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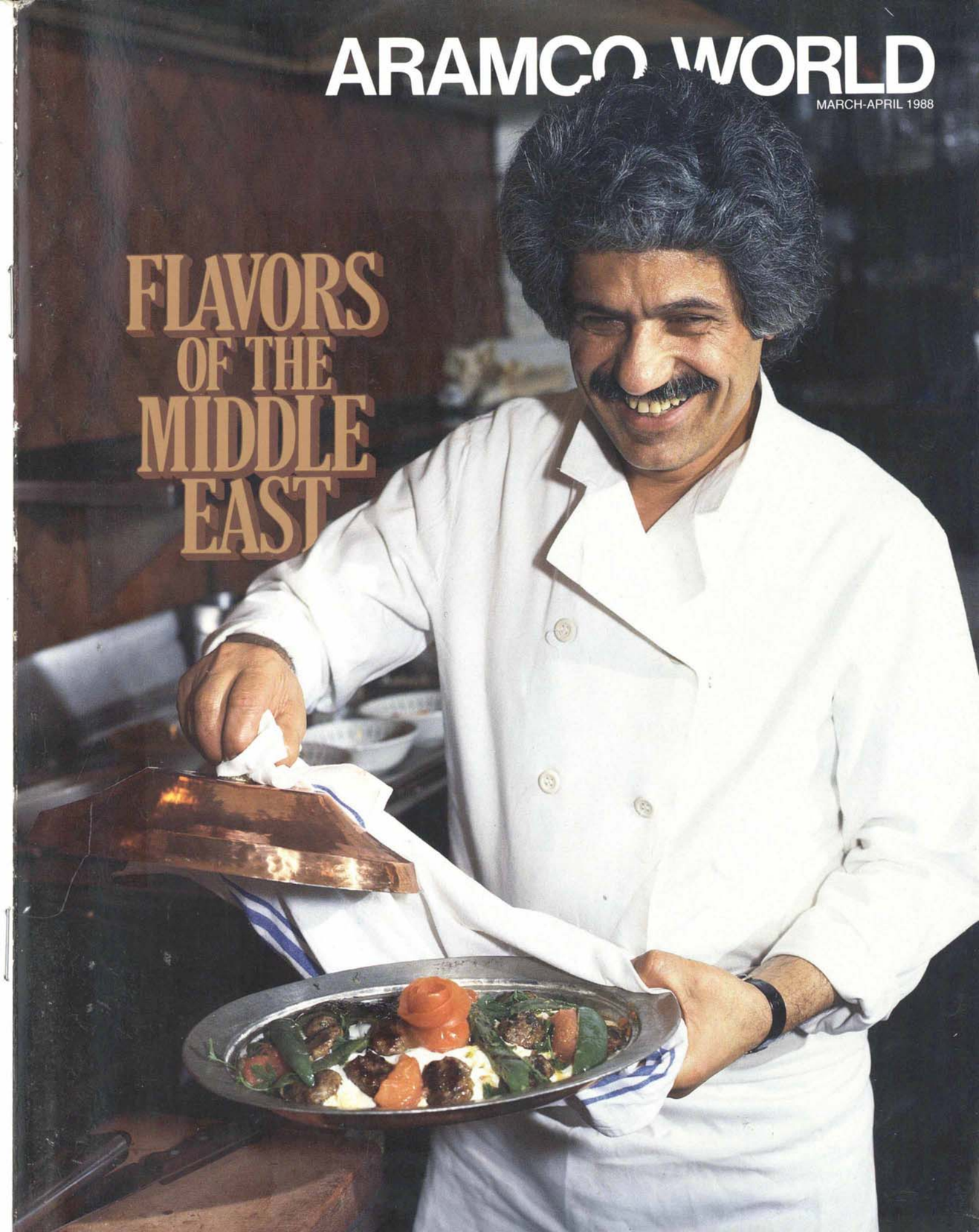
MARCH-APRIL 1988

FLAVORS OF THE MIDDLE EAST



وَهُوَ ٱلَّذِيٓ أَنشَأَ جَنَّٰتٍ
مَّعۡرُوشَٰتٍ وَغَيۡرَ مَعۡرُوشَٰتٍ
وَٱلنَّخۡلَ وَٱلزَّرۡعَ مُخۡتَلِفًا
أُكُلُهُۥ وَٱلزَّيۡتُونَ وَٱلرُّمَّانَ
مُتَشَٰبِهًا وَغَيۡرَ مُتَشَٰبِهٍۚ

HE IT IS WHO BROUGHT INTO BEING
GARDENS TRELLISED AND UNTRELLISED,
DATE PALMS, AND CROPS DIVERSE IN PRODUCE,
AS WELL AS OLIVES AND POMEGRANATES;
ALL RESEMBLING EACH OTHER
AND YET DIFFERENT FROM EACH OTHER.

THE QUR'AN, CHAPTER VI (AL-AN'AM, LIVESTOCK), VERSE 141

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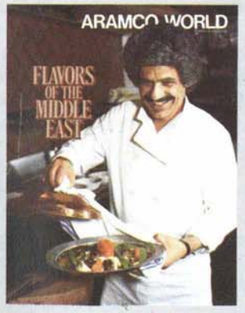

Cover: An ingredient as important as lamb, onion, cumin and thyme is the long tradition that flavors Kāzim Akkuş's dish of grilled meatballs in yogurt sauce. Like thousands of chefs before him, Akkuş left his native Bolu to carry Turkish cooking abroad. Other major strands in Middle Eastern cuisine are the Arab, North African and Persian traditions. Back cover: Green and black olives, sesame seed and spices flavor much of the Middle East. Photos: Bob Wilkins.

◀ God's bountiful provision of food crops to humankind is extolled in this passage from the Qur'an. Calligraphy by Makki al-Bahrani.

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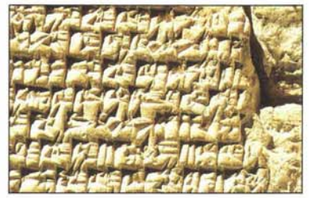
RODEN




LAWTON

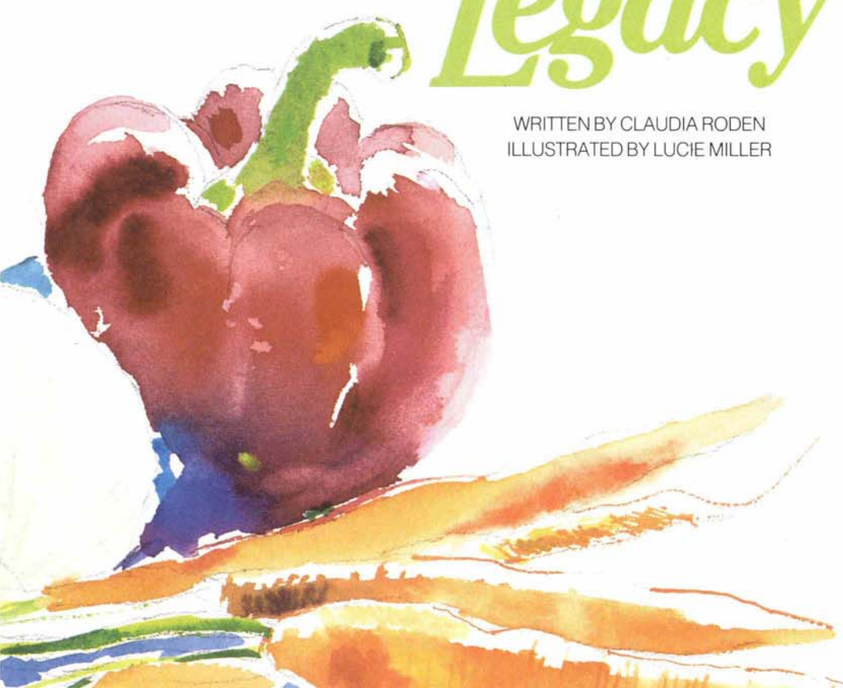

BURGOYNE


PETERSON


ARNDT

MIDDLE EASTERN COOKING
The Legacy

WRITTEN BY CLAUDIA RODEN
ILLUSTRATED BY LUCIE MILLER



Great value is attached to cooking in the Middle East. In that world of strong family ties, large clans and women at home, hospitality and gregariousness are deeply entrenched; offering food is the central act in the highly developed art of pleasing.

The cooking is different in every town, every village and indeed in every family: There are rural foods and urban ones, foods which belong to the desert, others which belong to the mountain, the plain or the seacoast, nomadic foods and street foods. Middle Eastern cooking outside the Middle East shows its own variations, too. But there are nonetheless many general characteristics which all these foods, and all the countries, share.

It is a very sensual kind of cooking, using herbs, spices and aromatics generously. Certain methods, like skewer cooking over charcoal or long, slow simmering in unglazed covered pots, are typical of the whole region. All the countries have rice and wheat dishes, stuffed vegetables, pies wrapped in paper-thin pastry, meatballs, thick omelettes, cold vegetables cooked in oil, scented rice puddings, nut-filled pastries, fritters soaked in syrup and many other common elements. You find raisins with pine nuts everywhere, garnishes of chopped pistachios and almonds, and the same food combinations, such as chick-peas with spinach.

It is a shared history, including that of two great world empires, which has brought unity to the kitchens of the Middle East. The spread of Islam and the establishment of an enormous Islamic state stretching across Asia, North Africa and the Mediterranean was the most important factor in the development of a gastronomic tradition comparable to that of France and China.

As the state grew, the Arabs brought to each new region their own tastes as well as those of the countries they had already conquered. Styles of cooking traveled within this vast area with the massive migrations of people; large-scale transport brought into the cities, and even into distant parts of the empire, local produce such as truffles from the desert, olive oil from Syria, dates from Iraq and coffee from Arabia. Crops such as rice, sugar, eggplants (aubergines) and spinach, originally from outside the state, spread throughout it.

The Abassid period, from the ninth to the 12th century, when Islam was the most powerful influence in the world and Baghdad was the political and cultural hub of the state, saw great marriages of cooking styles and great refinements in eating habits. A prosperous cosmopolitan ruling elite had emerged whose members led a life of luxury. Everyone – poet, astronomer, physician and prince – took an interest in gastronomy and dietetics. Writings on food were abundant and popular. The taste for spiced foods and sweet things appeared then: Before that, spices had been only merchandise. Aromatics were used in tiny quantities but in great number and in a variety of combinations. Cooking was transformed into an art which reached magnificent heights.

The banquets at the courts of the caliphs of Baghdad were proverbial for their lavishness. A court cuisine had developed which made use of expensive ingredients and elaborate and sophisticated techniques, and in which visual appeal was extremely important. It amalgamated the peasant dishes of the area and the Bedouin foods of the desert with those of Syria – Damascus had been the capital of the empire before Baghdad – and, especially, of Persia.

The enormous Ottoman Empire, which expanded right into the heart of Europe from the 14th century and into the 20th, produced a new court cuisine in its turn. The sultans' courts became notorious for their luxury and their devotion to the pleasures of the table. The imperial kitchens catered for some 4,000 or 5,000 people on the days the Divan (cabinet) met, and for up to 10,000 on special occasions such as the reception of a foreign ambassador. An army of cooks was required and that, in turn, required codification: Strict rules were adopted so that chefs could more easily train apprentices, and these rules formed the basis of a classic Ottoman cuisine.

In the early days of the Ottomans, all the palace cooks were slaves who had been captured, bought or given as gifts by Venetian traders. A cooking school was established for their children. The position of cook was important, even glorious, and it meant that, by ingratiating themselves with their noble employers or even the sultan, individual cooks could rise to become part of the ruling class. Köprülü Mehmet Paşa, the Ottoman Empire's most powerful vizier, began his career as a cook.

The first Turkish-born cooks employed in Topkapı Palace were recruited as camp cooks in the mountain region of Bolu, in northwestern Anatolia, where the sultans went hunting. It became the tradition that every boy of Bolu left at the age of 13 to work in the palace kitchen or in the houses of the nobles in Istanbul.

The type of cooking that was passed on grew out of an amalgam of traditions borrowed from the empire's conquered territories. The tastes of Byzantium and of the Arabs predominated, and nomadic Turkish foods combined with Chinese and Mongolian ones passed on through Turkestan. The result was the sophisticated cuisine that spread from the Danube to the tip of the Arabian Peninsula, from the Balkans to the shores of North Africa and to parts of what is now the USSR – often by means of the battalions of cooks that marched with the Ottoman armies.

The cooking of the Middle East can be broadly divided into four main general styles: Arab, Iranian, North African and Turkish.

Iranian cooking, based on rice, is the most complex and the least known. Arab cooking is highly developed in Syria, where Aleppo is considered the great gastronomic city, and in Lebanon – one of only two Middle Eastern countries to have developed a restaurant tradition. (The other is Turkey.) It is Lebanon, with her emigrant cooks and restaurateurs, which has brought the grilled meats and *mazzah* of the Arab restaurant menu to the attention of the world. This menu evolved 70 years ago in the region of Zahlah, in the open-air cafes along the cascading river Bardawni. The cafes, which filled the valley, vied to attract customers with an ever varied selection of appetizers, which were in fact the local village foods.

Moroccan food is the richest and most varied of North Africa, and that which has not been influenced at all by France. It illustrates the kind of kaleidoscopic diversity that exists in the Middle East. The national dish, *kuskus* (couscous), is of Berber origin. Many other dishes were brought by the Arabs in waves of invasions which started in the seventh century; they have remained almost unchanged since the Middle Ages. Still other dishes have their origin in Spain and bear witness to the long Muslim domination of that country. The food of Marakesh is Berber with an African element, while the bourgeois cooking of Fez, the dominant cuisine, is more Andalusian, as is that of Tetouan. And on the Atlantic side of the country certain strategic locations reveal the Portuguese incursions of the 15th and 16th centuries. Food in the mountain regions is predominantly Berber, while the desert has the usual food of the nomadic Arab tribesmen, based on dates. There is hardly any Ottoman influence except in Tetouan, where there was an exchange of cooks when the Ottoman army stopped

There is great regional diversity in Turkey, but the classic cooking we know abroad belongs to Istanbul. Despite the diversity, restaurants all over modern Turkey offer the same menu of meat and appetizers because professional cooks, who still mostly come from the region of Bolu, cook the same dishes in the same way. It is called *saray* (palace) cooking. The food trade is highly specialized, and its division into guilds is a legacy of the rigid hierarchy and elaborate organization of the imperial Ottoman kitchens, where butchers, grocers, icemen, collectors of herbs, soupmakers, confectioners and bakers were all organized into separate corps with their own quarters and sometimes even their own mosques.

Finally, each of these general kinds of Middle Eastern cooking is cut across by other divisions. The cities of Iraq, for example, each exhibit the effects of different culinary influences – Iranian in one, Turkish in another, Syrian and Indian in a third and fourth. In another example, while the cooking of Istanbul is like that of Cairo and Jerusalem – they were also major Ottoman centers in their day – it is different from that of other Turkish cities whose imperial role was less important.

