

DELIGHTS FROM THE GARDEN OF EDEN

A COOKBOOK AND A HISTORY
OF THE IRAQI CUISINE

Second Edition

كتاب الطبخ العراقي وقاريخه

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Equinox Publishing Ltd

equinox

London / Oakville

Published by Equinox Publishing Ltd.

UK
Unit 6, The Village, 101 Amies St, London SW11 2JW
USA
DBBC, 28 Main Street, Oakville, CT 06779

www.equinoxpub.com

First edition published 2003 by the author.
This edition published 2009.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13978 184553 457 8 (hardback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
(to follow)

Typeset and Designed in France by
Gus Hunnybun FCSD FISTD
Printed and bound in Great Britain by

*In loving memory of my son Bilal,
who has been my inspiration.
Despite his young years, he knew the meaning of food.
In his school journal, he once wrote,
"Love is when Mother makes brownies for me."
I regret, every second of my life,
having missed the chance of seeing this
When he was still with us.*



FOREWORD

Clifford Wright

When the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, little did it know it would rock the cradle of civilization. I've wondered if those young American soldiers knew they had invaded ancient Mesopotamia. When American brigades rolled past Ur, did they know that this was perhaps the first town known by mankind? Over the years, they learned of Sunnis and Shiites. But Iraq is more than that. Iraq is a land of more than 5,000 years of history.

Iraq is the cradle of civilization. All three monotheistic religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam trace their origins to Iraq, the home of Abraham. It is a cosmopolitan land, and a peasant land, a land of Arab Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Kurds, Turkomans, Assyrians, of secularists and theists, of tribesmen and engineers, of big cities and dusty villages, of famous rivers and their verdant shores and desert expanses home to Bedouins on their camels.

Since the time of ancient Mesopotamia this land between two rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, has had an uninterrupted civilization whose contribution to Western civilization is immeasurable. Therefore, the destruction of Iraq beginning with the state of fear created by the fascist regime of Saddam Hussein, is all the sadder because the Iraqi people, although now rid of a despicable despot, are nevertheless occupied by a foreign power that no matter how well intentioned seems uncaring about the heart and soul of this ancient land and its people. The Americans will leave one day and we only hope the Iraqi people can find this illusive unity and peace that all people seek.

After five years of occupation and civil war, the situation looked bleak in 2008. But when Iraqis start rebuilding their country and forming a new civil society, a road upon which, incidentally, they had been for decades, they will find in their differences the foundation for a new society and they will celebrate the things they share rather than the things that divide. They share a language, a literature, and an often overlooked element of material cultural, certainly a cuisine. For many Iraqis, their country is a garden

of Eden. So many evocative Biblical references to prophets and gardens of paradise are to ancient Babylon and Mesopotamia, that is, modern Iraq. The allure of a palpable land of milk and honey in the future must be encouraging to any Iraqi who hopes for a better future.

Some eight thousand years ago, the earliest agriculturalist began tending fields of barley and primitive wheat in Iraq. After time the very first written recipes in the world came to be etched in cuneiform on clay tablets in the ancient Mesopotamian civilization of Babylon. We can say without exaggeration that cuisine begins in Iraq.

It is this extraordinary story, a history told through food, that we are presented with in this deep, rich cookbook and culinary history by Nawal Nasrallah. It is not uncommon to hear people talk about a country's food as reducible to another country's food, say, the food of an invader or a neighbor. They say "American food is really nothing but English food" or "Greek food is really Turkish food." None of this is true. It is based on a mistake of identification and a tendency to simplify explanations by reductionism. It is easy to say a nation's food is just the food of its invaders. We don't want to deny the influence of invaders. The Spanish certainly had a major influence on Sicilian cuisine and the Turks influenced Syrian cuisine. In Iraq too, there are foreign influences such as Turkish, Persian, and Indian, but all these influences are the elements that fell into an Iraqi pot giving birth to a unique cuisine that is herein demonstrated.

Some people see the Middle East as hopelessly tribal or at the very least "ethnic," and they argue that the states of the Middle East are artificial creations of colonial powers and therefore, because of this fact, ethnic groups without a sense of political community were forced to live together. As a result, politics in the Middle East became authoritarian. What is missing from this equation is an understanding of regions in Iraq. Regional identification often compares to ethnic identification as a lens through which to view Iraq.

Polls in Iraq consistently show that the overwhelming majority of Iraqis think that splitting the country up along sectarian lines into Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish regions is a bad thing. They think of themselves as Iraqis.

This may seem far removed from cuisine, but it's not, because in this tour de force Nasrallah pulls together the disparate strings that make up this Iraqi culture by virtue of its shared cuisine. Her story begins with ancient Mesopotamia. This is no cursory overview, but a fascinating exploration based on a variety of sources from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Akkadian cuneiform tablets to modern archeobotanical studies, that seeks to provide a deeper understanding of what people cooked and ate so long ago and how this is all connected to the cooking in Iraq today.

The time line of Iraqi history is breathtakingly long, and Nasrallah does not shy away from the challenge. She brings us the richness of Iraq and Iraqi cuisine as also seen in medieval times with the Abbasid dynasty that came to power in 762 AD. During this period, we have the first true written cookbooks and a gastronomy in the form of recipes and poems about wine and food. Cuisines as a part of material culture do not remain immutable, they change with the ebb and flow resulting from their interaction with other cultures. There is no doubt that Iraqis share with other Arabs similar or identical dishes. There's no doubt, given that Iran is Iraq's neighbor to the east that Persian cuisine's influence can be tasted not to mention the more distant India.

Nevertheless, a unique culinary culture exists in Iraq and thanks to Nawal Nasrallah we are not merely introduced to it but we can experience it through well-written and accessible recipes. A recipe that requires vegetables to be stuffed with a filling made of ground meat, onion, garlic, raisins, parsley, dill, allspice, cinnamon, salt, and pepper is not only a recipe we can make in our kitchens, it is also an introduction to a medieval Baghdadi cookbook. There are regional differences in cookery such as the way

they stuff vegetables, *dolma*, in Mosul in northern Iraq. Throughout the book, you will discover the link between the ages - this is real culinary history. Take for instance the dish called *thareed*, made with chicken, lamb, or only vegetables and has a history older than the Abbasids dynasty.

This cookbook is more than an introduction to Iraqi cuisine. It is in fact an introduction to Arab cooking in general researched with the kind of depth not seen before in a cookbook of the Arab world and Middle East. Some years ago, when the occupation of Iraq by American troops was in its early stages, I read somewhere the account of American troops assigned to train new Iraqi army units. As their training came to completion, there was a great celebration by the local village sheik, but the American troops shunned the Iraqi food offered. The story made me sad. It was sad because they rejected the spirit in which the food was offered, but, from a gastronomic point of view, they rejected some of the best tasting food in the world. They missed out on understanding a culture through its food. Luckily, we do not miss out, as we now have a compendium of the best tasting Arab food and, indeed, world food.

*I am grateful to this book.
It has been to me like the
stories were to Shehrazad.*

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بَيْنَ الْحَوْضَيْنِ وَعَلَيْهِمَا شَطْبَتَانِ وَعَلَيْهِمَا كَسٌّ وَالْمِزَابُ
 تَجْرِكُ عَلَى مَحْوٍ رَظْرَفَاذٍ فِي نَقَبِي الشَّطْبَتَيْنِ وَعَلَيْهِ كَسٌّ وَأَبْنُ ب
 فَصِيرٌ يَقْطُرُ مِنْهُ الْمَاءُ إِلَى الْمِزَابِ مِنْ أَسْفَلِ الْخِرَانَةِ وَعَلَيْهِ فَ
 وَالْخِرَانَةُ وَعَلَيْهَا كَسٌّ



Illustration of a wine machine in al-jazari's Book of Ingenious Devices, 1206 AD (Upper Mesopotamia). Library of Topkapu Serai, Istanbul.

INTRODUCTION

IRAQI COOKING IN PERSPECTIVE



Iraqi Cooking in Perspective

That Little Street in Baghdad

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He who eats too much will not (be able to) sleep.

A Sumerian Proverb, ca 3500 BC (Gordon 97)

That Little Street in Baghdad

As a crossroad for several eastern and western cultures, Iraq had the ingredients for a multiracial society. Nowhere is this pluralistic culture more evident than in the little street in Baghdad where I grew up. It was a middle-class neighborhood, with eucalyptus trees lining both sides of the street, and in the springtime the whole neighborhood would be infused with the intoxicating aroma of the blossoms of citrus trees planted all along the fences. Those shady places were like magnets for the neighborhood children, where we used to play, fight, reconcile, tell stories, and chatter about everything and anything. As lunchtime approached, the time for the main meal of the day, we started playing our guessing game as the pleasant and most welcome aromas of food sneaked out of the simmering pots, and meandered along our street. We would sniff these floating aromas and guess whose mother is cooking what for that day. Although the dominant aroma would be that of stew and rice, cooked practically everyday, the guessing would still be intriguing for there were so many kinds of stews to guess at. And almost always there would be a single



Water jug

Opposite: A grand meal being served

distinctive aroma of a special dish, and we knew that one of us would soon be called by his or her mother to distribute samplings of that dish for the neighbors. As the custom had always been, it was not fit to return the neighbor's dish empty, so it would be returned with a comparable dish that is equally if not more delicious. Thus, our guessing game was kept alive by this exchange of hospitality, and from those little dishes coming and going, we came to learn a lot about people coming from all walks of life, and of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Such diversity was not a unique situation in the city of Baghdad, which across the centuries became a melting pot of sorts for all these groups.

My maternal grandparents owned some date palm groves in southern Iraq, and my mother and her siblings, as she always liked to reminisce, led a carefree childhood in the midst of these date groves, chasing the sheep and goats, and stealing a sip or two of milk right from the udders of the goats when grown ups were not watching. She was brought up to be married to a sheikh, but this was not meant to be. Instead, she got married to a schoolteacher from Basra, and with him and with a growing family they moved to different cities south and north. With these travels, my mother inevitably widened her culinary repertoire, and when we settled in that little street in Baghdad we were exposed to even more diversity.

I remember the best shrimp with rice came from a *Basrawi* woman (from Basra, the port city in the south), whom everybody called *Um Sahira* ('mother of Sahira'), as the custom was to call the parent after his or her eldest child. Whenever the occasion arose, she would boast of the excellence of the *baharat* (mixed spices) her relatives brought her from Basra. She would laugh, and her gold side tooth would gleam and glitter, and tell us how when she cooked the shrimp with rice the

exciting aroma of her spices was everywhere. Her back yard neighbor would tell her that as the aroma was sucked by the air cooler into their living room, the children would jokingly open up pieces of bread in front of the air cooler as if they were filling their sandwiches with the aroma of *Um Sahira's* spices.

Although we used to buy *kubbat Mosul* (flat discs of bulgur dough) readymade, the best ever made was by our Mosuli neighbor (from Mosul, a big city in the north), *Um Yunis*. They were so huge and yet so thin, as thin as the onion's skin as people used to say describing the perfect *kubba*. Our first encounter with a Kurdish specialty called *parda palau* (rice pies) was on a very sad occasion when my brother passed away. As the custom was, neighbors were to help people in bereavement by cooking food for them. That was the only time we ever received a dish from that Kurdish neighbor, of whom we knew almost nothing. We knew her name was Mary, but we were not sure that was her real name. She was a middle-aged retired belly dancer, and mingling with her was almost tabooed due to her profession. It seems she was even abandoned by her family, and she kept to herself all the time. One thing we came to know about her was her excellent cooking. It was sad though how her life of isolation was ended. Apparently, her youngest brother, who was a soldier on leave then, visited her, asked for money, she refused, they argued, and he stabbed her with kebab skewers. It was only after days that the murder was discovered, when the smell in the street that time was not of food but of a decaying body. For a long time after that incident, the sight of kebab skewers freaked us out, and we lost appetite for all skewered foods. But life went on, although it took us a while until we resumed our street games routine.

Three or four doors down from where we lived, there lived a nice quiet Jewish family. The father was a physician and the mother, *Um Naseem*, was a housewife. They didn't have children our age. On Saturdays she used to ask us children to light the stove for her, and we didn't understand the reason

behind this, neither was she ready to explain it to us. But she would, on occasions, send our families a delicious dish that she called *tabyeet*. It was chicken with rice that comes with an exquisite crunchy crust due to the prolonged time of simmering. Our Armenian neighbor was, without dispute, the best pastry maker. The simple sponge cakes with jelly and custard she made on her daughter's birthday were very tasty. She volunteered once to teach my eldest sisters how to make her famous jam pies. During Christmas time, our *Athouri* neighbors (Christians who claim descent from the Assyrians) would send slices of delicious aromatic fruitcake. When their daughter divulged the secret that they soaked the dried fruits in brandy, we started to act like drunk whenever we ate of the cake. My grandmother (*bibi*), who was staying with us at the time, also liked that cake, but when she heard about the brandy part, she hurried to the water tap, and amidst our laughter, started washing her mouth frantically asking for God's forgiveness.

Around the house where we lived, there grew *rarinj* trees (orange of Seville). This cheap variety of orange was sweet and sour and had a very thick and bitter peel. My mother mainly used it with salads as a substitute for lemon juice, that is, until our Christian Mosuli next-door neighbor once told us that she could show us how to make delicious jam from the peel, and thirst quenching *sherbet* syrup from the juice.

First-hand experience of a foreign cuisine came with the arrival of a small Indian family who stayed for some time in one of the apartments in our street. Their daughter was our age and her mother, whom we started calling *Um Nilo*, used to visit us sometimes, which was a chance for us to practice the little English we knew at the time. My grandmother, who was not usually a sociable person, always looked forward to these visitations, and I am not sure if this was because of *Um Nilo's* 'chapaties,' those delicious small spicy flat Indian breads, or the desire to brush up her 'English.' I remember the times when *Um Nilo* used to ask grandmother a question, of course expecting us

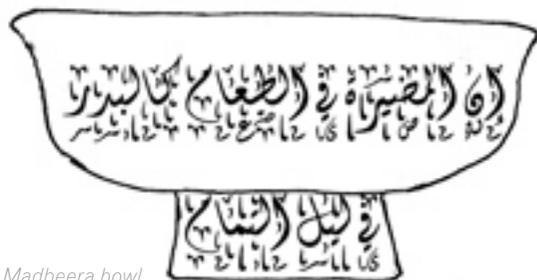
to translate for her. Grandmother would immediately switch to the Egyptian dialect she must have picked up from watching Egyptian films, and answer the question abruptly. We would all laugh and ask why she was doing this, and she would say, "Well, the woman doesn't know Arabic."

We also had a Palestinian neighbor who was my mother's friend-- her children were too young for us. She used to tell us of the fruits in her homeland, especially the beautiful and succulent cherries, of which we didn't know anything at the time. She would never get tired of telling us how once she bought a kilo (two pounds) of cherries that mysteriously disappeared. Upon "investigation" her youngest son confessed, and here she would mimic her son's small quivering voice, "*Akaltu an w'khayyi* (my brother and I ate it)." It was fun listening to a dialect other than our own being spoken live. Of the dishes she made I particularly remember her *tahini*, it was creamy in texture, and always came garnished with lots of olive oil, and whole chickpeas in the middle.

As to what we used to put in the neighbors' dishes in return, it was usually *mtabbag simach* (browned slices of fish layered with aromatic rice and raisins), for my Mama, as a true southerner, was a devout lover of fish. And while these dainty dishes kept on coming and going from one house to the other, stew with rice and bread were destined for the family table to be enjoyed on almost daily basis. Variety came from using different kinds of vegetables, and different cuts of meat, to be had with lots of fresh greens, salad, and condiments. Occasionally, especially when entertaining guests, special elaborate dishes would be prepared such as the stuffed foods *dolma*, *kubba*, and *sheikh mahshi*, or an array of scrumptious *nawashif* dishes of varieties of meat, fish, and chicken and fried *kubba*. But after that, back to rice and stew.

PART ONE BACK TO THE ROOTS

Iraq now shares with the rest of the Near Eastern countries culinary traditions based on balanced dietary trends that emphasize grains and vegetables, moderate intake of meat, and the use of varieties of spices. Such trends would no doubt appeal to health conscious eaters everywhere. However, the Iraqi cuisine has an undeniably distinctive character of its own that testifies to the diversity of its roots, and the refinement it developed over years of trial and improvement. The Iraqi cuisine evolved over several thousands of years during which the land became the scene for cultural exchanges through migration, invasion, counter-invasion, and colonization. It has its origins in civilizations that preceded and interacted with western cultures. The Sumerians, Babylonians, and Assyrians, collectively referred to as ancient Mesopotamians, played a significant role in shaping the Near East for three thousand years before Christianity. As the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the codes of Hammurabi may testify, the cultural sophistication the Mesopotamians achieved naturally extended to its cuisine. Archaeological records, for instance, show that the ancient Mesopotamians made about twenty kinds of cheese, flavored, sweetened, and sharp. They knew over a hundred kinds of soup and their records list about three hundred varieties of bread, some spiced, and some sweetened with date syrup and honey. In fact, the first documented 'cookbook' in human history was written in Akkadian on clay tablets, on the land of Babylon, about 3700 years ago. Here is how it all began.



Madheera bowl

The Old Testament tells us that once upon a time great empires flourished on the land of Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers, Tigris and Euphrates. The inhabitants of this region were known as the Babylonians and Assyrians. Biblical allusions, along with references in Greek and Roman histories, are generally vague or even contradictory. For instance, an older people who lived in Iraq, the Sumerians, were never mentioned. The Bible tells us that the descendants of Noah lived on the land of Shinar (Genesis II: 2), which in all probability was a distorted form of the southern Iraqi ancient name of S(h)umer. Mesopotamia is also believed to be the land where the Great Flood took place. This major incident was first described in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a work that preceded Homer's *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by more than 1300 years.

There was also the belief that the Garden of Eden was located in Mesopotamia, which points to another historical significance. While excavating in Ur in 1949, archaeologists found the platform of the temple ziggurat, built around 2000 BC. Beneath that ziggurat, they excavated nineteen levels at the bottom of which was a little sand mound surrounded by a reed fence with a tiny chapel. This was believed to be the city of Eridu, the first shrine in human history and the mythical mound of creation. According to Sumerian mythology, that was the first land that rose from the great sea of fresh water at the beginning of time. Out of this primeval ocean of sweet water all human and natural life came.

The Sumerians also thought of Ur as the location for the walled garden that enclosed the sacred Kiskanu tree (Wood 21). This mythical tree might well have been the prototype of the Tree of Life in the Biblical Garden of Eden, and the Qur'anic Tree in *Janat 'Adan*. Undoubtedly, the names of both gardens can be traced back to the Sumerian 'Edin.' This mythical Sumerian 'Edinic' place was probably the natural landscape of the wild uncultivated grassland of southern Mesopotamia. To this day Iraqi folk stories tell of a tree in the

southern region reputed to be Adam and Eve's Tree of Knowledge. In the city of Basra there still is an ancient tree known as *shajarat Adam* 'Adam's tree'. People visit it for blessings, and those who have a wish to be fulfilled would tie to its branches, strips of cloth of all colors and material.

The Book of Genesis makes references to ancient cities, such as Babylon, Akkad and Erech. According to the bible, Abraham began his wanderings with Sarah from Ur, capital of the Chaldeans, in the southern part of the region (*Genesis II: 31*). In the northern modern city of Mosul, built on the site of ancient Nineveh, tradition has it that the shrine of the prophet Jonah is located there. On the summit of an archaeological mound in the heart of the city of modern Mosul, the Mosque of *Nabi Yunis* (Prophet Jonah) was constructed after the traditional design with the characteristic narrow labyrinthine streets. In the first half of the fourteenth century AD, the famous traveler Ibn Battuta of Tangier visited this place, admired the Mosque, and said that about a mile from it there was a spring called by his name. This mosque and the buildings surrounding it have defied all serious attempts at excavation, due to the sanctity of the holy shrine. Locals have reported, though, that when houses in the shrine's proximity happened to fall or were repaired, people would stumble upon some bricks with cuneiform inscriptions, and they would usually put them to such domestic use as rebuilding their kitchens and living room walls. It has even been reported that while an inhabitant was digging in the *sirdab* (basement) of his house, he came across the head of a winged bull (Fagan 156).

It was only relatively recently that the world knew of ancient Mesopotamia. The main reason why such an old civilization has been overlooked is that the available building material the ancients used was largely mud brick, which was not as durable as stone. Annual floods, rain, and shifting sands slowly leveled and buried the towers and palaces, and all that was left were the irregular mounds of land known as *tilal* (hills). During the second half of the nineteenth century and the



twentieth century, however, archaeological excavations revealed the hidden history of the land to the entire world. To the locals, these mounds are not just a source of pride but also favorite picnic spots, particularly in springtime. My family's favorite spot was the mounds near the remains of the ancient wall of Nineveh, across the street from where we lived, and the ancient city of Nimrod, a mere twenty-minute drive south of Mosul. In those ancient sites, it was not uncommon to come across broken pieces of jars or bits of bricks with cuneiform inscriptions on them, lying there on the grassy mounds.

Above: Ancient ladle

CHRONOLOGY

This brief sketch of the historical development of the region is meant to provide contexts for later references to historical periods, monarchs, and influences.

6,000 BC

Herdsmen and farmers in the north of Mesopotamia migrated south to the basin between the Tigris and the Euphrates, a plain that stretches from present day Baghdad to the Gulf. Villages and towns were built, and grains, mainly barley, were cultivated. Irrigation evolved forming the agricultural basis of the prehistoric Ubaid culture (From the name of the mound Tell Ubaid). Those people gave their settlements names like Lagash, Ur, Eridu, Kish, and Nippur.

c. 4,000 BC

Semitic nomads inhabiting the Syrian Desert and the Arabian Peninsula were attracted to the area. Some came as invaders, others as immigrants, and the mingling of the Ubaidian and Semitic cultures laid the foundation for the world's first true civilization. 3500 BC: The Sumerians, whose origin is still an unsolved mystery, arrived on the scene and their ethnic and cultural fusion with the indigenous people helped the rise of an impressive civilization. They developed the irrigation systems, creating food surplus, needed in the development of the world's first cities. They traded with the neighboring countries, exporting barley and textiles and importing stone, timber and metals. Sumeria became powerful and rich with art, architecture, and education. The Sumerians invented writing, most probably driven by the need to keep trading records. The writing characters they produced were known as cuneiform, meaning wedge-shaped, since the stylus used for writing left an imprint in the form of a wedge. Besides, a powerful priesthood emerged to serve local deities at temples that had to be tended and cared for daily. Although Sumer was a small country, it was composed of no fewer than 13 politico-religious units known as "city-states," and the bitter struggle for supremacy among the rulers led to Sumer's decline.

2300 BC

Sargon, the Akkadian, took hold of power and established a new city, called Akkad, as a capital, and from the Sargonic period onwards, the central region of Mesopotamia was known as Akkad. Sargon started the first Mesopotamian Empire. The Akkadians were an ethnic group of Semitic origin, and they shared the life, religion, and culture of the Sumerians. The only difference between them was a linguistic one. In all other aspects, those two ethnic groups were indistinguishable.

1792-1595 BC

Babylonia gained control under Hammurabi, famous for his legal codes. Commerce, astrology, and the arts flourished.

1600 BC

The Babylonians were invaded by the Indo-European Hittites of Anatolia (Asia Minor) who plundered and destroyed, then withdrew to their homeland, leaving Babylon weak and drained.



1595-1170 BC

The Kassites, a non-Semitic people, swooped down to the south from the Zagros Mountains in the north, and seized control of Babylonia. Then the Elamites of Persia overthrew the last of the Kassite kings. They plundered Babylonia, and took with them spoils of war, including the stone inscribed with Hammurabi's code of laws and a gigantic statue of Marduk, the Babylonian chief god. Shamed and dishonored, the Babylonians, led by Nabuchadnezzar I, attacked Elam, and took back the statue of the god. In the north, Assyria gained control. 10th-9th centuries BC: A period of floods, famine, wars, and invasions. Babylonia was a prey to the Assyrians, who then gained power and became the masters of the entire Fertile Crescent.

612-539 BC

The Assyrians were ousted by the Medes of the Persian plateau, and the Chaldeans of Babylon. The Neo-Babylonian Empire emerged. Though it lasted only 75 years, it was the most brilliant and glorious era in the history of Mesopotamia, under the reign of Nabuchadnezzar II, who took the Israelites captives. Babylonia was rebuilt. The hanging gardens, one of the world's seven wonders, was built.

539 BC

Babylonia was conquered by the Persians.

331 BC

Alexander the Great defeated Persia and entered Babylon, beginning the Hellenistic rule.

c. 223 BC

The Mesopotamian region was taken from the Greeks by the Parthians, a Persian tribe of nomads. During this period, the city of Hatra was established in the north. Hatra controlled the trade routes of the west-northern desert, and held a strategic position between the opposing states of Rome in the West and Parthia in the East. The region was occupied by the Sassanides, also from Persia, from 227 BC -636 AD.

637-1285 AD

Five years after the death of the prophet Muhammad, the Arabs defeated the Sassanians, and gained control of Iraq. In 750 AD, the Abbasid Caliphs ruled the area. Caliph al-Mansur founded the round city of Baghdad in 762 AD, soon to become one of the greatest cultural centers in the world. This era was the golden age in the arts and science, during which scholars and artisans became the custodians of Europe's ancient heritage. Caliph Harun al-Rasheed and his Baghdad were mythologized in the Arabian Nights, along with other fictitious Baghdadi characters such as Sindbad the sailor, Aladdin, and Ali Baba.

1258 AD

The Mongols invaded Baghdad, a city of 800,000 people, and ended the Abbasid caliphate. Destruction in Baghdad was great. The irrigation system was ruined and libraries plundered.

1534-1932 AD

Iraq became the battleground between the Ottomans and Persians. In 1534, the Turks entered Baghdad. The Turkish domination lasted about 400 years. After the break up of the Ottoman Empire, British colonization began in 1917. The discovery of oil changed the course of the country's history. In 1932, Iraq was admitted to the League of Nations as an independent country.

And the rest is history.

I THE MESOPOTAMIAN DIET

The dietary knowledge available today of the ancient Mesopotamian period is largely deduced from countless archaeological findings, excavated artifacts, artistic presentations on bas-reliefs, cylinder seals, and a large number of cuneiform clay tablets. Cylinder seals, plaques, and reliefs depict scenes of people engaged in eating, drinking, and feasting. The cuneiform tablets give details on crops, cattle, and foods offered to the gods, the king and his household, in addition to food rations of the public. The most interesting of these documents are the official, economic and personal letters immortalized in the baked cuneiform tablets. They all attest to the fact that, apart from occasional famines due to wars and natural disasters, the Mesopotamians enjoyed a rich and varied diet. It was composed of plenty of indigenously grown and produced foods and ingredients such as cereals, legumes, animal and vegetable oils (sesame and olive), manna (sweet tree exudation), garden products, milk, cheese, sea and fresh-water fish, shell fish, locusts, white and red meat, and mineral products such as salt and ashes (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 45). One can safely assume the majority of the population took advantage of the resources available.



Ancient Wives in Ancient Kitchens

Here is a brief description of the physical conditions and cooking activities that took place in ancient kitchens (from J. Leonard *The First Farmers* 42):

Beneath some 7,500 years of detritus, excavators at Tell [mound] Hassuna, in Iraq, uncovered a farming village whose kitchens consisted of two cooking areas... In the hot, dry months, the women prepared and cooked food in airy courtyards equipped with hearths and, in some cases, ovens. But in variable weather they worked comfortably around indoor hearths, perhaps venturing out to bake loaves of unleavened bread.

Kitchens such as this one were in many ways the focal point of the agricultural revolution. The foods processed in them represented a radical change in diet, with wheat and barley replacing game and other wild foods as the mainstay. Fired vessels of pottery - too cumbersome and fragile for hunter-gatherers to carry in their wanderings--served as durable containers for cooking or storing foods and liquids. Such wares enabled cooks to prepare or preserve the harvested grains by boiling, parching, germinating, or fermenting them. (Leonard 42)

Interestingly, in his *Chemistry and Chemical Technology in Ancient Mesopotamia*, M. Levey contends that it was in ancient kitchens that the early tools and chemical processes originated. No wonder the names of the earliest known chemists and perfumeresses were those of women (44).

II AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTS

At the center of life in ancient Mesopotamia was agriculture. When the first farmers in upper Mesopotamia migrated to the south well before 4,000 BC, they had to adapt their skills to the special conditions of the southern plain where rain was scarce, and crops had to be irrigated by digging a network of canals and using simple bucket-like water lifting instruments called 'dalu' (also Arabic for 'bucket').

1 Field Products

Grains such as wheat, barley, and millet were planted in autumn and harvested in April. Barley was cultivated more than wheat because it proved to be more resilient and thus could thrive in poor and alkaline soil. Wheat, on the other hand, prospered in upper Mesopotamia, where soil was more fertile, and grains were irrigated by rainwater. They cultivated different varieties of barley and wheat to meet the different demands of their cooking.

Once harvested, grains were threshed, winnowed, washed, dried, and then stored. For consumption, the kernels were husked. They were sometimes toasted to make the task of grinding them a little easier. For immediate use, barley flour was made into unleavened bread by cooking it on hot surfaces. This kind of bread is still made in rural areas in modern Iraq. However, a good percentage of the cultivated barley was made into beer, a staple drink at the time. It was consumed by both men and women, and was believed to bring joy to the heart and happiness to the liver. In a Sumerian proverb, pleasure and distress were epitomized by the following (Gordon 264):

Pleasure - it is beer!

Discomfort - it is an expedition!

When a new building was built, the first brick used was made of clay mixed with honey, wine, and beer. From wheat flour they made leavened bread and baked it in clay ovens, known in Sumerian as 'tanuru' (cf. Arabic, *tannour*). These cultivated cereals were also

made into porridges. The last to reach the agricultural scene was rice. It was introduced around 1,000 BC and was planted in the marshes, sprout by sprout, in shallow paddies, harvested by hand, then carried in flat-bottomed canoes to the neighboring villages. Sesame (Akkadian 'samsamu,' cf. Arabic *simsim*) was cultivated mainly for its oil. As revealed in an Assyrian law code, oil was an important staple of life. This law dealt with the husband who deserted his wife and "left her neither oil, nor wool, nor clothes" (Levey 85). Legumes and beans, such as lentils, peas, mung beans, and chickpeas (Akkadian 'amusu,' cf. Arabic hummus) were grown in abundance. In a Sumerian poem about the goddess Inana/Ishtar and her suitors, the farmer offers to give the following products on her wedding to the Shepherd-god Dumuzi/Biblical Tammuz (*Kramer History Begins at Sumer* 140):

*I will bring you wheat, I will bring you beans,
I will bring you lentils.*

When the epic hero Gilgamesh set out on his journey for immortality, he carried chickpeas with him as part of his provisions. There is also evidence that dried white beans were also cooked (Levey 51). Such legumes were valuable sources of protein and an affordable substitute for meat. They were used widely in cooking porridges, soups and stews, as the Iraqis still do to this day. It is also believed that the ancients cooked rice with lentils, which is one of our staple dishes now. Flax was cultivated for the production of linen as well as oil.

2 Vegetable Gardens

Generally, the Mesopotamians had small vegetable gardens attached to their houses in addition to the fields where they worked for a living. Those gardens grew a lot of greens (Akkadian 'nibatu' or 'arqu'). They grew cucumber, eggplant/aubergine, gourd, beans, root vegetables such as beets/beetroot, turnips (Akk. 'laptu,' cf. Arabic *lift*), and radish. Of leaf vegetables: lettuce (Akk. "khassu," cf. Arabic *khas*), spinach, endive, Swiss chard (Akk. 'silki,' cf. Arabic *silq*), watercress, and cabbage. Herbs also grew in plenty, such as mint, rue, dill, and 'erishtu,' an unidentified herb that sounds so much like the rishshad herb (garden cress/peppergrass) which now grows exclusively in Iraq. The seasoning vegetables most frequently mentioned in their records were different kinds of onion, garlic, and 'karasu' (leeks, cf. Arabic *kurrath*). Apparently, these vegetables and greens were affordable and were so much in use, that when the Mesopotamians went poor and hungry they said, "In their stomachs, the greens are too little" (Levey 50).

They used a lot of spices and aromatics in their cooking such as cassia, anise, fennel, nigella seeds, coriander (Akk. 'kisibaru,' cf. Arabic *kizbara*), marjoram, turmeric, juniper berries, ginger, thyme, cardamom, cumin (Akk. 'kamunu'), spikenard, and asafetida. Saffron (Akk. 'azupiranu,' cf. Arabic *za'faran*) was known at the time but was mainly used for medicinal purposes. Mustard was added to flavor wheat bread and beer. It was also used to season their dishes. In their homes, they usually kept a mustard box and a saltbox on their tables. Of their uses outside the kitchen, mustard and salt were used as a weapon of vengeance and destruction. An

Assyrian text tells how one of the kings scattered salt and mustard on the land of Elam to lay it waste. Of all these, however, salt, called 'tabti' (good) in Akkadian, was the staple ingredient. In an incantation, it was addressed thus:

*You salt, who are born in a bright spot,
Without you, no meal in the temple is prepared.*

Salt also developed an ethically symbolic significance. If an Assyrian described a person as "He is the man of my salt," he meant, "He is my friend" (Joannes 32). Salt to this day still carries similar connotations. Loyalty, for instance, is associated with sharing bread and salt with others. Interestingly, this combination of salt and bread, symbolic or otherwise, was established thousands of years ago. A Sumerian proverb on lack of resources goes like this:

*If you have bread, you have no salt,
If you have salt, you have no bread.*

To protect the low-lying vegetables and greens, higher trees were planted. These in turn were planted in the shade of date palms. This way of cultivating vegetables and arranging trees for maximum shade and protection proved so successful that it is still in use to this day. It also explains why in ancient texts and *Qur'anic* verses, fruit trees in general -- but figs, pomegranates, and grape vines in particular -- were often mentioned in conjunction with date palms. We also know that kings were directly involved in laying out gardens and parks and orchards, and they introduced exotic trees and plants. The Hanging Gardens of Babylon is a good example (see below). In the 9th century BC, the Assyrian King Assurnasirpal II boasts:

*I dug a canal for the Upper Zab, cut it through a
mountain top....I irrigated the lowlands of the Tigris and
planted orchards with all kinds of fruit trees in them. I
pressed wine.... The canal cascades from above into the*

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon: Labor of Love

The Hanging Gardens of Babylon were roof-like gardens built within the walls of the royal palace in Babylon. It is believed that Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562 BC) built them for his homesick Median wife, Amytus, who was originally from the mountainous northern region. This labor of love became one of the seven wonders of the world of antiquity. It was described by the third-century BC Chaldean priest and historian Berossus (native Akkadian name Bel-Reusu 'Bel is the Shepherd') in his *History of Babylonia* (preserved in fragments quoted in the Christian historian Eusebius). It was also mentioned by Greek historians, such as Strabo, Philo, and Diodorus Siculus. They told how the gardens sloped like a hillside, and rose tier upon tier to the roof of the king's palace, thus raising the level of the plantations above the heads of spectators about 75 feet above ground level, and making what was called a hanging paradise. Earth was piled on these tiers, which were thickly planted with trees and flowers brought from every corner of the vast empire. The size and charm of these plants were a pleasure to the beholders. The gardens were said to be quadrangular, consisting of arched vaults located on checkered cube-like foundations. A stairway leads to the uppermost terrace roofs. The plants were kept green by an ingenious irrigation and water supply system. Through a hidden network of pipes, water was pumped from the nearby Euphrates river and by means of some hydraulic engines concealed in columns and operated by shifts of slaves, water was pumped up to the highest tier of the gardens and flowed down to the sloping channels. It was there in those luscious gardens that the queen and the royal ladies strolled under the rich shade of huge trees, surrounded by exotic and fragrant shrubs and flowers. Some believe those gardens were accessible to the public, as well.

*gardens. The alleys smell sweet, brooks like the stars of
heaven flow into the pleasure garden. (Cited by Van De
Mieroop 68)*

Of all the fruits, date palms perhaps were the first to be domesticated in the area. They were mentioned in texts from the middle third millennium BC, and appeared in seals, plaques and paintings. A hot and humid climate in the south, and the availability of water created favorable conditions for growing date palms. They grew along the riverbanks and canals, as they still do today. The southern city of Basra has one of the most extensive date palm groves in the world. There, they are automatically fed with fresh water when the water level of Shatt il-'Arab (the confluence of Tigris and Euphrates) rises twice a day, due to the back up effect of the Gulf tide. The date palm was also chosen to represent the mythical Tree of Life. It came to stand for fertility and plenty. Virtually every part of it was broken up and used in one way or another. Likewise, pomegranates were valued as a symbol of fecundity and were served at feasts and weddings.

