrot and grated orange rind. When the meat is cooked, it is removed and rice goes into the pot to simmer in the rich sauce. All put together for serving, it takes a garnish of raisins and almonds.

'Aysh abu laham is a local specialty the Hijazis describe as "something like pizza." A leavened dough, egg-rich and flavored with seeds of *shamar*, fennel, and *habbah sawda*, black caraway, it is baked in the shape of a thick-bottomed pie shell, then filled with fried mutton, chopped *kurrath* or spring onion, and topped with a sauce made from *tahinah*, sesame seed puree.

There might be a fish dish, perhaps *hut sijan*: tiny perch, slit open, seasoned with garlic, lemon and cumin; fried and eaten whole; or *samak humar*: fish baked with a sweet-sour sauce made from dried tamarind; or a large *hamur* (grouper) laid open and covered with onion, tomato, garlic, hot pepper and cumin—baked and then served with lemon, sometimes *laymun mukhallal*, quarters of lemons pickled with vinegar and turmeric.

A sweet, one soft and cold, is the customary way to end such a banquet, either the elegant *mahallibiyah*, a delicate pudding of ground rice and milk, ever so lightly flavored with orange-blossom or rose water and decorated with almonds and pistachios; or *sagudanah*, tapioca or sago pudding similarly scented and flavored.

But for special guests more sweets must be served, and there are many that are made especially for the Ramadan season. *Luqmat al-qadi*, "judge's morsels," spoonsful of soft, light dough, sometimes lightly spiced with cardamom and saffron, fried gently in oil and then dipped in syrup; *qatayif*: store-bought pancakes stuffed at home with nuts or cheese, then fried and covered with syrup; *basbusah*: semolina cooked with sugar syrup, baked into squares and sometimes served with a topping of *qishtah*, the Hijazi's answer to the Englishman's clotted cream; or *kunafah*: top and bottom layers of pastry that resembles shredded wheat, a middle layer of white goat cheese, butter and pine nuts, and over all after it's baked—once again—sugar syrup scented with rose water. The well-known sweet tooth of the Arabs is indulged in Ramadan, and never are rewards better earned.

Genuine Saudi food, but for a few of the sweets, is rarely to be found in restaurants. Saudi food is food of the home, where cooking and eating are intensely social activities. And so it falls to the housewife, herself fasting, to spend her days preparing these splendid Ramadan evening meals. There's an old Arabic proverb—"The woman killed herself with work, yet the feast lasted only a day!"

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