All these currents and connections have to do with the centers of power and the network of influence of the historical Middle East. Today, picking up a fork is as much a historical act – and as potentially illuminating – as picking up a spade at a Middle Eastern archeological site.

Claudia Roden is the author of A Book of Middle Eastern Food, *published by Knopf in the United States and, in a new edition, by Viking in Britain. Her latest book is* Mediterranean Cookery, *which accompanies the BBC television series of the same name, and is also published by Knopf in the United States.*

MESOPOTAMIAN MENUS

WRITTEN BY JOHN LAWTON
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF
THE BRITISH MUSEUM TRUSTEES, LONDON,
YALE BABYLONIAN COLLECTION
AND ANDRÉ MARTIN, PARIS.

"Carefully lay out the fowls on a platter; spread over them the chopped pieces of gizzard and pluck, as well as the small sêpêtu *breads which have been baked in the oven; sprinkle the whole with sauce, cover with the prepared crust and send to the table."*

ANDRÉ MARTIN

Pie à la Paris, 1988? No!
Baking à la Babylon, 1700 BC.

This 3,700-year-old recipe is for a meat pie baked in an unleavened crust, as pictured at left. Stirred into the dough were various condiments and aromatic ingredients that enhanced the taste. The pie's filling was composed of small fowls – we don't know whether they were wild or domestic fowl, land-, water- or seabirds – cooked in a spicy sauce with their own gizzards and pluck, or livers, hearts and lungs. The result must have been a little like giblet gravy. And when the dish was served, it was garnished with small flat bread loaves that were also specially flavored – not too different from the bread stuffing we eat with fowl.

Assyrian King Ashurbanipal dines lavishly in this seventh-century BC bas-relief from the North Palace of Nineveh.

A dish like that, though not necessarily to everyone's taste today, was certainly no mere mess of pottage. Indeed, the Mesopotamians, according to ancient art and texts, had a large and gastronomically advanced menu. The land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, today part of Iraq, was apparently the birthplace of *haute cuisine* as well as a cradle of civilization.

One text that has come down to us is a Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual dictionary, recorded in cuneiform script on 24 stone tablets about 1900 BC. It lists terms in the two ancient Mesopotamian languages for over 800 different items of food and drink. Included are 20 different kinds of cheese, over 100 varieties of soup and 300 types of bread – each with different ingredients, filling, shape or size.

Other archaeological evidence suggests that a complete shopping list of available Mesopotamian foodstuffs would be at least twice as long: A stone bas-relief discovered at Nineveh, for example, shows servants carrying choice delicacies – among them grasshoppers *en brochette* – to the royal table, while a satirical text about meat-filled intestine casings indicates that the Mesopotamians made, and presumably ate, the world's first known sausage.

Records of deliveries to the royal kitchens at Ur include suckling pigs, woodpigeons, ducks, lambs and geese. Other texts list many kinds of fresh- and salt-water fish, the preferred kinds being those raised in the reservoirs which were part of Mesopotamia's intricate irrigation system.

Mesopotamia was much more fertile in ancient times than it is today. Chickpeas and lentils – still important crops in today's Syria, Iraq and Jordan – head one Sumerian listing of foods that grew there. But the cornerstone of the Mesopotamian diet appears to have been the onion family – including leeks, shallots and garlic. The Sumerians also ate lettuce and cucumber, and apples, pears, grapes, figs, pistachios and pomegranates were widely grown.

The Sumerians also used a wide range of spices and herbs, including coriander, cumin and watercress, says Belgian scholar Henri Limet. That indicates, he says, that at least the upper classes enjoyed cuisine that was not only varied in its ingredients but refined in its preparation.

Nonetheless, the actual dishes the Mesopotamian peoples ate, and how they cooked them, remained a mystery until recently. Although Sumerian lexicographical lists and economic records indicate that a wide range of foodstuffs was consumed, not a single recipe existed from this early Mesopotamian period.

Indeed, the earliest cookbook we knew about – and it is more of a menu reference list than a step-by-step guide – is *De Re Coquinaria*, a Roman work probably compiled in the fourth century, a good 20 centuries after the Mesopotamian kingdoms flourished. Lacking information, scholars had depicted the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia as consumers of nothing more interesting than sorry mushes.

That was the case until eminent French Assyriologist Jean Bottéro, himself an accomplished chef, succeeded in deciphering three cracked, caramel-colored clay tablets written in Akkadian around 1700 BC. Though his predecessors had thought they contained pharmaceutical formulas, the tablets in fact recorded the world's oldest extant recipes, revealing a varied Mesopotamian cuisine of striking richness, sophistication and artistry.

The hand-size tablets include recipes for spicy meat and vegetable stews (See box, page nine) of gazelle, kid, pigeon, partridge and turnip, as well as for pies and garnishes that suggest, says Bottéro, "so much refinement in dealing with matters of the palate" that we must now accept that the Mesopotamians had a "scientifically-based, learned cuisine."

The best preserved of the tablets measures a little more than 12 by 16 centimeters (4¾ by 6½ in.), and features 21 meat-based and four vegetable-based stews, identified very much as dishes are today by their main ingredient ("stew of stag"), their appearance ("glistening" or "crumbly") or their place of origin: An "Assyrian stew" comes from the northern part of the country, while an "Elamite stew" is borrowed from neighbors in what is now the southwestern corner of Iran.

Telegraphic and concise, these recipes are not for the culinary amateur. Often just a few lines long, they summarize essential steps and ingredients, laconically ignoring quantities and cooking times, which their users were apparently expected to know from experience. A far cry from the cookbooks of today, they were not meant to guide the housewife, Bottéro believes, but mainly to standardize and even ritualize cooking procedures. In 1700 BC, after all, writing – and therefore also reading – was a professional rather than a general skill.

The two other tablets, however, are much more detailed and scrupulous in

BRITISH MUSEUM

Cooks at work in the royal kitchens of Ashurbanipal, shown in a seventh-century BC stone carving from Nineveh.

describing the various cooking operations. Unfortunately, they are full of breaks and illegible portions; few of the recipes are complete. They include mainly bird dishes, but also deal in detail with various cereal and vegetable side dishes.

Preparation of these meals was complex, calling in different recipes for operations like mixing, sprinkling, slicing, squeezing, pounding, steeping, shredding, crumbling, straining and marinating. Along with the number of steps involved, this complexity implies the availability of a wide selection of kitchen implements and ample culinary installations – both features more likely to be found in a temple or palace than in a private household.

Heat for cooking was provided primarily by an oven – although grilled and roasted meat were also common. Bread and pastry were baked in the oven and pots were placed over the oven's opening to bring liquids to the boil. Two vessels were invented, or refined, by the Mesopotamians to allow cooking in a liquid medium: the metal cauldron, for quick, pre-cooking steps such as browning, and a closed clay pot for simmering.

"All these details," says Bottéro, writing in a recent issue of *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, "show how far the Babylonians had developed the art of cooking, clearly to satisfy refined and gastronomical concerns."

The Mesopotamians, for example, prepared a fermented sauce, which they called *siqqu*, from fish, shellfish and grasshoppers for both kitchen and table use. They also had knowledge of the lactic fermentation needed to make cream cheese.

In their cooking, spices abound. No recipe contains fewer than three condiments, some contain as many as 10 – all added with care and combined into a blend of often complementary flavors.

"These combinations," says Bottéro, "obviously presume a demanding and refined palate, betraying an authentic preoccupation with the gastronomic arts."

Bottéro spent several years studying the three recipe tablets, which are part of Yale University's 40,000-piece Babylonian Collection, the largest assemblage of Mesopotamian antiquities in the United States. Acquired by Yale in 1933, baked in a kiln to preserve them in 1942, and copied by hand onto paper in 1952, the tablets had not received much attention until recently. Now they are among the collection's most talked-about pieces; just looking at them, reported the *New Haven Register* imaginatively, "you almost can smell a 4,000-year-old leg of lamb bubbling in a sauce thick with mysterious Mesopotamian herbs."

The staff of the French magazine *Actuel* carried imagination into practice recently to cook, photograph and eat the pie whose recipe is on page five. They called it "a real treat," but Bottéro, who has always refused to put the recipes to the test himself, is not impressed.

For one thing, the Assyriologist-chef believes, the Mesopotamians' concept of good food was not only worlds away from ours in time, but also in taste. They liked their food soaked in fats and oils, seemed obsessed with every member of the onion family and may have used much less salt than we do today.

Additionally, says Bottéro, truly recreating the Mesopotamian dishes is practically impossible because of the difficulty in matching the original ingredients precisely, and because of the tantalizing shorthand in which the recipes were written. In fact, he confided in a letter to Jack Sasson, who translated his findings into English, "I would not wish such meals on any save my worst enemies."

But Bottéro is convinced that the Mesopotamians – and not only Mesopotamian royalty – enjoyed them.

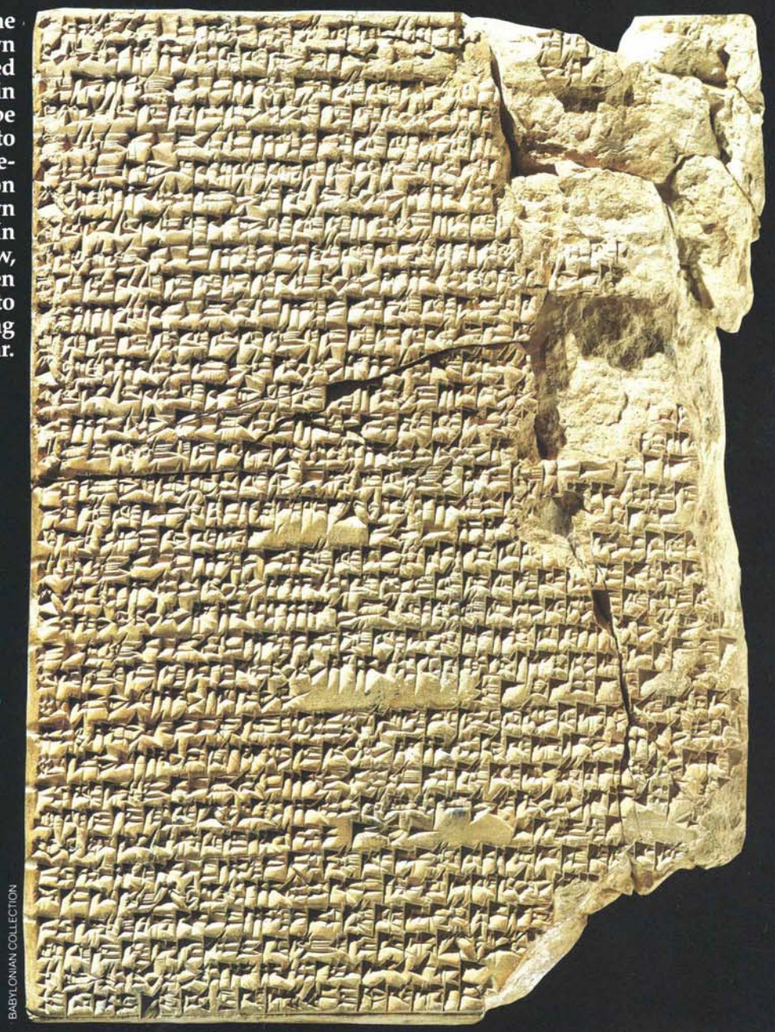
"It is my opinion," he wrote in the *The Journal of the American Oriental Society*, "that in any given culture, imagination and refinement, whether culinary or otherwise, are by themselves easily contagious. We might imagine, therefore, that even small households must have introduced some experimentation into their everyday eating, within the limits of their economic capabilities.

"In other words, I do not believe that the cuisine of even the most modest of [Mesopotamian] households is necessarily reflected in the sorry mushes and doleful mastications to which we Asyriologists have consigned them so sadistically."

John Lawton is a contributing editor of Aramco World.

A BABYLONIAN BANQUET

These three of the world's oldest known recipes were recorded 3,700 years ago in Akkadian by a scribe who used reed styli to make cuneiform (wedge-shaped) impressions on the clay tablet, shown actual size, at right. In the translations below, amplifications have been added in brackets to make the fuller meaning of the originals clear.



BABYLONIAN COLLECTION

KID STEW

Singe head, legs and tail over flame [before putting in pot]. Meat [in addition to kid] is needed, [preferably mutton to sharpen the flavor]. Bring water to boil. Throw in fat. Squeeze onion, *samîdu* [a plant probably of the onion family, and] garlic [to extract juices, add to pot with] blood and soured milk. [Add] an equal amount of raw *šuhutinnu* [another plant probably of the onion family] and serve.

TĂRRU-BIRD STEW

[Besides the *tărru* birds, which may have been pigeon, quail or partridge,] meat from a fresh leg of mutton is needed. Boil the water, throw fat in. Dress the *tărru* [and place in pot]. Add coarse salt as needed. [Add] hulled cake of malt. Squeeze onions, *samîdu*, leek, garlic [together] and [add to pot along with] milk. After [cooking and] cutting up the *tărru*, plunge them [to braise] in stock [from the pot]. Then place them back in the pot [in order to finish cooking]. To be brought out for carving.

BRAISED TURNIPS

Meat is not needed. Boil water. Throw fat in. [Add] onion, dorsal thorn [name of unknown plant used as seasoning], coriander, cumin and *kanašû* [a legume]. Squeeze leek and garlic and spread [juice] on dish. Add onion and mint.

FOR STARTERS

Mazzah – Middle Eastern hors d'oeuvres – range from the inspired simplicity of ripe cantaloupe slices served with pieces of salty *feta* cheese, through multitudinous salads, pickles, vegetables and dips, to elaborate preparations like herb-stuffed sardines grilled in vine leaves. Many a diner has browsed his way to the discovery that *mazzah* alone make an ample, delicious and various meal. Here are three stars from this culinary constellation: *tabbulah*, the salad of parsley, mint and cracked wheat that is one of the best-known *mazzah* outside the Arab world; *baba ghannuj*, also called *mutabbal*, a smoky-flavored eggplant dip; and green bell peppers stuffed with a spiced rice mixture, strangely refreshing when served cool.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BOB WILKINS

Chopping vegetables and herbs for tabbulah.