3. Animal Products

Fresh milk from sheep, goats, and cows was not popular as a drink by itself, probably because it spoiled fast in warm climates. It was rather used with other ingredients to make their favorite 'mirsu,' for instance, which was dessert of mashed dates, mixed with fine oil, yellow milk (i.e. rich fatty milk), and other ingredients, or the 'pappasu,' which was a combination of cream and honey (Levey 54).

Milk was more commonly made into yogurt, cheese, and butter. Clarified butter (Akk. 'samnu,' cf. Arabic *samn*) and sour milk (yogurt) were often mentioned in offering lists prepared by temple officials. The cows were brought to yield milk not only when their calves needed it but all year round. They were treated as

family members. In their letters, the Babylonians asked about the health of the cow along with the rest of the family members. The goats, sheep, and pigs were easily domesticated to ensure a ready supply of fresh meat. Cattle destined for sacrifice were fattened and usually ended on the tables of gods, kings, and the affluent. Animal fat was made from the fatty tail of sheep, which up until recently was one of the important sources of fat in cooking in Iraq. Mesopotamians also valued pork. The pig was frequently mentioned in the Sumerian proverbs, such as:

The fatted pig is about to be slaughtered, and so he says, "It was the food which I ate."

(Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 130)

Indeed, according to another Sumerian proverb, pig's meat was too good for a slave girl, who had to make do with the lean ham (Gordon 143):

Meat with fat is too good! Meat with suet is too good! What shall we give the slave-girl to eat? Let her eat ham of the pig!

Nonetheless, though raised and eaten, the pig was considered dirty, as the following Babylonian maxim reveals, which might well have been one of the reasons why its meat incurred taboos from Judaism and Islam (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 35):

The pig is not clean: it dirties everything behind it, It dirties the streets, it fouls houses.



Gazelles were another important source of meat, and were fattened by feeding them with barley. In ancient Sumer, one of the months was called "the month of eating gazelles" (Ellison "Methods of Food Preparations in Mesopotamia," 93). As for poultry, geese and ducks were domesticated from early times, but the chicken did not reach the region until the first millennium BC. The fowlers or bird keepers were mentioned in their records frequently, and the practice of fattening birds with dough was known.

The two major rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, were abundant sources of fish, and the southern marshes teemed with animal life. Textual and archaeological evidence show that the ancient inhabitants consumed fish, wild fowl, and turtles long before agriculture was established in the area. Full use was made of these assets in the third millennium BC. Fish was dried or salted and even smoked, as well as eaten fresh. Fish roes were preserved separately and eaten as a delicacy. Up until the middle of the second millennium BC texts containing lists of fish names and references to fish were abundant. In his history, Herodotus (484-425 BC) mentions the "three tribes in Babylon who eat nothing but fish. They were caught and dried in the sun, after which they were brayed in a mortar, and strained through a linen sieve. Some prefer to make cakes of this material [like fish cakes?], while others bake it into a kind of bread" (75). However, late Babylonian and Assyrian texts rarely mentioned fish and fishing. The word "fisherman," in the Neo-Babylonian era even came to denote a "lawless person." The reason behind this taboo might well have been that this same homeland of fishermen in the southern marshes became a refuge for outlaws escaping justice (Kramer *Cradle of Civilization* 94) -- as they always have been, that is, until relatively recently when Saddam Hussein had the marshes almost dried up. Nevertheless, scarcity of fish documents by no means indicates that people stopped fishing or eating fish. Assyrian bas-reliefs of the first millennium depict netting fish in a fishpond, and fishing was certainly carried on in the new Babylonian period.

Babylon and Assyria

Through the Eyes of Herodotus the Historian (484-425 BC)

Little rain falls in Assyria, enough, however, to make the corn begin to sprout, after which the plant is nourished and the ears formed by means of irrigation from the river. For the river does not, as in Egypt, overflow the corn-lands of its own accord, but is spread over them by the hand, or by the help of engines. The whole of Babylonia is, like Egypt, intersected with canals. The largest of them all, which runs towards the winter sun, and is impassable except in boats, is carried from the Euphrates into another stream, called the Tigris, the river upon which the town Nineveh formerly stood. Of all the countries that we knew there is none which is so fruitful in grain... The blade of the wheat-plant and barley-plant is often four fingers in breadth. As for the millet and the sesame, I shall not say to what height they grow, though within my own knowledge; for I am not ignorant that what I have already written concerning the fruitfulness of Babylonia must seem incredible to those who have never visited the country. The only oil they use is made from the sesame-plant. Palm-trees grow in great numbers over the whole of the flat country, mostly of the kind which bears fruit, and this fruit supplies them with bread, wine, and honey... The natives tie the fruit of the male-palms... to the branches of the date-bearing palm, to let the gall-fly enter the dates and ripen them, and to prevent the fruit from falling off. (I: 193)

On navigation in the river Tigris, Herodotus has the following to say:

The boats which come down the river to Babylon are circular, and made of skins. The frames, which are of willow, are cut in the country of the Armenians above Assyria, and on these, which serve for hulls, a covering of skins is stretched outsid... They are then entirely filled with straw and their cargo is put on board, after which they are suffered to float down the stream. Their chief freight is wine, stored in casks made of the wood of the palm-tree. They are managed by two men who stand upright in them, each plying an oar, one pulling and the other pushing... Each vessel has a live ass on board; those of larger size have more than one. When they reach Babylon, the cargo is landed and offered for sale; after which the men break up their boats, sell the straw and the frames, and loading their asses with the skins, set off on their way back to Armenia. The current is too strong to allow a boat to return upstream, for which reason they make their boats of skins rather than wood. (I: 194)

The boat Herodotus describes here is the coracle, known as *guffa* in the modern Iraqi dialect. It was quite common in the first half of the twentieth century AD to see coracles laden with people or watermelons along the river Tigris. They were made of reeds, covered with skins and plastered inside and out with bitumen for waterproofing

III PIONEERS OF THE GOURMET CUISINE

Considering all the options available back then, ordinary people in ancient Mesopotamia must have had the opportunity to consume healthy food. Expectedly, it was the gods, the kings, and the affluent who enjoyed the gourmet cuisine, as always has been the case.

A Penniless 'Artist' in the Glorious City of Ur

Here is a mock-letter written by "Mr. Monkey," a struggling entertainer in the ancient Mesopotamian 'showbiz.' He is urging his mother to send him some food to sustain him (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 131):

To Lusalusa, my 'mother,' speak!

Thus says Mr. Monkey:

"Ur is the delightful city of the god Nanna,

Eridu is the prosperous city of the god Enki;

But here am I, sitting behind the doors of the
Great Music Hall,

I must eat garbage; may I not die from it!

I don't even get a taste of bread; I don't even get a
taste of beer,

Send me a special courier - Urgent!"

The gods were given credit for abundant crops, and famine was interpreted as an expression of their wrath. The public's offerings of agricultural products and sacrifices of poultry, fish, and cattle were made all the time to mollify the gods. An ancient Sumerian clay tablet written around 3000 BC listed items to be included in meals prepared for the gods, which in all probability was meant as kitchen memorandum for training priests. It included a main course of meat, such as ducks, doves, lamb, beef, and fish. Olive oil or sesame oil were listed as a dressing, and the garnishes were dates, figs, cucumber, pistachio and other nuts, apricots, prunes, and dried raisins. For the sweet-toothed gods, sweet fruitcakes were served at the end of the meal. For beverages, wine was offered.

The society of the Mesopotamian gods was a curious duplicate of the human one. The temple idols were fed with the best food money could buy. They had many people in their service such as bakers, brewers, butchers, and dairymen. The gods' effigies were served four meals a day. Two meals before midday, one small and the other large; and two meals after midday, also one small and the other large (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* 111).

The procedure was to start by bringing a table before the images and offering bowls of water for the gods to wash their fingers before eating. All the 'eating' activities were to be accompanied by music, and when the meal was over, the place would be fumigated to dispel the odors of food. The tables would be cleared and bowls of water were brought again for the gods to wash their fingers. Interestingly, all the eating procedures of the gods, from washing the hands to eating, were hidden from the human eyes. To prevent any contact between the gods and the physical world, a linen curtain would be drawn while the gods were supposedly engaged in washing, eating and drinking. The blessed 'leftovers' of the gods were then taken to the king. There is also the possibility that the temple clergy might have taken them back to enjoy them (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* 117).

When a god paid a visit to a city, a welcome meal was served. For instance, when Inana (later Ishtar) was invited to Eridu, she was served fresh water, cream and beer (Joannes 33). According to an Assyrian text, the protocol for a great royal feast held in winter was as follows: After servants bring royal furniture into the room, the king takes his place, followed by his high officials, one at a time, then the crown prince and the rest of the king's sons. Servants would tend to the incense, burners, heating braziers, water for washing hands, torches, and fans. It was the custom also to sprinkle the king with the water in which the gods washed their hands, a ritual, which brings to mind a custom still practiced in the Arab world. When the visit is over, the host or hostess sprinkles the guests with rose water as they leave the house so that they have lingering fragrant memories of the visit.

The public on occasions did join the deities and the kings in feasting on well-prepared, lavish menus. The ninth century BC Assyrian ruler Ashurnasirpal II boasted of having entertained around 70,000 people on the inauguration of his palace in the city of Kalhu. His chroniclers gave a detailed account of the huge amounts his multinational party consumed (see 000 below). A typical feast included meat dishes, side dishes, desserts, and perfumed oils for anointing the guests' bodies, usually accompanied with entertainment such as music, singing, dancing, acting, and juggling. There is an indication, however, that at such a huge feast not all guests were treated equally. Several menus were prepared depending on the guests' ranks and political importance (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 70). It is not certain whether the women of the royal family were invited to such festivities as a matter of course. In all probability, the queens' households had parties of their own (Joannes 35).

On private levels, meals were shared to seal formal agreements, or to strengthen friendships. Merchants would seal bargains by sharing a drink. A document dating back to the second millennium BC, recorded that "Bread was eaten, beer was drunk, and bodies

were anointed with perfumed oil." Interestingly, we learn that they drank from goblets, and they clinked their drinking vessels as a sign of merriment (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 88). Even larger feasts were held for weddings, the costs of which fell on the groom's family. It was considered a mark of disgrace to reject a dinner invitation, and sharing a meal mattered more than the components of the meal itself (Joannes 33). At any rate, the guests had to show grace and restraint on such occasions, for gluttony indeed was looked down upon as a breach of table manners, as the following simile reveals: "People swooped down on a banquet like eagles" (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 297). As for the ordinary people, the husband was the breadwinner, and, according to the codes of Hammurabi, he could be away from home for a while provided he left enough for the family to sustain itself in his absence. On the contrary, the wife's proper place was her house, and her absence was disapproved of, because this might disturb order in the household, as exemplified in this Sumerian saying:

When (the mistress) left the house and entered
the streets,

The slave girl, in the absence of her mistress, made
her own banquet.

An essential part of her duties involved cooking for the family, for which she was greatly appreciated:

The house where beer is never lacking:

She is there!

The house rich in soup:

That is her place!

The house where there is bread in abundance:

She is the one who cooks it!

(Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* 76, 77)



A double page spread
from the original al-Warraaq
cookbook manuscript

The Kispu: An Ancient Mesopotamian Banquet for the Dead

Familial solidarity was conveyed by means of sharing a meal extended beyond the living members. A solemn meal called kispu (Akkadian term for 'sharing the same food') was shared with the deceased members of the family. It was usually set on the last day of the lunar month, when the moon-less night was at its darkest - a death-evoking spooky night, indeed. The Assyriologist Bottéro describes this curious meal as follows:

It seems to have taken place for preference in the 'sacred' part of the house; the wing of the 'icons', under the floor of which -- in accordance with an ancient custom -- the family dead were interred. It was believed that, besides the bones of the dead... there existed what was called the 'phantom' (the 'shade,' 'spirit' or 'soul' of our own folklore)... of what the dead person had been like in life, rather as seen in dreams... Placed under the ground by the obligatory rite of burying the body, this phantom reached what would from then on be his own and final 'home': Hell, a sort of immense underground cavern covering the same area as our world. All the dead were gathered there, under the rule of the infernal gods, after being governed on earth by the gods of the heavens. There they led a solemnest, dull, parsimonious and mournful life. Although they no longer had the same need for daily and plentiful food and drink as they had felt in their prime on earth, they still required a little, now and then, to feed their meager survival. The kispu repast - to which they were invited, their place marked, and in which they mysteriously came to participate - partly provided for that need, and it was a sacred duty of those still living to celebrate it with more or less solemnity and splendor, depending on their individual means. (Everyday Life 80-81)

The ancient Mesopotamian kings were not excluded from performing such rites, and as kings, their invitations to the dead were open to all, as in the following, offered by the Babylonian king Ammi-Saduqa (d.1626 BC):

O phantom-members of the Amorite Dynasy..., and all the phantoms of the soldiers who fell in terrible wars in the service of their sovereign: those of the princes and princesses, and of all of you, from East and West, who no longer have anyone to care about you, come, take your part in this feast, and bless Ammi-Saduqa, the king who offers it to you! (Everyday Life 81)

From a Sumerian text, we get a rare glimpse of the food items offered. They included cakes, roasted barley, clusters of dates, bitter-sweet beer, bunches of grapes, figs, orchard honey, wine, hot water, cold water, and cream and milk (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 340). These foods and drinks were poured into the tombs through pipes (Van De Mieroop *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* 83).

Indeed, remnants of such customs still linger in modern Iraq. Although as monotheists we no longer believe in the ancient doctrine of the underworld after death described above, we do offer food to the spirits of the deceased family members. According to the Muslim custom, evening banquets are offered the first three days after the burying rites are done with, and on the fortieth day. After that, close family members would visit the tomb the first day of the 'Id (religious festival) and distribute *kleicha* and *chureck* (dry cookies/biscuits and pastries) to people around the place asking them to recite Qur'anic verses to bless the soul of the deceased

As for eating utensils, people used spoons made of wood or metal and, occasionally, ivory, or their fingers. The earliest spoons known from ancient Mesopotamia were made of bitumen. Indeed, such utensils never vanished from the scene. Ladles made of bitumen used for scooping water out of earthen clay water vessels, known as *hib*, can still be seen in rural areas. Knives had blades of bronze, iron, or flint. Their eating bowls were mostly made of clay and tamarisk wood. Glass was known in Assyrian times but was still a rarity. Earthenware goblets, jugs, cups, handled vases, and narrow-necked jars were used instead. For preservation, the vessels would be sealed with linen and clay stoppers. Evidently, people used tablecloths and table napkins, which were held by servants for diners to wipe their hands when they washed them after the meals.

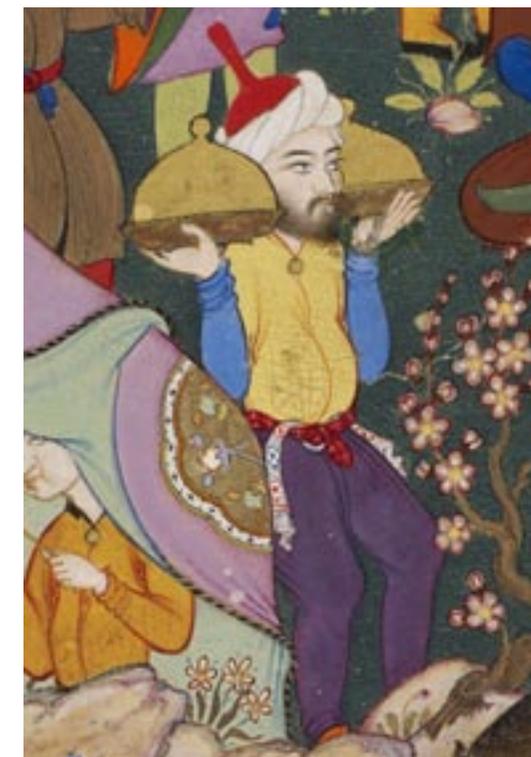
Regarding the eating habits of ordinary people, two meals a day were served, one in the morning and another in the evening, which was most probably the main meal of the day. The Sumerians equated the word 'meal' with 'twilight' (*kin.sig*, cf. Arabic *ghasaq*) but the Akkadians referred to it as 'consuming' (*inaptanu*, but there is also the possibility that the affluent enjoyed another two 'little meals' (like today's snacks?) also in the morning and evening (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 67). The Sumerian records rarely mentioned three meals a day. The meals themselves were divided into major and minor servings, to be washed down with beer. In their texts they also included "the sweet water of the Tigris and Euphrates, the well and canal" as part of the meal. But as always is the case, the meals of less privileged ordinary citizens of ancient Mesopotamia -- "the silent ones of the country" as described in a Sumerian proverb -- were much more modest than those described above. According to another proverb, there is always something lacking, "When a poor man has bread, he has no salt, and when he has salt, he has no bread" (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 67).

No special rooms were set aside for dining. There is evidence that the upper classes ate seated on chairs,

whereas the commoners squatted or sat cross-legged, and had their meals from a tray placed on the ground or a low stool. Some people still like to do this, on occasion, even though they have dining tables and chairs.

Sumerian Codes of Hospitality, c. 3500 BC

Let it be plentiful-lest there be too little!
Let it be more than enough-lest it have to be added to!
Let it be boiling hot-lest it get cold!
(Gordon 465)



The food is ready!

IV THE MESOPOTAMIAN MENU

The Mesopotamian cuisine was varied, rich, and sophisticated. We know this from a great number of written documents and artifacts, recovered from many archaeological sites in Iraq. There is, for instance, the bilingual Sumerian/Akkadian document written on twenty-four cuneiform tablets in which over 800 food and drink items were classified into four hundred headings. From this glossary we learn that they made twenty varieties of cheese, such as cream cheese, similar to the soft cheese that we make today from drained yogurt, fresh cheese, both flavored and sweetened, and sharp cheese. From this record we also learn that they knew about one hundred kinds of soup, thick and nourishing enough to stick to the ribs, using lentils, chickpeas, turnip, bulgur, and fish. From an ancient satirical document, we also learn that they knew how to make sausages from intestine casings. They preserved foods by salting, drying, pickling, and preserving in honey. Pickled grasshoppers were a delicacy at that time. They made the fermented sauce, "siqqu/shiqqu," from fish, shellfish, and grasshoppers. It was made for kitchen and table use, more or less, as Worcestershire sauce or fish sauce (such as nuoc-mam) is used nowadays. They made vinegar from grapes, and referred to it as "grape water." Pungent vegetables such as onion, leeks, and garlic were incorporated into the dishes, as well as seasonings like mint, juniper berries, mustard, coriander, cumin, salt, and ashes. Interestingly social class was defined by what kind of spices people used. "Naga" was for the poor, and "gazi" was for the rich. According to a Sumerian proverb, poverty was when you had meat but you had no 'gazi,' and when you had 'gazi,' you had no meat (Limet 138). Stews were thickened and flavored with grains, breadcrumbs, flour, milk, beer, and even blood. Judaism and Islam later prohibited the use of blood in cooking.

The ancient Mesopotamians also developed a relatively advanced technique in treating grains. They were crushed into several grades of fineness, and from these flours they prepared soured dough that was allowed to ferment and dry out for future use, similar to today's *kishk*. Besides, the grains, especially barley, were malted for beer. Evidently, they baked a lot of bread. Around three hundred kinds of bread were made. In Sumerian records, they were categorized as leavened, unleavened, excellent, ordinary, fresh and dry. They ranged in size from large to tiny. Different kinds of grains were used, and were spiced differently. The most basic kind was flat bread baked in the clay oven, called 'tinuru' in Sumerian, from which the Arabic *tannour* was derived. From scenes depicted in cylinder seals we know that this type of flat bread was served with chunks of meat or birds or fish on top (Ellison "Methods of Food Preparation" 91). Other breads were improved by adding milk, oil, and butter. They were called 'ninda' bread. More fancy pastries were baked, but these were beyond the means of the ordinary people. They were the 'gug' and 'kuku' cakes (as called in Sumerian and Akkadian, respectively) from which no doubt our cakes and ka'ak were derived. They were made with top quality flour and clarified butter, and flavored with cream cheese, raisins, and dates. The others were 'irilam' cakes, which were more like the fruitcakes we make nowadays. They were sweetened with honey, dried fruits such as dates and figs, and bound with flour. The ancient cookies/biscuits were sometimes shaped like hearts, heads, hands, ears, and even breasts. Others were made into rings, crescents, and turbans. The 'qulupu' cookies/biscuits were filled with raisins or dates, and then baked. Most of these pastries were perfumed with rose water and almond essence, and baked in the tannour oven, which, when covered, created an interior humid enough for baking pastries. Some of these pastries, such as the 'qullupu' cookies/biscuits, bear a striking resemblance to today's traditional date-stuffed *kleicha* cookies/biscuits (more on this in Chapter 18).



An Assyrian seventh-century BC stone relief showing cooks at work in the royal kitchens of Ashurbanipal of Nineveh. Clockwise: a servant opening and airing wine jars, with a swatter in one hand and a fan in the other. Two women preparing food. Two butchers working on a slaughtered animal. A baker tending to his oven. (British Museum)

Most people had *tannour* ovens in their houses, but in big cities, bread and pastry making was a flourishing business, and apprentices needed sixteen months of practice to learn the tricks of the trade. It was the custom to consume a great quantity of pastries during the religious festivals, something with which we are familiar today. Their popular dessert (*halwa*) was semi solid pudding of dates cooked and mashed with clarified butter and honey. This was no doubt the mother of all the date halwa so popular in the region throughout the centuries. In Akkadian, it was called 'mirsu' (cf. the Arabic verb *marasa* 'to mash').

In short, Mesopotamians had a large repertoire to draw on. No wonder the Sumerians took pride in the superiority of their cuisine. The Bedouins, they proudly argued, 'did not know what civilized life was. They ate their food raw, and if you were to give them flour, eggs, and honey for a cake they would not know what to do with them' (Limet 137). That was how they described an uncivilized person (M. Van De Mierop 43):

*He digs up truffles in the steppe
He eats his meat raw.*

V COOKING TECHNIQUES AND KITCHEN UTENSILS

The ancient Mesopotamians exploited to the full all the major cooking techniques with which we are familiar today, even etymologically: Roasting 'shuwu' (Arabic *shewi*), the Akkadian 'kababu,' meant 'to burn fire or wood, to grill' (cf. the universal kebab), boiling 'silqu' (Arabic *saliq*), and frying 'qalu' (Arabic *qali*), which also included toasting seeds in a pan.

In the realm of grilling on open flames, they showed admirable mastery. To control heat they put ashes or potsherds on the coals, kept the meat at a certain distance from flames, or placed some sort of plate, rack, or screen made of metal or ceramic. They even used specific terms to describe the grilling process. Fish, for instance, was 'placed on the fire,' (probably glowing coals), or was 'touched with fire' (Limet 139; Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 42). For those of us who grew up in Baghdad, such grilling options are quite familiar. Fresh *shabout* or *bunni* fish is grilled in the *masgouf* style along the bank of the river Tigris. A number of these fishes would be suspended on sticks around the flames of a camp-like fire so that they may be 'touched by fire,' and afterwards they would be 'placed on the fire.' Skewered meat including locusts



Traditional sufurtas

was grilled in the shish kebab style using braziers (Akkadian 'kinunu,' cf. Arabic *kanoon*). The kinunu was a sort of all-purpose hearth made more versatile by using grills, skewers, and racks. Other types of hearths either were built up or dug out as a fire bed, in a round or rectangular shape (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 46-47).

INTRODUCTION

For an indirect source of heat, they used the clay oven 'tinuru' (cf. Arabic *tannour*), which was built and hence immobile. It was fueled with brambles or desert bushes, and generated less intense interior heat. When the top opening was closed, enough humidity was created to bake fermented leavened breads, cakes, and other dishes (Limet 139). The fire in these ovens was never allowed to go out, since it would have been interpreted as a premonition of death or of a catastrophe about to befall the family (Levey 45). Evidently, the ancient Mesopotamians also used domed brick ovens, in which the baked food is put directly on the heated floor of the oven. Excavations in 1997 in the northern Mesopotamian city of Tell Brak have revealed remains of a communal domed oven belonging to the fourth millennium BC.

There is evidence that special oven pans were used for baking. Around 50 ceramic cooking molds were found at Mari. According to Bottéro, "most of them [were] flat and circular, and all of them decorated in various ways with geometric motifs, human figures, or scenes; some were the height and shape of animals (crouching lion; fish), which gave an aesthetic touch to the cooked and unmolded food (*The Oldest Cuisine* 49).

As for cooking in liquid, the Sumerians and Akkadians refined the practice of making stew using meat and vegetables, water, oil or animal fat, milk or breadcrumbs as thickeners, along with spices, herbs, and garnishes. More on this in the following section.

The ancient kitchens of the affluent had to be fully equipped to meet the demands of a sophisticated cuisine that required a lot of elaborate and time-consuming activities and procedures, such as mixing, sprinkling, squeezing through a cloth, pounding, steeping, shredding, grating, crumbling, mashing, filtering, and so on. Cooking in liquid also required the use of metal cauldrons, known as 'ruqqu' (thin?), used for the initial stages of quick boiling. For simmering, they used fired clay pots with lids on them, called 'diqaru' (cf. Arabic *qidr*), which were put at the opening of the clay oven to cook gently over a long period

Cooks Beware! A Sumerian Caveat

I am going to pour off the fat from the meat,
I am sliding the roasted barley off
(the roasting pan)
Who(ever) may hold the bowl (to receive it),
watch out for your feet!
(Gordon 472)

of time (Bottéro "The Culinary Tablets at Yale" 14). The Babylonian recipes also called for the use of an 'assalu'-platter for slow cooking of porridge, and a 'sabiltu' vessel. They also called for a pan called 'maqaltu,' which might well have been used as a frying pan, for it is curiously similar to the Arabic *miqlat* (frying pan).

For fuel, they mostly used wood, but we learn from Bottéro that they knew charcoal and used it widely in cooking. As for kerosene 'naptu' in Akkadian (cf. Arabic *nift*), a liquid product from bitumen, which the Sumerian called "oil from the mountains," its flammable quality was known but it was not yet utilized in cooking (*The Oldest Cuisine* 40).

VI THE BABYLONIAN CULINARY DOCUMENTS THE FIRST RECIPE 'BOOK' IN HUMAN HISTORY

In 1933, Yale University acquired three Akkadian cuneiform tablets believed at first to be pharmaceutical formulas. A closer examination by the French Assyriologist Jean Bottéro revealed the oldest cooking recipes. Bottéro thinks they were written around 1700 BC in Babylonia. His discovery was made known in the early 1980's. Despite some damage in the recipes, Bottéro finds enough text to reveal a cuisine of "striking richness, refinements, sophistication, and artistry," and concludes, "previously we would not have dared to think a cuisine four thousand years old was so advanced" ("The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia" 39-40). These Babylonian recipes are not inclusive of what constituted the entire ancient Mesopotamian cuisine. Bottéro assumes that they are just "strays from a huge collection," and speculates on "the possibility that a whole library of similar texts was devoted to the 'science of cooking'" (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 7). The tablet identified by the number 4644 has stew recipes; tablet 8958 contains recipes mostly on bird pies. The third one, tablet 4648, is the shortest and is badly preserved. Despite some breaks in the other two, there is enough in them to give us an idea on the ancient Mesopotamian cooking dishes and techniques. It is unlikely that these recipes were written by a cook, or were meant to be an instruction manual for the cooks of the temples or palaces. It is almost certain that the ancient cooks were illiterate. The writing system of ancient Mesopotamia was complicated. It was not alphabetical like most of the modern languages, but was both ideographic and syllabic and took years of constant hard work to master. That's why reading and writing was a profession by itself. A reading public as we know it today was nonexistent. Therefore it is Bottéro's conclusion that these recipes were written for "administrative and normative purposes, so that what was done in cooking might be set down and codified by means of recipes" ("The Cuisine of Mesopotamia" 46). The significance of these tablets lies in the fact that they comprise the only culinary document available to us from the ancient world including the Egyptians,

Flipping through the Babylonian 'Cookbook'

A couple of years ago I visited the Babylonian Collection at Yale University, and had the privilege of holding the Babylonian 'cookbook' with my own hands. The first tablet I examined was the one with stew recipes. It was the size of a hand, and looked so pretty with all those tiny inscriptions, and so smooth. After I looked at the first side, and as a matter of habit, I turned the tablet from right to left, but Ulla Kasten the curator taught me how to do it the Akkadian way: to get to the other side, you flip the tablet from bottom to top.

Hittites, Hebrews, and Phoenicians. "We can easily find out what they ate, but not how they prepared or enjoyed it" (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 3).

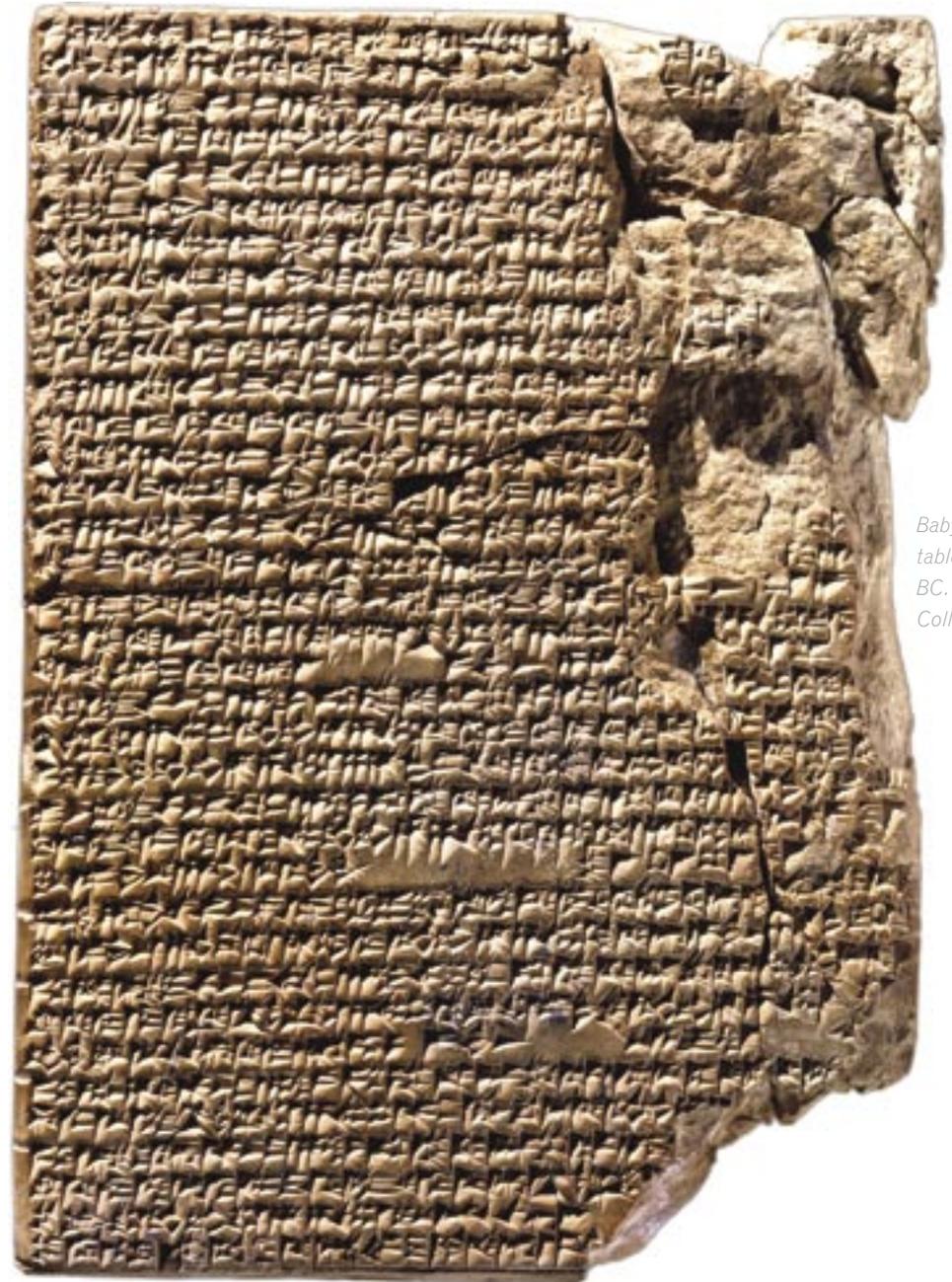
1 Tablet 4644 (Containing 75 lines of text)

This tablet is the best preserved. In its seventy-five lines, there are twenty-five briefly described stew recipes. Of these, twenty-one are cooked with meat, and they are:

Meat stew, Assyrian style stew, red stew, clear or glistening stew, venison stew, gazelle stew, goat's kid stew, bitter stew, stew with crumbs, 'zamzaganu' (?) stew, dodder stew, lamb stew, ram stew, 'bidsud' (?) stew, spleen stew, Elamite stew, 'amursanu'-pigeon stew, leg of mutton stew, 'halazu' (?) stew, salted stew, and francolin stew.

The last four stews are cooked with meat and vegetables, and they are 'Tuh'u'-beet stew, 'kanasu' (?) stew, 'hirsu' (?) stew, and the fourth one is a vegetarian stew of turnips. These last four recipes are separated from the above with a horizontal line.

One common feature these recipes share is that they are all cooked in liquid, which, according to Bottéro, was indisputably a step forward in the history

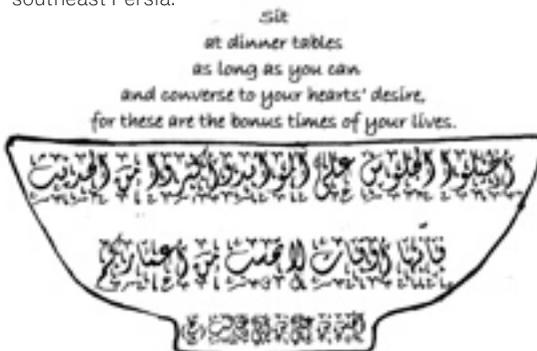


Babylonian culinary tablet 4644, ca 1700 BC. Yale Babylonian Collection.

of culinary techniques, in comparison to roasting and grilling. The sauce can be infinitely varied and enriched by adding a number of ingredients, which made possible the creation of a genuine cuisine with all its complexities, namely the Mesopotamian cuisine (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 17).

In the Akkadian original, the name of each dish is preceded by the generic term 'mei,' which means water. The French translator is a little unhappy with this nomenclature because 'mei' does not give an idea on the consistency of the resulting liquid. However, to people familiar with Iraqi food and cooking this poses no problem whatsoever. The Akkadian word for water is the same as the word for water in Arabic. In the modern Iraqi dialect, 'mei' is water, but the same word is also commonly used to refer to the liquid in which food is cooked regardless of consistency. In our cooking terminology, *mei dijaaj* or *laham*, for instance, means the "liquid in which chicken or meat is cooked" i.e. broth or stock, respectively. On the other hand, *mei marag*, is liquid of stew, which is normally thicker in consistency than that of broth or stock.

Like our modern dishes, some of the Babylonian recipes are named after the main ingredient such as Turnip Stew; some after the main cut of meat such as Leg of Mutton Stew, others after the appearance of the prepared dish such as Red Stew or Glistening Stew. Interestingly, two stews are named after the source of their origin: the ethnic Assuriatu Stew was derived from Assur; and the foreign Elamite Stew from Elam, southeast Persia.



The name of the dish is followed by a brief account of the recipe. Neither precise amounts nor times are given. Their terse style was obviously less to teach than to remind the cook of the necessary ingredients and steps. Obviously, they did not need the details they already knew them. It is worth mentioning, though, that laconic as they were, the recipes did not neglect to include pieces of information or details rendered important by the writer. For instance, the original name given to the Elamite stew was 'Zukanda.' In the Dodder Stew, which called for cured rather than fresh meat, cooking duration was given, "when the pot has barely sat on the stove, carve and serve" (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 9). This is because the meat was already cooked.

2 Characteristics of the Babylonian Stew Dishes

Of the components of these stews, meat, dissolved sheep's tail fat, and water were the most prominent, particularly fat, which was important for flavor. It also helped raise the boiling temperature, which allowed for a more tenderizing cooking process for tough cuts of meat (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 17). Variety was achieved by adding different kinds of meat. In some instances it was big chunks, in others it was chopped. In several recipes, two kinds of meat were combined in one dish such as in the Francolin Stew, where a fresh leg of mutton was added to the bird. A preliminary stage of cooking the meat in its fat so that it releases its juices, which then evaporate, is also demonstrated in the Babylonian recipes, as in Zamzaganu Stew: "You scatter cut up pieces of meat in a cauldron and cook" (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 54). In later medieval Baghdadi recipes, this method was called *ta'reeq* (literally 'sweating').

The extremities along with the heads of the slaughtered animals were prepared into a dish amazingly similar to the modern Iraqi traditional pacha dish. The recipe is 'Goat's Kid Stew' which calls for the head, legs and tail to be singed first on a direct source of heat before

cooking, exactly as we still do today. Vegetables such as beets/beetroot and turnips, along with still unidentified vegetables, were used. Many spices, the most important of which were aromatic wood (cassia?), cumin and coriander, were added at different stages of the cooking, and were given in combinations to ensure the utmost flavor. Herbs were also added, such as mint, dill, and an unidentified herb referred to in the recipes as "halazzu" for which Bottéro gives another name, "erishtu." The recipe specified "four sprigs or stems are used to spice up the taste" (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 5). Bottéro could not identify the herb, but it sounds like *rishshad* (garden cress/garden peppergrass), the exclusively Iraqi herb with small leaves, and a refreshing but slightly sharp peppery taste.

Supplementary ingredients such as onion and garlic are present in every single recipe, sometimes mashed and added. As for the herb known in Akkadian as "karasu," judging from the *kurra* herb available in the region nowadays, it must have been more like garlic chives, or table leeks, in which the interest is in the green tender stalks rather than the bulbous root. Salt "as required" was enlisted in most of the recipes.

To thicken and enrich the sauces they used breadcrumbs. In fact, one of the stews was called "Stew with Crumbs," after the last stage of cooking, which instructed the cook to "crush and sift spiced grain cakes, and sprinkle in the pot before removing it from the fire" (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 9). This sounds very much like a variety of *thareed* dishes known since pre-Islamic and medieval times, which used breadcrumbs to sop up the broth, such as *al-thareeda al-Iraqiyya* (Iraqi sop dish) in al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook (Chapter 83, also see Section XII.1 000 below).

Milk and 'kisimmu' were also added as sauce thickeners. The latter was a sour milk product similar to *kishk*. *Kishk* as we know it from medieval and modern practices is dried dough of crushed wheat and yogurt, dried and stored. It is still used the same

way in northern Iraq and the adjoining countries. However, in medieval times, the variety made by drying drained sour milk was specifically referred to as *kishk Turkumani* (Nasrallah *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens* 587). The Turkmans in northern Iraq today call it, *kisham*, and the resemblance to the Akkadian 'kisimmu' is telling. As instructed in the Babylonian recipes, 'kisimmu' was crushed with garlic and used, the same way it is used today.

In the Lamb Stew, they combined breadcrumbs and milk with fat, onion, mashed garlic, and leeks, creating what would have been similar to our modern béchamel sauce (white sauce). Several recipes in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook feature dishes using similar white sauces cooked with meat, such as *tharida baydhaa' lil-Rasheed* (bread sopped in white sauce cooked for Caliph Harun al-Rasheed, Chapter 83). Interestingly, this Babylonian recipe provides us with an example against which the contemporary Jews set their dietary prohibition of mixing meat with dairy products. In the Spleen Stew recipe, besides milk and breadcrumbs, bits of toasted 'qaiatu'-dough were added. Although the dough is still unidentified, I find this mention most intriguing. Adding those small pieces of dough might well have been man's first attempts at making pasta, more specifically, thin noodles, similar to what later began to be called *itriya* and *rishta* (see *Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History* 000 below). Bottéro's rendering was "bits of roasted qaiatu-dough" (10). I suspect it is related to the Akkadian 'qatanu' (to become thin or fine) from which Arabic *qitaan* (thin strip or cord) was derived. In Iraq today, *qayateen* and *qitaan* are still used with relation to cords.

Beer and blood were mentioned in some of the recipes, but these occur less frequently. Blood in particular was mostly used as a marinating agent for meat. For garnish raw condiments, such as chopped fresh mint, cilantro, and leeks were added, and the instruction, to add them "after cooking," was quite clear on that.

3. Tablet 8958 (Containing approximately 200 lines of text)

This tablet is much longer than the previous one, and in its approximately 200 lines of text, only seven recipes are given. They all deal with preparations of various types of birds, both domestic and game, presented in an extensively detailed manner.

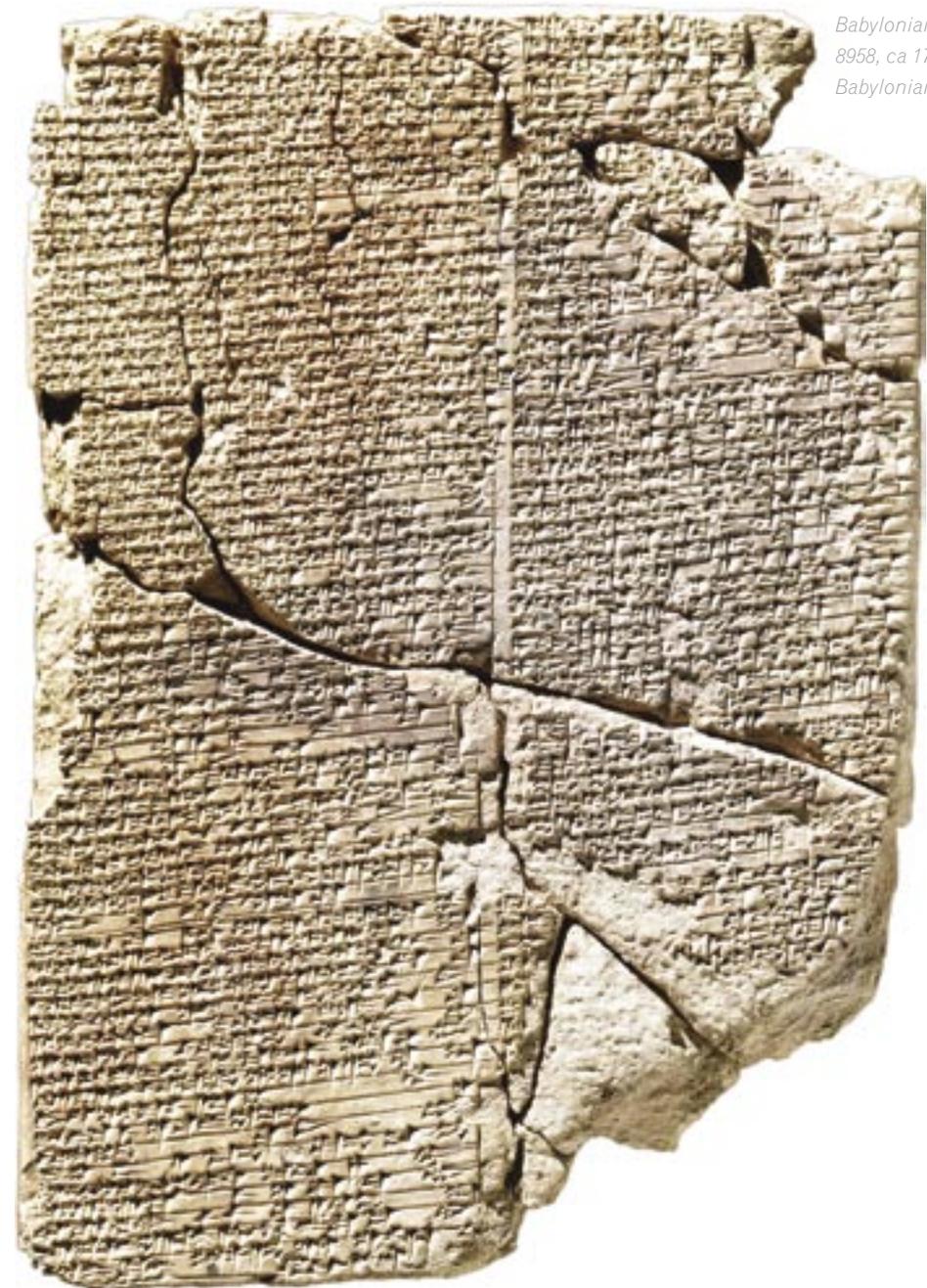
The writer of the tablet, for instance, felt the need to specify that the cooked bird should be put on the platter "lying on its back." He also gave substitutes, such as using 'baru' (ground grain) if 'kisimmu' (*kishk*, dried sour milk) was not available. He further gives instructions to serve the dish before it cools off, and suggests that "garlic, greens, and vinegar" are to be served with the dish. As to what to do with leftovers of the broth, "it can be eaten later, by itself," he suggests. In all these recipes great care is given to thorough cleaning of the birds before simmering them. A slaughtered bird is soaked in hot water, and plucked, and then washed in cold water. The neck is left attached to the body. Then it is cut open, gizzard and pluck removed, and washed again with cold water. The gizzard is split open, and membrane peeled off. This is exactly the way I have seen chickens plucked and cleaned when hens destined for the table were still bought alive.

All the recipes include a preliminary step in which the birds are put in a cauldron, but due to lack of information and breaks in the tablet, it is not clear whether water is added, or for what purpose they are put in the cauldron. However, judging from a recipe in the previous tablet, Francolin Stew, the directions were not to add the bird to the simmering stew before cooking it first in the cauldron. It is safe to assume, therefore, that the birds are put in the cauldron to parboil, before adding them to the pot.

There are also directions to take the birds out of the cauldron, and wipe and clean them well with cold water, sometimes sprinkle them with vinegar, rub them with salt and mint, and then simmer them with a fresh change of water with condiments. It is my assumption

that the preliminary stage of parboiling the birds was to make sure of the cleanliness of the birds, and what is more important, to get rid of any unpleasant 'birdie' odors. I know of people who still do this with red meat and chicken to get clean broth, clear of any scum particles, or any unpleasant *zufara* or 'chickeny' smells. The bird dishes featured in this tablet verged on the sour side in their final taste. "Vinegar as required" is added in addition to 'andahsu.' Bottéro thought it was some sort of alliaceous plant because it was listed with onion and leeks. However, according to *The Assyrian Herbal*, 'andahsu' was a variety of plums (cf. Arabic '*injas*, 129--30). It is my hunch this fruit was similar to the *goaja* plums that still grow in Iraq. When still unripe and green these plums can be very sour. Actually, in the tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook, this type of plum was used in several dishes, such as *Bustaniyya*. The writer referred to it as 'small and sour *ijas*,' and it was mashed in order to extract its sour juice (al-Warraq, Chapter 62). In one of the Babylonian recipes, the sourness was balanced with honey.

In at least three of the recipes given in this tablet, we have man's first attempts at making savory pies, apparently prepared for festive occasions, with an eye on surprising the diners with what lay hidden under the crust. The recipes went through four stages. The first was cleaning the birds, and parboiling and wiping them. The second, was simmering them in white sauce prepared from water, milk, fat, aromatic wood (cassia?), and rue. When the sauce comes to a boil, mashed garlic, and leeks along with onion -- but "in moderation" -- are added. The third stage painstakingly describes preparing the dough, in which 'sasku'-flour is soaked in milk until well saturated, then kneaded with 'siqu' brine (similar to fish sauce), along with mashed leeks and garlic. Some of this dough is made into 'sebetu' small breads. A 'makaltu'-platter (with high sides), big enough to accommodate the birds and the sauce, is lined with a thin layer of dough, letting the dough overhang the sides by 'four fingers." A top crust is made by first sprinkling another matching size platter with



Babylonian culinary tablet
8958, ca 1700 BC. Yale
Babylonian Collection.

chopped mint, then lining it with a thin layer of dough. Both layers are then baked.

Just before serving, the sauce is refreshed with additional pounded leeks, garlic, and 'andahsu' (sour plums). The birds are carefully arranged in the pot lined with the cooked crust, scattering the chopped gizzards and plucks all over. Some of the sauce is poured on the birds. The small 'sebetu' breads are arranged on top, and the whole dish is covered with the top crust attractively speckled with the chopped mint. The dish is thus taken to the table.

The other one is even more elaborate, with ample suggestions and directions for accompanying porridges. The laborious preparations of the dish clearly aimed at creating a sweet and sour effect. The sauce is prepared much like the previous pie, with extra red meat, beer, and "a carefully measured amount of vinegar," added to it. An 'asallu'-platter is lined with a thin layer of dough made from coarsely ground 'ziquq'-flour with buttermilk and butter, and then baked. Next, batter from 'tiktu'-flour, and aromatic beer is poured on the lined 'asallu'-platter. On top of this, they spread leeks, garlic, honey, butter, and one of the prepared porridges. Then the cooked birds are arranged on top. It is not certain how the rest goes due to breaks in the tablet, but Bottéro concludes that we can imagine the whole casserole would be covered with the top crust and then served.

4 Tablet 4648 (Containing 53 lines of text)

This tablet is badly damaged. Bottéro was able to decipher only three fragmentary parts, two of which dealt with bird recipes, also using vinegar, beer and 'andahsu' for flavor. As an Iraqi cook, I find the deciphered portions most interesting as in them I recognize two common cooking practices. There is a reference to preparing 'sasku'-flour (ellipses follow), then adding to it meat, which has been chopped first, which is so much like *khubuz laham* we still bake in Iraq. It is simply bread dough, mixed with chopped meat, onion, parsley, and spices (see Chapter 1) There is also a reference in one of the recipes to an ingredient used in making green porridge. In the Akkadian version, it was referred to as 'butumtu,' translated in the recipe as 'green wheat.' There are trees in northern Iraq that produce small nuts, the size of a chickpea each, which when broken would reveal nutmeat similar in color and taste to pistachio. We call these nuts *butum* (berries of the terebinth tree *Pistacia atlantica*). If the Akkadian 'butumtu' were the same as our modern *butum*, then we might just as well see in such a document man's first recorded attempts to incorporate the delicious and nourishing nuts into his diet, a practice that has been characteristic of Middle Eastern cuisine all along.

It goes without saying that all the above luxurious dishes belonged to the haute cuisine of the palace and temple. It was unlikely that the majority of the people had the time or the means to cook such elaborate stews and pies. However, Bottéro rightly concludes that in any given society and culture "imagination and taste are contagious." It is fair to assume with him that "the women who cooked in their modest homes knew how to turn out dishes which were just as tasty and imaginative as those which the 'nuhatimmu' [Sumerian for professional chefs] of the palace created, though they were probably simpler and not so varied" ("The Cuisine of Mesopotamia" 46).



One last remark. In case you'll be tempted to go to the kitchen and try some of these recipes, let me assure you they have been tried. Jack Sasson, who translated these recipes from French to English, said that during the 1986 meetings of *The American Oriental Society* in New Haven, a banquet was adapted from these recipes. He thought the result was "quite delicious" (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 8, n.8). Besides, the staff of the French magazine *Actuel* also tried the pie dish, took a photo for it, and then ate it. They thought it was "a real treat" (Lowton "Mesopotamian Menus" *Aramco World* 39 M/A 1988: 8). However, Bottéro, the decipherer of these recipes, said, "he would not wish such meals on any save his worst enemies" (*The Culinary Tablets at Yale* 19, n.40). The Babylonian tablets must have given him a hard time.

A meal being cooked for the Agha Khan.

VII THE QUESTION OF CONSISTENCY AND CONTINUITY

Bottéro sees consistency and continuity of the Babylonian cuisine, as reflected in the culinary documents discussed above, in a much older recipe of what he calls “court bouillon,” written around the 4th century BC. He believes it belongs to a larger collection of recipes, which are lost to us today. The recipe deals with vegetable broth, which needs to be reduced to one liter, after which it is strained and used for cooking meat. He also sees consistency in some dishes cooked a thousand years later, that is the Middle Ages, *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 21; *The Oldest Cuisine* 24-25), with which I cannot agree more.

Judging from the extant medieval Baghdadi cookbooks and from our own present day culinary practices, I see in these ancient recipes the beginnings of a long tradition that is still with us. In them I see the meat and vegetable stew dishes, cooked with different cuts of meat, enriched with sheep's tail fat, thickened with various agents, and flavored with garlic and onion. These stews were served with bread in medieval times, to which in modern times we added a side dish of rice. However it is served, stew has always been a staple dish.



A modern impression of a Sumerian cylinder seal (3rd millennium BC). It depicts a party scene in which the participants are women only.

University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

In the Babylonian recipes, I also see the same flair for combining spices and herbs to produce aromatic dishes. The taste for the delicately sweet and sour we find in one of these recipes has evolved into countless sweet and sour dishes, the trademark of the medieval era, some remnants of which we still have in our cooking. I see in them our love for bread and the thoroughly traditional *pacha* and *thareed* dishes that have been simmering in our pots all these centuries. I see in the “bits of toasted ‘qaiatu’-dough,” thrown into the boiling stew but a stage in the long history of man's attempts to perfect the art of making pasta, particularly the fine noodles we nowadays call *sha'riyya*. Last and not least, I see in them the same knack for culinary showmanship and love for intrigue, which culminated in the medieval dishes of *makhfiyyat* (hidden) and *maghmoumat* (covered), which evolved into the stuffed *kubba* and *mahshiyyat* dishes of modern times. I see this in the Babylonian pie dishes, laboriously contrived of birds simmered to perfection in flavorful white sauce, covered with a top crust, only to be uncovered in front of the awe-stricken eaters. Still, I shall let Bottéro, the decipherer of these tablets have the last word:

We know nothing of the culinary habits of neighboring ancient cultures. Whatever they may have been, certainly no one, after taking cognizance of the three Yale recipe collections, would deny that ancient Mesopotamia had its own original cuisine, a grand cuisine implying and demanding a subtle taste and an evident concern for real gastronomy.... There is some likelihood that this venerable cuisine may have inspired, from an early time, a whole tradition, whose long course, difficult or impossible to follow at first, has merged into the vast “Arabo-Turkish” culinary complex that still delights us. (Mesopotamian Culinary Texts 21)

PART TWO MEDIEVAL BAGHDADI COOKING

Echoing the traditionally accepted view of the Mesopotamian region after the fall of the last Akkadian dynasty, the Assyriologist Jean Bottéro says that after the conquest of Cyrus and Alexander and his followers the Seleucids (sixth and fourth centuries BC, respectively), the region “began to lose its atavistic independence and its energy,” only to be “ultimately finished off by the Parthians,” in the third century BC. As a result, he concludes, “Mesopotamia could do nothing other than die off and slowly fade from the memory at the beginning of the new era” (*The Oldest Cuisine* 11).

On the contrary, according to Daniel Snell (*Life in the Ancient Near East: 3100-332 BC*) 539 BC, the date when the Persians took over from the Babylonians, was significant only politically. “Socially and economically this date does not seem important.” He explains that the Persians “left most local traditions intact. They did not try to impose Persian values or bureaucracy, but they did want the subject peoples to accept their propaganda, which they themselves may have believed, that the Persians came to bring peace and to foster local heritages, as long as those heritages could be made to support Persian hegemony” (99). Even after the region came under the control of the Greeks, the real break “may be more apparent than real.” He further explains what happened as follows:

The traditional ways of record keeping were gradually replaced by Greek written on perishable papyri and skin. In Egypt such things are preserved for us, giving us the most detailed picture of social and economic life in Egypt yet, but in Mesopotamia, papyri and skins decayed, and as the cuneiform record dwindled [the last dated cuneiform tablet we have is an astronomical text dated to 74-75 AD, p. 142], we know less and less about later Mesopotamian life. (100)

Furthermore, “the actual presence of Persians in Babylonia and points west was minimal Native officials were employed for the most tasks, including military ones, and although taxes flowed to the capital in what is now Iran, little in the way of cultural influence flowed the other way” (102). In conclusion, Snell writes,

The societies and economies...did not die, but the texts that documented them ceased, their rulers changed, and they became slowly the societies and economies of the region today. It would be wrong to overemphasize the continuities with the past of these societies, which are themselves far from static, but it would be equally wrong to ignore that the geographical realities of the Near East are similar to conditions in the ancient times. (143)

Van De Mieroop (*The Ancient Mesopotamian City* 232) assures that “many of the old cities of Babylonia remained inhabited and important for several centuries” (232). There is evidence that the region “flourished from the neo-Babylonian period well into the early Islamic period because of its agricultural resources” (232). He further asserts, “The period after 500 BC was not one of decline in Babylonia. Quite the opposite was true. The region flourished, supported by a strong agricultural base” (233). As for the northern region, “some urban centers... were very prosperous,” as they depended on trade (235). Van De Mieroop concludes,

The ancient Mesopotamian city did not die out with the end of Mesopotamia's political independence - certainly not suddenly, at any rate. Many traditional aspects of urban life continued to exist from the fifth century BC long into the first centuries AD. New influences altered aspects of religion and culture, and the economy of certain cities was changed due to the enormous expansion of international trade. (245)

VIII BAGHDAD: NAVEL OF THE EARTH

Gardens of Eden

During the Abbasid period, Baghdad was legendary for the beauty and lushness of its sequestered pleasure gardens, with their soothing gushing streams, pools, and fountains. There also were the picturesque public pleasure spots outside the city where people used to picnic. Their orchards brimmed with all kinds of fruit trees and aromatic flowers and herbs, and the bounteous vegetable gardens made it possible for the creative cooks to conjure up the fabulous dishes for which the medieval Baghdadi cuisine was renowned. In their contemporary literature, Baghdad was often compared to the celestial gardens of Paradise (Jannat Adan). A nostalgic poet once said:

*I yearn for Baghdad, my homeland,
It was my haven in times of distress.
On the day I took my leave of it,
I was like Adam when from heaven was expelled.
(Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi (d.1024) Al-Risala al-Baghdadiyya 111, my translation)*

In the same source quoted above, the protagonist Abu al-Qasim sings praises of Baghdad thus:

*I would not even exchange it with the eternal Paradise.
Its soil is ambergris, its stones are rubies, its air is gentle, and its water is nectar. It is spacious and aptly situated. It looks as though the beauties of the world are spread all over it. A duplicate of Paradise, the centerpiece of the world and its navel, its face and its luminous forehead. (90, my translation)*

Such descriptions were clearly inspired by the beautiful verses of the Qur'an in which are given vivid accounts of what awaits the believers in *jannat Adan*, the celestial gardens of Paradise, under which rivers flow. It is a peaceful and densely shaded place, where the believers, clad in green silken gowns, will be sitting on sequestered luxurious recliners, and enjoying God's everlasting bounty. Fruit trees of all kinds such as

pomegranate, banana, dates, grapevines, are all within easy reach. They will also have whatever they crave of meat and poultry.

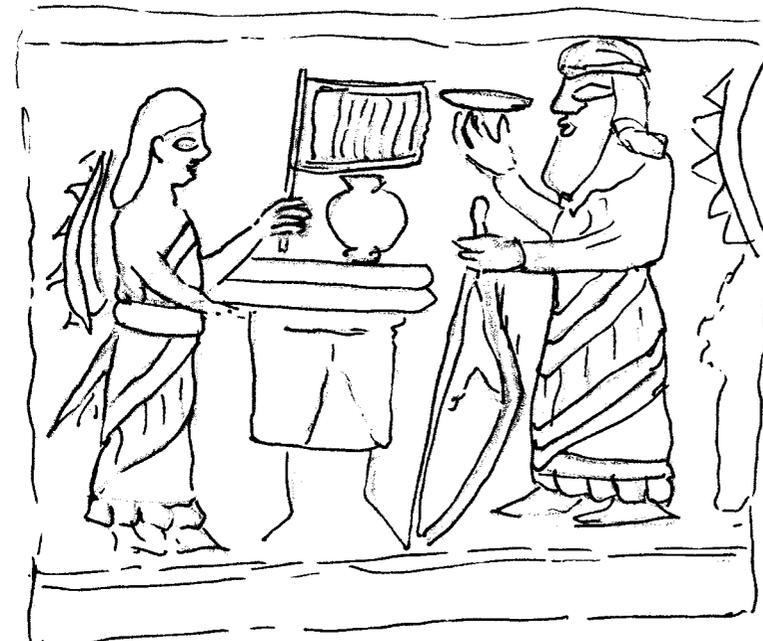
Like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the fountains in Paradise gush with water that flows down from above the rooftops of palaces (*tasneem*). There are rivers that flow with never-changing water, rivers that flow with milk, which will never sour, rivers of delicious non-intoxicating wine, and others of purified honey. The heavenly drinks are pure sealed nectar with a lingering taste of mastic, and wine flavored with ginger, served in containers of silver and glass.

In essence, the Muslim Paradise bears telling resemblance to the Mesopotamian paradisiacal narratives that go far back in time to the Akkadians and Sumerians. We knew of this only quite recently when Sumerian texts were translated, revealing an amazing wealth of information on these ancient peoples. Samuel Kramer in his *History Begins at Sumer* asserts, "the very idea of a divine paradise, a garden of the gods, is of Sumerian origin," and its location was a place they called Dulman, "the land of the pure, the clean, and the bright." It was the "land of the living," the home of the immortals who "know neither sickness nor death." At first, it lacked water, but then the water god, Enki, ordered it to be filled "with water brought up from the earth." Thus, it became "a divine garden, green with fruit-laden fields and meadows." It was the land of painless and effortless labor. The nine "months of womanhood" were reduced to nine days, and when labor came to goddess Ninmu, baby goddess Ninkurra painlessly slipped out of her "like good princely cream" (143-45). In addition to these mythical gardens, the ancient Mesopotamian kings were famous for designing their own terrestrial paradises where exotic plants of trees and flowers, brought from far and wide, grew. The most famous of these were definitely the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. They were irrigated by drawing water from the river Euphrates and pumping it by means of hydraulic engines all the way up to the top level of the gardens that rose tier upon tier.

*Baghdad, a joyful land for the affluent,
For the penniless, an abode of anguish and sorrow.
(A famous line on Baghdad often quoted in medieval sources, my translation)*

The geographer Yaqut al-Hamawi (d.1229) says that when the second Caliph of the Abbasid family Abu Ja'far al-Mansur (d.775) decided to build a new seat for the Caliphate, a place called Baghdadu attracted his attention. It was a vibrant thriving trading center or *souq* to which goods and provisions were brought from the four corners of the world by land, river, and sea. Although it was referred to as *qarya* 'village,' it seemed to have been teeming with life. He also quotes some of Ptolemy's (d.c.168) topographical facts on Baghdad. The name Baghdad was said to be of non-Arabic origin and stories differ on its meaning. Some say, for instance, it was composed of *bagh* 'orchard' and *dad* 'gave.' One of the Arabic names chosen for the city was Dar al-Salam 'the abode of peace' (*Mu'jam al-Buldan* 331). Modern archaeological discoveries support al-Hamawi's observation that part of the site of Baghdad

was ruins of an ancient city, and that Baghdadu was an ancient Babylonian city, dating back to around 2000 bc. Rapidly the city of Baghdad grew economically, culturally, and intellectually. It became the marketplace of the world, an important trading highway, and a gateway from which caravans set out to bring back foods from afar. Merchants ventured as far as China for cinnamon and other spices. Politically and culturally, it was a period of tremendous power and luxury. Islam spread westwards to Spain, and with it spread the Baghdadi lifestyle of luxury and culture. In short, Baghdad became a great influential metropolis. It was a great place for agriculture. The land itself was used to the utmost. Iraq was called *Ardh al-Sawad*, (the black-land country) because the whole region was cultivated, and was densely populated. We read in history books that a rooster crowing in one village was heard and answered back by the rooster of the neighboring village. Baghdad was described as *um al-dunya* 'mother of the world,' and *surrat al-bilad* 'navel of the nations.' The only snag, though, one needed to have money in one's pockets to enjoy its promised luxuries.



Meal on the go

Grocery Shopping in Medieval Baghdad

During the flourishing Abbasid period, Baghdad became an international open market for merchandise from all over the world, in addition to its own vast local repertoire. In the *Arabian Nights* story of "The Porter and the Three Ladies of Baghdad," this economic aspect of the city was well illustrated:

The porter was asked by a lady-shopper to take his crate and follow her. She first knocks at the door of a Christian, who sells her strained wine as clear as olive oil. She then goes to the fruit-shop and buys Syrian apples, Osmani (Ottoman) quinces, Omani peaches, cucumbers of the Nile, Egyptian limes, Sultani oranges, and citrons. The same shop offers flowers and aromatic herbs, as well. So she buys some Aleppan jasmine, scented myrtle berries, chamomile, violets, eglantine, narcissus, and pomegranate blooms. She stops at the butcher's booth and buys 10 pounds/4½ kg of mutton, and has it wrapped in banana leaves. She also buys some coal. Their next stop is the grocer's, where the damsel buys all kinds of *naql* (snack foods eaten in drinking sessions), such as salted and cured sparrows

(*'usfour malih*), bruised and cured olives (*zaytoun mukallas*), tarragon (*tarkhoun*), yogurt cream cheese (*qanbarees*), Syrian cheese, and pickles -- sweetened and unsweetened. She also buys shelled pistachio and hazelnuts, roasted chickpeas, Iraqi sugar-cane reeds, *malban* (chewy starch pudding, Levantine name for today's Turkish delight), and Tihami raisins.

From the confectioner, she buys an earthen platter, and piles it with all kinds of desserts, for most of which we are lucky enough to have recipes in the extant medieval cookbooks, such as *Qahiriyya* (delicate rings of cookies/biscuits dipped in syrup) *basandoud* (sandwich cookies), *zalabiya mushabbak* (fritters), *qata'if* (Arabian pancakes), *maymuna* (thickened almond pudding), *asabi'* Zaynab (cannoli-like pastries), all kinds of thickened puddings such as *sabouniyya* (solid starch-based pudding), and *luqaymaat al-qadhi* (literally 'judge's morsels,' fried pastry balls dipped in syrup), taffy/toffee (*faneedh/baneed*), and two sugar cones.

Her last stopping place is the perfumer's. She buys ten sorts of scented waters such as rose and orange-blossom water, rose water with musk, aloe wood, frankincense, ambergris, and musk, with candles of Alexandria wax (Burton 1: 82--83; Mahdi 126--28).

Prisoners at meal time



IX GASTRONOMES OF THE ABBASID ERA

Wealth and prosperity brought to the region during the Abbasid era created prosperous, leisurely classes that demanded the best money could offer. This naturally included gourmet cuisine. Indulging in luxuriously prepared foods, cooking, reading and writing about food in prose and poetry, and even arranging for cooking contests were commendable pastimes that the ruling dynasties and the affluent enjoyed, sometimes to fault. For instance, the grandson of Harun al-Rasheed, al-Wathiq (d.847), was known for his weakness for food, especially eggplant. He was known as *al-Akoul* 'the glutton.' He used to eat forty cooked eggplants in a single sitting (*Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi Al-'Iqd al-Fareed* 1005). From medieval history books, we learn of the lavish feasts held by the caliphs and the affluent, and of the public feasts they occasionally provided on certain religious and political occasions. On one such memorable public event, one thousand tables were set. On each table were put ten dishes of each of the following: *thareed* (a famous dish of lamb and bread sopped in rich flavorful broth), grilled meat, and fish. The 'waiters' went around serving drinks of honeyed water (*sherbet*) and *laban* (diluted yogurt). Of the caliphs' menus, it was said they were composed of no less than 300 kinds of dishes per meal. Such flights of extravagance were not always allowed to pass uncriticized. A case in point is the famous platter of delicate and delectable *qarees*, an aspic dish of fish tongues, 150 of them, which Ibn al-Mahdi offered to his half brother Harun al-Rasheed. Al-Rasheed chided him, for no dish, he told him, was worth such outrageous expenses. It went down in history as "The fish dish that cost one thousand dirhams" (*al-Mas'oudi Murouj al-Dhahab* 510). However, despite all the food varieties and luxuries available at the time, the basic dietary ingredients of dates, butter, and bread remained favorites for everybody. One of the Abbasid Caliphs was reputed to have said that the beauty of a dinner table was determined by how much bread was put on it. As might be expected, gourmandize has another side to it -- obesity, which was also dealt with in medieval

books. For instance, we read in Ibn Abi Usaybi'a's 13th century book on physicians that Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rasheed's paternal cousin 'Isa bin Ja'far (d.c.800) accumulated so much fat that al-Rasheed was terribly worried about him. The physician's verdict was that it was due to self-indulgence and easy living, and he managed to cure him with a lie. He told him that he needed to write his will for he was afflicted with an incurable disease and might die within forty days. Grief-stricken 'Isa lost so much weight, that he was able to cinch his belt five notches tighter (133). We also know of Ibn Dihqana (d.891), a gourmet and author of a cookbook, described as large and overweight. When a Caliph would leave the assembly and come back, the boon companions would stand up but he would fall asleep saying this was because he could not do so. He used to say, "I ate until I got afflicted with chronic diseases. Now I want to eat until I die" (al-Shabushti 5). Gastronomy to the depressed was the best solace and diversion. The unfortunate Caliph al-Mustakfi (d.949) suggested that his boon companions recite food poems after which the dishes described were cooked and enjoyed (Most of these poems are quoted in the following chapters). The narrator in al-Mas'udi's chronicle comments,

Never have I seen Mustakfi so overjoyed, since the day of his accession. To all present, revelers, singers, and musicians, he gave money, causing all the silver and gold with which he stood possessed to be brought out of the treasury, in spite of his straitened circumstances. Never a day like this did I behold, until the day when Ahmad ibn Buwaih the Dailamite seized him and put out his eyes. (Arberry's translation 29--30)

In comparison to the haute cuisine of the affluent, the cooking of the less privileged classes was definitely much simpler and less ceremonious. They confined themselves to what was readily available in the markets such as seasonal vegetables and pulses and cheaper cuts of meat. Spices were added sparingly, and sugar

syrup rather than honey was more commonly used for desserts. The dish known as *tharid*, for instance, was everybody's favorite. However, it could be made as simple and cheap as bread sopped in fava beans or chickpeas broth, with or without meat, or as laborious and costly as the meat preparations we encounter in al-Warraq's Chapters 61 and 83, where more expensive cuts of meat are used, a wider variety of spices is added, and artistic garnishes and presentations are required. Buying ready-cooked foods from the markets *ta'am al-souq* was sometimes even more affordable than cooking at home, due to fuel costs (Guthrie 94, 96). This might explain why it was not deemed fit for high-class people to patronize such places. Generally, cooked foods available in the markets were regarded as inferior in quality to homemade varieties, even though they looked more tempting.

We can safely assume that the commoners did enjoy good food, in normal circumstances at least. The trendy dishes the affluent enjoyed such as the varieties of stews called *sikbajat* and *zirbajat* were also popular among the rest of the community. This we learn from an anecdote al-Mas'udi (581) tells on the Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d.861). He was once sitting at a place overlooking the Gulf, and happened to smell *sikbaja* stew being prepared by one of the sailors on board a ship. He liked the aroma so much that he ordered the pot to be brought to him. The pot was returned to the sailor, filled with money, with a message that the Caliph appreciated his food. Later on, whenever the subject was brought up in his assemblies, he would say it was the most delicious *sikbaja* he had ever eaten.

Non-religious literature written during the period abounds with interesting anecdotes and descriptions of the daily lives of the common people, such as al-Jahiz's satire *al-Bukhala'* (the misers), written in the 9th century in the port city of Basra. The book is a collection of amusing and humorous anecdotes on miserly people, many of which inevitably revolve around food, and eating and drinking. One of the misers, for instance, explains to his friends why he uncharacteristically distributed a gift of date syrup amongst his friends. Had

he sold it, he explains, he would have been shamed. Had he kept it, it would have incurred further expenses such as buying butter and many other things, for his wife might have wanted to make puddings and cookies/biscuits (*'asida*, *aruziyya*, and *bastanud*) with it. Thus, it would have ended up being even more costly than raising his children (63).

Another amusing source on daily life in Baghdad was written by al-Jahiz's disciple Abu Hayyan al-Tawhidi. In his 10th-century *Al-Risala al-Baghdadiya* (the Baghdadi tract), the protagonist is a Baghdadi himself who spends a whole day being hosted by a household in the Persian city, Asfahan. His narrative gives us a realistic account of what life was like in Baghdad at the time, with a list of the foods and dishes prepared by the high and low. From his account we learn how the Baghdadis used to go on joy rides in boats on the river Tigris, and how they used to picnic in the countless pleasure spots outside Baghdad where they spend the day eating, drinking and carousing. Another interesting source of information is the assemblies Maqamat of 10th-century al-Hamadani and 12th-century al-Hariri. The roguish protagonists travel in the Islamic world, and food is certainly one of their pursuits.

The Arabian Nights offers dazzling accounts of the lifestyles of the extravagant and the ordinary alike. It was tremendously popular even at that time, especially amongst the masses. It opened to them gates into a world of fantasy abundant in romance, intrigue, and women and men seeking all kinds of fulfillment. Mouthwatering accounts of exotic and mundane foods and dishes are almost on every page. In the story of the porter and the three ladies, Scheherazade tells of numerous food items available in Baghdad to grocery-shoppers at the time. In the story of 'Azeez and 'Azeza, The lover's devotion was put to the test by making him choose between his heart and stomach. The lover failed the test the first two nights. He was hungry for he had not tasted food for a long time, "by reason of the violence" of his love. He uncovered the table and to his heart's - or stomach's - delight he found:

four chickens reddened with roasting and seasoned with spices, around which were four saucers, one containing sweetmeats, another conserve of pomegranate-seeds, and a third almond pastry (baklava) and a fourth honey fritters (zalabiya); and the contents of these saucers were part sweet and part sour. So I ate of the fritters and a piece of meat, then went on to the almond-cakes and ate what I could; after which I fell upon the sweetmeats, whereof I swallowed a spoonful or two or three or four, ending with part of chicken and a mouthful of something beside. (Burton, 2: 310-11)

After all this, who would blame the besmitten lad for laying his head on a cushion and surrendering to sleep, thus failing the test?