Combining burghul *with other ingredients.*

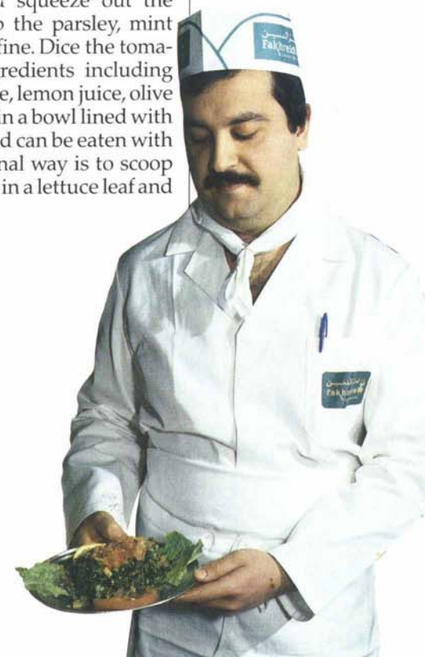
Adding olive oil before mixing. Opposite, a lavish table of seafood mazzah *including fish* kubbah *and smoked roe, prepared by Lucullus Seafood Restaurant, London.*

PARSLEY AND CRACKED WHEAT SALAD

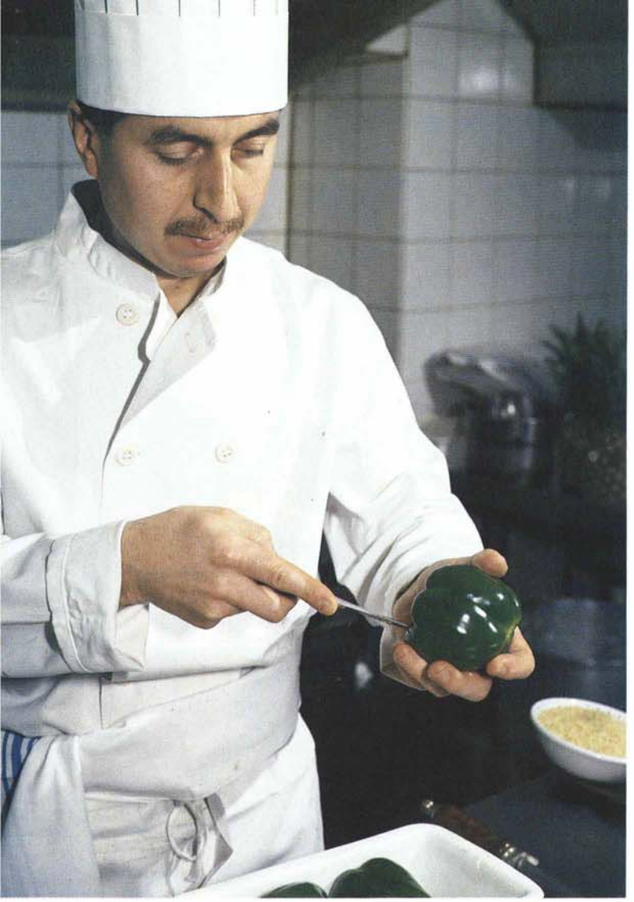
Tabbulah

85 grams (3 oz., ½ cu.) burghul
2 bunches flat-leaf parsley
(about 30 gr. before washing, or 1½ cu. chopped)
1 bunch fresh mint
(about 10 gr. before washing, or ½ cu. chopped)
3 green onions or 1 small onion
1 large tomato
90 milliliters (3 oz., 6 tbs.) lemon juice
60 milliliters (2½ oz., 4 tbs.) olive oil
salt
1 romaine lettuce (optional)

Wash the *burghul* and squeeze out the water. Wash and chop the parsley, mint and green onions *very* fine. Dice the tomatoes. Combine all ingredients including *burghul*. Add salt to taste, lemon juice, olive oil and mix well. Serve in a bowl lined with lettuce leaves. This salad 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.



Fadi Haddad with finished dish.



Seyfi Altuğ coring green peppers.

Filling peppers with cooked rice.

Drizzling peppers with olive oil before cooking.

STUFFED GREEN PEPPERS

Filfil Rumi Mahshi

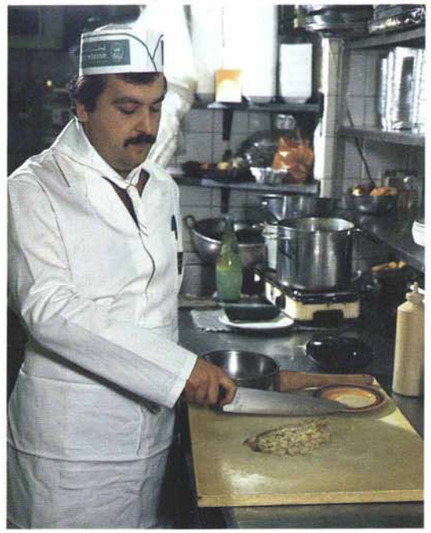
6 green peppers
180 grams (6 oz., ¾ cu.) pine nuts
4 large onions
250 grams (9 oz., 1½ cu.) olive oil
450 grams (1 lb., 2⅓ cu.) long-grain rice
125 grams (4 oz., ½ cu.) currants
5 grams (1 tsp.) salt , 3 grams (1 tsp.) pepper
15 grams (1 tbs.) sugar , water to cover
7 grams (½ cu.) mint
4 grams (1 tsp.) allspice
lemon slices, tomato wedges
10 grams (½ cu.) chopped flat-leaf parsley
30 milliliters (1 oz., 2 tbs.) lemon juice

Choose medium-sized green peppers. Wash them and cut out the stems. Core with an apple-corer or paring knife. Make the stuffing by lightly frying the pine nuts and chopped onions in olive oil. Add the washed rice and cook, stirring, for five minutes. Add the currants, salt, pepper and sugar. Pour in water to about twice the depth of the other ingredients in the pot and simmer until the water is absorbed. Add mint, allspice and lemon juice. When cool, stuff each pepper loosely, as the rice will swell. Cover open end of pepper with a slice of tomato like a lid. Set the stuffed peppers in a single layer in a large pan or dish. Sprinkle with salt and sugar, drizzle a little olive oil and 250 milliliters (1 cup) of water over them and simmer very slowly until the peppers are just tender. Decorate with chopped parsley, lemon slices and tomato slices or wedges, and refrigerate. Serve cool.

Other vegetables stuffed in the same manner are tomatoes, zucchini (courgettes), eggplant (aubergines), cabbage leaves or grape leaves. Both kinds of leaves should be briefly parboiled to make them tender and flexible.

Stuffed peppers cooled and ready to serve.

Fadi Haddad chopping eggplant for baba ghannuj.



Mashing eggplant to smooth paste.

Blending in tahinah.

Adding lemon juice.

EGGPLANT DIP

Baba Ghannuj

1 large round eggplant (aubergine)
2 or 3 cloves of garlic
60 milliliters (3 oz., 4 tbs.) tahinah
60 milliliters (2 oz., 4tbs.) lemon juice
salt, red pepper
olive oil
chopped parsley,
slices of red bell pepper to garnish

Cook the eggplant in a hot oven or on a fork over the flame of a gas stove. When it is well cooked through and the skin is blackened, douse in cold water, peel and chop into small pieces. Mash two or three cloves of garlic to a paste with about the same volume of salt. Add eggplant, mash to a smooth consistency and blend in the *tahinah* and lemon juice to make the Arab version of this dish; omit the *tahinah* for the Turkish version. Serve in a bowl with a little olive oil on top and garnish with chopped parsley, red pepper slices and a dusting of red pepper. Serves five.

Eggplant dip and parsley and cracked wheat salad were prepared for photography by Fadi Haddah of Fakhreldine Lebanese Restaurant, London, and stuffed peppers by Seyfi Altuğ of the Efes Kebab House, London.

Sprinkling with olive oil before serving.

A CHILDREN'S STORY

This description of a meal offered to honored family guests in the Eastern Province of today's Saudia Arabia is taken from *Amina and Muhammad's Special Visitor,* a teaching storybook intended for English-speaking primary-school children. Written as part of a Middle-East curriculum sequence, the book includes a glossary and notes for teachers.

AMINA & MUHAMMAD

WRITTEN BY DIANE TURNAGE BURGOYNE
ILLUSTRATED BY PENNY WILLIAMS-YAQUB

THE DELICIOUS MEAL: Mother and Aunt Samia carried out large trays of food into the sitting room where the cloths and plates had been laid. The food smelled delicious! Although the children wanted to hear Uncle Hasan's story, they were now only interested in the food before them.

"What a feast! Uncle Hasan will be very pleased with our hospitality," Amina thought to herself. "My father will be proud that he can offer his guest such a fine meal. He will be very proud of my mother."

The meal was, indeed, a feast. There was a bowl of *salunah*, a tasty, thick gravy made with meat and spices; a large bowl of *salatah* made of tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce, and another plate piled high with crisp *sambusak* (See glossary page 27). In the middle of it all was a large tray of roasted lamb on top of a mound of rice. Muhammad's favorite dish – chicken *kabsah* – was placed among the other dishes of *mahshi kusah* and other delicious foods. At each corner were piles of the warm, flat bread that Amina liked so much. Umm! Everything looked so good!

After the food was put out, Mother called the children into the kitchen for a moment. "Children," she said, "Please remember your manners. Let me see if you know them. Which hand do you use to eat with?"

"Only the right!" Muhammad shouted, hoping he had pleased his mother by his quick response.

"Very good!" said Mother. "And how do you sit on the rug?"

"We sit so that the bottoms of our feet face no one," answered Amina.

"Correct. What else must you remember?"

"We must remember that it isn't polite to stare at someone while they eat. We should look down at our own food."

"Fine," said Mother. "Now go to the sitting room to your places."

Mother went to the door of the *majlis* to tell Uncle Hasan and Father that dinner was ready.

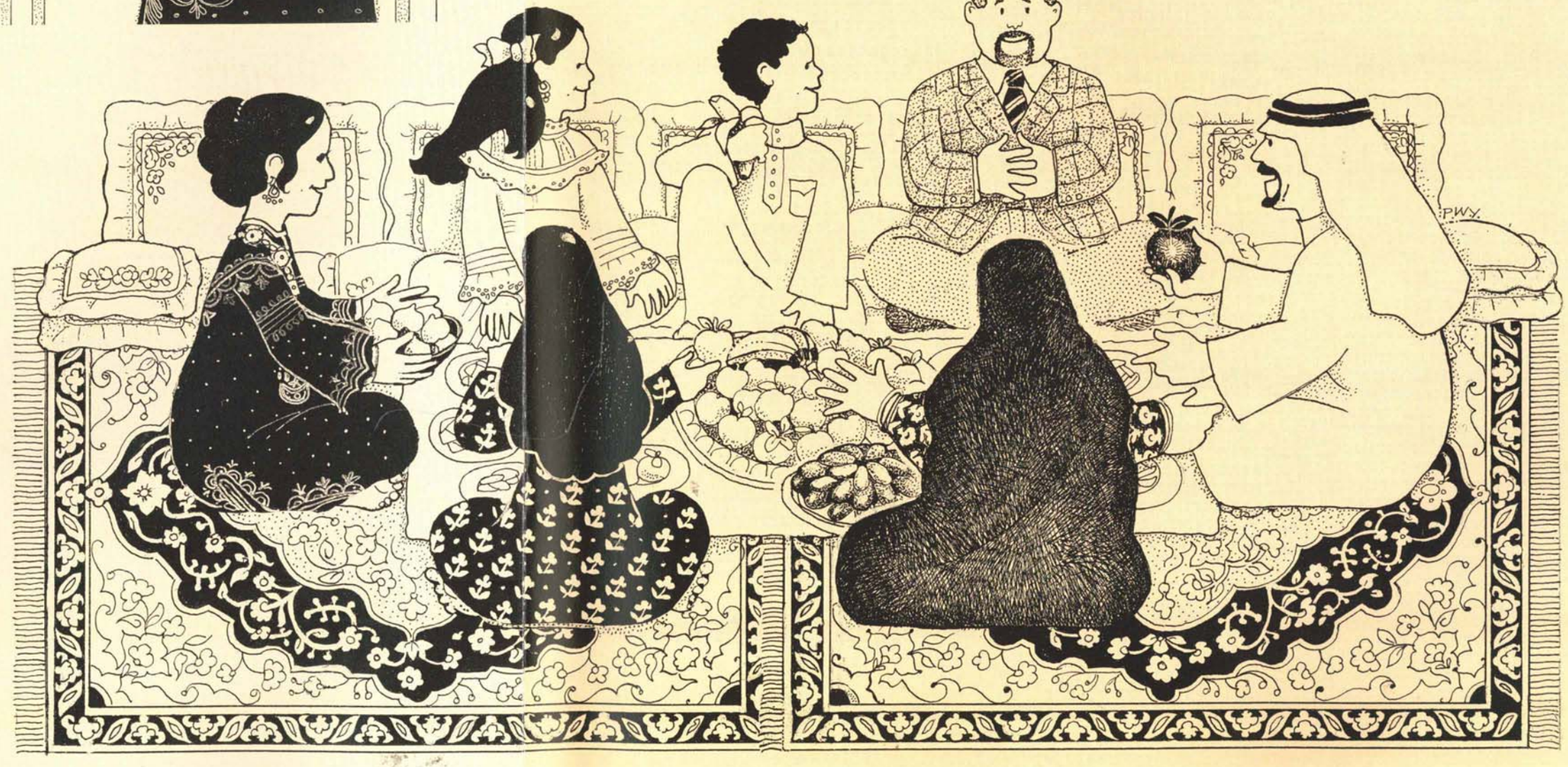
"Please sit down, Uncle Hasan," Father said. He indicated to Uncle Hasan that he should sit in the place of honor beside Father on his right side. "*Bismillah*, in the name of God," Father said quietly, before the family began to eat.