There were also stories that told the deprived listeners there was more in life than just a piece of bread stuffed with cheese. In one of them, a man who suddenly got lucky asked his mother what she wanted for dinner. He laughed when she asked for a simple meal. From now on, and as a rich woman, he boasted, she'd better demand browned chicken and meat, steamed rice, sausages, stuffed vegetables, stuffed lamb, *qata'f*, etc.

Great Chefs, Great Cities

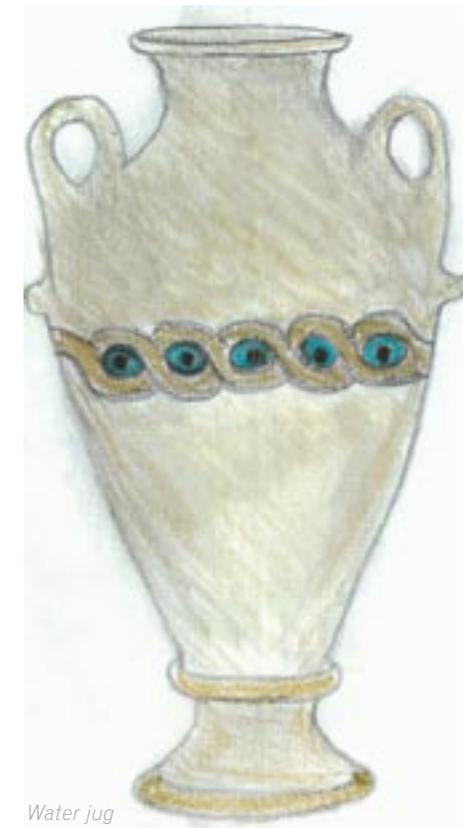
Location: Ancient Sumer, Ur

Time: 2900-2300 BC

Within the domain of the household, women were responsible for preparing the meals. However, the haute cuisine of the privileged at the temple and the palace was monopolized by the male chefs, called 'muhaldim' in Sumerian (Akkadian 'nuhatimmu'), who were assisted by other professionals such as preparers, embellishers responsible for food presentation, bread bakers, and the 'kakardinnu,' the pastry chefs. These were all honorable occupations and carried prestige. Outside the royal kitchens, there were other specialized food processors such as the ones who used to prepare condiments and sauces like 'siqqu' made from fermented fish and locusts (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 78--79).

Cooking was a profession learnt through

apprenticeship. The period of training was sixteen months, during which period the son was loaned to the artisan. Textual evidence also attests to the fact that cooking was acknowledged as an art--a list of the Sumerian artisans began with cooks. Others included were jewelers and metalworkers who by far were the most important craftsmen of Sumer. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim (Noah's counterpart), was instructed by the water god Ea to include artisans in his boat (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 82). In other lists, the cook sometimes was referred to as 'the great cook,' or 'chief cook.' Some of them even acquired considerable power and prestige. One of these 'great chefs' had his own seal given to him by the king (Limet 140).



Water jug

Location: Baghdad

Time: Abbasid Era, 8th-13th centuries AD

The court cuisine of the Abbasid Caliphate was legendary for its lavishness and sophistication. Cooking was definitely not a mere private skill, nor was it looked upon as just a profession. It was by common consent an art worthy of being pursued and perfected. The caliphs, princes, courtiers, men of learning, boon companions, and entertainers, they were all expected to be well informed in the gastronomical arts, and many of them had cookbooks in their names. Cooking to many was a commendable recreational activity. One of *The Arabian Nights* stories illustrates this humane aspect in the famous Caliph Harun al-Rasheed (d.809), who while in disguise, catches fish and prepares a delicious meal for a damsel and her lover. He fries it on a brazier, after seasoning it with salt and thyme, and serves it on a banana leaf with fresh lemon (Burton 2: 33; *Alf Layla wa Layla* 110-11). Sons of Harun al-Rasheed, al-Ma'mun and al-Mu'tasim, used to sponsor cooking contests, and even participated in some of them. However, Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839), half-brother of Harun al-Rasheed, looms large in this field. Politically he did not play an important role for he was more inclined towards the arts, poetry, music, singing, and gastronomy. Indeed, he was the prince of epicures. Although his actual cookbook perished, many of his recipes and dishes inspired by them -- usually referred to as *Ibrahimiyyat* - were immortalized in poems, anecdotes and in most of the extant medieval cookbooks, east and west of the Islamic world.

Of the contemporary figures in the literary and gastronomic fields Kushajim Abu al-Fath bin al-Husayn (d.c.961) was the most distinguished for his food poems, (several of which are quoted in this book), and cookbooks, recommended as 'textbooks' for culinary apprentices. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), for instance, in his section on bakers, cooks, and butchers, suggests that professional cooks consult Kushajim's cookbooks if they want to learn good cooking (*Sirr al-'Aalamayn* 8). Kushajim's ancestors came from al-Ramla in Palestine and settled in Iraq. He lived for a while in Aleppo and was court cook and poet for the Hamdanid ruler Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdani (d.967) and his father. His fame as the court cook reached far and wide. He then settled in Baghdad.

Gastronomy was a largely male-dominated field. Nevertheless, there was record of renowned females and their own signature dishes. We have Buran (d.884), wife of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun. She was responsible for inventing sumptuous eggplant/ aubergine dishes collectively called *Buraniyaat*, after her name. Even today, her name still resounds in places as far from Baghdad as Spain and Afghanistan. We also know of Um al-Fadhl, wife of Yahya bin Khalid al-Barmaki, mentor and vizier of Harun al-Rasheed. Her fame rests on a *barida* 'cold dish' she used to make for al-Rasheed's father, al-Mahdi (d.785). However, the most renowned of them all was definitely Bid'a, a blond slave girl of prince of epicures Ibrahim bin al-Mahi (mentioned above). In the anecdote al-Warraq included in his cookbook about her, she was described as *safra* 'muwallada, i.e. fair-skinned with golden hair, and though born on Arab land, she was originally from Byzantium. She was an accomplished singer and an outstanding cook, renowned for her cold dishes *bawarid*, beef stews soured with vinegar *sikbajat*, and desserts. After Ibn al-Mahdi died, she became the favorite slave girl of 'Areeb al-Ma'mouniyya, the famous Abbasid singer (d.890). 'Areeb used to tempt her guests to stay for dinner by saying that Bid'a herself had prepared *lawzeenaj* 'almond confection' with fresh

almonds. No wonder, her name was Bid'a 'the woman who excels in everything.'

The anecdote in al-Warraq's cookbook (Chapter 49) describes in detail the famous *sikbaj* (beef stew soured with vinegar) she prepared for Caliph al-Ameen (d.813). It was a festival to the senses. The aromas were incredible; the dish looked like an adorned bride, or an orchard flower (*zahrat il-bustan*). Al-Ameen was so pleased with Bid'a that he sent her a necklace as a gift for which he paid 30,000 dirhams, along with a poem singing her praises:

ولقد رأيتنا بدمعة بطعامها فأنسى بكالروض من الذنوب
فكانت هند العباد وقد بدت وحليها كالأندلس من اللؤلؤ
ضمير بصفتها لونه وقواكبها فكانت أرواحنا من حطاب
أريج يفرح نسيه ومخاربه في كنف خمرة فتنة الأوصار
وكأنها بين جفونها من طرفها في كل قلب مريفة كالنار

Here comes Bid'a with her dish, looking like a garden in spring.

Approaching thus, the dish looks clad in gowns of light. Bursting in color and aroma, as if from a perfumer 'tis just been fetched,

Emitting scented whiffs and steam, carried by a damsel dazzling the eyes with sheen.

Gorgeous with eyelashes like daring knives of fire in hearts of men.

X COOKBOOKS OF THE ABBASID ERA

All this interest in and attention to food and eating inevitably gave rise to the trend of writing cookbooks and manuals, especially when papermaking and stationary became significant businesses in Baghdad around the ninth century. Cookbooks and gastronomic guides and manuals in particular were in great demand at the time. Professionally, training chefs in the culinary arts was done by apprenticeship aided by cookbooks. Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111), for instance, in his section on bakers, cooks, and butchers, recommends that they consult Kushajim's cookbooks if they want to learn the trade (*Sirr al-'Aalamayn* 8).

Nevertheless, proficiency in the art of cooking was not restricted to professional chefs alone, it extended to Caliphs, princes, dignitaries, physicians, and the like. It was one of the desirable accomplishments of the 'Abbasid man,' especially the aspiring boon companion, who wished to win the favors of his superiors. A cookbook in the mix would definitely be a bonus in his credentials. This also gave rise to a genre of books that dealt with the etiquette *adab* of dining and wining with one's superiors such as *Adab al-Nadeem* by Kushajim. The ideal *nadeem* 'boon companion,' for instance, was expected to perfect at least 10 exotic dishes. A good number of the Abbasid Caliphs and princes themselves were known for their interest in cooking, and if those who had cooking tomes in their names did not necessarily write them, Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi, half brother of Harun al-Rasheed, did write his own. He was the most passionate among them, and his cookbook enjoyed wide circulation in the medieval eastern and western Islamic world.

Material prosperity during the Abbasid era created a social class, the nouveau riche, whose desire to emulate the aristocracy might also have played a role in the popularity of cookbooks. They had the means but lacked the knowledge. Cookbooks such as the one al-Warraq compiled for instance would certainly be in demand as they described the fashionable favorite dishes the elite enjoyed, which could be duplicated in their own kitchens. As for the general cooking manuals,

they were mostly written for the use of the stewards of "the urban bourgeoisie," who had to meet the demands of big households, as well as the "customary obligations of providing hospitality" to guests (Waines "'Luxury Foods' in Medieval Islamic Societies" 576).

Medieval Muslims regarded food as not only a legitimate source of pleasure but also a means for physical regeneration -- preventing and curing illnesses. Therefore, there was a great demand for physicians' dietetic guides and cookbooks on *islah al-at'ima* 'remedying foods,' such as *Manafi' al-Aghdhiya wa Daf'Madhariha* (benefits of food and avoiding its harms) by al-Razi (d.923) and the books of the Nestorian physician, Yuhanna bin Masawayh (d.857). It was known of Harun al-Rasheed and his successors that they had their meals under his watchful eyes. He would advise them against certain foods and if they did not heed the advice, he would treat them to avert their harm. Al-Mu'tadhid (d.902) had his most trusted confidant, Ibn al-Tayyib al-Sarakhsi (d.899) the eminent scholar, write for him *Kitab al-Tabeeh* 'cookbook,' divided according to the days and months of the year (Ibn al-Nadeem 187).

Besides the above mentioned books on dietetics, Ibn al-Nadeem (d.1000) enters in his famous bibliography *Fihrast* many more cookbooks (73, 88, 187), from which we sadly conclude that what we have available today of such books is the mere tip of the iceberg of the medieval culinary tradition that flourished hand in hand with the papermaking businesses. They were mostly lost or perished when the Mongols attacked Baghdad in 1258 AD and ransacked the city. Books were the second casualties after human beings. It was said that the river Tigris turned red the first day and blue the second, from the ink of books thrown into it.

Still, we are fortunate enough to have at our disposal nine Arabic medieval cookbooks from the eastern and western regions. The earliest of these is 10th-century *Kitab al-Tabeeh* (cookery book) by Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq of Baghdad. It covers urban cooking from late eighth to mid-tenth centuries. Three copies exist,

one at the University Library of Helsinki, one at the Bodleian Library, and a third augmented version in Istanbul. The edited Arabic text came out in 1987 (see my English translation *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens* Introduction).

The second medieval Baghdadi cookbook, also entitled *Kitab al-Tabeeh*, was written in 1226 by Ibn al-Kareem al-Katib al-Baghdadi (hitherto referred to as al-Baghdadi). The manuscript was first discovered by the Iraqi scholar Daoud al-Chalabi, and published in 1934 in Mosul. The British scholar A. J. Arberry translated it into English in 1939. This discovery was a breakthrough with regard to knowledge of medieval cooking, for it contained medieval recipes of dishes that were, up until that time, known only in name or not at all. For decades, it was the only significant document we had of the medieval Baghdadi cuisine. An augmented version *Kitab Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada* (the book of familiar foods) is also available. It is believed to have been written in the fourteenth century.

We also know of two medieval Syrian cookbooks: *Kitab al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb fi Wasf al-Tayyibat wa 'l-Teeb* (winning a lover's heart by delectable dishes and perfumes) was reputedly written by the 13th-century historian Ibn al-'Adeem of Aleppo. The edited book came out in 1986. It is a practical organized guide divided into ten chapters dealing with perfume compounds, useful kitchen preparations, and food recipes mostly briefly written. From Damascus, we have a 15th-century cookery 5½-page pamphlet *Kitab al-Tibakha*, first discovered and edited by Habeeb Zayyat in 1937. The work is attributed to the Damascene scholar Ibn al-Mubarrid, comprising 44 recipes, alphabetically arranged and briefly written.

From Egypt came the 14th-century anonymous *Kanz al-Fawa'id fi Tanwi' al-Mawa'id* (benefits of variety on the table), of which an edited edition came in 1993. It has 750 recipes unevenly distributed by categories among 23 chapters. From al-Maghrib and Muslim Spain, Andalusia, two cookbooks survived. *Fidhalat al-Khiwan fi Tayyibat al-Ta'am wal Alwan* (the best of the

offered foods) authored by Ibn Razeen al-Tujibi in the 13th century. It has 412 recipes arranged neatly and by category in 12 parts, each subdivided into a number of chapters. The anonymous *Anwa' al-Saydala fi Alwan al-At'ima* (a variety of dishes and their benefits) was written in the 13th century. This new Arabic edition came out in 2003 based on a better copy, which carries the original title. Previously, the book was identified as *Kitab al-Tabeeh fi'l-Maghrib wa'l-Andalus*, edited in 1965.

All these books, through their many acknowledged direct borrowings and adaptations of the Baghdadi dishes, throw further light on the Baghdadi cuisine, which had a profound impact on other regions that extend as far westwards as Spain and Italy, and eastwards to India. The culinary practices in the eastern as well as the western regions of the Islamic world kept to the essentials, as we know them from al-Warraq's book, in foodstuffs as well as culinary techniques. Still, we should allow for regional differences necessitated by the indigenous varieties of ingredients. A case in point is the cuisine of the western Islamic region, reflected in the two surviving medieval Andalusian cookbooks. We should also take into account the personal preferences of the writers themselves, as in the case of al-Baghdadi. Instances of shared dishes are *tharid*, *sikbaja*, *Ibrahimiyya*, *rummaniyya*, *zirkaj*, *safarjaliyya*, *summaqiyya*, *mishmishiyya*, *mutajjana*, *kishkiyya*, *Buraniyya*, *aruzziyya*, *'ujaj*, *muzawwarat*, *hareesa*, *judhab*, *sanbousaj*, *khushkananaj*, *khabees*, *faludhaj*, *zalabiya*, *qatayif*, and *lawzeenaj*.

The details of making such dishes may vary, but the method largely reflects a shared and a lasting cuisine that traveled westwards as far as Sicily and the Iberian Peninsula, and eastwards as far as India. Of the latter, the cookbook *Ni'matnama* of Sultan Ghiyath Shahi of Central India, written in late fifteenth century, is a case in point. The Sultan's extravagant menu offers varieties of dishes and foodstuffs, many of which were typical of the Baghdadi cuisine, some acquired new names and

others retained the original ones, or almost. Instances of such dishes are the filled pastries *samosa* (*sanbusaj*), *harira*, *shurba*, *thareed*, *kabab*, *burani*, *kashka*, *harsiyya* (*hareesa*), *kak* (*ka'k*), and *tanouri* (*tannouriyya*).

They are also important in that they give information sometimes overlooked in the Baghdadi cookbooks. For instance, in the Andalusian *Anwa' al-Saydala*, the anonymous writer commends the Abbasid caliphs of *al-Mashriq* for their love of bread. At their request, bakers daily display a huge tray laden with all kinds of bread for them to choose from (52).

Due to their relevance to the development of the Iraqi cuisine, I give here more details on the two Baghdadi cookbooks. The rest, I will mention within the course of the book wherever relevant.

Of the two Baghdadi cookbooks, al-Warraq's copy is historically the most significant because it is the earliest known to have come down to us from medieval times. We do not have a single book of medieval Persian cuisine, which only survived in anecdotes and poems. The emergence of the Chinese 'world's first cuisine' can only be dated back to the southern Sung period of around twelfth century AD, and the available sources do not provide specific preparations for dishes. With the exception of the fourth century AD compilation of Apicius, the first European fragmentary *Book of Cookery* was written in the fourteenth century (Waines *In a Caliph's Kitchen* 8).

From the book's introduction, we learn that al-Warraq was commissioned to write a cookbook on the dishes and foods of caliphs, lords, and dignitaries. As his nickname suggests, he must have been in the book business, which involved copying manuscripts, compiling volumes, perhaps authoring some, and trading in them. Even though al-Warraq's primary purpose for writing *Kitab al-Tabeeh* was to 'anthologize' the celebrated Abbasid cuisine in a comprehensive recipe book for dishes and drinks, he had an eye on demystifying it to facilitate its duplication in relatively simpler kitchens. The anecdote of the sultan's chef and sikbaja stew in his first chapter

sets the right tone, "Do you think," the chef asks, "that dishes cooked in the sultan's kitchen are any different from the familiar ones? The ingredients used there are no other than vinegar, fresh herbs, meat, eggplant, gourd, and saffron, and the like. In fact, it is the meticulous cleanliness of ingredients and pots that makes the difference" (Chapter 1). Additionally, his book serves as an instructive manual for healthy living, systematically arranged in an elegant and coherent compilation.

The book is divided into 132 chapters. It begins with the basics of kitchen utensils and ingredients, the humoral properties of foods, advice on how to avoid any harm that food may cause, and the benefits of exercise before the meal (Chapters 1--30). Al-Warraq then glides through the categories of snack foods and cold dishes, usually served before the hot meal or with it, prepared with red meat, poultry, fish, and vegetables (Chapters 31--47). Next, he embarks on the preparations of dishes cooked on the stoves in pots and served hot with bread, beginning with the basic *ma' wa milh* (literally, 'water and salt,' pot roasts) and porridges and bean dishes. He then proceeds to varieties of meat stews, braised and fried dishes, and omelets (Chapters 48--86). From the stove, al-Warraq switches to outdoor cooking using the *tannour*, grill, and the rotating spit *kardabaj* (Chapters 87--92). Dessert comes next (92--104) followed by dishes for the sick (105--9). Drinks, some of which are alcoholic, cover a number of chapters that include recipes for digestives (110--26). Since eating necessitates washing the hands before and after the meal and cleaning the teeth, there are recipes for hand-washing compounds and recommended varieties of

khilal 'toothpicks' (Chapters 127--29). Because eating was a social activity, literally, as diners share not just a table but also communal dishes, knowledge of specific etiquettes of dining with friends and dignitaries is necessary (Chapter 130--31). The book duly closes with a chapter on the benefits of having a nap after a meal (Chapter 132).

Within the course of these chapters, al-Warraq incorporates 615 recipes taken from more than twenty cookbooks by or for caliphs, princes, physicians, prominent political and literary figures, professionals, and the like. However, the fact that he himself might not have been the author of the recipes, by no means detracts from his achievement. Particularly significant is his effort in compiling and organizing such a huge volume from an extensive number of culinary and dietetic sources. Indeed, the book shows few signs of being an amalgamation of various sources, with a good deal of 'editing' on his part to achieve the unified feel of his 'anthology.'

The chapter headings of the book reveal al-Warraq's penchant for the literary and the artistic. They are given a literary ring - albeit somewhat forced and artificial to the modern ear - through use of rhyming words *saj'*. Geert van Gelder describes this as a "tour de force" that is "unusual even in works of a literary nature" (God's Banquet 64). Al-Warraq's literary interest is further revealed in the supplementary material he provides. There are a good number of entertaining stories related to the dishes and their evolution, as in Chapter 86 on *tabahija*; and their proverbial preparations, as in Chapter 49 on the slave-girl Bid'a and her *sikbaja*; and the amusing anecdotes on table manners, generosity, and stinginess, as in Chapter 131. He includes, besides, eighty-six poems of various lengths on a variety of subjects related to food. For Greet van Gelder, the poems are "the equivalent of the luscious color photographs of modern cookery-books" (64). There are twenty-one instances where the recipes are followed by poems describing how the dishes are cooked.

Interesting Tidbits from al-Warraq's 10th-Century Cookbook

☞ Do not cut vegetables with the same knife used for meat. ☞ Do not use old spices. ☞ To test the cleanliness of a pot, put a stone in one nostril and the washed pot close to the other and sniff. They should smell the same. ☞ Iron pans are the best for frying fish because they help crisp the skin, the most delicious part in fish. ☞ To get rid of the taste of burned food, put a couple of whole walnuts in the pot, and let them cook with the food for a while, then discard the walnuts. ☞ If you eat what you do not crave, it will eat you. ☞ Some foods are aphrodisiac and have the power to increase male sperm, such as sweets, especially dates and grapes. Other foods: carrot, eggs, onions, coconut, pine nuts, asparagus, and chickpeas. ☞ Eating cheese after a heavy meal will aid digestion. ☞ Cumin, cinnamon, and rue are gas-repellents and digestives. ☞ Having too much rose water would cause hair to turn white. ☞ Juices of pomegranate, quince, and apple are kidney-stone repellents. ☞ Cauliflower causes stomach gurgles. ☞ Exercise before a meal, but avoid it after a heavy meal. ☞ A brief snooze after a meal is recommended, provided you lie on your back, and do not use a high pillow. ☞ How to make yogurt without using milk: peel pieces of coconut. Shred it, then cover it with water, and squeeze it with the fingers until it becomes milky in texture. Strain and let it sour as you do with regular milk. ☞ How to make omelet without eggs: Cook chickpeas until mushy in texture, and mix them with boiled onion, oil, and coriander. Then mash mixture and fry it as you do with eggs.

At the approach of the 13th century, the Abbasid dynasty was in state of decline. The task of writing cookbooks and preparing manuals during the period was mainly undertaken by less illustrious personages, such as scholars and amateur epicures. Al-Baghdadi was such a one. We know the dates of his birth and death (1184--1240). He was originally from Baghdad, where he was known as *katib* 'secretary,' *adeeb* 'literary man,' and *muhaddith* 'well versed in the Prophet's tradition' (al-Zarkali 908). His fame undeniably rests on the little cookbook he wrote primarily "for his own use" but also for whoever wishes to use it, as he claims in his Introduction (33). He was dissatisfied with the several books he has come across. They contain "mention of strange and unfamiliar dishes, in the composition of which unwholesome and unsatisfying ingredients are used" (32). He acknowledges cooking as a noble art, and food as a perfectly acceptable indulgence, and assures the readers that it will do no harm to specialize in it.

This time we know we are dealing with middle class Abbasid cuisine, and the choice of the dishes in the book is more or less determined by al-Baghdadi's private taste. "I have mentioned in it," he says, "dishes selected by myself, perhaps passing over briefly such as are well-known and in common use" (33). Stylistically it is different from al-Warraq's book, who wrote it in a noticeably more leisurely fashion, as his aim was to instruct and to entertain. Al-Baghdadi's, on the other hand, was of a more a cook's book. He declares that his "principle throughout has been brevity and succinctness, and the avoidance of prolixity and long-windedness." And indeed he does just that. Despite its modest size (42 pages), the book is admirably comprehensive. All the necessary details are there, and in crucial recipes, exact amounts or precise instructions are given. In preparing the *Narinjiyya*, a stew soured with narinj (bitter orange/orange of Seville), his directions are that the oranges should be peeled by one person and pressed by another. For those who have actually handled these oranges, the reason

is obvious; the peel is devastatingly bitter and would otherwise ruin the stew. It is remarks like these, which convince the reader that he is dealing with a culinary writer who knows what he is talking about. The Iraqi scholar Daoud al-Chalabi, credited with discovering and editing the manuscript, was all admiration of al-Baghdadi's method. In his preface, he said that al-Baghdadi described the dishes "in exact language, just as though he was detailing some alchemical operation" (30).

The book contains around 158 recipes covering a wide variety of dishes including stuffed foods characteristic of the Iraqi cuisine to this day:

☞ 22 sour and sweet-sour stews, such as sikbaj (soured with vinegar), hummadhiyya (soured with citron pulp), and rummaniyya (soured with pomegranate juice)

☞ 6 sour milk dishes, such as labaniyya and madheera

☞ 17 plain (not sour) stews and soups, such as isfanakhiyya (with spinach) and shurba khadhrā' (green soup); and grain dishes, such as ruzz mufalfal (rice with separated grains), mujaddara (rice with lentils), fareekiyya (with green wheat), and mash (mung beans with rice)

☞ 8 fried and dry dishes (nawashif), such as mishmishiyya (with meatballs looking like apricots), and Buran (mashed eggplant)

22 sawadhij (plain dishes, not sour), such as Buraniyya (eggplant dish similar to musakka), madfouna (buried stuffed eggplant cooked in sauce), makhfiyya (hidden), bunduqiyya (made with meatballs size of hazelnut each), and muqarrasa (fried round meat patties)

☞ A long paragraph on chicken dishes, cooked as red meat, coriander seeds should be used, but no onion or garlic

☞ 9 simmered dishes, such as harisa (wheat porridge), tannouryya (meat in broth simmered in tannour), sukhtour or keeba (stuffed pieces of tripe), and akari' (trotters)

☞ 10 mutajjanat and bawarid (fried and cold dishes), such as masous (suckling kid soured in vinegar), maqlouba (fried meat patties), sanbousaj (stuffed and fried pastries), and bazmaward (meat-stuffed sandwiches)

☞ 12 fish dishes, fresh and salted, such as samak mashwi (baked in tannour), samak musakbaj (fried fish with vinegar sauce), and samak maqlu bi-khal wa rahshi (fried fish with vinegar and sesame paste sauce)

☞ 14 sauces, condiments, relishes, and vegetable side dishes, collectively called sibagh, such as na'na' muklallal (pickled mint), badhinjan bi laban (eggplant with yogurt sauce), boiled fava beans with vinegar and oil, kamakh reejal (fermented condiment made with milk), smoked olives, mustard-vinegar sauce, and seasoned salt

☞ 12 judhaab (savory-sweet dish of meat roasted above a casserole of bread-pudding preparation), and khabees (thickened puddings)

☞ 9 halawaat (candies and desserts), such as halwa yabisa (chewy taffy/toffee), sabouniyya (solid starch-based pudding, similar to Turkish delight), and lawjeenaj (similar to baklava rolls)

☞ 13 sweet pastries, such as khushkanaj and irneen (cookies/biscuits) qata'if (crepes), and luqmat al-qadhi (fried pastry dipped in honey).

Al-Summaqiyya

Al-summaqiyyat is an Arab medieval stew in which choice chunks of meat were simmered in flavorful sumac juice. They were also known as *al-Haruniyyat* for they were Caliph Harun al-Rasheed's favorite (d.809). According to al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, choice cuts of meat along with salt, and a bunch of chopped shallots (*kurraṭh al-basal*) chopped leeks were fried first in oil, and then strained *ma' al-summaq* (sumac juice) was added. The juice should cover the meat by four-fingers width, the recipe specified. To get sumac juice, al-Warraq's recipe recommends warming up the soaked sumac berries under the sun, or letting them steep in hot water, rather than boiling them, as this would spoil their flavor. Then vegetables along with a handful of ground walnuts, and another handful of walnut halves were added. The pot was seasoned with coriander, black pepper, cassia, and galangal. This *summaqiyya* stew was served as thareed in a large bowl, i.e. broken pieces of bread drenched in its rich sauce. This was the most popular way stews were served at the medieval tables. The cooked meat pieces were arranged around the bowl's edge, and pounded walnuts and chopped mint were sprinkled all over the dish (Chapter 68). As prepared in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, pieces of fat meat were simmered until

almost done. Then chard, carrots, onion, leeks, and peeled eggplant/auergine were added. In another pot, the key ingredient sumac was boiled with salt and bread pith, and then strained. Medium-sized meatballs were made from lean meat, and added to the pot along with seasonings of dried coriander, cumin, pepper, ginger, cinnamon, mastic, and some sprigs of fresh mint. Finally, the prepared sumac liquid along with ground walnuts, ground garlic, dry mint, and a few pieces of whole walnut were added. Some people, the recipe adds, would like to garnish the dish with "eyes of eggs," i.e. eggs poached with the heat of the simmering pot, sunny-side up (al-Baghdadi 39). As we see, al-Warraq's 10th-century version was much simpler.

Interestingly, this stew along with other similar dishes, such as *rummaniyya* (pomegranate stew), and *leimouniya* (lemon stew), they all featured in 14th-15th-centuries Italian and French cookbooks, where they were called *romania*, *somachia*, and *lomonía* (Rodinson, "Romania and other Arabic Words in Italian" 178; Rosenberger 222).

In the northern city of present-day Mosul where dried whole berries of sumac are more readily available than fresh lemon juice, people still prepare a similar dish, which they call *Simmaq*. A playful folkloric Mosuli song sings its praises but also bemoans the fact it is loaded with fat. The opening lines are:

Ya simmaq, ya simmaq. Akli dhini ma tindhaq.

Al-Baghdadi's cookbook proved to be so popular that it was repeatedly copied and used throughout the Islamic world. An augmented version, *Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada*, was executed in the 14th century. The added recipes came from many sources inserted at different times. Significantly, his celebrated book constituted the core of the work *Kitabu't-Tabih* of the renowned Turkish Physician Muhammed bin Mahmud Shirvani

(d.1450), who served Sultan Murad II (d.1451). Shirvani's book was a Turkish rendering of al-Baghdadi's Arabic original, to which he added information on health and around 77 recipes (Yerasimos 19).

XI CULINARY TECHNIQUES OF THE MEDIEVAL BAGHDADI CUISINE

Cooking to the medieval Arabs was recognized as an art. In the preface to his 13th-century cookbook, al-Baghdadi says that “a cook should be intelligent, acquainted with the rules of cooking, and that he should have a flair for the art” (33). A prerequisite to these was the personal hygiene of the cook. He particularly elaborated on this saying, the cook “must keep his nails constantly trimmed, not neglecting them, not allowing them to grow long” (33). Next follows thorough cleanliness of kitchen utensils and pots. Al-Warraq emphasizes this point by saying that what differentiates between the food of the Caliphs and that of the ordinary people was not ingredients as much as the utmost care taken in cleaning the ingredients as well as the pots. Some even went as far as saying that if it were left to them, they would recommend using a new pot every time they cooked a dish (al-Tujibi 31). Al-Warraq gives an extensive list of the kitchen utensils and gadgets that any cook worth his salt should have handy. Stone pots were recommended for prolonged stewing, and metal ones for brief boiling. Iron pans are the best for frying fish for they ensure a crisp skin. There should be separate knives and cutting boards for meat and vegetables. A metal mortar and pestle is good for grinding spices, and stone ones should be used for pounding meat. He does not even neglect to mention small items such as goose feathers for glazing pastries, and pieces of clean cloth to wipe the inside of the *tannour*.

The fresher the vegetables and herbs are the better. ‘Expired’ seasonings and spices are out of the question. When buying cinnamon, for instance, the bark should be “thick and luxuriant, strong-scented, burning to the tongue” (al-Baghdadi 33). An important rule for good cooking is removing the scum when the pot boils, otherwise the dish will be spoiled.

The kitchen stove *mustawqad* was to be large enough to accommodate more than one pot. Smaller rounded stoves were needed to cook thickened puddings such as *faludhaj* and *khabees*. Within the course of the recipes in the book, other cooking implements were

mentioned such as a trivet called *daykadan* (Arabic *minsab*), a handy device used to support pots, which needed to be raised above the fire. It was also put above the smoldering coals of the *tannour* to allow the pots to simmer slowly. The small portable stove *kanoun* ‘brazier’ was also used, especially for grilling and on picnics. Other portable stoves mentioned in cookbooks are *nafikh nafsahi* and *kanoun ‘ajlan* (Chapter 59). The first literally means ‘a stove which blows its fire by itself,’ i.e. it does not need someone to blow it to keep it going. It seems to have been a relatively familiar gadget in the affluent kitchens of medieval times. It was a slow-burning stove, which allowed delicate pots like those made of glass and delicate foods like green *isfidhbaja* stew to keep on cooking over a prolonged time. *Kanoun ‘ajlan* was another type of slow-burning brazier. It might have been called so because it was made of clay, which, compared with metal, would allow for slow cooking. In this case, the name derives from ‘*ajal*’ ‘clay.’ There is also the possibility that the name derives from ‘*ijla*’ ‘bottle of oil’. In this case, we may assume that fuel used for this stove was *zayt al-waqoud* ‘fuel oil,’ which ignites much faster than coal, and hence the name, ‘a brazier that ignites quickly.’

The key to medieval cooking is harmony, and this is particularly manifest in the stew dishes they prepared, where the sour agents such as vinegar, sumac, or sour fruits and vegetables, had to be carefully balanced with the sweet, mainly date syrup, honey, and sugar. A rule of thumb: “seasonings are used freely with plain dishes and fried and dry foods, but sparingly in sour dishes that have their own broth” (Al-Baghdadi 33).

On such stoves, most of the Abbasid dishes were cooked and the fuel used was mostly firewood and coal. When firewood was used, the non-smoking varieties were preferred. Otherwise smoke would be blown back to the pot and spoil its flavor. Food was cooked in different degrees of heat. A strong fire was described as having tongues. When the stew got to the last stage, the directions were to stop fueling the fire to allow the food to simmer gently and the fat to separate

and rise to the surface. Such directions as removing the fire and letting the pot settle in the remaining heat indicated that the fuel was put in moveable containers. To keep the food clean while cooking and to prevent flies from falling into it after it has been cooked, the pots were kept covered with their own lids. The serving bowls were carried to the table covered, too. Such a demanding and ambitious cuisine prompted the Abbasid cooks to be inventive in devising their own implements and techniques. A water-bath was called for to cook a delicate cake batter high in egg content (Chapter 100). It was made by taking a big pot, and arranging in its bottom some cane leaves. The cake pan was put inside it, and water was poured in the big pot. A low-heat fire was started underneath the big pot so that it boiled gently with its tight lid on. When slow cooking was required, as in preparing *ma’ al-sha’eerr* ‘barley broth,’ a double boiler was devised by putting the pot with crushed barley and water in another pot that had water in it (Chapter 108).

To prepare simulated bone marrow *mukh muzawwar*, spleen and sheep’s tail fat were pounded and stuffed in a leaden tube then boiled in liquid. When taken out of the tube, it would look cylindrical like bone marrow. Another way of doing it was to pound shelled and skinned walnut, and mix it with egg white. The mix was put in a cup made of glass and then placed in a pot, which had water in it. Thus, the mix would cook in hot water bath (Chapter 36).

Another inventive device was a steam cooker to prepare *dakibriyan*, which al-Warraq defines as *shawi al-qidr* ‘pot-roasting’ (Chapter 87). A rack was made by piercing six holes around a high-sided soapstone pot, half way between the top of the pot and its bottom. Three trimmed sticks of willow wood were inserted through the holes, long enough to stick out of the pot. The holes were sealed from the outside of the pot with dough. Then water was poured to the level just below the sticks. A fatty side of lamb was sprinkled with salt, rubbed with olive oil, and put on the arranged sticks. The pot was then covered, sealed tightly with mud, and

put on the fire to cook.

Of the most popular dishes cooked on stoves, meat stews loomed large. Lamb, kid’s meat, beef, and poultry were used. In the medieval meat markets, lamb and mutton used to cost more than beef. The latter was deemed harder to digest, and hence fit for the commoners who were physically active and had stomachs strong enough to digest it. There was a great variety of such dishes in al-Warraq’s cookbook, some plain, some sour, and others sweet and sour. Most of the stew recipes start with the initial stage of melting chunks of sheep’s tail fat. Then choice cuts of meat were added, and allowed to sweat at first. This age-old technique was called *ta’reeq*, you let the meat release its juices at first and wait until all moisture evaporates and the meat sits in its own fat, as the medieval cooks would say. Then water was poured, and the stew would then simmer over an extended period. Within the course of the cooking, other ingredients were incorporated such as vegetables, spices, herbs, and thickening, sweetening, and souring agents. Of these, spices and herbs - collectively called *abazeer* - were the most essential ingredients, attentively incorporated into dishes, with an eye on balance and fine taste. The most common were coriander, cumin, cloves, cinnamon, cardamom, mustard, and ginger. The herbs are mostly parsley, cilantro, dill, mint, leeks, rue, and basil. The aromatics and colorants were rose water, saffron, mastic, ambergris, and camphor. To thicken and enrich the stew, ground nuts, breadcrumbs, starch, yogurt, *kishk* (yogurt and grains dried, and crushed when needed), milk, or crushed chickpeas were added. What attracts the attention in al-Baghdadi’s stew recipes is his fondness for the seasoned succulent meatballs, which undoubtedly reflected not only his own private preferences but also a general culinary trend that was initiated much earlier. They were called *kubab* (sing. *kubba* ‘ball’), and were made by pounding meat into paste, and mixing it with herbs, spices, and sometimes egg white, as a binder. They were added to the simmering stews, that is, in addition to the meat

chunks already cooking in the pot. This was probably one of the ingenious and most practical ways of using the not so tender cuts of meat. They varied in size and shapes, some were a little smaller than oranges, others were small and round like hazelnuts (*bunduqiyyat*). *Rutabiyya* stew (like dates) had small longish kubabs, each of which was stuffed with a whole almond to make it look like a date (al-Baghdadi 195). The meatballs were sometimes called *mudaqaqat*, because meat was pounded first.