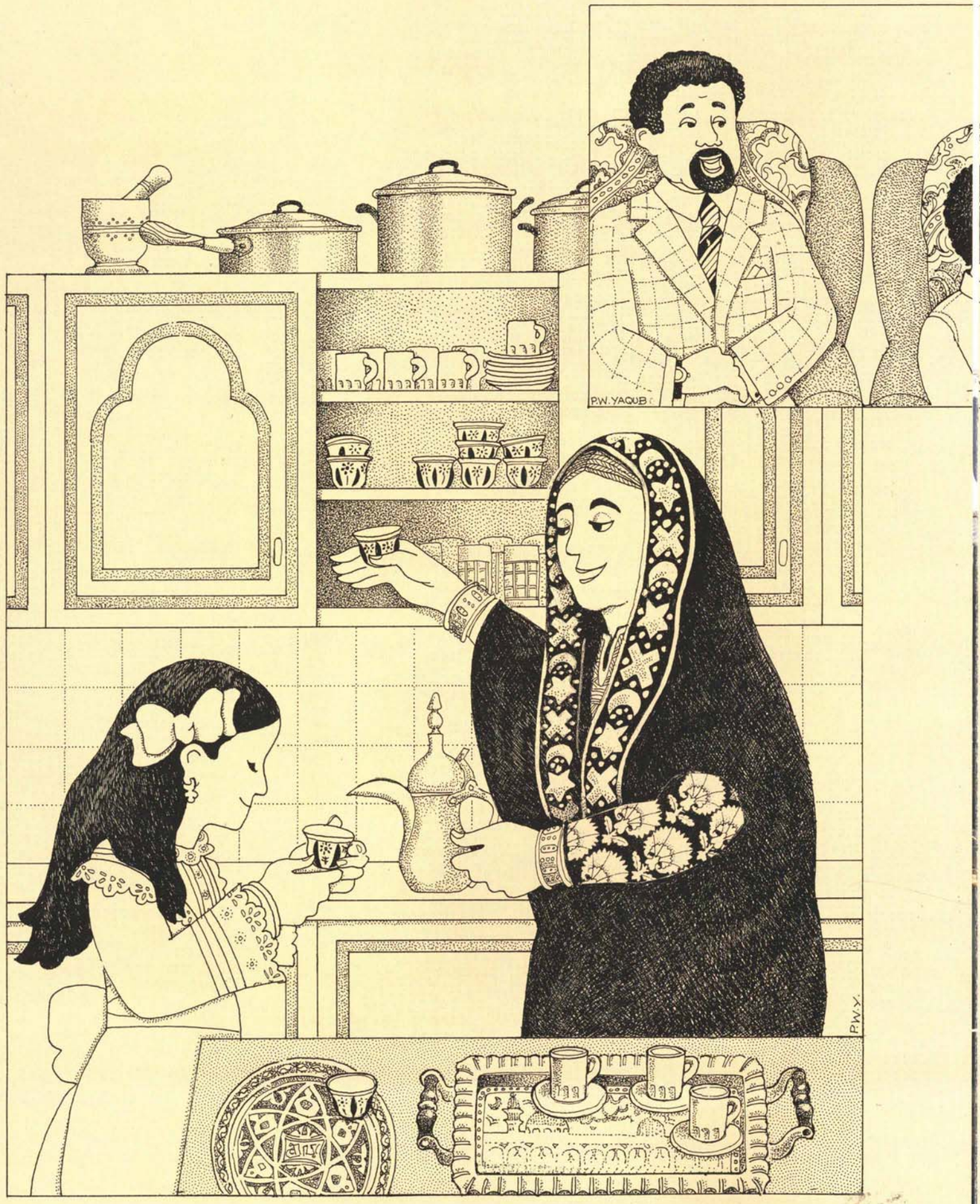
The meal was as delicious as everyone knew it would be. Amina and Muhammad ate so much they thought they might burst!

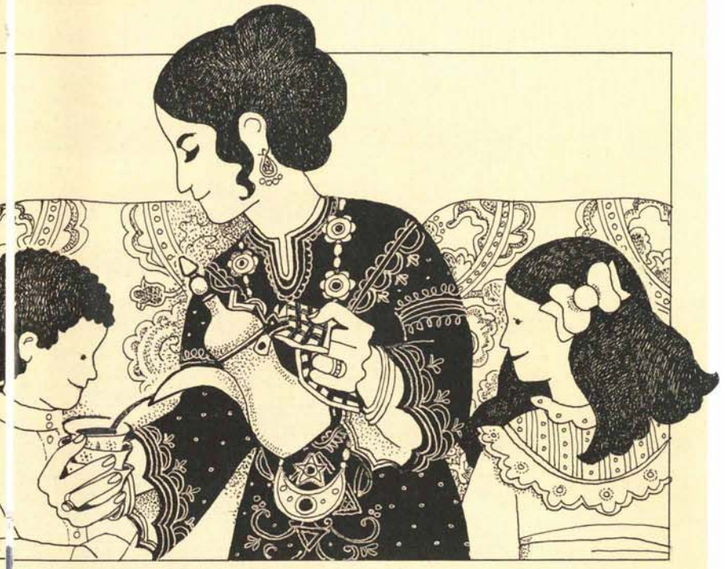
The two large trays of fruit – the oranges and apples, the dates and figs, that Father had brought – were the last things to be eaten. Then, after everyone had finished the meal, Father said with thankfulness, "*al-Hamdu lillah!*" which means "Thanks be to God!"

Uncle Hasan leaned back against the pillows and said, "What a fine meal that was! I thank you for your hospitality and generosity. I am so full, I don't know if I can move!"

Muhammad laughed. "I'll help you, Uncle Hasan!" he said. Then Father, Uncle Hasan, and Muhammad went to wash their hands before going into the *majlis* to sit on the couches there.







Amina helped her mother, Aunt Samia, and Grandmother clear the food away and prepare tea and coffee.

Grandmother carefully took the tiny coffee cups out of the cupboard. Amina loved to hold them and look at the pretty blue flowers that decorated them. She put the coffee cups on a tray and then put the small tea glasses on another. When the coffee was ready, Mother carried the tray with the coffee cups into the *majlis*.

Mother poured the hot, fragrant coffee into the little china cups and offered it to all the adults. Muhammad and Amina liked the smell of the cardamom spice that was in the coffee. Mother poured second cupfuls for everyone. But, when she offered a third, each person tilted his cup from side-to-side to show that he had had enough.

Later the grown-ups had sweet, mint tea. The teapot was left on the table so the adults could continue to sip tea as long as they wanted. Since mint tea is such a soothing, refreshing drink, the children were sure the sipping would continue for some time. ⊕

Diane Turnage Burgoyne has degrees in political science and inter-disciplinary social science, and lives in the Eastern Province of Saudia Arabia.

BACKGROUND NOTES

Popular Foods

The family of Amina and Muhammad prepare an elaborate meal for Uncle Hasan's welcome, a typical Eastern Province menu for a guest. A whole lamb is steamed in a roasting pan on the stove and stuffed with rice, chicken, and nuts. It is then put in the oven to brown.

Mahshi kusah, zucchini (courgettes) stuffed with fried ground meat, spices and pine nuts, is served along with *mahshi tomat*, tomatoes filled with the same stuffing. There is also *salunah*, a thick gravy, *salatah*, a salad of tomatoes, cucumbers, and lettuce, Arab bread, *sambusak*, and *kabsah*, a dish made of chicken, lamb, or fish mixed with rice and tomatoes.

Such a meal is served to show the generosity and hospitality of the host, traits highly valued in Saudi Arabian society. It has been said that the best compliment that can be paid a Middle Easterner is to say that the person is a good host.

Mealtime Manners

Before the meal begins Mother calls the children into the kitchen to remind them of their manners, considered very important. The children know they must eat only with their right hand. Eating with the hand was the accepted form in traditional society. Today, Saudi Arabs may use silverware instead of eating in the traditional manner, depending upon the type of food being served, the occasion and the location. In the city, silverware is used often whereas in the village and certainly in the desert, the hand may suffice for everyday use.

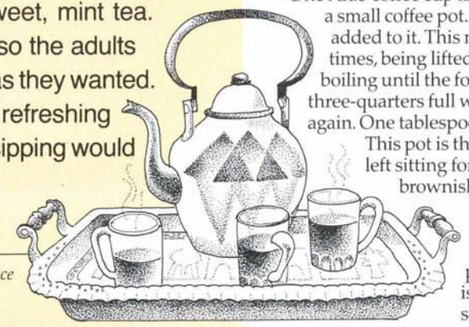
Mother's second question referred to the position in which the children sit. Since Saudis traditionally sit on rugs when they eat, the position of one's feet is important. It is considered impolite to point the soles of one's feet toward anyone. The most common positions to eat from are with one's legs to one side, with them crossed, or in a squatting position.

Mother also reminds the children to look at their own food and not to stare at anyone else. She also makes sure the children remember to say *bismillah*, "In the Name of God," before beginning to eat.

The Coffee and Tea Ritual

After the meal is finished, Mother serves coffee and tea to the family. All over the Middle East, the making and offering of coffee is an important duty of a host, whether city-dweller, villager or nomad. In Arabia, in the desert, great ceremony is given to coffee-making. The coffee beans are roasted over an open fire, pounded with a mortar and pestle. The coffee is then flavored with cardamom and served in tiny cups with no handles. It is poured from a shiny brass coffee pot held in the host's left hand into the small cups in his right hand, enough to give the drinker three or four sips. The cup is refilled until the guest shakes his cup to signal he has had enough.

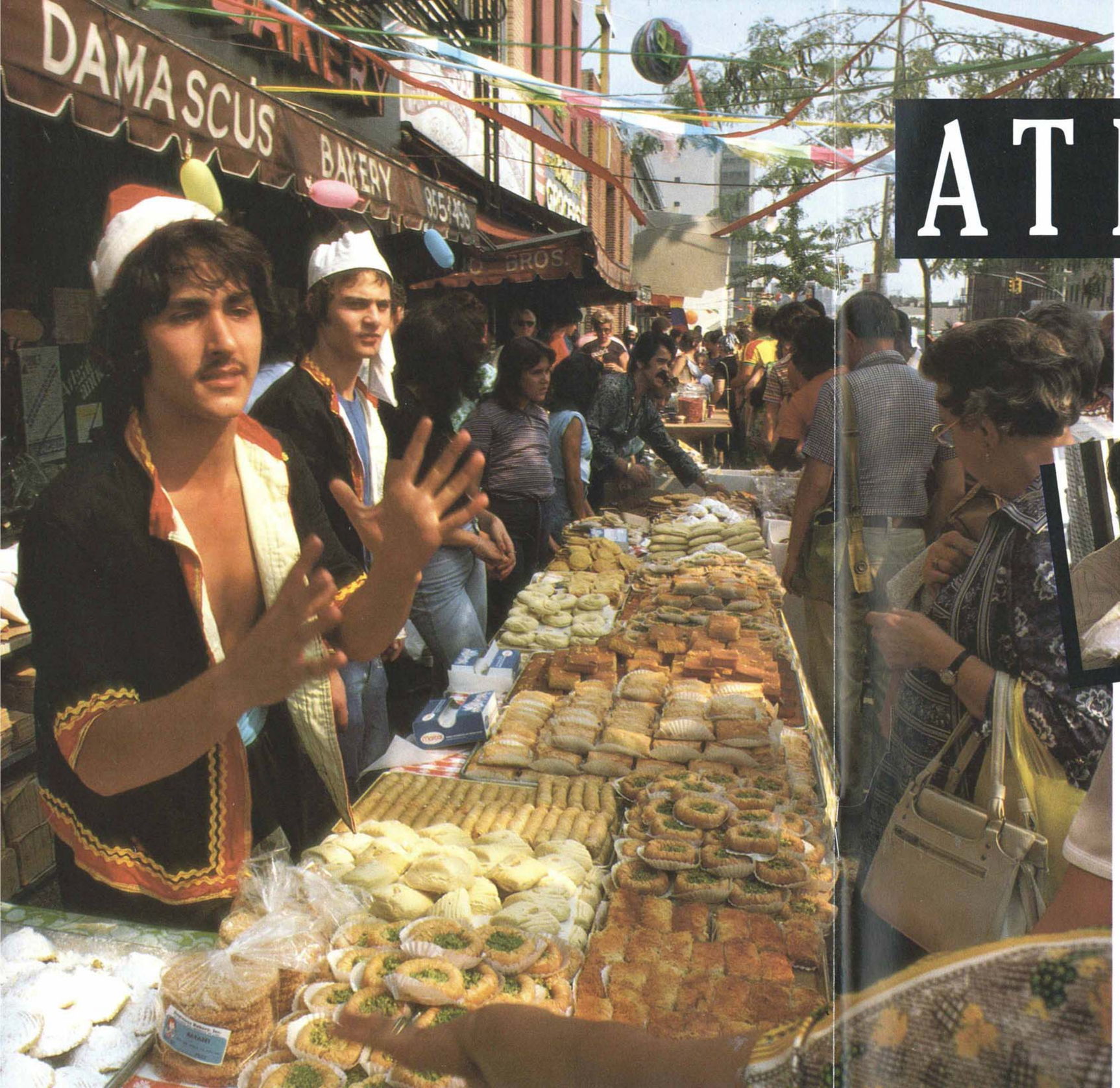
Today in the city, coffee is, of course, made on the stove. One Arab coffee cup is filled with ground coffee and put in a small coffee pot. About one cup of boiling water is added to it. This mixture is brought to a boil three times, being lifted off the heat for a moment after each boiling until the foam subsides. The pot is then filled three-quarters full with more boiling water and boiled again. One tablespoon of cardamom is put in another pot. This pot is then filled with the boiled coffee and left sitting for fifteen minutes. The coffee is light brownish-yellow in color when served.

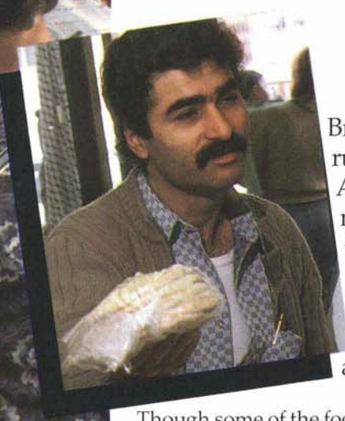


Tea is served after coffee, usually in glasses rather than cups. It is sweet and sometimes laced with mint. The person who pours the coffee and tea is usually the youngest adult, who serves to show respect for the elders.

BROOKLYN'S ATLANTIC *Avenue*

WRITTEN BY JANE PETERSON
PHOTOGRAPHED BY KATRINA THOMAS





Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue is a place where cultures rub off on each other: Arab culture is left a little more American, American culture a little more Arab. But mingling is only part of what goes on here. Above all, this is a place where both newcomers from the Middle East and Arab-Americans of different generations come to sustain a taste for the food they were raised on and all that it nurtures: family, friendship and a way of life.

Though some of the foods can be found in other parts of New York, many people still trek to Atlantic Avenue once a week or once a month from Manhattan, Queens, Connecticut or New Jersey; people who live nearby may drop in two or three times a week. Whatever the frequency, they all come to buy familiar food at reasonable prices, or to find special items or a special quality unavailable elsewhere: dried lemons, perhaps, or bread baked in a brick oven, or a tray of baklava freshly made from a widely coveted secret recipe. And they come to soak up the atmosphere.

One of the people who shops on Atlantic Avenue several times each week is George Rabbat, who emigrated from Syria in 1958. His wife, Eugenie, remembers how she felt after leaving her large family in Aleppo. "I am lost," she says, "I cry every night for eight years."

The first time she walked into a store on Atlantic Avenue, her then five-year-old son tugged at her hand and whispered, "Mama! Smell the food! I feel I'm in Syria!"

"I hear people speaking Arabic," she says, her voice ringing with the excitement of that moment. "I want to hug them and kiss them! This is my life!"

Some of the shops on Atlantic Avenue have been selling Middle Eastern goods for 100 years, ever since large numbers of "Syrians" – many of whom came from what is today Lebanon, Iraq or Jordan – first started arriving in the United States. By the turn of the century, about 100 Arab families were clustered near the end of the avenue by the waterfront, a satellite of the main "Little Syria" on Washington Street in lower Manhattan. They enjoyed a rich cultural life that was in many ways like the one in the old country, with Arabic newspapers, coffee houses and festivals where they danced the old dances. In those days, some of the young men journeyed back home to fetch brides.

Atlantic Avenue's annual festival offers authentic food and fanciful costumes. Above, buying pita bread on the avenue.

For many of the children and grandchildren of the immigrants living on or near Atlantic Avenue, its shops and restaurants were their only tangible link to the old country. Helen Uniss Khouri, for instance, was born in Brooklyn into a distinguished family from Abeye on the eve of World War I; she did not travel to Lebanon until the late 1940's, and her sister Katherine Uniss Haddad never did get to go. As children, all of their images of the homeland were filtered through the memories of their elders or reflected in the transplanted life of the avenue.

And indeed, life here resembled life in Abeye. For one thing, the house was always full of guests to feed. Helen Khouri remembers sitting with her mother among the Arab ladies in the butcher shop on Saturday morning, chatting as the butcher fixed their lamb, "some for *kubbah*, (see glossary, page 19), some for stuffing, some for stew...."

"And when he prepared the *kubbah*," adds Katherine Haddad, serving up her phrases with the rhythm of a seasoned raconteur, "they stood right over him to make sure he took every *bit* of fat and sinew...They could drive him *crazy!*"

The tiny, bright-eyed sisters also remember listening to relatives reminisce about food in the old country. With mounting hilarity, they chant the phrases they heard so many times when they were young: "In Abeye, the *zaytun* are *hil-l-l-u* (sweet)." The apricots? "*Hil-u!*" And the grapes, the cherries and so on. Then they demonstrate the way the adults used to hold up a thumb and forefinger widely separated to show the remarkable size of the fruits – "*Hayk, hayk, hayk* (like this, this, *this*)!" – and they dissolve into laughter along with their guest.

In the 1940's, the Battery Tunnel displaced the residents of Washington Street, and Atlantic Avenue became the only Middle Eastern center in New York. Raymond Rashid, whose father opened Rashid Sales record store in 1934, claims that when he was growing up in the neighborhood in the 1950's and 1960's, he rarely saw what he called "a real American" – a blond, blue-eyed person.

Yet, the neighborhood was to lose many of its Arab-American families in the 1960's and 1970's. In the standard immigrant pattern, many moved up and out to fancier or quieter neighborhoods. At the same time, many children and grandchildren of the early immigrants seemed to lose interest in their culinary heritage. Charlie Sahadi, the 42-year-old co-owner of Sahadi Importing Co., observed the customers in his father's store when he was a teenager – and became worried about the future of the family business.

"I saw my parents' generation buying five pounds of olives, 10 pounds of wheat, 10 pounds of rice," he explains, speaking rapidly with a Brooklyn accent and Lebanese gestures. "I saw my generation buying one pound of olives, a pound of cheese and a pound of nuts. And I could foresee my kids' generation buying a quarter pound of this and a quarter pound of that – and without building a customer base that was larger than what we had, the business was gonna disappear."

Some businesses did. As late as 1974 one could still walk into the back room of Mahmoud Alwan's pastry shop and experience a small shudder of excitement, as if one were stepping out of the glaring street into the dappled light of the Damascus *suq*. Under a skylight stood a large, bald man in a white apron, his eyes intent on an enormous cauldron of hot oil into which he flicked small dollops of dough with a spoon. "He knew how to flick it just right," recalls a neighbor. Skimmed off at the right moment and drenched in sugar syrup, Alwan's *'awwamat* tasted other-wordly.

Around the time Alwan retired and returned to Syria, the old coffee houses and local Arabic newspapers faded away. And because of socio-economic problems, the future of Atlantic Avenue, along with that of much of Brooklyn, appeared to be in doubt. It was too soon to pronounce an end to "Little Syria," however, for just then new Middle Eastern immigrants, mostly Palestinian and Yemeni, began to appear on Atlantic Avenue.

At the same time, many of the foods sold there started to gain a wider audience. Health food was beginning to catch on, and some of the items on the healthnik's list – yogurt, dried fruits, whole grains, nuts – were Middle Eastern staples. In addition, people who began buying bulk food for freshness and price discovered Atlantic Avenue. Simultaneously, ethnic or specialty foods became popular. "Specialty foods," exclaims Charlie Sahadi, "what are they? Imported foods. That's what we sell! So all of the sudden we're in the right place at the right time."

In the end, the 1970's and 1980's turned out to be the right time for both Brooklyn and Atlantic Avenue. To boost Brooklyn, the city pressed merchants and restaurant owners along the avenue to set up an ethnic festival in September 1975. Over 14,000 people showed up to browse in the shops and stalls and eat Middle Eastern food. By 1986, attendance at the annual event had ballooned to half a million.

Food is ostensibly what Atlantic Avenue's Middle Eastern section is about, and much of the general public samples it either at the festival or in its restaurants. Though two of the restaurants are owned by Yemenis and one is Moroccan, the hot spices of Yemen and the intricate stews of Morocco are bypassed by nearly all in favor of a Levantine menu. There is some variation in quality and taste among the restaurants – the pastry at Adnan's is said to be the best, and the spicy fish at the Tripoli, the *mazzah* at Sido's and the lentil soup at Bourock's – but their similarities are greater than their differences.

Just as evocative as the food is the hospitality, for one may receive a truly Arab welcome here – the hand over the heart at the Bourock – and be left in peace to take as much time as desired over a meal or pastry and coffee. A young Yemeni who waits on tables at Adnan's Restaurant and studies economics at New York University, Abdulgalil Alwan, describes hospitality as a way of showing one's feeling towards one's guest, of revealing what is in one's heart. Like many Arabs, he is convinced that the spirit of generosity is not learned, but innate among his people.

Though the manners are gracious here, Abdulgalil Alwan agrees with many others who work and eat on Atlantic Avenue that restaurants cannot produce real home cooking, mainly because of the time required. If his wife, whom he recently brought over from Yemen, were to prepare a real Yemeni meal for guests, it would take "days! A week!"

It is the food stores on Atlantic Avenue that are central to the survival of Arab traditions in the new world, for they make it possible for fine Arab cooks to practice

Some of Atlantic Avenue's shops and restaurants, purveyors of culture as well as food, have been in business for a century.

Symbols of hospitality, pastries attract attention at the festival and in front of the Moustapha brothers' shop.

their art. Not only the wholesale and catering business, but also the retail business is good, growing at roughly 10 percent a year.

Among the customers are more Arab-Americans and more non-Arab Americans – "more of everybody," as Henri Halabi, Jr., of Damascus Bakery, says. The bakery, founded with one brick oven in 1930 by his grandfather, now produces 17,000 loaves of pita bread an hour in an automated plant elsewhere in Brooklyn.

The Damascus Bakery, Rashid Sales, Sahadi's Importing Co. and the Oriental Pastry Shop form a nucleus of old stores that remain from the early years. Though several others have closed, new stores have been opened by more recent immigrants to the avenue. Old or new, each food shop has its own loyal customers. Old-timers may buy bread from Damascus Bakery or out of the brick ovens at the Near East, then proceed to Sahadi's for *za'tar* spices scooped from jars that are replenished every two or three weeks, or they can cross to the Oriental Pastry Shop for lamb sausage or *baba ghannuj*.

The Oriental Pastry Shop is, of all the stores, the most like home for people from Muslim cities or neighborhoods of the Levant, and for outsiders it is the most exotic. Arab music and the scent of cardamom coffee suffuse the air. Except for the golden photograph of the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock and a complete miniature edition of the Koran in large frames, practically every inch of wall space up to the ceiling is crammed with cans, jars and boxes. On either side of the path down the middle, the floor is covered with open barrels of green and black olives, bright red pickled eggplants, and bins of *mulukhiyyah*, dried fruit, dried beans, lentils and licorice sticks. Here and there, somehow hanging or wedged or perched, are a copper *shawurma* grill, headcloths, *'uds* (lutes), drums, brass waterpipes, kettles and coffee cups.

On a Saturday morning early in March, one finds two Iraqi women with a heavy sterling silver tray, buying sweets for a daughter's engagement party on Long Island. A young Palestinian is waiting for a tray of baklava to carry on the plane to California. And Nadim Rabah, who emigrated from Beirut in 1971, calmly waits nearly an hour with his eight-year-old son Ramze for a tray of *kunafah*. Ramze's mother, American-born, does not cook Lebanese food, but Rabah occasionally does, and he drives from Queens once a month to buy pastry. Other customers come from as far as Pennsylvania and Maryland, and many people ask for the recipes that Anas, the youngest of the three Moustapha brothers, claims he wouldn't even reveal to his mother.

This morning is even busier than usual, but the air in the shop is thick with patience. While they wait to be served, people chat with friends and strangers, taste and talk about the olives. In a pattern not uncommon in the Middle East, most of the customers are men, and there is much banter and teasing.

The whirlwind in the eye of this calm is Ghiath Moustapha, a compact man with flashing eyes, who waits on a customer, answers the phone, yells to his brother Muyassar in the kitchen to fetch some *baba ghannuj* or another tray of baklava and, when the crowd ebbs, dashes out front to supervise the unloading of a truck.

Wardieh Tabri from Ramallah has been coming to Oriental Pastry from Manhattan for "10 or 12 years," as much for the feeling as for the food. "You come over here, you joke around, you talk. In an American store it's business. You take what you want, you pay and you leave, and that's it."

Tastes have changed a little – people like their *kunafah* less sweet and they are eating less lamb and more veal – but certain things stay the same because people like it that way. Mohsen Kenini, an Egyptian from Port Said who drops in often on his lunch hour, says he feels comfortable here; he contrasts it to other stores where you have to take a number and wait: "I don't like the new way." It is not the waiting that he minds, but the numbers.

"The new way" is at Sahadi's across the street, the store that Charlie Sahadi recently renovated in accordance with his hunch that the business would have to become more international to survive. Out front, the old sign remains – a cedar of Lebanon and the sand-colored columns of the great temple at Baalbek against a blue sky – but inside there is no clutter on the new quarry-tile floor, and the 14 kinds of olives and pickles are up in stainless steel bins; the shelves are heavy with pasta and fancy teas. Except for the four sizes of *burghul* and the frozen *mulukhiyyah*, it could be a store in any upscale shopping center – or in a wealthy section of Beirut.

In addition to regular customers like Helen Khouri and Katherine Haddad, the new store attracts more and more non-Arab Americans, about 40 percent of the clientele compared with Oriental Pastry's estimated 25 to 30 percent.

Twenty-one-year-old Christine Sahadi, whose favorite pastime is cooking, recently opened a section in the back of her father's store to sell a variety of carry-out foods, including Arab specialties such as *kubbah*. She is building on the tastes she acquired as a child during Sunday meals at her Aleppine grandmother's house, and on techniques learned from her mother.

Food and news from "home" nourish the heart. Below, customers are tempted by stuffed vine leaves, kubbah *and* tabbulah.

Though it has gone modern, Sahadi's, like its neighbors, still functions as a casual meeting place, and for recent arrivals it is sometimes a place to begin to find one's way. They find a particularly sympathetic ear in Charlie Sahadi's cousin, Sonia Abounoum, who remembers what it was like to leave Zahlah nine years ago: "You feel like it's the end of the world." When she shows newcomers where to shop or helps them find a doctor or a lawyer, she is doing what shopkeepers on the avenue have been doing for decades.

Some of the newer shops resemble village stores in the old country. They have fewer products than their more established neighbors and, with one exception, there are no American accents behind the counter. Teyba's *halal* meat and poultry shop sells Islamic literature as well as a variety of packaged and dried foods and souvenirs. A substantial percentage of its shoppers are Black Muslims, and the store is inundated with customers preparing for the 'Id feast at the end of Ramadan.

At Soueidan Bakery one is likely to encounter more "unhyphenated Americans," partly because the store opened recently and partly because its Lebanese co-owner, Musa Soueidan, relishes showing people who have never tasted Arab food how to eat it properly.

Scoffing at the "Americanized" food served in the nearby restaurants, he seeks to emulate the success of the Chinese, which he believes is the result of keeping their culinary cupboards pure. "Not all people want to eat hamburger," he notes. He keeps a bottle of olive oil handy for those who are trying *labnah* for the first time, and he insists that his *lahm m'ajun* must be eaten with yogurt to "keep the stomach flexible" and avoid getting fat.

Everyone's business is thriving, and though Charlie Sahadi's dire prediction for the future of the Middle Eastern food business has not come true – on the contrary, bakeries, shops and restaurants have sprung up all over the metropolitan area – it remains to be seen what will happen to Atlantic Avenue itself.

The avenue reflects what is happening in Arab-American homes, where the survival of traditions centering on food presents a complex picture. In some ways, these traditions – the "open door, open heart" – have faded, and Katherine Haddad is basically right when she says the days of overflowing houses are gone. But viewed from other angles, it is also apparent that the traditions are not dying but shifting – and even spreading in unexpected ways.

Everyone is familiar with the changes that undermine the old ways. Nowadays a call to a friend's home may connect with an answering machine. Women working, smaller families and the dispersal of grown children make if difficult to spend much time on food preparation. Even in the old countries, things are changing: In Yemen, says Abdulgalil Alwan, where by tradition you must welcome your guest for three days, "it doesn't happen like the old days" anymore, except in the villages. "People are busy."

As far as quality is concerned, it is worth noting that not all mothers in the past were good cooks; then as now, not everyone had an interest in, or a flair for, cooking. They say it's in the hands. Raymond Rashid's mother may be "the best cook to come out of Jadidat Marjayoun," but the beloved grandmother of Helen Khouri and Katherine Haddad, whose Brooklyn Heights home was a well-known gathering place for Arab intellectuals, sometimes burned the food and made the children eat it anyway. *Ma'alaysh*.

The new Arab cookbooks at Rashid's are usually bought by Syrians and Lebanese; that's one indication that not everyone learns from mother anymore. On the other hand, their popularity also suggests renewed interest in Arab food. And a new video tape by Adila Aziz, Egypt's Julia Child, shows how to make a *kubbah* dish resembling an open-faced cheeseburger topped with an olive: At least some Arab cooks are interested in new variations on old themes.

The owners still serve customers at Malko Kalkanni Bros., above. At right, Christine Sahadi arranges carry-out food in her father's store. Louis Memsey of Near East Bakery, below, bakes by eye and by touch.

Assimilation can work both ways. Numerous Arab mothers boast of Irish- or German- or Italian-American daughters-in-law who have become the best cooks of Arab food in the family. And there are also neighbors and friends who learn how to prepare Arab food. Its appeal to many non-Arab cooks lies not only in its healthfulness and taste, but also in the spirit in which it is made, served and eaten.