The medieval Baghdadi cooks used vinegar in many of their dishes to add zest and flavor to food and to tenderize meat. The preservative and tenderizing qualities of vinegar were exploited to the full. Besides pickling vegetables, it was also used for preserving meat, called *mamqour*. Meat was also steeped in it and then cooked, such as in *masous* dishes. They also soured their stews with it. Other souring agents were used such as sumac, sour pomegranate, unripe grapes, and lemon juice. From this practice stemmed the need sometimes to balance the sourness with sweet agents, such as sugar, honey, and date syrup. This also explains the need to add good amounts of fatty substances to their dishes. Fats were mainly melted sheep's tail, clarified butter (*samn*), sesame oil, and olive oil. Fat helped to cut the sharpness of the vinegar, and to keep their sauceless dishes (*nawashif*) nice and moist. As a last touch to the sweet-sour stew dishes, al-Baghdadi did not fail to mention spraying the pot with "a little" or "a trifle" of rose water. The fact that just a small amount of this fragrant substance was used indicates that it was just meant to give a light pleasant whiff to the pot, especially if we know that spices in the sweet-sour stews were supposed to be kept to the minimum. They have "their own broth," al-Baghdadi explains (33). The practice of spraying the pot with a little rose water, however, might well have been al-Baghdadi's personal touch. Al-Warraq's cookbook, written two hundred years earlier, rarely mentions this. When everything was cooked, fuel was removed from underneath the pot, which allowed the pot to simmer

gently in the remaining heat. The general instruction was to leave it in this state for an hour *sa'a*, which need not be taken literally. A telling sign that the stew was ready to serve, was when the pot's oils and fats separated and rose up to the surface. This indeed might take a good while.

The stews were usually served hot as the principal component of the medieval meal. They were eaten with bread, or prepared *thareed* style. Broken pieces of bread were sopped in the broth and the cooked meat was arranged all over the *thareed* bowl or around the sopped bread. They preferred to arrange the *thareed* dishes pyramided *musa'nab*.

The ancient *tannour* was at the center of the baking scene. It was used for baking bread and cookies/biscuits, and slow simmering of pots and casseroles, called *tannouriyyat*, like porridges, bean dishes, potpies, and heads and trotters. It was also used to roast meat such as a fatty whole lamb or kid -- mostly stuffed (which we nowadays call *qouzi*), spiced whole sides *janb mubazzar*, big chunks of meat, plump poultry, and fish. They were placed on flat brick tiles arranged on the fire, or securely threaded into skewers and lowered into the *tannour* so that they roast to succulence. When lean or not-so-tender pieces of meat were used, marinating or parboiling was resorted to. A pot with some water was put underneath the roasting meat to receive the dripping juices and fat. Roasting in the *tannour* was usually referred to as *shawi*, and the roasted meat is *shiwa'*. It was the custom to serve grilled meats accompanied with simple condiments and sauces, which served as dips. Collectively they were called *sibagh*, which were believed to "cleanse the palate of greasiness, to appetize, to assist the digestion, and to stimulate the banqueter" (al-Baghdadi 205). Grilled dishes and other 'hamburger'-like patties, and sauceless dishes cooked on the stove were called *nawashif* (dry dishes).

People used to send some of the dishes they prepared at home to the commercial big *tannour* when more controlled heat or prolonged simmering or roasting

was required. For instance, al-Warraq recommended baking *baseesa* 'crumbled pie' in a commercial *tannour*. A whole stuffed kid was to be sent to *tannour al-rawwas* (Chapter 87), which was the *tannour* of vendors specialized in serving the popular simmered heads and trotters of cows and sheep. In Iraq today, the dish is called *pacha*, and the cook specialized in selling it is the *pachachi*. The pots were kept in the slow-burning *tannour* overnight to be ready for customers early in the morning.

Another way of preparing meat, and sometimes vegetables like truffles, was grilling them as *kabab*. The meat was cut into pieces, skewered, and grilled on open fire. It was sometimes pan-grilled. *Mukabbab* designated meat or vegetables prepared this way (In other contexts, *mukabbab* means shaped into *kubab* (sing. *kubba*) balls like meatballs). This was the most basic and perhaps the most ancient technique of cooking meat. A more 'advanced' grilling method was *kardanj* 'grilling on a rotating spit' mostly used with plump chickens and pullets. A feather was used to baste the revolving chicken with oil or other ingredients such as spices and *murri* (liquid fermented sauce, Chapter 90). It was eaten with dipping sauces *sibagh* and bread.

A sumptuous casserole-like dish, called *judhaba*, was baked in the *tannour* (Chapter 92). It was a sweet preparation, which looked like a bread pudding, layered in a casserole, called *judhabadan*. It was placed inside a slow-burning *tannour* with meat suspended above it. It might be a fatty side of lamb, a plump chicken, or a duck. As the suspended meat slowly roasted, fats and juices would drip into the casserole, resulting in a sweet and salty luscious dish. The basic recipe for the pudding was composed of pieces of white bread sopped in water until they puffed then spread in the pan and drenched in sugar and honey. In some of the recipes, sheets of *ruqaq* 'large and thin bread' were layered with pieces of fruit such as banana, melon, mulberry, or crushed raisins and then drenched in sugar. To serve the dish, the casserole was inverted onto a platter. No

similar clear instructions were given in the recipes regarding the accompanying grilled meat -probably too obvious to mention. In *Lisan al-'Arab*, one of the meanings of *jadhaba* is 'cut,' and *judhaba* is explained as

المطعم الذي يشرح

'thinly sliced food' *musharrah* (similar to the way grilled meat is cut for the shawirma sandwiches of today). One of the ninth-century stories in *Maqamat* of Badi' al-Zaman al-Hamadani tells us that the meat was thinly shaved and served with the bread pudding (*Al-Maqama al-Baghdadiyya*, 72). *Judhaba* was one of the popular dishes bought from the food markets.

The most inventive of these *judhaba* dishes by far was *Al-Mansouriya* (after the Caliph al-Mansour). Pancake-like yeast batter was made and poured into the *joudhaban*. The pan was then placed in the *tannour* under the suspended meat, which had just started to drip its fat. A long reed was stuck in the batter, and honey was to be slowly poured through the reed into the cooking batter. As it rose, the batter would develop air pockets that eventually would be filled with honey, while at the same time sucking up all the fat drippings of the meat. Al-Warraq's comment was that it would be as delicious as honeycombs (240).

No food symbolized the leisurely Abbasid urban cuisine more than *ruqaq* bread, large and paper-thin. An anecdote tells how a Bedouin in the city mistook the sheets of bread for fabric. It was usually baked on *taabaq*, which was a slab of fired-brick or a sheet of metal. However, we learn from al-Warraq's recipe that they were also baked in the *tannour*, one at a time (Chapter 13).

The commercial bakery furn brick oven was the place to go to for a variety of bread called *khubz al-furn* 'brick oven bread.' It was crusty and pithy bread, thick and domed. The commercial furn had a flat floor. Fire was lit on one side and the shaped breads were transferred with a peel and put on its hot floor.

Using *malla* to grill meat was a perfectly acceptable

option for high cuisine regardless of its humble Arab-Bedouin origin. *Malla* is a pit in which food, such as bread and meat, is buried so that it bakes in the heat of ashes and stones. Cecil Hourani in *Jordan: The Land and the Table* describes meat roasted this way in an orchard outside Amman. He says that the dish "has now been added to the menu of a new and elegant Amman restaurant" (39-40).

Preliminary courses offered before the hot substantial dishes included an array of appetizers collectively called *udm* (sing. *idam*) such as condiments like *kawameekh* and *bin* 'fermented dips', pickles *mukhalalat* such as eggplant/aubergine, turnips, mint leaves, olives, and capers seasoned with spices and herbs. They might be *rabeetha*, which were pickled small fishes, or pickled locusts for the making of which there is a recipe in al-Warraaq's book (chapter 40). Or simply *milh mutayyab* (spiced or seasoned salt). Rock salt was first kept in a hot oven for a whole day, and then it was crushed, and added to a variety of spices such as coriander, and toasted seeds of sesame, nigella, hemp, poppy, cumin, and fennel, pomegranate seeds, and terebinth berries (*habbat khadhra*). It was sometimes attractively colored yellow with saffron, or red with sumac juice, or green with chard juice. Or it could be made *muza'tar* by adding thyme to it (al-Warraaq, Chapter 21; al-Baghdadi 207--208). These condiments were usually served with bread.

Also offered before the hot main dishes were *bawarid* cold dishes of meat and vegetables, served with their appropriate dipping sauces *sibagh* to help with their digestion. The sauces were sour-based and often thickened with ground nuts. In the Abbasid popular culture, such cold dishes were understandably nicknamed *bara'id al-khayr* 'harbingers of good news.' Other appetizers included dainty sandwiches, *bazmaward* and *awsaat*. For *bazmaward* they usually used *ruqaq* thin breads on which they spread the filling, rolled tightly, and then sliced into discs. They also baked round thick discs of bread in the *furn* (brick oven), removed the pith, filled them with sandwich

stuffing, pressed them very well, and then cut them into smaller portions. These were called *awsaat* (sing. *wast*) because the stuffing was put in the bread and not rolled. I have also come across a recipe that instructed the baker to put a latticed metal disc with slightly raised sides inside the bread dough, before baking. This disc was called *ward mushabbak*. The instructions as to what to do next were very succinct, most probably because the cooks back then knew what to do. It is my assumption that after baking, the device would be removed leaving behind a pocket in the bread big enough for stuffing (al-Baghdadi *Kitab Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada* 381).

Other preliminary goodies offered were filled pastries of *sanbousaj*, various kinds of sausages *laqaniq*, and yogurt dishes like *jajaq*, ancestor for our *jajeek* appetizer, so well known these days in the entire Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern countries. It was made by mixing yogurt with garlic, onion, tarragon, chopped parsley, and mint, chopped stalks of romaine/cos lettuce, and chopped cucumber, to be served with oil. Fresh and tender herbs, called *buqoul al-ma'ida* 'table vegetables,' such as table leeks, rue, mint, tarragon, thyme, and basil, were used as garnish and appetizers. They were described as 'ornament of the table.' However, hearty eaters nicknamed them *zuham bila manfa'a* 'much ado about nothing'.

Dishes deemed unsubstantial were usually cooked in smaller pots and offered as snack food, such as *qalaaya* (fried meat), *mutajjanat* and *tabahijat* (braised poultry and red meat), *mulahwajat* (simple meat dishes cooked in haste), and *narjisiyya* (omelets with eggs sunny-side-up). Grilled chicken was sometimes served with a cold side dish of *khall wa zayt* (vinegar and olive oil), made by sousing *khubuz maftout* (crumbled bread) in vinegar and oil, and topped with chopped cucumber pulp, mint, tarragon, thyme, parsley, and sometimes aged cheese (al-Warraaq, Chapter 47), which beyond doubt was one of the ancestors of today's *fattoush* salad.

Vegetarian dishes, called *muzawwarat* 'simulated

dishes,' were served during Lent by Christians and physicians recommended them for the sick (Chapters 46, 105). As their name suggests, the dishes were meant to give the semblance of the original version usually prepared with meat. Indeed, the cooks tried their best to make them taste as if there was meat in them to satisfy the eaters' craving for meat. Sometimes the main ingredient in the dish is simulated such as making an eggless omelet, drained yogurt without yogurt, making milk from coconut, fish condiments without fish, and so on. Such dishes, perhaps made to meet some dietary restrictions, would certainly exhibit the cook's resourceful and inventive skills. However, to hearty meat eaters, such dishes were not considered 'real' food. A sick poet once said in protestation (*al-Tha'alibi Yaimat al-Dahr* 538, my translation):

*How can muzawwara my nourishment be?
Eating muzawwarat is a falsity!
Vinegar and the trifling vegetable dishes are not for me.
Let the doctor get out of my way!
Say in doctors and medicine faith has gone astray.
Give me! Where is kabab? Where are the fried dishes?
The succulent roasts and the spiced meat?
Bring them on!*

Despite the ten thousand years or so that separate us, don't we all feel his pain?

Before sending the dishes to the table, great care was taken to garnish them with a variety of herbs and vegetables, chopped, diced, and sliced. In the recipes, most of the dishes were given a final sprinkle of finely chopped rue, parsley, mint, cilantro, or basil. Of these, rue was particularly necessary despite its unpleasant taste because it was believed to aid digestion and help with bloating. Cold dishes were given a generous drizzle of olive oil and garnished with peeled cucumber sliced into *dirhams* 'silver coins,' ruby-red pomegranate seeds, dyed skinned almonds, chopped eggs, olives, cheese, ground nuts, a dash of black pepper or coarse

salt, and the like. Large trays of meat or *thareed* dishes (broken pieces of bread sopped in broth) were sent to the table decorated with colorful thin slices of *bazmaward* (rolled sandwich), sausages of different sizes, *tardeen* (thin triangular meat patties), fried filled pastries *sanbousaj*, chopped egg, and the like so that the dish resembled an orchard flower *zahrat al-bustan* or a bride *'arous* (Chapter 49). Before serving an omelet with eggs sunny-side up, a fresh sprig of rue was implanted in the midst of each egg yolk and the wide frying pan was skirted with a large thin bread *ruqaqa* to hide its blackened outside (Chapter 73). Culinary artistic complexity was not only sought after in flavor. Contrary to the above mentioned straightforward honest dishes, the medieval Baghdadi cooks sometimes cooked with an aim to surprise, deceive or intrigue, which gave rise to a host of stuffed dishes such as *mahshiyat* (stuffed vegetables), *maghmouma* (the covered), *madfouna* (the buried), *mukaffana* (shrouded), or *makhfiyya* (the hidden). An honest sounding dish such as *rutabiyya* (cooked with dates) was meant to play a trick on the eaters by serving them a stew containing small oblong stuffed meatballs that look like dates, along with real stuffed dates (al-Baghdadi 195). They even made the process of cooking an entertaining show, such as watching sparrows with heads on simmering in a glass pot, bobbing gently up and down along with colorful spice grains and pulses (*Kanz al-Fawa'id* 62-63, also see *Like Sparrows for Cupid* 000 below).

After the main dishes, desserts were usually served. The medieval physicians gave this 'sweet' tradition their nod of approval. Desserts with their hot and rarefying properties *mulattif* were believed to help digest dense foods. The rich and scrumptious desserts that were made and consumed during the period were amazing. I get dizzy by just going through the list. They included puddings cooked in pots such as *khabees* and *faloudhaj*. *Muhallabiyya* was rice pudding, sometimes made like custard, with eggs. *Zalabiya* was fried batter dipped in boiled honey. Sometimes the batter was made

furniyya, which was a yeast cake baked in the *tannour* then drenched in fresh milk, clarified butter, and sugar. It was also called *zalaqanba* and *safanj* 'sponge.' A popular dessert was *qatayif*, delicate crepes filled with ground nuts and sugar and scented with rose water, musk, and camphor (Chapter 102). Equally popular was *lawzeenaj* (Chapter 99). The drenched variety, called *mugharraq*, is reminiscent of the modern *baklawa*. Extremely thin sheets of bread were baked on *taabaq*, filled with a mix of ground nuts and sugar, scented and bound with rose water and mastic. Then they were rolled, stacked, and drenched in syrup and delicate oil of almond or walnut. Among the cookies/biscuits people used to make, especially for religious feasts and as part of travelers' victuals, were *khushkananaj*, similar to today's *kleicha*. They were filled pastries pressed into concave wooden molds carved with geometric shapes. More traditionally, they were shaped into crescents to resemble the crescent moon, which heralds the beginning of the religious feast. There were also sandwich cookies/biscuits *mutbaq*, and with topping *aqras mukallala*. For those who could not afford such delicacies, there were always dates, many varieties, fresh and dried.

Great measures were taken to decorate desserts and cookies/biscuits. Special molds were used to impress elaborate designs, colored sugar and nuts were sprinkled like confetti on confections to make desserts look like a colorful orchard bustan. The most elaborate construction I came across was decorating *khabees* 'thick pudding.' A dome made with honey pulled taffy/toffee was built on it with a minaret in the middle. Then the structure was decked with crushed pistachio, and colored sugar and almonds (Chapter 94).

Of beverages, water was usually served during the meal, but was to be taken sparingly. Sweetened drinks, and wine for those who imbibed it, were consumed after the meal. They were believed to aid digestion. As for the bubbly non-alcoholic beer *fuqqa*, the recommendation was to drink it when the stomach was empty because it caused bloating. The same recommendation applied to fresh fruits because it was

believed they digested fast, and hence needed to be purged before having the main meal.

We also come across dishes, which were not usually made for the regular daily meals, collectively called *naql*. An array of dainty foods were served in small portions and offered during drinking sessions, similar to today's mezze dishes. They were not meant to be filling, but taken to just satisfy one's hunger, induce a feeling of thirst, and delay intoxication. They were called *naql* because the drinkers alternated between nibbling on them and sipping their wine. Instances of such offerings: salted toasted nuts, raisins and fruits like pomegranates and apples, rock candy *nabaat al-sukkar*, sugar reeds steeped in rose water, tiny sausages, *khushkananaj* and *ka'k mujaffaf* 'dry cookies/biscuits, and filled savory pastries like *sanbousaj*. In one of the recipes, directions were to make *sanbousaj* pastries as small as fava beans and serve them with toothpicks. It also suggested that a large number of these nibbles needed to be made because one cannot have enough of them (Istanbul MS, fols. 58v-59r). Grilled sparrows and cured meat *qadeed* were also presented. One of al-Warraq's recipes described how to prepare the cured meat in a fancy way. The uncooked meat strips were wound around reeds before roasting them lightly in the *tannour*. They came out as delicate spirals of cured meat that crumbled in the mouth, described as *hashsh* 'brittle.' These were served with fried or baked small and thin breads, similar to chips/crisps, or thin bread slathered with *taheen simsim* 'tahini/sesame paste' or *binn* 'fermented condiment,' and then sliced into strips (Chapter 89).

Generally, successful cooking requires good timing and, more or less, accurate measurements. In al-Warraq's recipes, timing was sometimes left to the discretion of the cook, suggested by the handy expression 'as long as it needs.' Sometimes a specific duration was given such as *sa'a* 'an hour,' a very elastic measure indeed, for it can be literally an hour, a good full hour *sa'a saliha*, or not quite an hour *suway'a*. It may also express immediacy and urgency of action to be taken. Drizzling the food with juice, for instance, *sa'at ikhrajih*

means the moment it is taken out of the pot. Checking on a pot *kull sa'a* 'every single hour' does not carry the literal meaning. It actually translates to 'every now and then.' We still use this expression in the same sense. Similarly, with *lahza*, which literally is a second, but in a cooking situation, it needs to be taken more practically as 'briefly.'

As for measuring ingredients, a good number of al-Warraq's recipes gave exact measurements, even as small as *qirat* ($\frac{1}{4}$ gram) and *danaq* ($\frac{1}{2}$ gram), an indication that scales for measuring ingredients were expected in the Abbasid kitchen. Overall, we are rarely left at a loss as to how much to use in a recipe. Giving parts and ratios, and the approximate 'handful,' 'what the palm and the stretched fingers can hold,' 'what the extended and put together three fingers can take,' and 'what the nail can carry' were handy eye-measurements for the general cooking. However, for sensitive ingredients that make or break a dish, exact measurements were given. A combination of spices for instance was usually added to the pot in harmonious proportions. Measurements here were necessary to give the practical cook an idea of the components and proportions of the spice mix, in case he had to double or triple the recipe. The versatile measurement 'as much as needed,' was certainly good enough for experienced cooks.

Regarding the number or times of meals per day, evidently there were no set rules. The Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun, for instance, used to have three meals in two days, the first one at mid-day, the second in the early morning of the following day, and the third, in the evening. He also preferred having early lunches in the summer for three reasons: cooler breeze, colder water, and less flies. Early lunches in the winter were also recommended because the nights were long. At any rate, early meals were encouraged as they help sweeten morning breath. The recommendation was to have two meals a day following the verses in the holy Qur'an, which promise the dwellers of Paradise an early lunch and an evening dinner. Breakfasts were nowhere mentioned. Apparently, such early meals seem to be a modern concept in our dietary habits. We also have to assume that each meal proper had, more or less, the same components: *Kawamikh* dishes to whet the appetite, and dry (*nawashif*) and cold (*bawarid*) dishes, invariably accompanied with *sibagh* (sour-based dips), to be followed by the hot *thareed* dishes. Then followed desserts. Cheese was recommended as a digestive. It was said to cleanse the palate after dessert. Exercising before the meal was approved of, but it was to be avoided on a heavy stomach. A short nap after a meal would also be a good thing. At any rate, the golden rule was to eat when hungry otherwise food would eat you.



A famari bowl

XII ELEMENTS OF THE MEDIEVAL BAGHDADI CUISINE AND AFFINITIES WITH ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN COOKING

With the advent of the Abbasids, Mesopotamia regained its past glory, and Baghdad was transformed into the prosperous cosmopolitan capital of the world. In addition to its already vast repertoire of animal stock and agricultural products, new foodstuffs were introduced, which added to the richness and variety of its cuisine. As to what constituted this cuisine, it is essential to take into consideration in discussing such issues the newest Culinary Arabic manuscripts made available to us in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and the publication of the Babylonian collection of recipes in the early 1980s (see Section VI above). Isn't it about time we steered away from the simplistic - and yet so dominant - standpoint that whatever the Abbasid cuisine had to offer is owed to the Persian influence at the time? Indeed, the Persian factor is there, loud and clear, but it was definitely not the only one.

As early as 1948, and way before the publication of the Babylonian recipes, Maxime Rodinson had the insight to see that the medieval recipes and documents accessible to him at the time exhibit how the Abbasid cuisine "had absorbed local traditions, making use of ancient techniques, adopting exotic elements and enriching the whole with greater complexity and refinement." He mentions this in his groundbreaking "Studies in Arabic Manuscripts" (149).

After the Babylonian culinary collection was made public in the 1980s, the indigenous and ancient affinities with the Abbasid Baghdadi cuisine and the question of continuity became more apparent. David Waines, a leading scholar in medieval Arab Islamic culture and author of *In a Caliph's Kitchen*, said that he revised his views "in the light of the Mesopotamian evidence and its relationship to the Arabic tradition" (*Patterns of Everyday Life* xxxiii, n. 46). He sees "family resemblance," such as "styles and textures of the recipes, combinations of ingredients, use of condiments and spices." In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, for instance, he finds "a tradition which, if not unbroken, at least originated in Mesopotamia, was inherited by

the Persian Sassanians who then passed it on, with their own contributions, to be 'resurrected' within the Muslim culture of Abbasid Baghdad." In sum, "The Mesopotamian origins of the Arabic high culinary tradition could not be clearer" (*Patterns of Everyday Life*, xxxiii).

The following is my elaboration on this issue.

1 *The Question of Continuity*

Continuity of the ancient Iraqi culinary tradition into later ages can be seen most prominently in technique and presentation. They are best revealed in al-Warraq's book due to his care in identifying sources and the very fact that his collection of recipes is extensive in terms of variety and quantity and it is the earliest we have. Regarding technique, the ancient Babylonian twenty-five stew recipes show a basic cooking method that combines meat and vegetables in seasoned and enriched stew. Essentially the same type of stew became a staple dish in the Abbasid cuisine, as it is still today. The Akkadian word for broth or stew is *mu/me*, literally, 'water.' It is interesting to encounter similar terms in al-Warraq's collection, such as meat dishes cooked in broth called *ma' wa milh*, literally 'water and salt' (Chapter 48). The ancient recipes also show that the palate for rendered sheep's tail fat *alya* in medieval Arab cooking was shared by high and low. It has been deemed a delicacy in the entire Near Eastern region ever since ancient times.

In al-Warraq's stew recipes, great emphasis is put on removing the froth *raghwa* of the boiling meat to prevent it from developing *zuhuma* 'unpleasant greasy odors.' Meat is sometimes parboiled, as in *ma' wa milh* recipes (Chapter 48). To help produce clean and clear broth, meat is given an initial brief boil after which it is washed in cold water then wiped and cooked again. Indeed, such practices had their ancient roots. The Babylonian recipes reveal the same sensitivity to such unpleasant odors. The recipes for small birds, for instance, give these preparatory instructions: "In a

clean cauldron, put the [b]irds, gizzards, and entrails. After heating it, remove the meat, and wash well in cold water" (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 11, subsequent numbers in parentheses refer to this document).

Other similarities involve using more than one kind of meat in one dish such as combining beef and poultry. The ancient love for heads, extremities, and innards, as in the Babylonian "goat's kid broth," simmered in water and enriched with fat, onion, leeks, garlic, and *kisimmu* (*kishk*, sour milk product), is demonstrated in al-Warraq's recipes (Chapter 44), and the love continues. In Iraq today it is called *pacha*. *Kisimmu* is frequently included in the Babylonian stew recipes to enrich the sauce and give it a pleasant tart flavor. Al-Warraq's *kishkiyyat* dishes use meat, onion, herbs, spices, fat, water, and *kiskk* (Chapter 63). When *kisimmu* is not used in the Babylonian recipes, we encounter other thickening agents, namely milk and breadcrumbs, sometimes used separately but often combined in one dish to create a thick and rich sauce. Several of the medieval recipes use milk and breadcrumbs to thicken and enhance the stews, as in *basaliyya* 'onion stew' (Chapter 76), and *shaljamiyya* 'turnip stew' (Chapter 54).

With so much bread being made in the region, it is not surprising to learn that a practical dish like *thareed* should have been a staple ever since ancient times. As we have seen in the Babylonian recipes, bread was incorporated into the dishes in several ways. Breadcrumbs were added as a secondary item to thicken sauce. They were also added as a principal ingredient, such as the "broth with crumbs" (9). They were added as a last cooking stage, *a la thareed*, exactly like what we have been doing throughout all these millennia. In al-Warraq's cookbook there is a dish called *al-thareeda al-Iraqiyya*, which has a striking resemblance to the Babylonian "crumb stew." Meat along with, water, milk, onion, vinegar, and spices were simmered in a pot, to which breadcrumbs were added in a final stage (Chapter 83). Again, as with sheep's tail fat, this clearly shows that the dish was already known in the ancient Near

Eastern region, and was not specifically an Arab dish. One of the Babylonian recipes, 'spleen broth,' dictates that "bits of roasted qaiatu-dough" are added to the pot. Perhaps that was man's first recorded attempt at making pasta or noodles, which by the time of the Abbasids was in full swing: in the shape of noodles such as *itriya* and *rishta*; *lakhshat* and *tutmaj*, which were thin pieces of pasta boiled in broth; and ravioli-like pieces of pasta made from rolled out thin dough (for details, see *Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History* 000 below). A medieval recipe similar to the Babylonian 'spleen broth' is called *Nibat'iyya* 'Nabatean dish,' i.e. indigenous to Iraq. It is chicken stew made with chickpeas, onion, a variety of spices, and three handfuls of *itriya* noodles (Chapter 72).

Furthermore, both cuisines show a knack for using spices and herbs, in combinations and at different stages in the cooking process. The ancient recipes mention cumin, coriander, and the aromatic wood, which might be cassia. They also include herbs and seasoning vegetables such as leeks, dill, mint, onion, and garlic.

The other two cuneiform tablets establish further affinities between the two cuisines such as the taste for the sour and the sweet-sour. In these tablets, some recipes use vinegar, *andahsu* 'prunes,' and honey. A bean stew mentioned in *The Assyrian Herbal* uses beans, clean salt, breadcrumbs, kidneys, and apricot (Thompson 197). The medieval dish *mishmishiyya* 'apricot stew' adds apricot to enrich the sauce and give it a delicate sour flavor (Chapter 62).

The two cuisines use salty and sour liquid fermented sauces to season their pots. In the Babylonian bird-pie recipes, the fermented sauce is even added to the dough to enhance its flavor (11-14). In the medieval recipes, it is added in small quantities to many of the dishes, hot and cold, dry and with sauce. It was believed to aid digestion and enhance flavor. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was called *siqqu*, made from fish, shellfish, or locusts. They were fermented in brine then strained and stored (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine*

59-61). By the time of al-Warraq, the cereal-based fermented sauce became more common. It was called *murri* and *ma kamakh*. Fish-based sauce was also available. In some of the medieval sources, it was called *ma noon* (literally 'fish juice'), which indicates its ancient indigenous origin ('noon' is the word for fish in Akkadian).

The flair for showmanship is clearly exhibited in both cuisines. A case in point is the elaborate Babylonian bird-pies. A baked pie shell is filled with birds simmered in rich and flavorful white sauce. It is fitted with a baked crust made attractive by sprinkling the pan with mint leaves before lining it with the spread dough and baking it. Thus covered it is carried to the royal table (11--15). A recipe in al-Warraq's cookbook called *tannouriyya* (i.e. baked in the *tannour*) shows a striking resemblance to this ancient dish. A pan with high sides is lined with a thin layer of dough and filled with cooked chicken and other ingredients. After the top is covered with a flattened layer of dough, the pie is lowered into the *tannour* to bake (Chapter 91).

When classifying medieval dishes, one often comes across the notion that porridge and pulse dishes, such as *hareesa* and *hintiyya* made with crushed wheat and '*adasiyya* 'lentil dish,' belong to the realm of the humble pre-Islamic Arab cuisine. The Babylonian recipes show that such dishes were enjoyed by all ever since ancient times. The porridges in these ancient recipes were served as "accompaniments to the meat." Besides wheat, 'shelled and ground lentil' or 'fine quality green wheat' were used (14). Green wheat was called *fareek* in medieval times, and still is. All these varieties have their counterparts in al-Warraq's collection (Chapters 50, 52, 64).

The Babylonian recipes highlight the ancient people's love for accompanying relishes. A remark at the end of one of the recipes reads, "When everything is cooked, remove the meat from the fire, and before the broth cools [?], serve it accompanied by garlic, greens, and vinegar" (12). It is quite likely that these ingredients were not served separately but rather crushed or

chopped and mixed into sauces. If so, then it can be said that the practice continued. The Abbasid cuisine dictates that *sibagh* (vinegar-based sauces and dips) need to be served with foods such as porridges and fried and grilled dishes of fish, chicken, and meat to aid digestion (Chapters 34, 35).

2 The 'Passing on' of the Mesopotamian Cuisine to the Baghdadi Abbasid Kitchen

The ancient Mesopotamian culinary traditions 'passed on,' to medieval Baghdad indirectly via the contemporary Persians, inheritors of the once prosperous Sassanian dynasty, who in their turn inherited the ancient Mesopotamian culinary traditions and passed them on with their own contributions (Waines *Patterns of Everyday Life*, xxxiii). Another important venue, often overlooked by modern researchers, is the direct one through the contemporary Nabateans themselves, the indigenous inheritors of the ancient Mesopotamian cuisine.

2.1 The Nabateans, Direct Inheritors

Historically, the indigenous Mesopotamians were a mix of Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Arameans, who in medieval times were collectively called Nabat al-'Iraq (not related to the ancient Nabateans from the area around Petra, collectively called Nabat al-Sham). They were politically ineffective and survived mostly as farmers in rural areas. However, their middle class played an important role in spreading the intellectual and scientific knowledge that spurred the Abbasid cultural boom. Van De Mierop in his significant study of ancient Mesopotamian cities holds that "intellectually and culturally, Mesopotamia was flourishing," and that "the splendors of the Abbasid Iraq were not created ex novo by the Muslim rulers, but must have had some of their roots in the ancient traditions of the region" (245). Though most of them were not actively aware of this heritage, the Nabateans were the farmers who provided most of the produce, some of which was specifically called *Nabati* such as varieties of leeks, thyme,

cabbage, mastic, and mulberry. They were the ones who carried on the business of making the indispensable fermented sauces and liquids - *kawameekh* and *murri*. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was made with fish and locusts. By the time of the Abbasids, it was mostly cereal-based. The most widely used fermented liquid sauce was called *murri Nabati*, many of al-Warraq's recipes use it. The Nabateans were the specialists who made *sihnaat* of fish or locusts and *rabeetha*, which were condiments made with small fish, shrimp, or locusts (Chapter 40). They had connections with the members of the ruling Abbasid family as they catered to the needs of their kitchen pantries and their appetites. Of their dishes, al-Warraq does incorporate several in his 10th-century cookbook, such as the staple *tannour* bread called *khuzb al-ma' al-Nabati* (Chapter 13), which we know for sure that it has been known ever since the times of the ancient Mesopotamians. It is still today; we call it *khubuz* may, which is basic bread made with flour, yeast, salt, and water. A side dish of vegetarian thareed called *khall wa zayt Nabati* was made with crumbled bread sopped in sweet and sour vinegar sauce, garnished with cucumber pulp, onion, mint, and parsley, and drizzled with olive oil (Chapter 47). A chicken dish cooked with noodles *itriya* is called *Nibatiyya*. The recipe belongs to Ishaq bin Ibrahim al-Mawsili (d.850), the famous Abbasid singer (Chapter 72).

Judging from medieval records, the Muslim scholars were oblivious to most of the ancient Mesopotamian history, and only the indigenous Nabateans and the Persian kings, especially the Sassanians, were the "main constituents in the history of Mesopotamia" (Hämeen-Antilla *The Last Pagans of Iraq* 49). By way of example is my interesting experience trying to probe into the etymology of *tannour* (clay oven). Because it is mentioned in the Qur'an, I assumed it is of Arabic origin. I asked, and was told it derives from the Hindi *tandoori*; then I came across a statement in Ayla Algar's *Classical Turkish Cooking*, "This is definitely a Turkish word, despite its similarity to the Persian *tannura*, and we can therefore confidently claim a Turkish origin for the Indian

tandoori style of cooking" (183). As for the medieval Arabic dictionaries, they all asserted its Persian origin. Finally, I checked books on the history of ancient Mesopotamia, and to my surprise, the word turned out to be of Sumerian origin. They called it '*tinnuru*.' This kind of knowledge was not available before the middle of the nineteenth century. In fact very little was known about the ancient civilizations of Babylon and Assyria, and of the Sumerians practically nothing was known. After the fall of Nebuchadnezzar, the region lost its political glory. It was ruled subsequently by the Persians, Greeks, Parthians, and the Sassanians, up until 636 AD, when the Muslim Arabs defeated the Persians, and took hold of the region. However, throughout this period the culture itself "remained Mesopotamian, in custom, organization and in the language of the root population, whose Arabic is descended from the Aramaic spoken across the Near East in early Christian times, which in its turn comes from the Semitic Akkadian" (Wood, 34-5). But the indigenous Nabateans' cultural contribution, including the culinary aspect, often passed unacknowledged due to the low standing of the majority of them, politically, socially, and economically. This led to the rise of some medieval Mesopotamian 'nationalistic' voices. The most relevant to our purpose and the earliest was Ibn Wahshiyya (10th century) and his book *Al-Filaha al-Nabatiyya* (farming practices of the Nabateans). He was a contemporary Chaldean himself, who in his introduction claimed that the book was an Arabic translation of ancient Babylonian sources dealing with their advanced knowledge on farming, originally written in Syriac *Suryaniyya qadeema*. He said he translated it in 904 and dictated it to a copyist in 930 to make known the useful knowledge it contained and give credit where it was due (1: 5, 7, 546--48). Ibn Wahshiyya expressed his resentment about the unjust disregard his fellow Nabateans had fallen into ever since they lost their political power. He said the occupiers reaped the fruits of their knowledge, which they had been accumulating

over thousands of years.

In one of his comments on turnip *saljam*, he gives a recipe for *ma' al-saljam al-hamidh* 'sour turnip juice,' which uses peeled and diced turnip, turnip juice, and baked sour bread. The bread is whipped into the turnip mix, while it is still hot until it dissolves completely. Herbs like rue, mint, and parsley are added. The mix is left until it matures and sours. Ibn Wahshiyya says it is eaten with bread as an idam appetizer, and its juice is made into a digestive drink. He also says the sour turnip juice is used in meat dishes to make the sauce deliciously sour. Part of his comment on this Nabatean sour turnip juice is worth quoting in full due to its relevance, thus coming from the depth of the past (1: 545--46, my translation):

This liquid extracted from turnips as described by the Nabateans is often made by the Persians in Faris, Ray, and Asfahan. They make the juice and call it shalmaba (شلمابه), which means turnip juice in Arabic. They drink it like fuqqa' (unfermented beer) and cook it with meat to sour it, the way they sour sikbaj with vinegar and other similar dishes.