Adaptation is another way of keeping traditions alive. A Palestinian professor of demography living in Manhattan orders ingredients, bread and pastry delivered from Atlantic Avenue to her apartment, and fixes a dinner for 18. A grandmother whose parents came from Aleppo still makes delectable string cheese with black seeds, and then freezes it for her family's monthly visit. Italian butchers in Bay Ridge are trained by their Arab customers to fix *kubbah*, and one woman freezes hers to take along when she goes to Florida.

In the meantime, new infusions of immigrants, some living 12 or more to a house, help refresh the taste of people living here, even going so far as to bring seeds from favorite tomato and cucumber plants. Abdulgalil Alwan's wife brought her family's ways with her when she moved to Brooklyn last year. Another young Yemeni woman, Samira Almountasser, though born in Brooklyn, would not think of cooking any but Arab food for her family: "It's part of our tradition."

Finally, there are the children or grandchildren, sometimes even male ones, who become enthralled with cooking the food they were raised on.

"Somebody has to show you how to do it," explains Christine Sahadi, who has worked hard to learn how to form *kubbah* into just the right football-like shapes. "I had to go through it with my mother until I could get them to look like hers. They still don't look like hers, really, but I'm trying."

Sahadi confirms that many friends who are second- or third-generation Arab-Americans like her want to eat Arab food – but don't want to cook it. "They wait for their grandmothers to make it." But once her mother's mother was gone, Sahadi felt it was up to her. "If my grandmother can't make it anymore, I'll do it."

"We miss many things," says her cousin Sonia from Zahlah, speaking, as Helen Khouri's relatives did, of sweeter fruits and more flavorful chickens – and speaking as well of the way of life that went with them. Surely, as long as people remember the taste of these things, Arabic will be spoken, and Arab food eaten, on Atlantic Avenue

Jane Peterson is a free-lance writer who has lived in Brooklyn and Beirut.

A GLOSSARY

OF · DISHES · INGREDIENTS · AND · TERMS

'Awwamat – Small dough balls made of flour, milk and soda or yeast, deep-fried and drenched in sugar syrup scented with orange-blossom water.

Baba ghannuj – A dip made of mashed cooked eggplant mixed with lemon juice, garlic and *tahinah*.

Baklava – A pastry made of many paper-thin sheets of dough *(filo)* brushed with butter, layered with nuts, and coated with sugar- or honey syrup.

Burghul – Cracked wheat. Made by first boiling, then drying and grinding whole wheat; available either fine- or coarse-ground.

Halal – Prepared according to the requirements of Islam. In the case of meat, the procedure includes invoking the name of God and bleeding the animal.

Hummus – Literally, chickpeas, but usually refers to *hummus bi tahinah*, a dip made from mashed cooked chickpeas, lemon juice, garlic and *tahinah*, and eaten with bread and olive oil.

Kabsah – A lamb, chicken or (less commonly) fish stew with rice, tomato and spices.

Kubbah – A mixture of ground lamb, fine *burghul* and grated onion pounded to a paste and served raw or cooked in a number of ways.

Kunafah – A sweet pastry made with strands of butter-coated dough that look like shredded wheat, filled with ricotta-like cheese or nuts.

Kuskus – Couscous, a steamed semolina dish served with a meat-and-vegetable stew.

Labnah – "Yogurt cheese," or yogurt that has been drained of its whey. Usually eaten with olive oil.

Lahm m'ajun – "Arab pizza," pita bread topped with a thin layer of finely ground meat, onions, tomatoes and seasonings.

Mahshi kusah – Zucchini (courgettes) hollowed out, stuffed with a mixture of fried ground meat, spices and pine nuts, and fried.

Majlis – Reception or sitting room.

Manqush – Bread baked with a topping of *za'tar* mixture and oil. Also called simply *za'tar*.

Mazzah – *Hors d'oeuvre* such as stuffed grape leaves, *hummus, baba ghannuj*, pickled turnips, olives and raw *kubbah*.

Mulukhiyyah – A dark green leafy plant with a sour, viscous juice, used to make a chicken dish or a soup much loved by most Arabs. The plant is a member of the mallow family.

Sambusak – Deep-fried pastry triangles stuffed with spiced ground meat. Familiar throughout the Islamic world under many names and in many variations.

Shish kebab – Cubes of meat grilled on skewers, often separated by bay leaves or pieces of vegetable.

Shawurma – Layers of marinated and ground meat of different kinds, interleaved with fat and flavoring, roasted on a vertical spit.

Tahinah – A paste of crushed sesame seeds, used as the base for sauces and halvah, and as an ingredient of many other dishes.

Water-buffalo milk – This extremely rich and creamy milk is widely used from southern Asia to southern Italy. Diluted with cow's milk, it is used to make butter and ice cream; the heavy cream is used on some pastries.

Za'tar – Literally, thyme, but also refers to a mixture of herbs and spices that, though it varies according to family recipes, always includes thyme and sumac, and commonly also salt and sesame seeds. Eaten with *labnah* or olive oil and bread. See manqush, above.

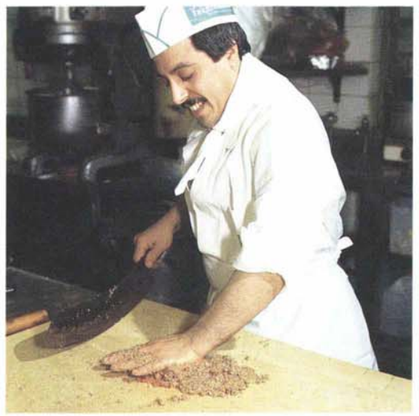
Zaytun – Olives.

MAIN COURSES

The variety of main dishes in Middle Eastern cooking is as great as one would expect from a territory that extends, in culinary terms, from the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush. Yet there are affinities and cross-connections: Moroccan *tagines*, meat-and-fruit stews, are related to Persian dishes that also inspired Ottoman court cooks; people with a pastoralist tradition, past or present, share a predeliction for roasts and kebabs; and the seas offer riches that coast-dwellers, at least, cannot ignore. Each of the three dishes below, presents a different aspect of Middle Eastern food. The fish kebab relies on the quality of fresh ingredients and the *kubbah* on conscientious preparation; the meatball recipe exemplifies the roles of yogurt and of the charcoal grill.

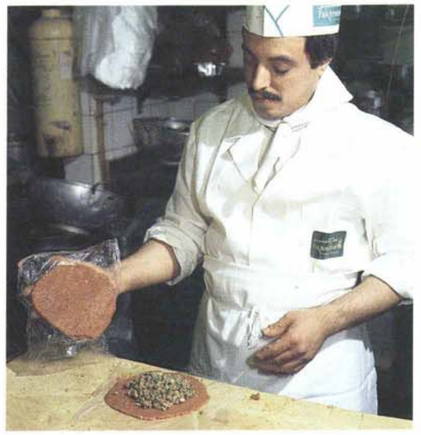
PHOTOGRAPHED BY BOB WILKINS

Mahfouza Riad preparing kubbah.



Spreading stuffing on bottom layer of kubbah.

Placing second layer on stuffing. Opposite, Sami Abu Akram removing kubbah *from oven, ready to serve.*



BAKED LAMB LOAF

Kubbah bi al-Siniyah

Stuffing

500 grams (17 oz.) lean lamb from the neck
2 medium onions
225 grams (7½ oz., 1 cu.) pine nuts
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) olive oil
5 grams (1 tsp.) salt, 3 grams (1 tsp.) pepper

Kubbah

500 grams (17 oz., 2¼ cu.) burghul
500 grams (17 oz.) lean lamb from the leg
1 medium onion, 5 grams (1 tsp.) salt
2 grams (½ tsp.) each of paprika, white pepper, cumin and cinnamon
bowl of water with ice
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) olive oil

Stuffing: grind the lamb once. Chop the onions very fine and sauté with the pine nuts in olive oil. Add meat, salt and pepper and sauté till lightly browned. Keep warm.

Kubbah: Soak the *burghul* in advance, wash it and squeeze out the water. Put the lamb through the fine blade of a meat grinder and then pound it to a paste in a mortar. Chop the onion very fine and pound with salt and spices. Put the onion and the meat through the grinder once together. Knead the meat mixture with the *burghul*, dipping hands in ice water to keep meat smooth. Put the mixture through the grinder again, adding ice water as required.

Oil a large round baking pan well and pat in a smooth layer of *kubbah* about half a centimeter (¼ in.) thick. Spread the stuffing in a second layer over the *kubbah*. Shape a second slightly thicker layer of *kubbah* on a large plate or a piece of plastic wrap and slide it or place on top of the stuffing. Score the surface of the top layer with a knife to make a diamond pattern. Sprinkle generously with olive oil and bake in a hot oven for about 20 minutes, or until browned. Garnish with pine nuts. Serves six.

FISH KEBAB

Sikh Samak

1 kilogram (35 oz.) of firm-fleshed fish (swordfish, monkfish or similar)
1 large onion
bay leaves
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) olive oil
60 milliliters (2 oz., ¼ cu.) lemon juice
salt, peppercorns
slices of lemon
20 grams (1 cu.) chopped flat-leaf parsley
bell pepper pieces, mushrooms, celery pieces, tomato wedges

Clean and wash the fish. Cut into cubes 2½ centimeters (one inch) on a side. Spread the fish cubes in a dish and cover them with a layer of finely chopped onion. Break and sprinkle the bay leaves on top, then pour olive oil and lemon juice over the whole. Sprinkle with salt and peppercorns and lay the lemon slices on top. Sprinkle with finely chopped parsley and leave to marinate for two hours.

Put the marinated fish cubes, interspersed with vegetable pieces, on a skewer – not too close together, so that the fish cooks evenly all around. Use about five pieces of fish to a skewer. Cook over a charcoal fire, turning occasionally. Serve with a bowl of summer salad.

Amin Haddad cutting fish into cubes.

Placing marinated fish on skewer. Far right, grilling over charcoal fire.

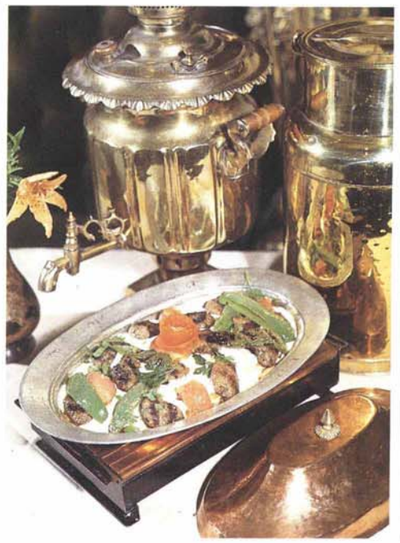
GRILLED MEATBALLS IN YOGURT SAUCE

Kuftah Lahmiyyah

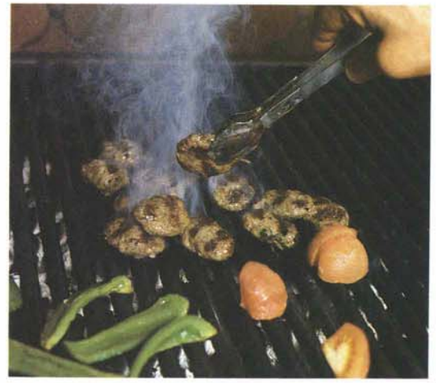
Kuftah
900 grams (2 lbs.) lean lamb
2 large onions
15 grams (¾ cu.) minced flat-leaf ("Italian") parsley
30 milliliters (1 oz., 2 tbs.) milk
5 grams (1 tsp.) salt
3 grams (1 tsp.) black pepper
3 grams (1 tsp.) thyme, 4 grams (1 tsp.) cumin
Sauce
3 tomatoes
15 grams (½ oz., 1 tbs.) butter
2 rounds day-old Arab bread
450 grams (1 lb.) yogurt
30 milliliters (1 oz., 2 tbs.) meat broth or bouillon
bell pepper, tomato, parsley

Put the meat, onion and parsley through the meat grinder, add the milk and spices and mix well by hand. Form into walnut-sized meatballs, flatten them slightly and grill them – preferably over charcoal. Peel, seed and chop the tomatoes, cook them to a sauce in butter. Toast the bread, break or cut it into small pieces, and put it in the bottom of a warmed dish. Spoon the tomato sauce and meat broth over the bread. Beat the yogurt and pour it over the bread, then arrange the meatballs on the bed of yogurt. Garnish with slices of tomato, pepper pieces and more chopped parsley. Serves six.

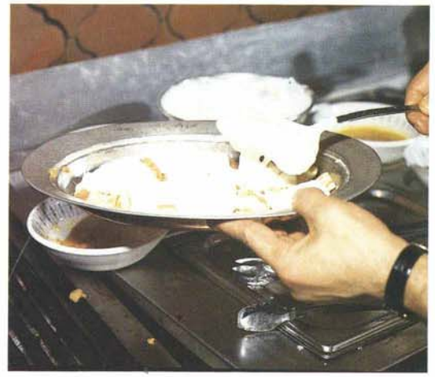
Baked lamb loaf was prepared for photography by Mahfouza Riad of Fakhreldine Lebanese Restaurant, London, fish kebab by Amin Haddad of Lucullus Seafood Restaurant, London, and grilled meatballs in yogurt sauce by Kâzim Akkuş of the Efes Kebab House, London.



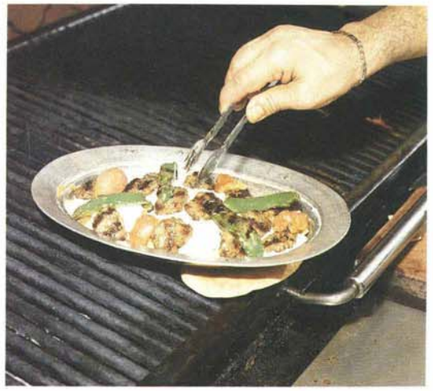
Forming ground meat into kuftah.



Grilling kuftah *on charcoal fire.*



Covering bread with yogurt.



Placing kuftah *on yogurt bed. Far left,* kuftah *garnished and ready to serve.*

THE FLAVORS OF ARABIA

WRITTEN BY ALICE ARNDT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY CHRISTOPHER D. SALVO

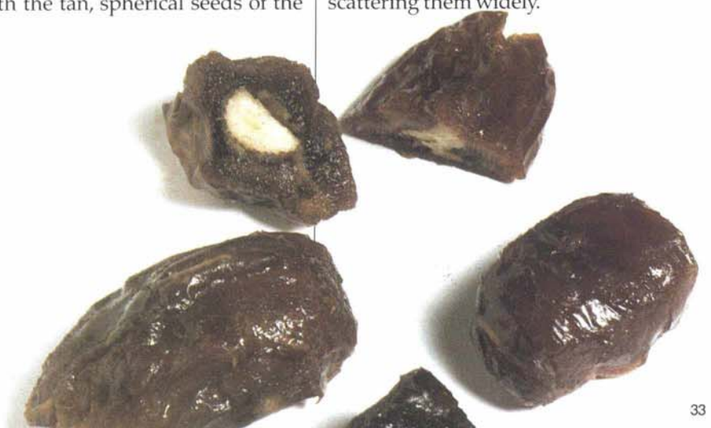
The Arabian Peninsula has been closely linked with spices throughout its history. Spices were appreciated everywhere in the Middle East for their fragrances and their medicinal properties, as well as for their enhancement of flavor in food. Herodotus, "the father of history," wrote in the fifth century BC of the spices of Arabia that "the whole country is scented with them, and exhales an odor marvelously sweet." For centuries the Roman Empire, with its insatiable demand for Eastern spices, kept caravans crisscrossing the Peninsula, bringing such important spices as pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, spikenard, nutmeg and cloves to the West. Muhammad himself, as a young man before the Koran was revealed to him, accompanied caravans across the Peninsula to Syria, carrying goods which very likely included spices. After Islam was established believers came to Makkah from all over the world to make the Hajj, or pilgrimage, and enriched the Peninsula with an enormously varied culinary acquaintance. Arabian cooks developed a mastery of flavoring, using a multitude of spices in each dish to create a taste which is rich and subtle, never overpowering but magnificently enhancing the food.

In many other regions of the world where the climate is hot, the food is, too. In southern India, Mexico, and parts of Africa, for example, many dishes are served that will literally scorch your tongue if you're not used to them, and make beads of perspiration stand out on your forehead. Perspiration has a cooling effect on the body, of course, and it is generally accepted that this is the purpose of such spicing. In contrast, spicing in Arabian cuisine is not extremely pungent. Although there are, as everywhere, individuals who enjoy a good hot red pepper, or a large dose of ginger, mustard or onion, the flavoring in Arabia is tasty enough to awaken an appetite in the heat, but not so hot as to induce a loss of the moisture so essential to life in an arid or desert land.

Certainly, in most cities of the Peninsula there are sophisticated supermarkets where you can find spices sold in rows of uniform bottles containing colored powders. But it is more common – and more fun – to buy the spices whole in some tiny, fragrant shop or stall in a *suq*. These whole spices are interesting in that they reveal, to a certain extent, which part of the plant has yielded the spice, whether bark or berry, seed or sap. More importantly for flavor, they will be stronger and more aromatic, since the volatile essential oils are lost much more rapidly after the spices have been ground. The spice seller will often grind your spices for you on the spot, if you prefer, or he may offer to sell you a preground mixture which he will assure you is excellent for specific dishes, such as a rice pilaf or a vegetable stew, but whose ingredients remain his secret.

Dates have always been an important food in the Peninsula, where several varieties are cultivated in ancient groves in the large oases; dates are a common condiment at any meal and with coffee. Various nuts – almonds, walnuts, pistachios, hazelnuts and pine nuts – all of which grow in regions of the Middle East, lend texture as well as flavor to Arabian foods. Familiar spices and herbs like cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, hot red and green peppers (*Capsicum* spp.) and allspice, ginger, mint, parsley, bay leaves, basil, dill, rosemary, garlic and onions all are used frequently. A few others which are becoming more commonly known in the West are popular as well, such as cumin, caraway and coriander – both the tan, spherical seeds of the coriander plant and its parsley-like fringed green leaves, known in the West as cilantro. But beyond those there are still other spices and condiments important to the flavor of Arabia that are relatively unknown in the West today.

Sesame seeds, the pale, small seeds of a tall herb grown in many parts of the Middle East, are extremely important to the cuisine of the region. The seeds are pressed to extract a high-quality oil; lightly toasted, they add their nutty flavor to a large number of breads and pastries, or provide a tasty coating for sweet Medina dates stuffed with almonds. *Tahinah*, a paste made from sesame, is mixed with mashed chick-peas, garlic and lemon juice to make the beloved dip *hummus*. Sesame seeds mixed with honey are a nutritious, sweet snack. Perhaps Ali Baba commanded the cave to "Open, sesame!" because the seed pods of this plant (except for modern commercial varieties) burst open suddenly and forcefully when the seeds are ripe, scattering them widely.



Dates

Cardamom

Cardamom is an essential ingredient in that ubiquitous symbol of Arab hospitality, coffee. In the Arabian Peninsula, coffee is usually a straw-colored brew, made from lightly roasted beans, lavishly perfumed and flavored with crushed, large green cardamom pods, and served unsweetened in miniature handleless cups in a stream of generosity that ends only when the guest's thirst is unquestionably satisfied. As it is one of the world's most expensive spices, cardamom's generous use is intended as an honor. In addition, coffee brewed from dark-roasted beans, and usually prepared with sugar, is drunk occasionally. That brew is sometimes spiced with a little ground cardamom seed as well.

Cardamom is by no means limited to coffee; its pleasant, camphor-like flavor combines well with any food or beverage, hot or cold. (I challenge you to find an exception.) The seed pods, slightly crushed, are a standard spice in the traditional Arabian dish *kabsah*, a lamb-and-rice stew, and it is a common ingredient in fruit desserts.

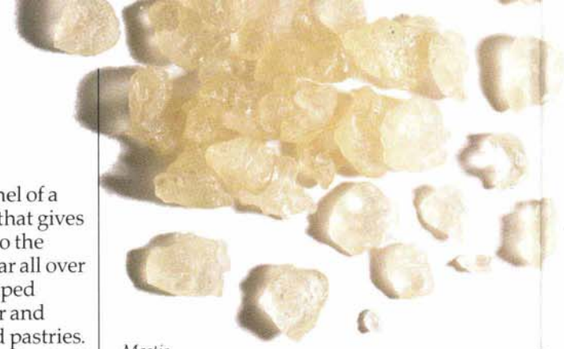
As a native of southern India, the spice has traveled the short distance to the Arabian Peninsula since antiquity. The plant is a member of the ginger family, grows to a height of two meters or more (six or eight feet) and produces its aromatic seed pods on curly panicles at its base.

Dried limes lend a bright tang to stews, some varieties of *kabsah*, and fish dishes. The limes may be used whole and fished out of the dish before serving, or pounded to a fine powder. To make your own dried limes, boil the small round variety of limes vigorously for a few minutes, then dry them in a sunny or otherwise dry and warm place for several weeks until they turn brown and feel hollow.

It is ***mahlab***, the aromatic kernel of a kind of cherry with a black fruit, that gives that distinctive flavor and scent to the sweet braided yeast bread popular all over the Middle East. The droplet-shaped kernels are ground into a powder and used in this and other breads and pastries. In addition to providing "the bread spice," this versatile tree has several other uses: Its fragrant oil is used in making perfumes, its hard, heavy wood is valued in turnery, and the tree itself provides grafting stock for cherry growers in southern Europe and western Asia.

Mahlab

Dried limes

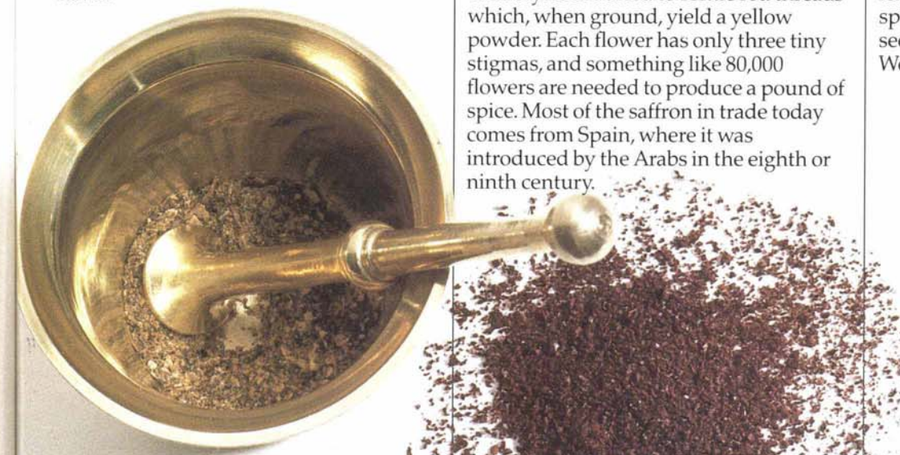


Mastic

Mastic, the resin exuded from the bark of a small evergreen shrub closely related to the pistachio tree, is best known in the West today for its use in such products as varnish and paint, but cooks in Arabia continue their centuries-old custom of enjoying its unique fresh, resinous aroma and flavor in meat soups and stews and in puddings. Mastic melts into the food rather than dissolving, so it is best to pulverize the translucent light-yellow lumps before adding them. Mastic is one of the many ingredients used in the popular *shawurma*, that elaborate construction of marinated meat, fat and flavors which rotates on a vertical spit placed close to a fire.

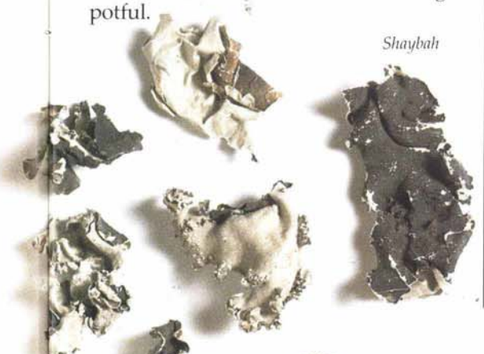
Nutmeg is the seed of a large evergreen tree native to the Spice Islands (the Moluccas) of what is now Indonesia. The fleshy yellow, peach-like fruit of this tree splits open when ripe, revealing the nutmeg encased in a dark-brown shell, which is in turn wrapped in a bright red net, or aril; this aril is the spice mace. Nutmeg has long been in popular use in the Middle East, as in the rest of the world, both as a flavoring and a medicine; however, its medicinal properties have caused it to be classified officially as a drug and it is therefore banned in Saudi Arabia today. Very large quantities of nutmeg can produce hallucinations followed by ferocious headaches, and an overdose can be lethal.

Rosewater and ***orange-blossom water*** lend their sweet perfumes to a wide variety of foods, notably puddings and pastries but also to some fruit drinks and salads. They may be used separately or together, depending on the dish and the taste of the cook. The essences are distilled from the petals of the flowers with water, a process developed by the Arabs; the flower waters on sale today are usually a dilution of this product. Rosewater is one of the earliest distilled products ever made, and its manufacture has been an important industry in the Middle East for about 1,200 years. Rosewater and orange-blossom water are added to food simply for the pleasure their fragrance gives, rather than for flavor.



Shaybah, also known as "old man's beard," is a tree lichen found in the Arabian Peninsula whose complex bitter, metallic flavor is popular in meat and vegetable stews. A small piece of curly black-and-silver lichen will flavor a large potful.

Shaybah



Saffron

Saffron is commonly used in the more elegant rice dishes, both savory and sweet, as much for its beautiful yellow color as for its unmistakable earthy taste. Chicken and fish are also often flavored with saffron. This spice, the world's most expensive, is made up of the stigmas of an autumn-flowering crocus native to the Middle East. The stigmas and parts of their styles are dried to brittle red threads which, when ground, yield a yellow powder. Each flower has only three tiny stigmas, and something like 80,000 flowers are needed to produce a pound of spice. Most of the saffron in trade today comes from Spain, where it was introduced by the Arabs in the eighth or ninth century.

Sumac

Powdered dark-red ***sumac*** berries provide a pleasant lemony spice which tastes especially good on meats such as shish kebabs. Although it is produced by a small Mediterranean/Persian tree related to the poisonous sumac of North America, and it is sometimes used in tanning leather, the agreeable acid of these berries is in no way harmful. Sumac was mentioned nearly 2,000 years ago in the writing of Dioscorides, a Greek physician serving in the Roman army, as having healthful properties; Dioscorides says it was "sprinkled among sauces" and mixed with meat. Modern-day eaters find it excellent on pizza. Sumac is also generally considered an essential ingredient in the spice mixture *za'tar*.

The ***tamarind*** is a small tropical tree similar in appearance to an acacia. Its name is derived from the Arabic for "Indian date." The pulp of its long brown seed pods yields an extremely viscous syrup with a distinctive sour flavor that is excellent in vegetables, meat and fish dishes. Tamarind syrup makes a delicious and refreshing cold drink, prepared like lemonade with water and sugar. This spice is not so exotic in the West as it may seem at first: Tamarind is an ingredient in Worcestershire sauce.

Tamarind

Za'tar is the Arabic name for the herb thyme, but it also denotes a delicious mixture of two parts thyme, one part sumac, one part sesame seeds and a little salt. (Proportions may vary, and other spices may be added according to each family's taste.) Served with a high-quality olive oil and flat Arab bread, it is a popular breakfast throughout the Middle East.

Alice Arndt is a culinary historian who has lived in the Middle East for 10 years.

Za'tar

THREE TURKISH DELIGHTS

From the delicious simplicity of fresh fruit and light fruit compotes to the magnificent elaboration of the famous pastries and palace desserts, Turkish sweets provide both a fine ending to any meal and a warm expression of hospitality to casual callers and guests. Of the three desserts presented here, one relies on the fresh flavor of the delicious tart cherries of Anatolia. Another, rarely made in private homes, includes – and conceals – chicken breast meat among its ingredients, and is surely one of the strangest and most delicious inventions of the Topkapı Palace kitchens. The third, according to legend, was invented by Noah's wife, who, after the Ark landed, concocted a final meal out of the leftovers of all the supplies aboard, turning out a wheat pudding whose variations are familiar today in many parts of the Middle East.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERGUN ÇAĞATAY

MORELLO CHERRY BREAD

Vişneli Ekmek

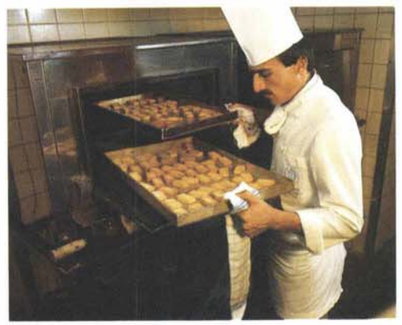
1 kilogram (35 oz.) morello cherries
(750 grams [26 oz.] when pitted)
200 grams (7 oz.) water
450 grams (1 lb., 2 oz.) sugar
1 loaf of firm, day-old white bread, unsliced

The ingredients are the making of this dish; select flavorful bread – perhaps homemade – and ripe, fresh cherries. Use a loaf that is nearly square in cross-section. Slice it thickly, and cut the slices in two to make 20 long, rectangular pieces. Pit the cherries and stir the sugar into them. Let them rest in a large pan for about half an hour, then stir in the water and bring to a boil.