I believe the Persians learnt it from the Nabateans, who used to make it before them. When the Persians conquered them, occupied their lands, and seized their properties, they took their books and inherited their knowledge. They took from them such dishes [as sour turnip juice] and gave them Persian names and called them their own. Now this recipe for making turnip juice in this book proves right what I have just said, that the Nabateans were the first to make it. There are many similar cases to be found in the Nabatean books on cooking various foods and beneficial drinks.

I am not saying this to vilify the Persians or be disrespectful to them. They are the wisest and fairest of nations. The truth has to be told however, and we owe it to those whom we know to have the precedence to make their achievement known.

2.2 The Persian Factor

During the Abbasid rule, especially the early period when the Barmacide family was still influential, the Persians enjoyed enviable prestige and power. It was the time when doing things the Persian way was the denominator of fashion and a guarantee of social acceptance and favoritism, and cooking was no exception. The impact showed itself in names of dishes - mostly ending with - *aj* such as *sikbaj* (stew soured with vinegar), *narbaj* (pomegranate stew), *zurbaj* (delicate stew of birds) - food items, culinary terms, kitchen utensils, and the like. Even Arabic words started to be suffixed with the medieval Persian sounding - *aj*, such as *jawjeenaj* (walnut confections). Of the twenty-two sweet and sour dishes al-Baghdadi gives in his 13th-century cookbook, only seven are given Persian names, the rest are called after the down-to-earth souring agent added to the dish. Yet, it was mostly these exotic Persian dish names that kept on resounding in poems, stories, and chronicles. The storytellers of the *Arabian Nights*, for instance, enchanted and hooked their readers and listeners with profuse descriptions of the ways and means of the aristocracy, of their lavish feasts, the rich desserts dripping with honey, and the quaint dishes of *sikbaja*, *narbaja*, and *zurbaja*. My bet is that a stew with a mundane name like *hisrimiyya* (soured with unripe grapes), *hummadhiyya* (soured with citron pulp), or *sa'fasa*, which is actually the Arabic name for *sikbaja* itself, would have hardly had elicited any mouth-watering on the part of the audience, though similar. By analogy, these dishes were as hip at the time as cream sauce à la king and pie à la mode were in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, or café au lait and chai tea are today. To illustrate how names cannot always be taken as a reliable criterion in determining origins, the following is an anecdote dealing with the invention of a dish, from al-Warraaq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 85). It is *kushtabiyya*, the name is Persian, but is the dish?

One of the Persian kings used to travel a lot, and he used to take with him his cook, who was an Arab. At the end of his riding sessions, the king would usually say to the cook, "gusht biya," (bring the meat). The cook would have prepared for him meat slices grilled or boiled, served with a dip. One day the king came and the cook had sliced the meat but had not lighted the fire yet. So he had to improvise. He put the meat in a frying pan, poured fat on it, sprinkled it with a little water and salt, chopped onion for it, and added some ground spices. He covered the pot with an inverted leaden bowl to trap in moisture, and lighted a strong fire underneath the pot. It was cooked fast, and it came out lusciously drowned in its moisture and fat. The king liked it, and it became his favorite dish. Therefore, the Arab cook called it kushtabiyya and it became a famous dish.

We have no tangible proof of historically extant knowledge of ancient Achaemenian gastronomic achievement. What we know is mostly drawn from hints in Greek sources, which suggest luxurious and elaborate dishes and delicacies. According to Herodotus, the Persians used to serve a great number of side dishes, one after the other (Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Persian Food Stereotypes and Political Identity," 292).

Of the later Sassanian dynasty (226-636 AD), there is mention of the Book of King Khosrau and his Page belonging to the fourth century. Before being knighted, the page was tested by the king on culinary matters. He recommended the delicate dessert *palutak* (*faludhaj*) made with apple and quince juice. Another favorite delicacy he mentioned was *lawzeenak* (*lawzeenaj*) for summer and winter (Rodinson, "Studies in Arabic Manuscripts," 152, notes 2, 3). Interestingly, *lawzeenak* points to some ancient Persian borrowing --almond in Persian is *badam* and *lawz* is more akin to the Akkadian *luzu* (Thompson *Assyrian Herbal* 182). Besides, the dessert *palutak*/*faludhaj* mentioned above was not necessarily uniquely Persian because the dessert was known to pre-Islamic Arabs. In fact, they even have

a candidate for its inventor: 'Abdullah bin Jud'an, one of the affluent and most generous masters of the famous tribe of Quraysh. They described it as "wheat starch cooked with honey." Indeed, this dessert had its own Arabic name. They called it *siritrat* to convey the pleasure and ease one experiences during chewing and swallowing it.

To sum up, the Persians were indebted to the Mesopotamian region they occupied for centuries. Within the course of intervening centuries, they certainly had their fair share in contributing to it, and it was in this new garb that it was introduced anew to medieval Baghdad.

3 The Arab Factor

Although the Arabs were commonly described as simple and austere people due to harsh and dry physical environment, they knew luxury, as al-Jahiz (d.869) in his book on misers *Al-Bukhlaa'* assures us, where the land was more productive and means more abundant. He concluded from their poetry that they knew fine white flour, fruits, roasted meat, and stew *maraq*. They knew *muraqqaq* (fine, thin sheets of bread), *sinab* (dipping sauce made with mustard and raisins), and strained honey. 'Abdullah bin Jud'an, one of the affluent and most generous masters of the famous tribe of Quraysh during the pre-Islamic era, was said to be the inventor of the famous dessert *faludhaq*, usually attributed to the Persians (see section above). Of their other foods, *thareed* 'bread sopped in broth' was the master of dishes. They made hays, dates mixed with clarified butter and breadcrumbs, which was mostly travelers' fare. They valued bread and preferred meat to dates (*Al-Bukhla* 229-31). Even the delicate *zalabiya* was mentioned in old Arabic poetry, and the famous *sikbaja* (beef stew soured with vinegar) was said to have been known to pre-Islamic Arabs. *Lisan al-'Arab* gives its Arabic name, *sa'fasa* (سافسة) or *safsafa* (سفسفة).

Mischiefous Cooks

In the Abbasid professional cooking scenes, two figures stand out, not only for their culinary accomplishments, but also for their delightful sense of humor. Jahdha al-Barmaki al-Nadeem (d.936) was a renowned cook and has several cookbooks in his name. He was a singer and lute player, and in these capacities, he was a very popular boon companion. The name Jahdha was given to him by one of the caliphs due to some protrusion in his eyes. One of his famous jokes: When once asked about a dinner he attended, he said everything was cold except the water. Medieval sources describe him as morally filthy and stingy at the table, but generous with his money. He was accused of not keeping his fast during month of Ramadhan. The story goes that while he was staying with friends during this month, he stole a piece of bread in the middle of the day and sneaked into the toilet, sat on the potty and started eating. When discovered, he said he was crumbling some bread for the hungry roaches.

The other one is 'Ibada, who worked as a palace chef for many Abbasid caliphs. His father used to cook in the kitchens of al-Ma'moun (d.833), and he learnt the profession from him and excelled in it. He was

described as an effeminate with a mischievous sense of humor. While still in the service of al-Ma'moun, he did something, which antagonized his master's brother, al-Mu'tasim, against him.

The story goes that al-Ma'moun was in the mood for a cooking contest. He ordered that meat, vegetables, and the like be brought in. Then he himself as well as al-Mu'tasim and a number of boon companions started to cook a dish each. 'Ibada noticed that al-Mu'tasim's pot was emitting pleasant aromas that dominated all others, which made him feel jealous of him. So he went to him and gave him a bit of 'professional advice.' He said, "If you want to improve your pot, add a bowlful of *kamakh* (fermented sauce)." Al-Mu'tasim did so, and soon enough some foul smells came out of his pot, for which al-Ma'moun rebuked his brother saying, "Don't you know that adding a dead body into a living thing would spoil it?"

When al-Mu'tasim became Caliph in 833, he banished 'Ibada, saying that he was not worth killing. Afterwards, 'Ibada became the master chef for Caliph al-Wathiq and al-Mutawakkil after him. We are told that when al-Mutawakkil once suggested to 'Ibada that he leaves his effeminate ways so that he starts looking for a wife for him, 'Ibada's answer was, "Are you a caliph or a matchmaker?" (al-Shabushti 44-5; Ibn Khillikan 118).

4 The Exotic Element

The epithet *ghareeb* (exotic, unusual) describing a dish was a high compliment in Abbasid society. Any boon companion worth his wine, so to speak, was expected to master no less than ten exotic dishes. Introducing foreign unfamiliar elements into an already rich repertoire was therefore encouraged. The region's affluence, active trade, and Baghdad's cosmopolitan nature played a big role in this. Slave girls, for in instance were brought from near and far, and the excellent cooks among them were valuable commodities.

PART THREE POST MEDIEVAL ERA

XIII BAGHDAD DURING THE OTTOMAN RULE

After the Mongolian attack in 1258, Baghdad lost its glory. All the attention was turned to Istanbul after it became the cosmopolitan capital of the Muslim Ottoman Empire in 1453. Iraq with the rest of the Middle East became under the political control of the Turks until after the First World War. During this long stretch of time, Topkapi Palace was uninterruptedly the residence of the Ottoman sultans. According to Marianna Yerasimos, author of *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine* the "Ottoman cuisine was a culinary culture which grew from the fifteenth century onwards and was shaped by an elite group, who lived in and around Istanbul's Palace, elite who took pleasure in good food" (10). This is reminiscent of what happened in Baghdad during the Abbasid era.



A water bottle

As to what happened to Baghdad after the end the Abbasid era, extant information from the region, historical and otherwise, was scarce. Still, from what we do have, and contrary to the general opinion, Baghdad apparently did enjoy a vibrant "cosmopolitan atmosphere." In her rare and valuable study of the little-known Baghdadi school of painting of the late 16th and 17th century, Rachel Milstein tells us that Baghdad has always been an "important station on the way to Mecca and to Karbala, holiest of Shi'i shrines." Economically, the region was important to the Ottomans as it gave them access to the Gulf, and thus served as a "main commercial link between India, Turkey and the Mediterranean." As a result, there was "continuous flow of pilgrims to the Shi'i shrines and an exchange of goods." The markets were "rich in spices, gem stones and hand crafts." The European traveler Sir Anthony Sherley, who visited the area in 1598 expressed his "amazement at this variety." He said he saw "excellent goods of all sorts and very cheap." As for the Iraqis themselves, he said they were "somewhat more abstinent from offending Christians, than in other parts" (*Miniature Painting in Ottoman Baghdad* 1-5). I also find significant, Milstein's comment that "Despite the Mongol destruction in the 13th century and the successive conquests which followed it, Baghdad always retained its importance as a center of religious studies and literary activity," and artistic activity exemplified by the genuine school of Baghdadi painting described in the book (2). That is a far cry from the back-water lackluster place generally described in sources dealing with this period. According to Milstein the miniatures illustrate Baghdad's great range of architectural styles, modes of dressing and useful everyday articles which they saw around them in the physical and human aspects of the cityscape and the colorful and cosmopolitan bazaars which flourished

XIV OTTOMANS AND ABBASIDS IN THE KITCHEN

under the Ottoman regime" (43). Describing the region during the rule of the Ottoman Empire and after, Sami Zubaida in his valuable article "National, Communal and Global Dimensions in Middle Eastern Food Cultures," describes Iraq as "the receptacle of the greatest diversity of communities and cultures." Mosul remained, commercially and culturally, "part of the region comprising southern Anatolia and north-west Iraq. The center of this region was Aleppo. They of necessity shared "food ingredients and styles." Therefore, the bulgur dishes, for instance, were more prominent in the Mosuli menu than in the rest of Iraq. Baghdad has always been "an open and cosmopolitan city," which comprised many traditions, including Muslim -- Sunni and Shi'i, Christian, Jewish, Arab, Kurdish, and Armenian. In their cooking, Zubaida sees three strains: the aristocratic Istanbuli cuisine, the Persian, and "old Arabian foods" of the "common background," comprising dates, milk, butter, and boiled meat (35). I must confess, I only see here, Turkish, Persian, and Bedouin foods. It makes one wonder as to what happened to the mainstream cuisine of the city dwellers, inheritors of the medieval Baghdadi cuisine? To begin with, the medieval Arab cuisine is not "a cuisine that is now dead," as Charles Perry writes in his Introduction to his English translation of al-Baghdadi's 14th century augmented version *Kitab Wasfal-At'ima al-Mu'tada* (279). It has been indeed alive and cooking all these centuries in the region's pots, and even in the cauldrons of the Ottoman sultans, modified and enhanced nonetheless, as we shall see in the following sections largely based on Marianna Yerasimos' pioneering research *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine* (first published in Turkish 2002, English translation 2005). It covers 15th to 19th centuries, using reliable direct and indirect sources including extant Ottoman cookbook, account books, diaries, medicinal books, and books of travel.

In her discussion of the genesis of the Ottoman cuisine, Yerasimos admits there is still a raging debate on who started it or what constituted it. However, according to her, "the culinary culture which grew from the 15th century onwards and was shaped by an elite group, who lived in and around Istanbul's Palace... and its extraordinary richness in terms of ingredients and variety of dishes" cannot possibly be explained by one influence, be it central Asia, Anatolia, or Byzantium (10, 11). She believes that "the important and definitive influence of the Abbasid (Arab) and the Savavid (Iranian) culinary cultures on Ottoman cuisine" should not be forgotten." She also says that "especially in the 15th and 16th centuries, Ottoman cuisine shared ingredients, cooking methods and dish names with the Middle East," and that the impact of the Arab Abbasid cuisine cannot possibly be downplayed (11, 12). From M. Yerasimos we learn that the oldest and most interesting documented recipes written in Turkish hitherto available to us belonging to this period are found in a manuscript written by Muhammed bin Mahmoud Shirvan, referred to as Shirvani (d.1450). The Turkish title was *Kitabu't-Tabeeh* (cookbook). This manuscript was brought to the attention of interested scholars as late as 1984. Now, Shirvani was court physician for Sultan Murad II (d.1450), and his works on medicine and translations from Arabic and Farsi to Turkish were well known. However, what's more to the point here is that this first Turkish cookbook by Shirvani was indeed a translation of al-Baghdadi's famous 13th-century cookbook *Kitab al-Tabeeh*, described above (00). Shirvani added information on health and around 77 recipes, which Yerasimos concludes were popular in the Ottoman palace at the time (19). The augmented recipes' interest also lies in the fact that they shed light on the beginnings of the experimentations of the Ottoman palace cooks with the already large repertoire of the inherited Abbasid cuisine. For instance, besides the stuffed eggplant, other vegetables and fruits were treated similarly, such

as in *piyaziyye* and *tuffahiyye* dishes prepared by coring onions and apples and stuffing them with a mix of lamb and a small amount of rice.¹ Ottoman Sultans were interested in acquiring Arabic cookbooks. A beautifully inscribed copy was commissioned by one of the 16th-century sultans (British Library, MS Oriental 5099). Indeed, even before the establishment of the Ottoman rule, the Turks' interest in the Abbasid cuisine was manifested in Istanbul's augmented copy of Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's 10th century Abbasid cookbook described above (00). The copy was finished in 1297, and the title page states that it was owned by the Ayyubid King al-Malik al-Salih Najm al-Deen of Damascus and Egypt (d.1249) whose wife Queen Shajarat al-Durr (d.1257) was of Turkish origin. The Preface to the Arabic text as well as the extensive table of contents was written in Ottoman Turkish, most probably added later when the book was acquired by the Ottoman palace. Indeed, al-Baghdadi's recipes were even popular with the Mongolian Khans. *Yin-shan Cheng-Yao (Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor's Food and Drink)* was originally written by Hu Szu-Hui in 1330. It was a complete "Turko-Mongol medicinal dietary book with recipes," some of which belonged to al-Baghdadi.² Another important factor in disseminating and popularizing the medieval Abbasid cuisine in the kitchens of the Sultans and the wealthy was hiring for their chefs Arab cooks, who were valued for their artistic and skillful ways with food (Yerasimos 136). In light of the above, it should not be surprising to find significant affinities between the typical Abbasid dishes and what was served on the tables of the Ottoman Palace and the affluent. Going through the centuries with Yerasimos, it is interesting to see how

the Ottoman dishes slowly developed, where they chose to stick with the Arab elements, and where they departed. In this, we also see where cooks in Baghdad emulated the Istanbuli cuisine and where they opted to stick to their own old ways. In the 15th and 16th centuries, for instance, the Ottoman cooks were still in the habit of throwing all kinds of aromatics into their pots, such as black pepper, coriander, cumin, cinnamon, ginger, cloves, cardamom, aniseed, you name it. However, according to Yerasimos, the Ottoman cuisine after the 18th century can be described as "quite plain" (52). In this aspect, they broke away from the Arab custom, but in other aspects, the Arab-Abbasid factor can still be discerned throughout these centuries, albeit in varying degrees, depending on what was cooking. A striking example is desserts. According to Yerasimos, "the Turks of central Asia, like the Chinese, did not eat sweets. It was even considered shameful for a 'manly man' to eat sweets." She adds, "The culture of the sweet among the Turks started and developed rapidly with Arab influence and Islam" (227). In fact, Yerasimos credits the "skilled Arab cooks of the 18th century for developing the tray layered *bakalwa* as we know it today, and she quotes Mouradjea D'Ohsson's book *Tableau general de l'Empire Ottoman*, published in Paris (1788, II: 108), in which he describes borek as:

a dough-based dish... much loved by this people. They are of magnificent size with vegetables, meat, fruit, or jam. This dish compares in beauty and lightness to the layered cakes (gateaux feuilletés) made in Europe. Most Arab chefs are masters of such dishes.

¹ My comments are based on 27 recipes of these 77 augmented ones. I am grateful to Anahita, member of SCA group (Society for Creative Anachronism), who provided me with synopses of 23 of Shirvani's recipes. She used Stephane Yerasimos' *a la table du grand turc*, which is a French rendition of Shirvani's cookbook. home.earthlink.net/~lilinah/directory.html, accessed Nov. 5th 2008.

² home.earthlink.net/~al-tabakhah/Misc_ME_Food/MECookbooks.html, accessed Nov. 5, 2008. I have not had the chance to have a look at the English translation of this document by Paul D. Buell et al, *A Soup for the Qan: A Translation and Study of Chinese Dietary Medicine of the Mongol Era as Seen in Hu Szu-Hui's "Yin-shan Cheng-Yao"* (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000).

Interestingly, in the above account, no distinction was made between savory and sweet *borek* (*baklava*), and the dough itself, whether it was bread dough, dough made with water, or pastry dough (136).

The extant medieval Arab cookbooks from the eastern and western Islamic world reveal the Arab cooks' high level of expertise in making pastries sweet and savory, remarkably similar to those made later on by the Ottoman cooks as described in Yerasimos' book. But they were not called *boureg* or *baklava*. Of these, we may mention here the savory *sanbusaj* prepared with thin sheets of *ruqaq* bread or dough. They also made *muwarraqat* (layered thin sheets of bread), *mukhabbazat* (small filled pastries), and *mujabbanat* (pastries filled with cheese), and the sweet *lawzeenaj* and *jawzeenaj*, those dainty rolls prepared with paper-thin pastry sheets. Sweet *sanbusaj* (sweet pastries made with thin wrappers). Layered rich pastries were also prepared, such as *musamma*, *shahmiyya*, and *liyiyya* (made with clarified butter, tallow, and sheep's tail, respectively). Other sweets were passed on unaltered, though names of some had to be adapted to the new host language, such as *kadayif* (*qata'if*), *tel kadayif* (*kunafa*) *lokma* (*luqma*). The famous thickened puddings of the Abbasids, *khabees* and *faludhaj*, started to be called *helva*, which itself is derived from the Arabic *halwa* (generic for dessert). *Lezvine* became the new name for *lawzeenaj*, *sutlaj* and *muhallabbi* for *aruzziyya* and *muhallabiyya*. Some of the adopted luscious Abbasid yeast cakes *furniyyaat* drenched in honey started to be given equally luscious and sensational names like *kadin gobegi* (lady's belly) and 'beauty's lips.' Though it is difficult to recognize at a first glance an Arab pastry in *Kurabiye*, but it is in fact no other than the dainty sugar cookies/biscuits known in the medieval Arab word as *ghareeba* 'exotic' (recipe in Chapter 101 of al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, later on modified to *ghurayyiba*). *Rahat'ul hulikum* (Turkish delight) was no other than the chewy *faludhaj* thickened starch puddings of the medieval Arabs (recipes in al-Warraq's Chapter 93). *Sherbets* of the Arabs were also a regular feature on the

Ottoman menu.

Along the long road of cooking all these desserts, a good number of desserts, not previously known to the Arabs, showed up in Ottoman cookbooks and records. Of these, we may mention *lalanga*, *revani*, *gizlama*, and *gullaj*. Cotton-wool *helva* (candy-floss/cotton candy), nowadays called *sha'ar banaat* 'girls' hair' in Iraq, was first mentioned in the 19th century. An exciting addition to the 18th and 19th centuries was ice cream: milk-ice cream, ice cream with snow water, ice cream with cream, and ice cream with sour cherries or strawberries (Yerasimos 234, 237). The Ottomans also developed a liking for stewed fruits, called *hoshafi*, served as a light dessert after the meal. This culinary tradition never really caught on in mainstream Iraqi cooking, neither then nor after.

In the realm of savory dishes, what immediately attracts our attention in the Ottoman cuisine is the absence of the fermented sauces, *murri* and *kamakh*, so *familiar* in the Abbasid kitchen. It is not certain whether these condiments were used but not documented, or whether people lost their appetite for them. Anyway, up until the 14th century, Arab cookbooks still contained recipes for making them, and the logical explanation for the waning interest in these sauces is the advent of tomatoes, which rendered using such enhancers unnecessary, and revolutionized the Old World's cooking. Although, in the Ottoman records, the first mention of dishes prepared with tomatoes appear in the 19th century, logically, experimentations and cooking with tomatoes must have started much earlier, say the 17th 18th centuries.

Soup *shorba* was important in the Ottoman repertoire. It was treated almost as a meal by itself, and was consumed daily. This is a development, which the Iraqi cuisine did not really relish. Though soup has always been a distinguished food item in our menu, it never really was or is consumed on regular basis, as Yerasimos describes in her account of the Ottoman cuisine. Instead, rice and stew are our daily staples. Another cooking technique characteristic

of the Ottomans, which featured in many of the recipes provided by Yerasimos was lemon-egg sauce as a thickening agent. This is completely alien to conventional Iraqi cooking. Nowadays, *kufte/köfte* (meatballs and patties made with a flavorful mix of ground meat) are closely associated in the minds of many with the Turks. *Kufte* dishes are included in the earliest Ottoman 15th century cookbooks, and a *köfte* cleaver was mentioned in a 1573 Ottoman source (Yerasimos 18). Yerasimos says *köfte* is "one of the best-known dishes of Ottoman cuisine" (82). They feature in many of the Ottoman stew dishes (*yahni*) and soups. But for those familiar with the medieval Arab cuisine, these meatballs were already incorporated into the Abbasid dishes, except back then they were called *kubab/kubaab* (sing. *kubba*). What's more, I discovered two recipes in Ibn al-'Adeem's 13th century *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* (550--51), where the meatballs were actually called *kuftawaat*, plural of *kufte*, which is of Arabic origin by the way. The verb *كفت* k-f-t means to 'press and gather something in your hand,' which is synonymous with *كَبَب* k-b-b. The Ottoman cooks, however, exploited the possibilities of the meatball, and I should say quite successfully, creating some intriguing varieties such as *kadinbudu köfte* 'lady's thigh *kufte*.'

The Turkish kebab *doner* (*shawirma/gyro/guss*) well-known and loved in the entire Middle-East might well have been an ingenious development of rotating meat on a spit, known during the Abbasid era as *kardana*, or the *judhaba* dishes, made by suspending a chicken or a chunk of meat above a bread-pudding-like casserole, to roast in the *tannour*. We know that meat prepared this way was served thinly shaved like *shawirma*. However, the novelty of *kebab doner* was in slicing the meat into steaks, stacking them in a spit, and grilling it vertically facing the fire. We still do not know when this change took place but definitely by the 19th century. Yerasimos assures us that she has a picture, an anonymous lithograph taken in the 1850's, which shows a man selling *kebab doner* (83).

One of the Ottoman dishes I encountered in Yerasimos' list was *kalye* (182). Frankly, I did not recognize the dish at first, but when I read the detailed recipe, it turned out to be no other than the Arabic dish *qaliyye*, which was a fried dish. Likewise with *mutajjana* (succulent fried dishes), which featured, with some changes, in 15th and 16th centuries Ottoman cookbooks as *mutacene*. We are told it was very popular back then (88).

The Abbasid's impressive varieties of cured meat and stuffed sausages - fresh and dried, small and large - were probably already shared with the entire region. The art of making sausages is an ancient one, but names certainly metamorphose. To the medieval Baghdadis at any rate, as described in their cookbooks, the small ones were variably called *maqaniq*, *laqaniq*, and *naqaniq*. These were made with the small intestines and stuffed with a spicy mix of pounded, fatty meat, and were either immediately roasted in the *tannour* or air-dried and stored for future use. The large and the very large, using large intestines - called *maba'ir* and *mahashi*, respectively - were stuffed with a spicy meat mix, and boiled in broth or roasted in the *tannour* (al-Warraq, Chapter 36). The Abbasids also prepared *qadeed* (seasoned meat slices, marinated and then sun-dried, like meat jerky) and *namaksoud* (large chunks of meat, seasoned and preserved by salting). In the Ottoman sources in Yerasimos' book, I only came across one variety of sausage, *mumbar* (fresh sausages made by filling large intestine with a rice-meat mix, and then boiling them). We still make *mumbar* in present-day Iraq the same way (recipe 000), assuming that the name and the dish are of Turkish origin. It was only a few months ago that it hit me: *mumbar* (the dish and its name) is no other than the Baghdadi medieval *mib'ar* (pl. *maba'ir*, mentioned above).

In the Ottoman menu, there was also *kulbasti/kyul-basstissi*, which started to be mentioned in their records in the 18th century. There is a whole chapter in a 19th-century cookbook by Turabi Efendi (10-12) dealing with this dish. A close look at these recipes reveals remarkable affinities with the Arab medieval *shara'ih*

mubazzara: boneless chunks of meat were sliced and butterflied until they turn into thin slices. Next, they were rubbed with a spice mix, and then grilled or fried, and either further simmered in their sauce or served with prepared vinegar-based dips *sibagh/sals* (al-Warraq, Chapter 89; Istanbul MS of al-Warraq, fol. 192v). Indeed, the second half of the Ottoman word *-basstissi* carries the same meaning as *shara'ish*, being derived from the Arabic *basata* (to flatten).

The Ottoman cuisine was also famed for its dough-based foods, such as *boureg* and some types of pasta. Associating such foods with the Turks of central Asia has been established as early as the eleventh century. The famous Abbasid theologian and philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) mentioned *tutmaj* (small flat pasta sheets), *shishborek* (ravioli), *salma* (small coin-shaped pasta), and meat filled *bourek* as typically Turkish foods (*Sirr al-'Aalamayn* 8). The medieval Abbasid cooks experimented with all these dishes, but once again, the names can sometimes be misleading. We have a recipe for preparing *tutmaj* (fresh pasta) and cooking it in broth in al-Warraq's 13-century augmented Istanbul MS (fol. 168r). Another recipe, more or less similar to this one, was called *lakhsha* in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 81). *Lakhsha* is a Persian word used to designate the slippery boiled fresh pasta pieces, and the dish was said to have been inspired by the Persian King Khosrau (d.579).

In today's Turkish cooking, ravioli-like pasta called *mantı*, is said to be of Chinese origin (Algar 175). During the Ottoman period, it was called *fincan boreghi* (cup *boureg*) because the pasta pieces were cut out with *finjan* (small cup). Now back in the 13th century, this sort of pasta was known as *shish-borek* (variant *shush borek*). The round cutter for making it was mentioned in the Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla il'al-Habeeb* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 624). *Fincan boreghi* seems to be a Turkish later translation, since *shish* means 'cup' in Persian. Now, if we 'fast-backward' to al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, a recipe named *Ibrahimiyya* (after the Abbasid Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi, d. 839) called

for small meat-filled packages of pastries to be boiled in the stew broth (Chapter 58). Such pastry packages were usually referred to as *sanbusaj*, and they were the medieval close ancestors of *boureg*. Cooks back then knew how to make very thin sheets of dough, which they filled, rolled into different shapes, and fried. Within the course of the Ottoman era, the cooks played creatively with the infinite possibilities of such pastries.

In discussing the Ottoman *yahni* (Persian loan word, meaning 'cooking with water'), we cannot help but see in them the Abbasid stew dishes (*maraq/murouqat*), with their balanced flavors of the sweet and the sweet-sour using honey, date syrup, vinegar, juice of unripe grapes, and so on. The Ottoman cuisine referred to this ancient culinary technique as "cooking with water" or "with stock" (Yerasimos 80, 82). They were even served the Abbasid way - as *thareed* (bread sopped in the stew sauce), though we might not recognize the name immediately because it was called *tirit* (99). But then the tomatoes came to the Middle East, and in the 18th and 19th centuries records, *yahnis* with lots of tomatoes and potatoes were introduced (Yerasimos 82).

Rice dishes *plav/pilaw* were central to the Ottoman menu, and according to Yerasimos they remained the food of the elite until the 17th century because rice was hard to get and expensive (107). Yerasimos also wonders where "the Turk's love of rice, which neither existed in the culinary traditions of central Asia, nor grew in Anatolia," originated, and mistakenly thinks that it came to the Middle East with the Mongol invasion. She says, "The Mongols, who occupied the region from the 13th to the 15th century, brought rice, unknown in the Middle East and Anatolia, from China" (107). Now, to set the record right, rice was introduced to the Middle East in the first century BC, and from then on, it slowly gained popularity. By the 10th AD century, many excellent varieties of rice were available in the Middle East during the Abbasid era, such as *Ja'fari*, *Zabeedi* (from Yemen), *Shami* (Levantine), and *Mutawakkili*. In the 9th and 10th centuries in the southern Iraqi city of Basra, rice bread *khubz al-aruzz* was widely used

because it was more affordable than wheat bread. It was usually baked on the *taabaq* (large flat iron pan). Rice at first was held in low esteem because it was believed to be less nutritious than wheat and barley, and the recommendation was to cook it with milk, sugar, and lots of fat, for which we have several recipes in the categories of *muhallabiyat* (rice pudding) and *aruzziyyat* (rice porridge), as in al-Warraq's 10th century cookbook. By the 13th century, and definitely before the Mongol invasion, rice dishes as we know them today and certainly as the Ottomans came to know them later, were cooked in the Eastern Arab world. *Ruzz mufalfal*, for instance, was the popular way for cooking the rice, which resulted in separated grains. Rice was also cooked with other grains, such as lentils and mung beans, as in *mujaddara*. A variety of such rice dishes were included in the Arab medieval cookbooks, the earliest of which is al-Baghdadi's, written in 1226. Therefore, we can say with certainty that the Ottoman cuisine was greatly indebted to the Arab cooks, who introduced rice to the Ottoman kitchens, where its great potential and infinite variety was exploited to the full. The Turkish *aadi pilaw* (ordinary rice), for instance was no other than the Arabic medieval *ruzz mufalfal*. In affluent Istanbuli kitchens, rice received a royal treatment, and the long list provided by Yerasimos for pilavs attests to this (109-110). In the face of this, the indigenous grain, bulgur, had to bow and surrender. My guess is that in the circles of refined Istanbuli high society, rice was recognized as a friendlier and quieter grain than bulgur.

On Ottoman tables, rice featured as a main dish. It was also incorporated into other food preparations. For instance, the festive grilled kids and lambs stuffed with a mix of meat, breadcrumbs, truffles, and the like, which featured on the luxurious menus of the Abbasids, started to be stuffed with a rice mix by the 19th century. In Iraq today, the Turkish derived name for a lamb prepared in this manner, *qouzi* (from Turkish *kuzu* 'lamb') is more commonly used than the Arabic *kharouf mahshi* 'stuffed lamb.' Yerasimos' translation of this

dish is 'lamb *dolma*,' following the Turkish terminology - *dolma* simply means 'stuffed,' which brings us to the subject of *dolma*.

Rice was used in stuffing vegetables, of which the *dolma* we know quite well. *Dolma* in the modern Arab cuisine means one thing: vegetables, such as grape or Swiss chard leaves, eggplants, courgettes and the like, stuffed with a flavorful mix of ground meat and rice, and simmered. It may also be cooked without meat. If the filling does not have rice, then it is not *dolma*, it is *sheikh mahshi* (recipe 000). But this rigid division in nomenclature was non-existent in the Ottoman culinary terminology, simply because *dolma* means 'stuffed,' the equivalent for which in Arabic is *mahshi*. In Turkish, anything stuffed is called *dolma*: it could be a stuffed fish, lamb, or chicken, or even a pickle *dolma*.

Starting with the 15th century, mention was made of Ottoman stuffed vegetables *dolma* with a meat mix only and no rice, such as apple and onion *dolma*; they were cored out and stuffed. As time goes on, we encounter an explosion in the varieties of vegetables used, all cored out and stuffed or wrapped if leaves are used: quince, eggplant, vine and cabbage leaves, courgette, turnip, and even honey melon. In the 18th and 19th centuries, we start seeing tomato *dolma*, green pepper, mixed *dolma*, whole cabbage, whole pumpkin, artichoke, and even okra *dolma!* (Yerasimos 177-79, 189). The first mention of *dolma*, which actually mixes meat and rice just as we do it today, comes from the 18th century records. It is called *Halep Dolmasi* (*dolma* from Aleppo), which is an Arab city in Syria. Should we conclude from this that the *dolma* we cook nowadays, and which we usually associate with the Ottoman heritage, turns out after all to be developed by Arab cooks? Quite likely. Significantly, another 18th century dish, which Yerasimos translates as "sheikh of *dolma/dolma* fit for sheikh," is called *sheyhu'l-mahshi*, which is the Ottoman rendition of the thoroughly Arabic *sheikhu'l-mahshi* (i.e. the best of the stuffed foods), for which there is a recipe in al-Baghdadi's 13th century cookbook. The only difference is in the name.

During al-Baghdadi's time, it was called *madfouna* (the buried), because the meat-mix stuffing is hidden inside the hollowed-out eggplants, and then simmered in liquid (193). It seems that similar stuffed dishes were widespread in the 13th-century Islamic world in its eastern and western regions. The Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala* contains several dishes for stuffed eggplant. One of them, called *mahshi* (the stuffed), used for its stuffing a mix of cooked ground meat, eggs, and breadcrumbs. It was meant to deceive the prospective eaters into thinking that the cooked eggplants have not been stuffed (144). *Yalanci dolmasi* (fake *dolma*) was a late development in the making of *dolma* dishes. Apparently, it started to be popular in the 19th century. The two recipes we have were made with lots of olive oil; one used eggplants and the other vine leaves. This variety is called fake because it does not require meat. In this respect, it is similar to the medieval *muzawwarat* dishes, which Christians used to cook during Lent.

Now we come to a vegetable-meat dish, which is neither a stew nor a dry dish. It is called *medfunne/medkune* (a layered dish of vegetables and meat), which is Arabic in name and content. In the list Yerasimos provides, it occurs four times in the 15th, 18th, and 19th centuries, along with a similar dish called *musakka/muzakka*, mentioned twice in the 19th century (and once with courgette). Judging from the Ottoman recipes for *medfunne* (the buried), it consisted of chopped meat and onion layered with sliced eggplant, in a wide pot. Then a small amount of broth or water along

with some seasonings is poured all over. The pot is simmered, covered, on coal fire until little sauce is left, and then turned over onto a wide plate, trying to keep the dish in one piece. However, in al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, similar dishes were called *maghmoumat* (sing. *maghmouma*) 'the covered.' They were called so because after layering the vegetables as described above, the top was covered completely with a flat bread (though some recipes skipped this step), so that when the pot was turned over onto a large platter, the bread would become the bottom layer. In al-Baghdadi's 13th century book, there is a *maghmouma* recipe similar to al-Warraq's, in addition to *madfouna*, which is similar to today's *sheikhu'l-mahshi* (eggplant stuffed with meat, and simmered in broth). During the Ottoman period, the name *maghmouma* was dropped, eggplant stuffed with meat started to be called *sheikhu'l-mahshi*, and *madfouna* was used to designate the vegetable and meat layered dishes that have little sauce in them. The Ottoman 19th-century *musakka* dish was a Turkish etymological rendition of the Arabic *musaqqa'a*, and is strikingly similar in content to *madfouna*. In his 19th-century cookbook, Turabi Efendi includes both *medkune* and *muzakka* in his section on *basstilar* (the layered or spread dishes). In modern Iraq, we call such a dish *tabsi betinjan* (*tabs* is a Turkish loan word meaning 'tray,' see also Al-Buraniyya: *The Mother of all Musakkas* 000).

As for condiments, appetizers, and small side dishes of *mezza*, traditionally associated with conviviality, we perceive no significant breakthrough from the medieval Abbasid menu. Many of the famous Abbasid *bawarid al-buqoul* (cold dishes of cooked vegetables, al-Warraq, Chapters 45, 46) featured on the Ottoman tables. They were mostly cooked eggplant, zucchini/courgette, Swiss chard, spinach, string beans, and fava/broad beans, served with the appropriate vinegar-based sauces. However, but by the 18th century, they started to be called *salatasi*. The Ottoman menu naturally included other *salatalar* of seafood; or refined some of the bread-nut sauces, which came to be called



tarator. The category of *buqoul bil laban* (vegetables with yogurt) was a familiar item in the medieval Arab menu, such as *qar' bi laban* and *silq bi laban* (yogurt with courgette and chard, respectively) in al-Baghdadi's 13th century cookbook. The Ottoman records included them as *mastaba* (mast loan Persian for yogurt). *Jaajaq* (pl. *jawaajeeq*) yogurt salads for which 10th-century al-Warraq's book provides the earliest recipe in the extant medieval cookbooks (Chapter 39) was well-known in the eastern Muslim world. In the Ottoman records, it makes its first appearance in the 19th century as *jajeek* (Yerasimos 211, 213; Turabi Efendi 207). The pickled vegetables *mukhallalat* of the pre-Ottoman region exploded into an endless list as revealed in the records Yerasimos provides (211). Pickles were a big

thing to the Ottomans, who called them *turshular*. They were relished as appetizers, "brought to the table in small dishes and nibbled throughout the meal" (217). Indeed, the pickles replaced all the medieval fermented condiments which were so popular at the time, such as *kawameekh* (made with rotted bread), *rabeetha'* (made with shrimp), and *sihnaat* (made with small river fish).

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The emergence into the modern world, and the transition from the Ottoman era to 'independence,' though politically tumultuous, was more or less a subtle and a smooth one from the culinary perspective. I guess there is not much for me to say here, except that once again, we deal with a situation where some foods and dishes or their names were regarded as status symbols.

The affluent in Baghdad, and those who had the Turkish connection through intermarriages or businesses or politics, were naturally more likely to embrace whatever new the Istanbuli cuisine had to offer, and many followed suit, each according to his/her means, affiliations, and proximity to the urban centers. In the cooking of high society, for instance, spices were used with reservation after the Istanbuli fashion, but the ordinary people, especially as you go farther south, kept to the inherited old Arab tradition of using a variety of spices, and more liberally.



The flat bread *khubuz*, baked in the clay oven *tannour* has always been a staple food even since the times of the Sumerians, but it was not deemed as trendy as the diamond-shaped *sammoun*, commercially baked in brick ovens in the major cities of Iraq. *Sammoun* was looked upon as an emblem of urbanity. But commercially baked bread was quite common during the Abbasid era. It was called *furrani*, after the brick oven furn, in which it was baked. During the Ottoman era, the Greek *psomos* (generic name for bread) was adopted, and *furrani* became *somun* in Ottoman Turkish (Yerasimos 133). From Yerasimos' description of *somun*, it was round and plump, exactly like the original Abbasid *furrani*. The diamond shape must have been a later development, perhaps a modern Iraqi touch to this old bread, for I have not seen similar breads anywhere else.

Stew remained a fixture in the daily main meal, prepared almost as of old, albeit less fatty. In fact, it was only recently that the melted fat of the sheep's tail and the clarified butter *dihin hurr* were abandoned. We switched to what we thought was a healthier brand, vegetable shortening, which carried the 'alluring' brand name *dihn il-raa'i* (the shepherd's fat). The stews are now more conveniently thickened, colored, and soured with the versatile tomato juice, with the help of a squeeze of a lemon, a pinch of *leimoun doozi* (citric acid), *noomi Basra* (dried lime) or *dibs il-rumman* (pomegranate syrup). Sometimes a pinch of sugar is added to balance the final taste. Of the few medieval white stews that survived, apricot stew (*margat mishmash/turshana*) is a favorite.

Stews are more likely to be served with rice, though we still like to eat *margat bamya* (okra stew) the medieval way, i.e. as *thareed*: *tannour* flat bread is cut into pieces and drenched in the stew's rich liquid, with tender chunks of meat on-the-bone arranged all over it. Serve it along with onion wedges, and the dish will be perfect. We like our rice to be fluffy with separated grains, which the medieval Arab cooks called *ruzz mufalfal*. For variety, sometimes rice was mixed with lentils or

mung beans, some people call this *kichri* - Indian name, which the British Anglicized to *kedgeriee* (cf. Levantine *mujaddara*; Egyptian *kushari*).

Many of the medieval traditional dishes are still with us today. Varieties of *thareed/tashreeb* of broken pieces of *tannour* bread sopped in rich broth are still popular, although they are more likely to be enjoyed in the privacy of home because they are somewhat messy. The centuries old *akari'*, *ru'ous*, and *qibbayaat* (simmered trotters, heads, and stuffed tripe, respectively), never lost their allure, only the name changed to the Turkish *pacha*. *Harisa* (mashed wheat with meat) was not touched by time. As for the roasted stuffed lamb, we no longer call it *kharouf mahshi* but *qouzi* and stuff it with rice after the Ottoman fashion. We still call the sauceless dishes *nawashif* (literally 'dry') after the medieval Baghdadi fashion. They constituted foods that we still enjoy today, ranging from mashed eggplants and yogurt with vegetables *jajeek* to the scrumptious sandwiches of *awsat*, *shata'ir*, and *bazmaward*, which we now collectively call *laffaat* (sing. *laffa*), or the more hip, *sandaweech*. But *boureg*, as developed in the Ottoman kitchens, is enjoyed as a Turkish creation alongside its cousin the medieval *sanbousa*.

The medieval stuffed dishes got a makeover in the Ottomans' kitchens by adding rice to the stuffing of the vegetables. As a result, in present-day Iraq, the stuffed vegetables, which received this Ottomanized touch, are strictly called *dolma* (which in the true Turkish sense carries the generic meaning 'stuffed'). The stuffed dishes that kept to the Abbasid medieval tradition of stuffing the eggplant and zucchini/courgette with a ground meat mix are called *sheikh mahshi* (the best of the stuffed dishes).

On the other hand, the creation of the various *kubba* dishes, for which the Iraqi cuisine is famed, can by no means be attributed to the Turkish factor. These, and most of the traditional desserts, cookies/biscuits, and yeast cakes now available at confectioners,' or the ones prepared at home, were all handed down to us from

medieval times, and in some cases, even much earlier than that, as in the case of the *kleicha* cookie. The Ottomans exploited the possibilities of some desserts creatively, as in the layered *baklawa* dessert. However, there is no indication that they had any interest in *zalabiya*, the famous medieval Baghdadi fritters drenched in syrup, which inspired famous Abbasid poets. I went through the extensive records Yerasimos provides in her survey of 500 years of Ottoman cooking, but *zalabiya* is nowhere to be found, and yet *zalabiya* in Iraq today is the favorite dessert, which to me is an indication that so many indigenous culinary traditions may continue despite political changes.

Up until the 1960s and even later, with all the varieties of traditional foods prepared at home, people did not develop the habit of patronizing restaurants for recreational purposes as happens in Europe for instance. Even those who go, usually order European foods for a change. The regular patrons of small restaurants and stalls were mostly travelers and people working far from home for the day, where they were served the regular staples of rice and stew and *nawashif* dishes, such as *kebab* (grilled ground meat), *guss* (*shawirma*), *kubba* and the like, or *pacha* (simmered heads and trotters) for an early hefty breakfast before work. In his unique recollections on Baghdad in the twenties, Abbas Baghdadi (342) tells us about the first restaurant in Baghdad to serve western (*franji*) and Middle Eastern (*sharqi*) foods. It was called *Mat'am al-'Asima* (the capital's restaurant), and boasted - also for the first time in Baghdad - a menu. The first restaurant,

he adds, which offered Italian, Greek, and Lebanese dishes, was situated next to the fashionable high-end store *Orozdi Back*, which at the time was the equivalent of, say, *Sacks Fifth Avenue*.

Speaking of firsts. After the deluge of Abbasid Baghdadi cookbooks and manuals, which the medieval gourmets commissioned, wrote, or circulated (most of which were lost or damaged), we had to wait until 1946 for the first modern Baghdadi cookbook. *Recipes from Baghdad*, a small volume of around 165 pages, was edited by May Beattie and Bedia Afnan. The Introduction was written by no less than her Majesty the Queen Mother of Iraq. It was published by the Indian Red Cross in Baghdad. A third edition was executed in 1961 by the Iraqi Red Crescent Society (Women's Branch). The recipes, we are told were "obtained from Baghdad residents of many nationalities," and that no recipes were included "for elaborate dishes." (3) The writer explains that for measurements, a Players or Gold Flake round 50-cigarette tin, filled level will correspond to the standard American measuring cup (5). The book was written in English, and the intended readers were certainly the English-speaking foreign ladies, who tasted Iraqi food, and desired to prepare it in their own kitchens.

For the first modern cookbook written in Arabic, we had to wait until the late 1960s. *Daleel al-Tabkh wa 'l-Taghdiya* (guide to cooking and nutrition) was executed by two specialists in home economics, Nazeera Adeeb and Firdos al-Mukhtar. It was mostly used by young brides away from their mothers, or by those looking for unfamiliar Western dishes and pastries. Nowadays, of course, there is more need for Iraqi cookbooks even for the most basic of traditional dishes, as generations of young people are growing up away from home.

In the following chapters, the vast array of recipes and accompanying information will give further glimpses into everyday culinary practices in Iraq, past and present. So hold on tight to your flying carpets, for it is time now to set out on our culinary tour, and as the Iraqis say, *b-'alif 'aafye* (May you enjoy the food in a thousand healths).

بألف عافية

Weights and Measures

In their daily activities and trade transactions, the ancient Mesopotamians needed to measure correct quantities for different purposes including cooking. Balances were used, some of which were small enough to measure a shekel (almost a gram), and others were large enough to measure a man. Incidentally, we know this from a document in which a captive prisoner was to be freed by paying what equaled his weight, silver. Portable metal balance scales were used with weights made of stone or bronze beautifully carved or cast into forms of animals such as ducks and lions. By volume, the largest measure was 'emer' (literally a donkey load, which, interestingly is still used nowadays to measure vegetables and fruits such as melons bought in bulk, we call it himil, i.e. a donkey's load). We know the value of these measures because the excavated storage jars were marked with their capacity.

As for weight measurements during the Middle Ages, evidently the portable metal balance scales with sets of metal weights were still in use. Vendors use them now in weighing bulky produce, such as melon. The medieval weighing system (with its dirham/ 3 grams, dinar/4½ grams, ouqiyya/10 dirhams, ratl/1 pound, etc.) was adopted by the

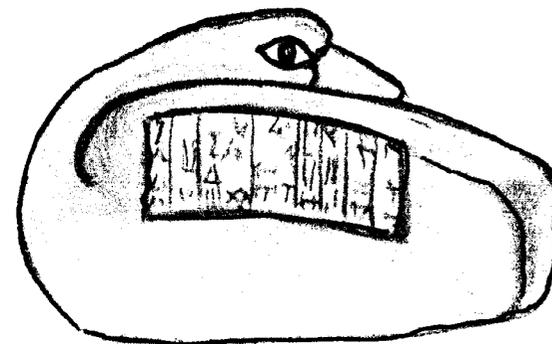
surrounding regions, and was transmitted even to northern Europe by the Norse traders who had trading relations with Baghdad. Medieval Arab cooks frequently resorted to approximate measurements, which are more or less 'standard' and universally applicable, such as part/ratio, what the palm and the stretched fingers can hold, a handful, a fistful, what your nail can pick up of ground substances such as spices, a drop, and the versatile 'a little.'

Business as Usual

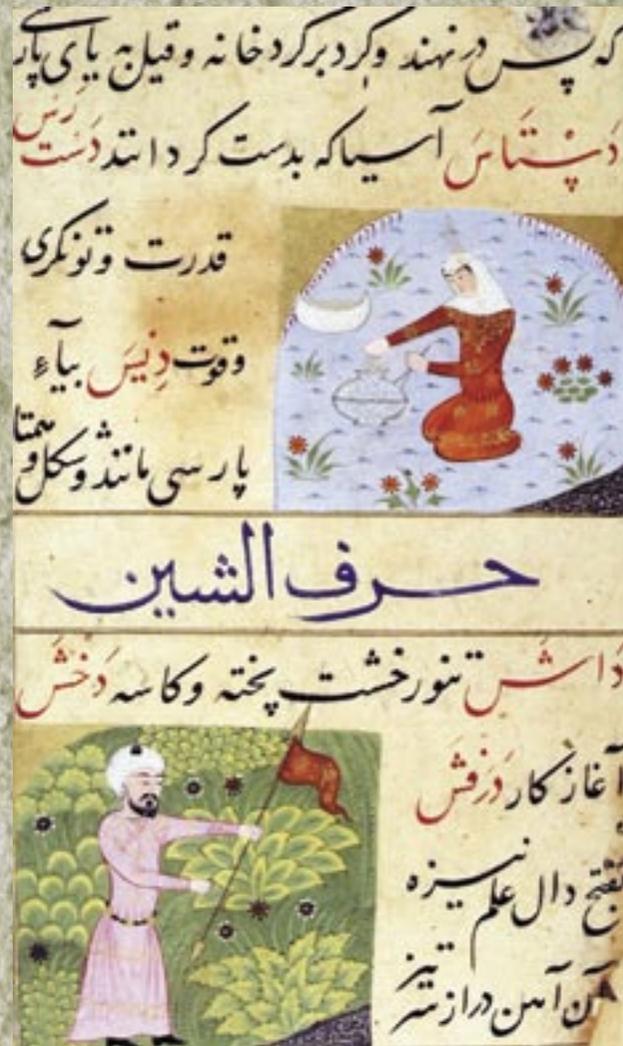
The Sumerians were fortunate at times to have been ruled by truly great kings, who earned the reputation of being just, such as King Shulgi and King Ur-Nammu, who was credited with standardizing weights and measures in his own Law Code. It boasts that he "fashioned the bronze sila-measure [1 liter], standardized the one-mina weight [500 grams], and standardized the stone weight of a shekel of silver [about 1 gram]."

However, as we all know, no laws can prevent the devious ways and means of the corrupt business people, as the following complaint of a Sumerian buyer reveals (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 263, 266):

*The merchant -- how he has reduced prices!
How he has reduced the oil and barley.*



A weight of about 5 pounds made of black stone, late third millennium BC (Iraqi Museum).



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 The Sultan's Turban

The Glory of Life *Al-Khubz*

الخبز

*Eat bread, Enkido, the glory of life,
 Drink wine, Enkido, the custom of the land.
 (The Epic of Gilgamesh)*

In a cookbook that seeks to trace the origins of a modern cuisine back to its ancient roots, what's more appropriate than opening it with a chapter on bread, believed to be the world's oldest prepared food?

Opposite: Illustration showing a woman grinding using a quern.



A Letter from a Grumpy Babylonian Son to his Mother

Following is a letter from a grumpy Babylonian son to his mother, from which we incidentally learn that the Mesopotamians used to consume a lot of bread:

Tell the Lady Zinu: Iddin-Sin sends the following message:

May the gods Samas, Marduk, and Ilabrat keep you forever in good health for my sake. From year to year, the clothes of the [young] gentlemen here become better, but you let my clothes get worse from year to year. Indeed, you persisted in making my clothes poorer and more scanty. At a time when in our house wool is used up like bread, you have made me poor clothes. The son of Adad-iddinam, whose father is only an assistant of my father, [has] two new sets of clothes while you fuss even about a single set of clothes for me. In spite of the fact that you bore me and his mother only adopted him, his mother loves him, while you, you do not love me! (Oppenheim *Letters from Mesopotamia* 84-85)

Baking with the Ancient Mesopotamians

They ate a lot of bread in ancient Mesopotamia. We know this from a Babylonian letter written by a grumpy son, who was surprised that his parents were not sending him new clothes at a time when in their house “wool is used up like bread” (Oppenheim 84). Indeed, so important was bread in their lives that they thought of it as the epitome of life, as shown in the lines above quoted from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Etymologically, this aspect is best illustrated in the symbols the Akkadians developed for ‘to eat’ and ‘bread’: the first is *akálu*, and the second is *akalu* (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 38).

Archaeological records show that the ancient Mesopotamians made more than 300 kinds of bread, both unleavened and leavened. They baked plain and improved breads, which were shaped and spiced differently. The ancient records classify these breads as large and tiny, long and short, fresh and dry, black and white, excellent and ordinary. The improved bread was called ‘ninda’ to which fatty ingredients were added, such as sesame oil, butter, lard, sheep’s tail fat and even fish oil. The oils themselves were sometimes seasoned and flavored, most probably to mask the rancid taste which fat quickly develops in hot weather. The Sumerians described these improved oils as oils ‘made good.’ Date syrup and honey were sometimes added as sweetening agents. Excellent quality breads baked with ‘noble fat’ (clarified butter) were reserved for the gods and the royalty. The Sumerians also make what they called ‘gug,’ or ‘kuku,’ in Akkadian, which was a kind of rich pastry (Limet 133).

In making these breads, they used a variety of grains, but mainly barley and wheat. By the first millennium BC, the Akkadian texts mentioned white barley, small grain barley, and pearl barley. It was not the ideal grain for making successful bread because it is very low in gluten content. Therefore, it was mostly used in baking unleavened breads on the heated exterior walls of upright clay cylinders (Bottéro “Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia” 39). When ovens were not available,

Akkadians on the go baked bread on heated stones, or made an arrangement of stones and hot ashes and buried the flattened dough in it to bake what they used to call ‘akal tumri’ (bread using ashes) or ‘kamaan tumri’ (flat loaf in ashes). A scene in an Assyrian relief of Ashurbanipal’s campaign shows unleavened bread being prepared: an Elamite prisoner is kneeling by the fire, tossing a flat disc of bread between his hands, the way people still do to this day, and another disc is already placed in the ashes (Levey 48).

The Ancient Mesopotamians were soon to learn the value of wheat. It had more gluten in it than the rest of the grains they grew. From then on, baking of leavened bread went hand in hand with unleavened varieties. For a start, it might have taken one or two neglectful housewives to forget to immediately bake the dough they kneaded, which gave it enough time to pick up yeast from the air. They must have noticed that dough had puffed, and when baked, gave them bread which was more appetizing, lighter in texture, and easier on the digestion.

Cooking on direct heat worked well with unleavened bread, but not so, when it came to leavened varieties, which needed less intense heat and more humid cooking environment. By the third millennium BC, clay ovens were built to provide better conditions for baking leavened bread. This kind of immobile oven was shaped like a dome, with a large opening at the top to insert the flattened bread, and small opening at the foot for stoking the fire and clearing the ashes. Such ovens were actually found in many excavated sites in the region, such as Tell Asmar, Nippur, Ur, and Namrud from the end of the fourth millennium (Ellison “Methods of Food Preparation” 91). They are still built the same way in Iraq.

The technique of baking bread in a clay oven is simple: fire is built in the bottom of the clay oven, and the flattened leavened dough is pressed or slapped onto the oven’s inner hot wall, above the smoldering fires. In ancient Mesopotamia, these ovens were known as ‘tanuru,’ from which the Arabic tannour was derived.

In one of the verses in the holy *Qur’an*, Noah’s Flood is described as having started with eruptions of water metaphorically referred to as an erupting *tannour* (Chapter: Hud, verse 40). The image evoked is that of an erupting volcano. For those of us who have seen a *tannour* being prepared for baking bread, this image is quite familiar. When brushwood is lighted in it, flames of fire, 6 to 7 feet high, would shoot out of the upper opening of the oven. Then the fire would soon subside, leaving smoldering coals in the bottom, hot enough to heat the oven’s inner wall. The flattened discs of bread would then be slapped on the hot interior walls of the *tannour*. When the top opening is closed with a lid, enough humidity, generated by the baking breads, would be trapped to allow them to puff, developing the characteristic lovely bubbles. The humid environment inside the *tannour* also enabled them to bake all kinds of dainty cakes and cookies/biscuits.

Sumerian Diplomacy

Clay ovens to the Sumerians were indispensable. They had to keep them constantly burning and in tip-top shape. An extinguished tannour was a bad omen. As shown in the following piece of wisdom, the older the ovens got, the more care they needed:

Be gentle to your enemy as to an old oven

The initial step in making bread was grinding the grains. They tried toasting them first, which helped make the grains less hard, but it spoiled their gluten. Gradually their milling and grinding techniques so much developed that by the first millennium BC they had two main types of mills, the hand-operated ones, and the animal-turned ones. The hand mills were made of two round flat stones, stacked together. The top one was rotated with the help of a stick placed in a vertical slot near the outer edge of the disc. Its Akkadian name was ‘tee’inu,’ from which the Arabic *tahouna* (grinder) was derived. This is still in use in rural areas. We call it *majrasha* (grinder). By using different kinds of stones,

they were able to produce several degrees of grinding, to meet the different demands of their busy kitchens. The groats were used for making porridges, such as tikku-flour, which, according to the directions given in the Babylonian recipes, was not kneaded but mixed with beer and added to the dish. Finer grains were soaked first, and then kneaded, such as sasku-flour, and ziquq-flour (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 8-15). The finely ground grains used for more delicate pastries were more expensive and hence within the reach of the affluent only. The following Sumerian proverbs clearly demonstrate this:

In my budget there is no place for any one to bake cakes. Fine flour is appropriate for women and the palace. (Gordon, 65)



A traditional Iraqi tannour oven

The Epic of Gilgamesh

Although this epic is believed to be at least 5000 years old, we knew of it only in the mid-19th-century. Cuneiform tablets on which it was written were unearthed in several sites in Iraq. The epic was written as a series of 12 tablets, all of which were found in fragments. Because there were several copies of each tablet, archaeologists were able to use fragments from different sites to put the epic together. Most of the tablets found in ancient Babylon and Assyria were written in Akkadian. The most famous and complete collection is the one found at Nineveh. It was translated by George Smith.

The epic's stories of creating humans from clay, the serpent that steals the secret of eternal youth, and the Great Deluge, they all bear striking resemblance to stories in the Bible and Qur'an. The epic also depicts one of the earliest quests in search of immortality, but at the same time, it deals with common human experiences such as friendship, hatred, ambition, fear of death, and the urge for adventure.

Gilgamesh was the king of the ancient Babylonian city of Uruk (the Biblical 'Erech'), situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Southern Mesopotamia. "He who saw everything to the ends of the world," as the title of the poem put it, Gilgamesh was two-thirds god and one-third man. He was strong, brave, and handsome, and cared for Uruk, around which he built the famous wall. When he became increasingly arrogant and oppressive, the people of the city prayed to the gods for help. The goddess Aruru created a strong opponent out of clay, and called him Enkido, a noble hairy savage who lived in the steppe among the wild beasts:

*[He] was wont to eat only plants with the gazelles,
Only to drink water with the wild,
Only to suck the milk of the wild creatures.*

Instigated by Gilgamesh, the prostitute of the temple seduced him and thus introduced him to civilization:

*They set bread before him.
He was bewildered, and looked on it, and marveled.
Enkido understood not how to eat bread,
To drink wine he had not learned. Then the priestess
opens her mouth and says to Enkido:
"Eat bread, Enkido, the glory of life,
Drink wine, Enkido, the custom of the land."
Then Enkido ate bread till he was full,
Then he drank wine, seven beakers.
His spirit lost itself, he grew merry,
His heart rejoiced and his face glowed.*

The two heroes battled, and Gilgamesh found an equal opponent in Enkido, so they became friends, and set out together in a series of adventures. But Enkido got sick and died. Gilgamesh, overcome by grief and the realization that he too would die, set out on a journey seeking immortality. On his way, he stopped at an inn house where he asked for food and drink. Siduri, the cupbearer or the bartender, offered him food and wine and with it a sound piece of advice, which by all measures was the first literary presentation of the *carpe diem* theme (seize the day):

*Gilgamesh, whither runnest thou?
Life, which thou seekest, thou will not find.
When the gods created mankind,
They allotted to mankind Death,*

*But Life they withheld in their hands.
So, Gilgamesh, fill thy body,
Make merry by day and night,
Keep each day a feast of rejoicing!
Day and night leap and have thy delight!
Put on clean raiment,
Wash thy head and bathe thee in water,
Look cheerily at the child who holdeth thy hand,
And may thy wife have joy in thy arms!*

Gilgamesh continued with his quest, and crossed the Waters of Death to find Utnapishtim, the man who had achieved immortality. Utnapishtim was the survivor of the Great Flood. In pity, he told Gilgamesh where to find the plant of eternal youth. So Gilgamesh dove into the bottom of the sea; he found the plant, but exhausted, he fell asleep. A serpent stole the plant while he was asleep. Finally, Gilgamesh realized the inevitability of death, and that immortality came from the good a person achieved in his life.

Sumerian Foods Mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh:
Caper buds, wild cucumber, ripe figs, grapes, several edible leaves and stems, honey, meat seasoned with herbs, and bread—a kind of pancake made of barley flour mixed with sesame seed flour and onions (Trager 7). While traveling, Gilgamesh carried chickpeas with him, as the following lines show:

*They dug a pit in the sunlight.
Then Gilgamesh went up on the mountain.
He poured out his chickpeas into the pit.
"Oh, Mountain, grant (me) a dream..." (Levey 50)*

As to how these breads were made, there is ample information in the Babylonian recipes of bird pies (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 11-15). Interestingly, the whole process was summarized in a letter written by Bel-ibni, a general of Assurbanipal's army. "They grind the grains, sift [the flour], knead [the dough]... and bake. They eat [this bread] and live thereby" (Levey 48). That's it!

Bread back then had the same uses as they do today. They ate it by itself with a drink, broke it to pieces and used it to scoop their stews. Sometimes the bread itself served as a plate on which other cooked foods were put. The Ethiopians still serve their food, even in the most affluent restaurants, in this way, using their flat sour *anjera* bread simultaneously as a plate and a scoop. Bread was made into shapes other than flat, such as balls, rings, and crescents (Ellison "Methods of Food Preparation" 91).

All the aforementioned varieties of breads were baked at home. However, there is also evidence that in the big ancient cities of Mesopotamia, bread making was a flourishing organized industry. Apprentices were to serve their masters, the 'nuhatimmu,' for 15 months to learn the tricks of the trade (Levey 48).

There is also evidence that the ancient Mesopotamians used domed brick ovens (Arabic *fun*), in which the baked food and bread were put directly on the heated floor of the oven. However, these were definitely used for communal and commercial baking. Excavations in 1997 in the northern Mesopotamian city of Tell Brak have revealed remains such an oven belonging to the fourth millennium BC (www.antiquity.ac.uk/projGall/emberling02/, accessed 28 Nov. 2008).

Baking with the Medieval Baghdadis

During the medieval times, the milling industry flourished in the Islamic world to the extent that "water mills were used everywhere (Hassan and Hill 214). This advanced technique made possible the production of a variety of flour grades, the most important of which were white flour and semolina (*samid* derived from the Akkadian 'samidu'). The outcome was a myriad of breads that adorned the tables of the Caliphs and the commoners alike. Hospitality was judged by how much bread was served with the meal. Aesthetically, the beauty of the *khiwan* (dining table) was measured by the number and variety of breads displayed on it. Writing from 13th-century Andalusia, the anonymous writer of cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala*, commended the caliphs of al-Mashriq (the Abbasid Caliphate, the center of which was Baghdad) for their love of bread. They would command their bakers to make a variety of breads, beautifully displayed on a huge tray called *tabaq al-'ardh* (display tray), and they would choose as their appetites dictated (52). He also says they made many kinds of bread and gave each of which a specific name (52).

Among the grains used in making bread, wheat was deemed the best for its balanced properties. Three varieties of bread were made of wheat flour. The first is *khubz sameedh*, made with *sameedh* flour (bran-free, high in starch, and low in gluten, called *darmak* in medieval Andalusia and al-Maghrib). It was nicknamed *abu al-badr* (father of the full moon) due to its impressive whiteness. *Khubz huwwara* was another fine variety made with *huwwara* flour (bran-free, made from red wheat, which is high in gluten). *Khubz khushkar* was made with whole-wheat/wholemeal flour from which nothing is removed.

Next comes barley, which was believed to produce poor quality bread, dark, heavy, and prone to crumbling. Rice was used in making *khubz al-aruzz*, especially in the southern city of Basra. It was a cheap variety of bread; thought to be hard on the digestion. Leavened bread (*mukhtamir*) was generally believed to be easier to digest than the unleavened varieties (*fateer*).

Singing praises of the Baghdadi bread, the persona in 10th-century *Al-Risala al-Baghdadiyya* (Abu Hayyan al-Tawheedi 151-52) amusingly described it as follows: it is made with excellent flour - white with a tinge of tan. When kneaded, it is as elastic as gum, and stretches as if it were *kundur* (also called *lubaan* 'frankincense'), and sticks to the fingers. When eaten, it squeaks between the molars, and is so chewy that it exhausts the jaws. It is such a joy just to look at it, and a single morsel would gratify your heart's desire. In all probability what is being described here is *khubz ma'rouk*, called so because the dough was kneaded vigorously to release the gluten in the flour. Al-Warraaq includes a recipe (Chapter 13). It was deemed easier to digest than other breads because it was kneaded well and fully fermented. Here is how the Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi described a baker while kneading it:

رأيت في يد الخباز بعركه فوق القوداه كمثل الدرّ تمر
 إغوا تاول منه وره رجعت كالنوى من كفه أوحى من القدر

*I saw it first on the baker's board, being pressed
 and kneaded,
 And like springing pearls, it bounced back.
 He took a pearl, and faster than fate itself,
 He put it back, looking like a shield.*

Khubz al-ma' (literally 'water bread') was basic leavened bread - flat, light, and porous - baked in the clay oven *tannour*, as it has always been ever since ancient times. We are lucky to have a medieval recipe for making it in al-Warraaq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 13). The commercial bakery *fun* 'brick oven' was the place to go to for a variety of bread called *khubz al-fun* 'brick-oven bread.' It was crusty and pithy bread, thick and domed. Such bakeries were always subject to inspection by *al-muhtasib* (inspector) for quality control (Hassan and Hill 219). They also prided themselves on baking the unleavened ruqaq breads, large and thin. It was usually baked on *taabaq*, which was a slab of fired-brick or a sheet of

metal. However, we learn from al-Warraaq's recipe that they were also baked in the *tannour*, one at a time (Chapter 13). *Ruqaq labiq* was the soft and malleable variety. *Ruqaq kazmazaj* was the dry and thin variety. It was sprinkled with *kazmazaj* seeds (seeds of tamarisk tree). This variety was especially recommended for thin slave girls and boys to help them gain weight. Another refined sort of bread, *muwarraq* (layered), was prepared by rolling out dough ruqaq way, brushing it with oil or butter, folding it, then rolling it out again. This procedure was repeated several times. When baked, the bread would look puffy and layered. *Awraq al-ruqaq* (sheets of thin bread) were proudly displayed on the medieval *khiwan* (dining table), a testimony on the skill of the baker and the good taste and hospitality of the host. They were spread in piles all around the table, or were rolled or folded on appetizing herbs. These thin breads also had other uses, such as to enclose other

Ibn al-Rumi on Ruqaq Bread

Ibn al-Rumi (d.c. 896) is the famous Abbasid poet, who lived and died in Baghdad. He was described as a glutton whose death was caused by a cookie/biscuit laced with poison, due to some satirical verses he composed on a vizier (al-Mas'udi 661). Following is an example on the beautiful verses he composed on food, in which he describes thin rounds of flat bread, called *ruqaq* (my translation):

*I remember once a baker by whom I passed,
 As fast as lightning ruqaq bread he was flattening.
 Between seeing it turning from a ball in his hands
 To a large full circle like the moon,
 Took only as much time as an ever-growing circle in water takes,
 When a stone into it is thrown.*

Bottle Bread (Khubz al-Qanani): A Recipe from al-Warraq's 10th-Century Baghdadi Cookbook

Besides the regular traditional flat breads, al-Warraq's *Kitab al-Tabeeh* (Chapter 13) contains some unusual bread recipes, such as 'bottle bread.' Here is how to prepare it (my translation):

☞ Make soft dough similar in consistency to that of *zalabiya* [consistency of pancake batter], using as much as needed of good quality fine *samidh* flour [high in starch and bran-free,] [and water].

☞ Pour a small amount of pure olive oil (*zayt naqi*) or sesame oil into wide-mouthed heatproof thin bottles, and sprinkle the inside with rose water. Pour the batter into the bottles until they are almost full. Place the filled bottles on flat tiles (*qarameed*) spread in the bottom of the *tannour*, and let them bake in medium heat until done. To test for doneness, insert a toothpick (*khilal*) into the baking dough. If it comes out clean, it is done.

☞ When you take out the bottles and break them, the breads will come out looking like bottles, God willing. [To serve,] moisten the breads, if you like, with refined sweetened milk perfumed with mastic and rose water, or with milk and honey, or eat it plain, God willing.

foods when making *maghmouma* and *judhaba* (see Introduction 00) or to use as wrappers for the filled pastry *sanbusaj*.

For sandwiches, they sometimes used *ruqaq* bread, and just rolled them around the filling. To serve, they sliced the filled roll into dainty discs, called *bazmaward*. When *furrani* bread was used, it was split open and pith was removed. After filling the inside of the bread, it was pressed down well, and then sliced. These sandwiches were called *awsat*. There is also evidence that they used a simple device, a latticed metal washer-like disc (*ward mushabbak*) when baking bread for sandwiches. It was put inside the bread before baking it, and was removed after baking. The function was to create a pocket inside the bread to put the sandwich filling in (al-Baghdadi's augmented version *Wasf al-At'ima* 381--82).

Bread was indispensable for serving their stews, since they were traditionally offered as *thareed* (bread sopped in its liquid), which was the main hot dish in the *Abbasid* meal. Bread was also essential with *udm* (sing. *idam*), which were the appetizers and other preliminary dishes offered at the beginning of the meal. It was also used in place of a spoon to scoop dishes with little sauce in them.

However, when on the go, they consumed *khubz al-malla*, a rustic unrefined sort of bread baked in *malla*, a pit in which flattened dough was baked in the heat of ashes and stones. The bread was also called *madhroub* because it had to be struck with a stick after it was taken out of the *malla* to shake off ashes and sand. This is an ancient bread-making technique that is still used today especially by Bedouins.

The Modern Baking Scene

The bread-making scene has undergone little changes over the centuries, a testimony to the practicality and workability of ancient and medieval ways of baking. Rolling out unleavened dough thin, and baking it on *saj* (domed metal plate) is still done in northern Iraq, by the Bedouins both nomadic and settled, and dwellers of the southern marshes. As for the leavened flat bread,

it is still baked in the same clay ovens as of old days, except that some of the modern *tannours*, especially the commercially operated ones, are fuelled with gas or kerosene. But there is nothing like the genuine traditionally baked bread touched by the smoky aroma of the smoldering coals of brushwood. The baker, normally the woman of the house, wraps her hands from wrists to elbows with pieces of cloth to protect her hands from the heat of the fire. The woman takes the fermented ball of dough and flattens it by wetting her hands and flipping the enlarging disc from hand to hand. The dough, as if by magic, gets bigger and thinner. She then puts it on a slightly domed bread cushion, even up the edges, and slaps the disc against the hot inner wall of the *tannour*. The breads, 8 to 10 breads a batch, will soon develop golden small bubbles all over their faces, and within 5 minutes, the baked breads start to peel away from the wall, and are ready to be picked up with long-handled tongs. The baked bread is then spread on a huge wicker basket. It is normally consumed while still warm.

For the children of the house, a treat awaits. Tiny breads called *hannunat*, a gesture of love and caring. A better treat in the good old ignorant days would have been hot bread spread with *dihin hurr* (clarified butter), and sprinkled with sugar. Sometimes the bread is rolled around fresh herbs and greens and distributed among the neighbors in fulfillment of a vow (*nidhir*), which a member of the family had made when a problem is solved or a wish is fulfilled. This is called *khubz il-Abbas*, after the name of a Muslim Imam.

Besides *khubz il-tannour*, commercial brick-oven baked bread was also available. It was called *sammoun*. I have always wondered about the name of this commercial bread but M. Yerasimos (*500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine* 133) set my mind to rest. In her chapter on breads and pastries, she mentions *somun* in passing. She says it is round and plump bread, which was one of the three types of bread known to the Ottomans, long before the 18th century. *Somun*, she explains, is derived from the Greek *psomos*, a generic name for bread. Mystery

The Grinder's Dilemma

By Iraqi folk poet Mulla Abboud al-Karkhi (d.1946)

*I throw myself into grinding, though I know grinding will do me harm.
But soon after, I break the grinder and curse whomever it belongs to.*

solved! However, as we have seen, commercially baked bread was quite common during the Abbasid era. It was called *furrani*, after the oven *furn*, in which it was baked, and from Yerasimos' description, it was the same as the Ottoman *somun*, round and plump. The diamond shape, typical of the Iraqi *sammoun*, must have been a later development, a kind of modern Iraqi touch to this old bread, for I have not seen similar bread anywhere else.