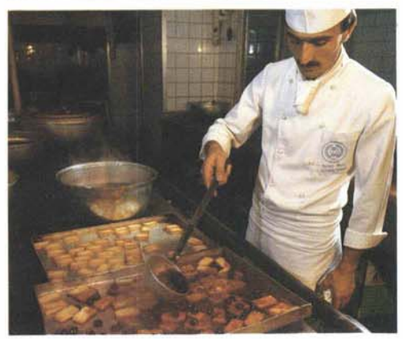
Toast the pieces of bread in the oven until crisp. Put them on a platter and slowly pour over them the hot cherries and syrup. Let the dish cool.

Put each two-piece serving onto a dessert plate. Decorate with whipped cream and a generous pinch of chopped almonds. Serves 10.

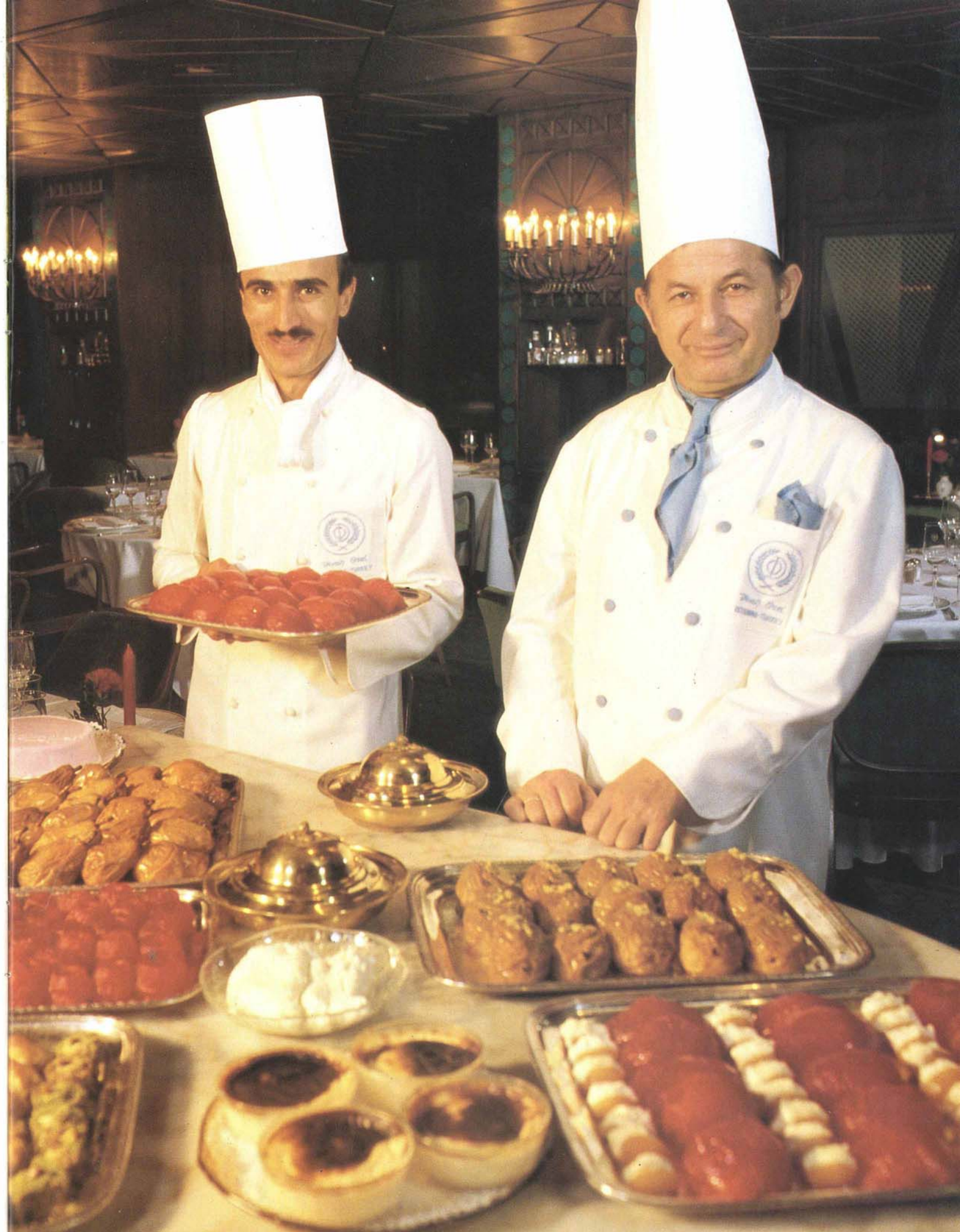
Pitting the fresh sour cherries.

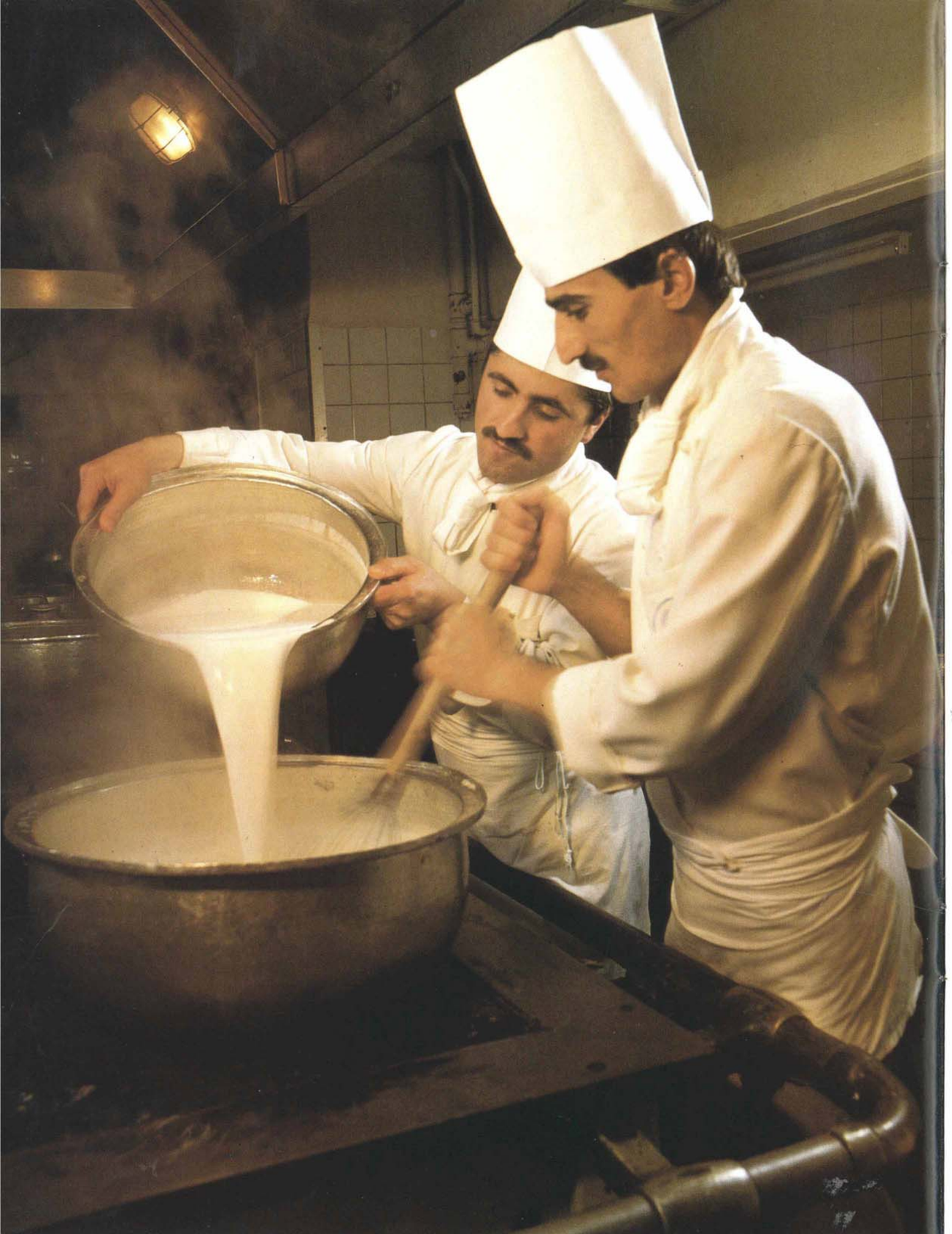


Taking the crisp pieces of toasted bread out of the oven.



Pouring the hot cherry syrup over the bread. Opposite, dessert chef Adnan Aslan (left) and chef de cuisine Süleyman Özgen.





BROWNED CHICKEN-BREAST DESSERT

Kazan dibi
Tavuk Göğsü

5 kilograms water-buffalo milk (4¼ Imp. qts., 5 qts. 10 oz. US measure)
1,250 grams (2 lb. 12 oz.) sugar
1 boiled double chicken breast, well cooked
1 kilogram (2 lb. 3 oz., scant 4½ cu.) rice

Rinse the rice and soak it in cold water overnight. Drain it and buzz it in a blender in small portions until it becomes a milky liquid. Keep this *sütbye* cool until it is added to the pudding: It stiffens immediately when heated.

Pick the boiled chicken breast into small pieces and rub it between your fingers or pound it in a mortar until it is almost like a purée.

Bring the water-buffalo milk to a boil, adding sugar and stirring. (If you need a substitute, try two or three parts cow's cream to one part cow's milk.) Add the *sütbye* slowly to the simmering milk, stirring continuously. Then add the finely rubbed or pounded white chicken meat to the mixture. Stir continuously for 45 minutes.

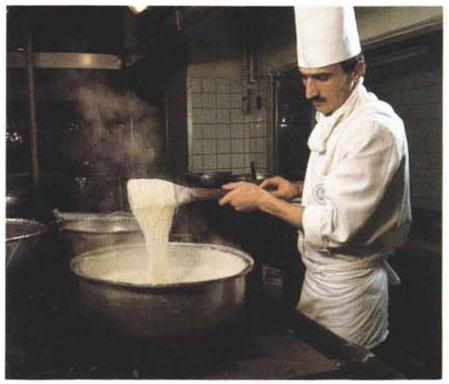
The pudding can now be poured into bowls and eaten when cool. However, the more sophisticated version – which is also more attractive and, many say, even more tasty – is browned in a further step and designated *kazan-dibi*, or "bottom-of-the-pot."

Divide the mixture into two large flat pans similar to roasting pans. Cook it slowly on the stove top, over medium heat, while you stir the upper layers only with a spatula. Don't stir too deep: Allow the undercrust to turn dark golden brown, but without burning. Continue, shifting the pan if necessary, until the whole bottom layer becomes the desired color, then remove from heat and allow to cool.

The pudding is traditionally served in rolled-up slabs, with the browned side up and the seam of the roll beneath. Cut the pudding into rectangles of a size that allows each one to make a single fat roll. Use a spatula to scrape each portion off the bottom of the pan, rolling it up with your hand as you go. Serves 25 – and rarely made in smaller quantities.

Boiled chicken breasts ready for use.

Rubbing the shredded meat between the fingers to shred it further.

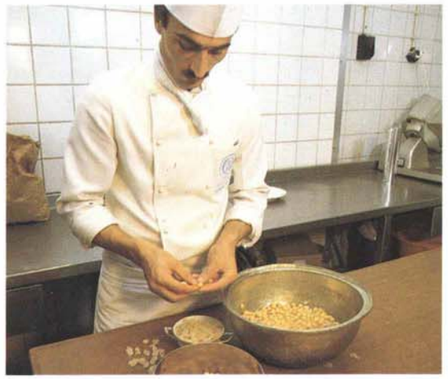


Opposite, the sütbye *is poured into the simmering milk-and-sugar mixture. At left, the stirring continues for 45 minutes after that.*

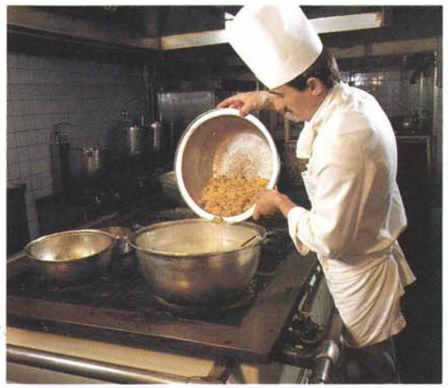
Browned rolled portions cool in the pan.

Chopping the apricots and dried figs.

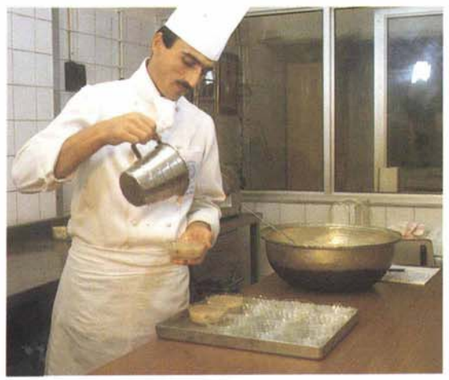
Squeezing off the thin skins of the chickpeas.



Pouring the blended wheat into the cooked whole wheat.



Pouring the cooked asure *into individual bowls for cooling and decorating. Opposite, the finished product.*



WHEAT PUDDING

Asure

500 grams (18 oz., 2¼ cu.) whole wheat
150 grams (5 oz., scant ¾ cu.) chickpeas
150 grams (5 oz., scant ¾ cu.) white beans
100 grams (3½ oz., scant ½ cu.) dried figs
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) hazelnuts
100 grams (3½ oz., scant ½ cu.) dried apricots
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) seedless raisins
4 liters water (6¾ Imp. pints, 1 gal. plus 1 cu. US measure)
1,500 grams (3 lb. 5oz., 6½ cu.) sugar
1 dessertspoon of rosewater
100 grams (3½ oz., ½ cu.) pine nuts
100 grams (3½ oz., generous ½ cu.) walnut halves or quarters
50 grams (1½ to 2 oz., scant ¼ cu.) dried currants
pomegranate seeds for decoration

In separate bowls, soak the wheat, chickpeas and dried white beans overnight in plenty of water. Drain. Boil the wheat in the four liters of water for three hours, then let it stand in the remaining water. Boil the chickpeas and white beans, each separately, until tender. Drain them, but reserve the cooking liquid. Cut up the dried apricots and all but one or two figs and leave them in a little water. When they have softened, force them through a coarse sieve. Chop the hazelnuts. Then squeeze off and discard the skins of the boiled chickpeas.

Put half of the boiled wheat in a blender and buzz until mushy. Pour it back into the pan with the rest of the wheat. Add the chickpeas, white beans, figs, apricots, hazelnuts and raisins. Stir together, add the sugar and bring to boil, stirring. Simmer for 15-20 minutes. If more liquid is needed, use the reserved liquid from the cooked beans. During the last five minutes of simmering, add the rosewater.

Pour the pudding into dessert bowls and let it cool a bit before decorating the top with sliced figs, pomegranate seeds, pine nuts, currants and walnuts. ⊕

The desserts were prepared for photography by Adnan Aslan, dessert chef of the Divan Hotel, Istanbul.