Up until the sixties or so, almost every household used to have a *tannour* installed, usually built with working surfaces on both sides. For safety, the *tannour* oven was built outside the dwelling areas, such as at a corner in the porch, the garden, or on the versatile roof of the house.

In the western world where most of the roofs are sloped, and are good only for installing TV antennas and satellite dishes, the function of Middle-Eastern flat roofs might not be fully grasped. A few sentences on this might not be amiss.

Besides serving as a 'bake house,' the roof, on warm sunny winter days and cool summer evenings could be used as a playground for children, especially in houses without gardens. However, rope jumping was not allowed, but who would listen, we even played soccer and basketball over there. For a change of scene, people might picnic up there, such as having an early breakfast on breezy summer mornings, or lunch on warm winter days. It is also a good place for drying up the laundry, and is perfect as a quiet study-room. It is also the

place where some young men called *mutyerchiyya* (pigeon-fliers) practice their hobby of rearing and flying domesticated pigeons by whistling and waving to them with a brightly colored piece of cloth. A hobby often deemed frivolous. While watching television the other day, I was amused to see that some people still practice this hobby on the roofs of skyscrapers in New York. During the cool summer nights, the roof serves as an open air 'bedroom.' It is a pleasant thing to do, except on occasions when a dust storm takes the sleepers by surprise, covering everything, including the sleepers themselves, with a film of fine reddish dust, or when mosquitoes are in the mood for late 'dinner.' This naturally does not mean that people sleep in public as mistakenly thought by one of the visitors to the area (Fagan 44). The high walls, usually built all around the roof, help give the sleepers a kind of enclosure and a sense of privacy. As a further protection from the prying eyes of neighbors or the bloodthirsty mosquitoes, the beds sometimes are enclosed with white muslin called *kulla*. For the thirsty sleepers there is the cool water of *tunga*, the earthenware porous pitcher, with its mouth always covered with a piece of muslin to keep water clean. As for the sleepless, there is always the beautiful crowded night sky to enjoy. However, I most of the time ended up sleeping with my glasses on, for I liked to doze off with the clear sight of the twinkling stars filling my eyes.

Uses of Bread

A meal is not complete without the warm and crispy rounds of bread. Sometimes the bread is a dish by itself, as when it is rolled for a sandwich. It is also an eating utensil used for scooping food off a dish. Indeed, this has always been the case with bread. A recurrent ancient scene depicted on cylinder seals and plaques, is that of seated figures, scooping food from plates with pieces of '*tanuru*' bread. The flat breads sometimes function as plates on which other cooked foods are put. Bread is not called the staff of life for nothing. Indeed, it is an emblem of life itself, as one of the names of bread,

Of Bread and Flies: Medieval Reflections

*Life is like a bread smeared with honey.
A fly fell for it, got stuck, and lost its wings and died. Had it been content with plain dry bread, it would have survived.*

(al-Dhahabi Tareekh al-Islam 1224, my translation)

ewish (living), connotes. Passing away is sometimes euphemistically expressed by saying that the person "has eaten all his bread." According to the ethical social codes, you are supposed to remain faithful with whom you have shared bread and salt. This connection between bread and salt was established millennia ago. We know this from a Sumerian proverb on poverty:

*If you have bread, you have no salt,
If you have salt, you have no bread.*

Bread is symbolic of God's bounty. Therefore, it should be treated with all due respect. As children, we were cautioned against stepping on bread for it is *haram* (forbidden) to do this. If a God-fearing person comes across a piece of bread on the floor he is supposed to lift it up, make a kissing gesture, lift it up to his forehead, in acknowledgement of God's bounty, and put it away from the feet of careless walkers. Throwing away bread is also *haram*. Indeed, this might explain the existence of a wide variety of dishes that use stale bread, which is characteristic of the Arabo-Muslim cuisine in general.

IRAQI FLAT BREAD

Khubz il-Tannour| Khubuz Mei Makes 8 flat breads
15in/38cm across or 15 flat breads 9in/23cm across



Finished Iraqi flatbreads.

Below: The heated dough generates humidity which causes the face of the khubuz to develop attractive bubbles.



Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook provides a detailed recipe for making it. Al-Warraq gives it two names: *khubz al-ma'* and *khubz Nabati*, i.e. bread of the indigenous Iraqis, which is a testament to its local roots (more information on Nabateans 000 below). Compared with commercially bought *khubuz mei*, homemade variety is denser in texture and a little darker in hue because it is made mostly with whole wheat/wholemeal flour. Unfortunately, up until recently, this was not considered a virtue in bread. Homemade *khubuz* can also be bought from privately run 'bakeries,' usually the home of a needy woman, mostly a widow, who would sell bread to support her family. She is called *khabbaza*.

Dough for this bread should be soft and somewhat wet, so that when it is flattened and slapped into the inner wall of the hot *tannour*, it will generate humidity, which, in turn, will cause the face of the *khubuz* to develop attractive bubbles, characteristic of this variety.

This leavened bread is as ancient as the Sumerian civilization itself is, and the way it is prepared and baked now has undergone little changes. As they say in the United States, "If it ain't broken, don't fix it." Up until recently, bread was leavened with a piece of dough, called *shunga*, which worked as a starter. It was usually kept in a covered container to be used for the following day's baking by incorporating it into the new batch.

The components of the bread are quite basic: wheat flour, salt, starter (yeast) and plain water, which throws light on its name, *khubuz mei* (water bread).

I have never used the clay oven *tannour*, nor have I ever tried to make *khubz il-tannour* myself, that is, until I came with my family to the United States. It was nowhere to be found, and we missed it a lot. So driven by necessity, I started experimenting in my small kitchen, with the help of hints from a friend. The major problem was how to prevent it from sticking to the pan, because no oil is used in making or handling the dough, just pure water. Another problem was how to flatten the dough. My first attempts to emulate the way of the masters by flipping the dough from hand to hand to enlarge the disc were a disaster. Most of the flattened discs ended up falling on the floor, or acquired pathetically funny shapes. Sprinkling the surface of the pan with flour before flattening the dough on it did not work either. The flour burnt, and triggered the smoke detector. Semolina flour helped a little but was too messy. At last, and in an epiphanic moment, the idea came to me - use parchment paper! Ever since baking *khubz il-tannour* in the convenience of my kitchen has become just a breeze.

One last note, I have experimented with paper other than parchment, such as wax paper, aluminum foil, and brown paper, but results were not satisfactory. Besides, parchment paper is reusable until it becomes brittle.

3 tablespoons dry yeast

9 cups (2.25 liters) warm water

(it should feel comfortably warm to the dipped finger)

20 cups (5lb/2.27kg) flour

(A good combination will be one part whole wheat wholemeal flour, and three parts bread strong four)

2 tablespoons salt, preferably sea salt

A little semolina or wheat bran for sprinkling on work surface

Cut out circles of parchment paper, a little bigger than bread size

Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

☞ In a medium bowl, mix dry yeast and warm water. Stir with a wire whisk, and set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, put measured flour in a big deep container. I use a plastic container 10 in./25 cm in diameter and 7 in/18cm deep. Mix in salt.

☞ Make a well in the middle, and pour in yeast mixture. Stir liquid into the flour in a circular movement, with a wooden spoon, until all flour is incorporated into the liquid.

☞ Wet both hands with warm water, and start kneading lightly, wetting the hands every time dough gets too sticky to handle, until dough pulls away from sides of bowl, and is less sticky to handle, about 6 minutes. The finished dough should be soft and look somewhat wet. This soft consistency will make it easier for the bread to develop those characteristic bubbles all over the surface. Smoothen surface of dough with wet hands. Cover bowl and let rise in a warm draft-free place for about 45 minutes. Half way through rising time, pinch down and lightly knead the dough with wetted hands.

☞ Fifteen minutes before baking, preheat the oven. If you have a baking stone put it on the lowest shelf of the electric oven (but directly on the oven floor if it is gas) as soon as you preheat it, otherwise it might crack if you expose it to sudden change of temperature. If you do not have a stone, put a large baking sheet upside down on the lowest shelf, and another one on the highest shelf.

☞ After dough has risen, punch it down lightly with wet hands. Generously sprinkle two big trays or a big working space with semolina or wheat bran. Divide dough into 8 or 15 portions, which you form into balls by gathering the sides and tucking them in, and put them on the trays or working space. Always handle this dough with wet hands.

☞ To flatten dough portions, put one cut out parchment paper on an inverted tray (any flat and solid transferable surface will do), and place it on a warm place. Then put one portion of dough on paper.

With moistened fingertips flatten with swift jabs to all directions until a thin disc about 15in/38cm in diameter is formed (or 9in/23cm). Let the marks of your fingertips show on the surface. Moisten your fingers as often as you need while doing this. In fact, the more moisture the better, for this will create humidity in the oven while baking, which is good for this bread. Let the disc rest for 5 minutes before baking.

☞ Open the oven door and draw out one third of the lower rack. Transfer the flattened dough with the help of the tray (or whatever you are using) to the level of the lower rack. Swiftly transfer disc with paper by pulling it from the uncovered edges of the paper into the heated stone or inverted pan. If the paper happens to fold or wrinkle while transferring, smooth out folds so that it lays flat.

☞ Immediately, start working on the second piece, repeating the same procedure. After about 5 minutes of baking, transfer first baking bread to upper shelf, also with the help of the uncovered edges of paper. By now, it should have developed bubbles on its face. Put second piece on the stone or inverted pan. Flatten the third piece and get it ready for baking. Repeat the same procedure with the rest of the pieces.

☞ Have ready, a big wicker tray or rack. As soon as the first bread on the upper shelf is nicely browned, especially the bubbly parts, in about 4 to 5 minutes, take it out of the oven. Peel paper off the baked bread immediately, and put it in a wicker tray or rack. Reuse parchment paper if it is still in good condition. Avoid stacking finished breads while still hot, as this will cause the attractive bubbles to deflate. You can do this when they cool off.

The whole procedure should go fast because each bread would take less than 10 minutes to bake. Keep cooled off breads in plastic bags to prevent them from drying out. Freeze for future use any amount you cannot consume in 2 or 3 days. To heat frozen bread, put it in the oven at 350°F (175°C/ gas mark 4) for 5 to 7 minutes or until hot. It will taste as fresh as newly baked bread.

Iraqi Folk Song

Like wheat between the riverbank and water
planted, was I left stranded.

They neither said "God be with you,"
nor bad me farewell.

Variations on Iraqi Flat Bread

From the basic recipe above, you can make the following assortment of breads. Be creative and make your own variations.

Bread with Sesame or Nigella Seeds:

After you flatten the bread, sprinkle its surface with dry toasted sesame seeds, or nigella seeds (see Glossary).

Bread with Herbs and Cheese:

Make delicious aromatic bread by mixing the following ingredients with the dough before flattening it on parchment paper. The amount given is enough for making 2 large breads. After punching the dough as directed in the sixth step above, add the following to what equals two portions of dough (feel free to use your favorite fresh herbs):

¼ cup (3oz/85g) shredded mozzarella cheese

¼ cup (3oz/85g) crumbled feta cheese

¼ cup (6oz/180g) grated Pecorino Romano cheese

1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped parsley

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped mint or basil

¼ cup (15g) chopped fresh dill or

1 tablespoon dill weed

2 tablespoons za'tar (see Glossary) or fresh thyme

☞ Mix well. Incorporate into dough, and then divide into two portions (or more if smaller breads are desired). Prepare and bake bread as directed above.

SPICY BREAD WITH MEAT AND VEGETABLES

Kubuz 'Uroog/Khubuz Laham Makes 4 big breads

By adding ground/minced meat, chopped vegetables, and spices you will get tasty and nourishing bread. You might call it the Iraqi counterpart of pizza, in which meat and vegetables are mixed with the dough. The bread is called *Khubuz Laham* because of the meat added to it. As to why it is called *Khubuz 'Uroog/'Uroog*, there is no one 'official' theory. Some think the word '*uroog*' is derived from the Arabic verb 'to branch like veins,' which describes the way the bread looks when mixed with the vegetables and meat. Others believe it is from '*iraq*, meat scraped from the bones (*Abu Hayyan al-Tawheed* 335, n.1). I think that the nomenclature might be taken further back to the Ancient times when vegetables in Akkadian were called '*arqu*.' Besides, there is a hint in one of the Babylonian recipes that the practice of mixing meat with dough was already known. There were directions to clean *sasku*-flour and "add it to the meat, which you have first chopped" (*Bottéro Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 15). To make this delicious bread, mix the following ingredients with half the fermented dough, divide it into 4 portions, and bake, following the same procedure, except that this bread will take a little longer to bake to allow meat to cook well. Traditionally lots of chopped fat from sheep's tail is added. A lighter touch is given here by replacing it with olive oil. You may leave out meat if you want to make it vegetarian.

1½ pounds (675g) ground/minced lamb or beef. If lean meat is used, add 3 tablespoons olive oil
2 cups (4oz/115g) parsley, chopped
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), chopped
2 teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1 tablespoon baharat (see Glossary)
1 teaspoon curry powder



Traditional Ways with Flat Bread

Dibis w'Rashi نيس وراثشي (date syrup with *tahini*/sesame paste):

☞ Serve bread warm with the traditional dip of *dibis w'rashi*: put some date syrup in a bowl, and drizzle it generously with tahini. Proportions depend on your personal preference. Interestingly, combining date syrup with tahini was encouraged in medieval times because tahini (called *rahshi* back then, cf. today's *rashi*) was believed to be hard to digest. However, eating it with honey or date syrup would help it go through the system faster (*Ibn Jazla*, fol. 110r).

A Kurdish Treat:

☞ Serve bread warm with a dip of drained yogurt (see Chapter 2), or roll it around warm toasted walnuts. Have with it sweetened hot tea.

Khamee'a خميعة (bread sopped in milk):

☞ Boil a cup of milk with 1 teaspoon sugar, and pour it into a bowl. Cut a piece of hot freshly baked bread into bite-size pieces and add to the milk. Traditionally it is drizzled with a generous amount of sizzling hot clarified butter.

In the anonymous 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala fi Alwan al-At'ima* (163) a similar recipe is called *thareed al-haleeb* (bread sopped in milk).

BREAD SIMMERED IN TAMARIND SAUCE

Mahroog Isib'a (his finger is burned)/Tishribaya Makes 4 small servings

Iraqi Folk Song

*I came to light the tannour, and the flower fell.
 Let go of me, soul of my soul, I hear my
 mother calling.*

A delicious way of consuming stale Iraqi flat bread. Apparently, people eating this dish end up getting their fingers burnt. It is so delicious they could hardly wait for it to cool off a little. It may substitute a side dish of rice or potatoes.

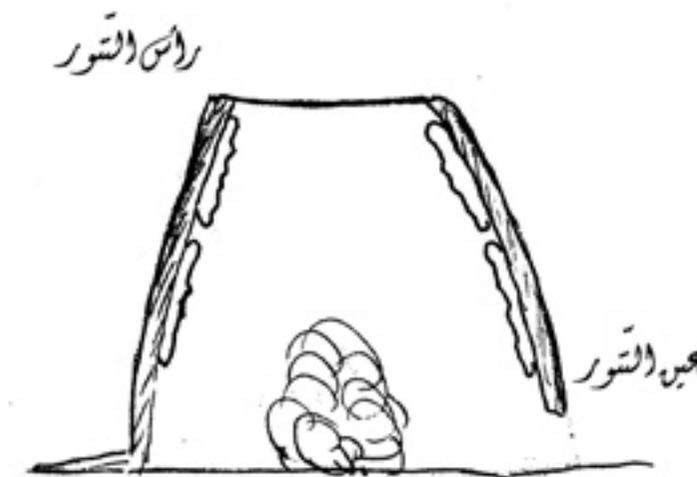
2 tablespoons oil
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g) coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon curry powder
½ teaspoon turmeric
1 garlic clove, grated, optional
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
2 heaping tablespoons tomato paste, or ½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce, optional
1 tablespoon tamarind concentrate, may be substituted with 1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
½ big Iraqi flat bread (plain), broken into pieces
For garnish:
 dry mint, and yogurt

☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil and sauté onion until transparent, about 6 minutes. Add curry powder and turmeric a few moments before onion is done, and stir until aromatic.

☞ Add garlic, salt, pepper, chili, tomato paste or sauce, and tamarind syrup. Stir together for a few minutes.

☞ Add bread, and cover with hot water by up to 2in/5cm. Stir briefly to allow bread to mix with spices. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer, covered, until most of the liquid evaporates, about 20 minutes. Fold twice while simmering.

☞ Transfer to a big platter, sprinkle with dry mint and drizzle with yogurt. And don't forget to let it cool off a little!



Sketch showing the principle workings of the tannour

Turkumani Treats

Turkumans are an Iraqi ethnic minority in the northern region, particularly in the city of Kirkuk. Their cooking has a lot in common with the general Iraqi cuisine, but they also have some specialties in which grains and yogurt are used.

Mastawa is a soup-like dish in which shelled wheat is simmered in yogurt, with lots of mint.

Kishkak is another soup in which kishk (also called *kasham*) is used to make a hearty soup, flavored with mint. *Kishk* is dough made of yogurt and bulgur, shaped into patties and dried, and used to flavor and enrich sauces. A recipe for preparing this type of *kishk* is included in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 40). It seems that the *Turkumans* have always had their own way of preparing it. According to a medieval recipe, called *kishk Turkumani*, in al-Baghdadi's 14th-century augmented version *Kitab Wasf al-At'ima* (323), yogurt is drained, and then shaped into loaves and dried in the sun. Its other name *kasham* is testimony enough to its ancient origin. In the

Babylonian stew recipes a similar ingredient was called '*kishimmu*, and the similarity is uncanny (see Introduction, Section VI.1).

Belamaj is an interesting dish prepared by browning flour in oil, and adding liquid to it to make gravy of medium consistency. It is flavored with a little sugar, cinnamon, and garlic, and poured on broken pieces of fresh flat bread.

It is reminiscent of the medieval flour based soups, and resembles the American traditional breakfast treat of biscuits with gravy.

Karawan Asha is a simpler version of the *Tishribaya* (bread cooked in flavorful sauce, see recipe above). As the name suggests, it must have originally been one of those practical dishes for which travelers used stale or dry bread. The dish is prepared by browning onion in oil first. Then water or broth, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and broken pieces of stale or dry flat bread are added. It is to be simmered until most of the liquid evaporates and bread is pleasantly moist. (For information on *Turkumani* dishes, I am indebted to my friend Amal al-Toma)

An Iraqi Saying Cautioning against Bad Management

He who does not manage his affairs wisely,
His wheat will devour his barley.

BARLEY BREAD

Khubuz il-Shi'eer Makes 2 breads

Barley bread was one of the earliest breads to be baked on the ancient land of Mesopotamia. Though people in rural areas never stopped making it, in the big cities it unfortunately grew out of vogue for the last two or three decades. It was looked down upon as being too rustic for city slickers. It became synonymous with utter deprivation, as in the following Iraqi saying:

خبز الشعير على الفقير حرام

For the poor, even barley bread is too dear to have.

Barley flour is now believed to make healthy and tasty bread, rich in cholesterol-lowering soluble fibers. In texture, it is denser than wheat bread because it lacks the glutinous proteins that help bread to rise and acquire a light texture. Therefore, when baked, barley bread cannot develop those attractive bubbles that appear on the face of baked flat wheat bread. To help it rise, I add a little wheat bread flour, wheat bran and gluten if available. The following proportions make 2 big flat barley breads (14in/35cm across):

1 tablespoon dry yeast
3 cups (715ml) warm water
4 cups (16oz/450g) barley flour
1 cup (4oz/115g) bread/strong flour
1 cup wheat bran, optional
1 tablespoon gluten, optional
(but it does help the texture a lot)
1 teaspoon salt
¼ cup (1oz/30g) sesame seeds, dry toasted, for sprinkling on bread

- ☞ Dissolve yeast in water, and set aside in a warm place for 5 minutes.
- ☞ In a big bowl, mix the flours, bran, gluten if used, and salt. Make a well in the middle.
- ☞ Pour yeast mixture, and follow the same instructions in making Iraqi flat bread, above. The finished dough should be somewhat soft. When



A hawan (wooden pestle and mortar)

kneading you will notice that the dough will feel funny, like kneading a piece of clay. This is because barley dough does not have enough gluten in it.

- ☞ Let dough rise for about 1 hour in a warm place, then punch down and divide it into 2 portions. Follow the same instructions of Iraqi bread regarding heating the oven and shaping the breads. Sprinkle with toasted sesame, and allow shaped discs to rise for about 15 minutes.
- ☞ Bake as directed in Iraqi flat bread.

FLAT BREAD WITH DILL

Khubuz bil-Shibint Makes two 12in/30cm flat breads

I developed this bread to incorporate two of my favorite ingredients, dill, and potatoes. It is in fact a variation on the traditional flat bread. Although I prefer to use wheat bran and whole wheat/wholemeal flour in my breads, for this recipe I use unbleached bread white flour, mainly for the sake of contrast between the vibrant greenness of the dill and the attractive ivory whiteness of the dough.

2 medium potatoes (about 8oz), peeled, cut into cubes, boiled and drained. Reserve 1 cup (250ml) of drained liquid (keep warm), and mashed drained potatoes
2 tablespoons dry yeast
1 teaspoon sugar
1 cup (250ml) warm water
4½ cups (510g) bread/strong flour
2 teaspoons salt (preferably sea salt)
1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped fresh dill, packed
¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
Toasted sesame seeds, optional
Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

☞ In a small bowl dissolve dry yeast and sugar in 1 cup (250ml) warm water. Set aside in a warm place for about 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl mix flour and salt, and make a well in the middle. Add mashed potatoes, dill, olive oil, yeast mixture, and reserved cup of drained potato liquid. With a wooden spoon, stir mixture in a circular movement to incorporate flour into the other ingredients. Then with oiled hands (for it will be sticky) knead mixture for about 6 minutes. The final dough will be somewhat soft and sticky. Oil on both sides and let it rise, covered, in a warm and draft-free place, for about 1 hour.

☞ Punch dough down, and divide into 2 equal parts. Prepare 2 circles of parchment paper, about 12in/30cm in diameter, and place them on a transferable flat surface, such as a big tray turned upside down, or a piece of hard cardboard. With oiled hands, spread each dough portion on the parchment paper, spreading and flattening as you go to make a flat disc, about 12in/30cm in diameter. Make sure to leave your fingerprints on the entire surface for this will create an interesting surface when baked. If parchment paper is not available, then generously oil 2 large baking sheets and flatten the portions on them. Sprinkle with sesame seeds if wished. Let rise in a warm place for about 30 minutes. No need to cover the rising breads because surface will stay moist from the oil used in spreading the dough.

☞ If you have a baking stone, put it on the lowest rack of the oven if it is electric (if gas, put it on the oven floor) when you turn on the oven. If you do not have a stone, then just turn a large baking sheet upside down, and place it on the lowest oven rack. When ready to bake, transfer risen flattened dough with the support used underneath it, and lower it to the level of the stone or the upside-down baking sheet. With the help of the parchment paper, transfer the disc to the oven. If dough is flattened on a baking sheet, then put the flattened dough with the baking sheet on the stone. If no stone is used then place the baking sheet on the center oven rack. Meanwhile get the other batch ready.

☞ Let the bread bake for about 10 minutes, or until the surface nicely browns in spots. Take it out of the oven and immediately peel off the paper. Let it cool on a rack or a wicker tray. Repeat with the other portion.

BRICK-OVEN BREAD

Sammoun



An Ideal Sumerian Mother

In a touching Sumerian document, a traveling son, named Ludingirra, sends a letter to his worried mother. Since his courier is a stranger, the son has to describe her for him so that he may recognize her. Here is one of the signs:

*Let me give you my mother's third sign:
 My mother is rain in its season, water for the prime seed,
 A rich harvest, very fine (?) barley,
 A garden of plenty, full of delight,
 A well-watered fir tree, adorned with fir cones,
 Fruit of the New Year, the yield of the first month,
 A canal carrying the fertilizing waters to the irrigation ditches,
 A very sweet Dilmun date, a prime date much sought after.*

At the end of the letter, the son writes, "Ludingirra, your beloved son gives you greetings" (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 334, 335).



Sammoun is brick-oven bread, usually bought from the neighborhood commercial bakeries in the cities. It is white bread, traditionally shaped into diamonds, a little bit bigger than the palm of the hand, puffy and wide in the middle, and tapered into two rounded crisp ends. Some brick-oven breads took other shapes later on but it is all sammoun to us. When making sandwiches, the inside is usually scraped out. Flat bread by contrast is rolled around the filling, nothing is wasted.

The name is a loan word from Turkish *somun*, which in turn is of Greek origin, *psomos*, a generic name for bread. During the Ottoman period, this variety was

known well before the 18th century, and was described as round and plump (Yerasimos 133). In medieval Baghdad, brick-oven bread, called *khubz al-furn*, was similar in shape to the Ottoman *somun*. It seems that the diamond shape was developed by the early 20th-century Iraqi bakers, for I have not seen similar bread elsewhere. In his observations on life in Baghdad in the 1920s, Abbas Baghdadi says that *sammoun* was more readily available in the trendy quarters of the Rusafa side of Baghdad. An inferior and cheaper *sammoun* variety was made with whole wheat/wholemeal. This was not popular, as it was dense and darkish in hue. Its name was *sammoun il-'askar il-asmar* (soldiers' brown bread), in acknowledgment of its high nutritious value but inferior texture and looks (376).

In the big cities, bread is usually bought before a meal is served to ensure its freshness. I remember when as children we used to be sent to the neighborhood bakery at noontime, the line seemed to be a mile long. Not that we minded. The wait was whiled away by chattering with friends and neighbors, and as we got nearer to where the action was, the aroma of baking the bread filled the place, and was deliciously intoxicating. We would be mesmerized watching the breads being glazed, slashed, and popped into the huge oven. As a batch came out of the oven, we would cringe at the annoyingly gritty sound made when breads rub against each other, as they were thrown from the baking trays to the big bread wicker box. It was not unusual to go home with blistered fingertips from handling the hot sammouns whose crispy ends had been chewed away on our way back.

Bread can come right to your door if you buy it from vendors, who roam the streets carrying baskets of bread on their heads. The shrill cry of the female vendor "*is-sammoooon, is-sammooon,*" at the early hours of the morning, still rings in my ears. Others might choose to say, "*حار يجوي الصمّون*" (the bread is scorching hot).

The following recipe will enable you to make within a few hours bread similar in appearance and texture to Iraqi sammoun. If you prefer the slow-rising method, then go to the next recipe.

3 tablespoons dry yeast

1 tablespoon sugar

½ cup (125ml) warm water

8 cups (2lb/900g) bread/strong flour

1 cup (3oz/85g) wheat bran, optional

1 tablespoon salt

3 cups (715ml) water, or 2 cups (475ml) milk or

buttermilk and 1 cup (250ml) water

¼ cup (60ml) oil

For glazing: 1 egg white whisked with

1 tablespoon water

Sesame seeds, dry toasted, optional

Semolina flour, or wheat bran to sprinkle on

baking sheets, optional

Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in ½ cup (125ml) warm water, and set aside, 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl, mix flour, bran, if using any, and salt. Make a well in the middle.

☞ Pour yeast mixture, water, and oil into the well.

With a wooden spoon, incorporate liquids into flour in a circular movement. With slightly oiled hands, knead dough for 6 to 7 minutes. The finished dough should have a soft to medium consistency. Oil dough on both sides, and set aside, covered, in a warm draft-free place. Let dough rise until doubled in bulk, about an hour.

Shaping and Baking Sammoun Bread

Preheat the oven, and punch down the dough. The number of breads depends upon shapes and sizes chosen. The following are some suggestions and guidelines, and remember to handle dough with slightly oiled hands:

☞ To make traditional diamond-shaped sammoun, divide dough into 10 portions, and let rest for 10 minutes. Quickly roll one portion between the palms until it becomes about 8in/20cm-long log. Lay it flat on a greased baking sheet, sprinkled with semolina or wheat bran if wished. Then flatten and stretch it to broaden the middle part, and make it look diamond-shaped with two nipple-like ends.

Repeat with rest of pieces, leaving spaces between pieces to allow for expansion. With a very sharp knife or a razor blade, make 2 diagonal slashes, or one long slash in the middle. Allow to rise, loosely covered with a kitchen towel for about 30 minutes at a warm place. When ready to bake, brush pieces of bread with glaze, and sprinkle lightly with dry toasted sesame if desired. Put the baking sheet in middle shelf of the oven, and using a spray bottle filled with water, spray the breads, the interior of the oven, and the oven door (avoid the bulb if there is any), and quickly shut the door to entrap the moisture you have created inside the oven. Repeat the spraying twice during the first 5 minutes of baking. The total baking time is 15 to 18 minutes, or until the breads are golden brown. Immediately transfer breads to a big paper bag lined with a kitchen towel, and partially close the opening to allow some of the steam to escape. For a crispier crust, let breads cool on a wicker basket or a rack.

☞ To make buns, after punching the dough, divide it into 18 to 20 portions, depending on how big you want them to be. Form into smooth balls as follows: hold a portion in one hand, and with the other pull the sides towards the center bottom of the piece. Put the ball, smooth side up, on a greased baking sheet, greased and sprinkled with some semolina, if wished. Leave a good space between portions. Let rest for a

few minutes, then flatten the balls with oiled fingers to ¾in/2cm-thick discs. If dough springs back, let it relax a little further, and try again. Make 2 slashes on the surface with a sharp knife or razor blade. Let rise, covered, for about 20 minutes. Then brush with glaze, spray with water, and bake exactly as described in the diamond-shaped sammoun, above.

☞ To make baguette-like sammouns, after punching dough, divide it into 8 pieces. Let them rest for 10 minutes, then flatten each into a rectangle ½in/1cm thick, and roll from the longer side in a jelly/Swiss-roll fashion. Seal edge well and taper the ends by rolling slightly. Arrange pieces, seam side down, on prepared greased baking sheets, sprinkled with semolina flour or wheat bran, if wished. Leave space between pieces to allow for expansion. Make 3 long diagonal slashes with a sharp knife or a razor blade. Let rise, covered, for about 30 minutes. Brush with the glaze, spray with water, and bake as described in diamond-shaped sammoun, above.

☞ You can also make flat sammoun, impressively large and attractively dimpled. It is good for dipping and scooping: After punching dough, divide it into 4 or 6 parts, depending on how big you want them to be. Form portions into balls and let them rest for 10 minutes. On a surface generously sprinkled with semolina, flour, or wheat bran, roll out a portion with a rolling pin to a disc, ½in/1cm thick. If dough resists and springs back, allow it to relax for a few minutes, and try again. Transfer the flattened disc to a greased large baking sheet, or a cut out round of parchment paper, and let it rest while you do other portions. Cover bread discs loosely, for about 20 minutes.

Preheat oven to 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8. When ready to bake, brush the ones ready to go to the oven with the glaze, and sprinkle surface with dry toasted sesame or nigella seeds if wished. Then lightly make some impressions like dimples on the surface with wet fingertips, avoiding the border of the circle by 1 in./2.5 cm. You need to do this quickly so that bread does not deflate. Immediately put the baking sheet in the

SLOW-RISING SAMMOUN BREAD

oven. If using parchment paper, transfer disc with the help of a hard transferable surface, such as the back of a big tray, and put it on a baking stone or a baking sheet turned upside down. Spray bread and oven 2 to 3 times during the first 5 minutes of baking. Bake for 15 to 17 minutes, or until puffy with dimples, and nicely browned in patches.

Spread (do not stack) baked breads on a wicker basket or a rack, let cool for a few minutes, and then serve. When breads are cool, keep them in plastic bags, and freeze the amounts you cannot consume within 2 days.

Since the joy of bread is having it fresh and warm, I find the following recipe quite convenient. Prepare dough before you go to bed. Let it ferment slowly during the night, and have it ready for baking in the morning. Thus on a weekend morning you'll be able to treat your family to piping hot bread right from your oven. Alternatively, you can prepare the dough in the morning and bake it in the evening at your convenience. Besides, using less dry yeast and allowing bread to ferment along a considerably longer period will yield better quality bread, more porous, and chewier in texture.

1 tablespoon dry yeast
1 tablespoon sugar
4 cups (950ml) water, room temperature
9 cups (36oz/2¼lb/1kg) bread/strong flour
1 cup (3oz/85g) wheat bran, optional
¼ tablespoons salt
¼ cup (60ml) oil
For glazing: 1 egg white whisked with
1 tablespoon water
Dry toasted sesame for sprinkling on breads, optional



An interesting way to shape bread is to make it into a bowl. This way it can hold food and you can eat its contents as well as the bowl itself. This will save you some dishwashing!

ARABIC BREAD/PITA

(Pocket Bread) A Basic Dough Recipe
Il-khubz il-'Arabi Makes 12 breads

☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in water, and set aside for 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl, mix flour, bran if used, and salt. Make a well in the middle, and pour in yeast liquid and oil. Using a wooden spoon stir mixture in a circular movement until well incorporated. With oiled hands knead briefly for about 6 minutes, or until you get a smooth and soft dough. Oil dough on both sides and set aside, covered, at room temperature for 8 to 9 hours.

☞ When ready to bake, punch dough down, and shape and bake as described in Brick-Oven Bread Sammoun, given above. If dough is too elastic to handle after punching because it is cold, let it rest for a while at a warm place. Besides, with this kind of bread you need to let the shaped breads rise at a noticeably warm place to give the cold dough a boost.

Have Your Bowl and Eat It

An interesting way for shaping bread is to make it look like a bowl so that it can hold food. This way you may eat the contents of the bowl as well as the bowl itself. This will save you the trouble of doing some dishwashing.

☞ Make dough for the bread bowls by following directions given in Brick-Oven Bread Sammoun. The size of the bread bowls depends on your preference and purpose. I use cereal bowls as molds to make bread bowls to contain soups that are rather thick in consistency (nearly all the recipes given in the soup chapter can be put in these bowls).

Alternatively, you can fill bowls with salad garnished with beans and boiled eggs to make it a complete meal. Following is how to make the bowls:

☞ Grease or spray the back of small ovenproof bowls. After dough has risen, take a portion the size of a small orange (for cereal bowl size). Flatten it on a surface sprinkled with semolina, and drape it on the inverted greased bowl. Pull the sides to cover the entire surface. Set it aside, covered, for about 30 minutes. Then glaze and sprinkle with sesame seeds if wished. Bake as directed in the recipes.

This variety of flat bread started to make its appearance in Iraq around the late sixties. Some people call it *khubuz Lubnani*, others, *khubuz Suri* (from Syria), or simply *khubuz Arabi*, to differentiate it from the indigenous *tannour* flat bread. Like all flat breads, it is very versatile, used as a scoop or made into sandwiches. The only disadvantage is that it gets dry very quickly, and therefore needs to be stored properly. In the West, this bread is known as pita bread, and it is a little different from the Greek version which does not puff and separate when baked, and is higher in fat content. Although Arabic bread is not hard to come by in the markets nowadays, home-baked bread is far more superior in quality and much cheaper. Following is a recipe for basic dough, with some traditional ways for using it:

2 tablespoons dry yeast
1 tablespoon sugar
½ cup (125ml) warm water
9 cups (2¼lb/36oz/1.15kg) bread/strong flour
(or a blend of 7 cups (28oz/800g) bread/strong flour
and 2 cups (8oz/225g) whole wheat/wholemeal flour
1 cup (3oz/85g) wheat bran, optional
1 tablespoon salt
½ cup (125 ml) oil
1½ cups (375 ml) warm water
1½ cups (375 ml) warm milk
Semolina or flour for sprinkling the work surface

☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in ½ cup (125ml) warm water, set aside in a warm place for 5 minutes.

☞ Put flour, bran if used, and salt in a big bowl. Make a well in the middle.

☞ Pour yeast mixture, oil, milk, and water. With a wooden spoon, incorporate liquids into flour in a circular movement. With slightly oiled hands, knead dough for 7 to 8 minutes. The final dough should be of medium consistency. Oil dough on both sides. Set aside, covered, in a warm draft-free place for 45 minutes or until well risen.



- ☞ Punch the dough down and divide it into 12 portions. Place them on a surface sprinkled with semolina or flour, and cover them with a clean piece of cloth.
- ☞ Meanwhile Preheat oven to 450°F (230°C/ gas mark 8), and place oven shelf on lowest level. Remove the other shelf. Put a baking stone on the shelf (if oven is electric, if gas, then put it directly on the oven floor). Instead, a baking sheet turned upside down may be put on the shelf. Have ready 12 pieces of parchment paper, big enough to accommodate an 8 in./20 cm discs of bread.
- ☞ On a surface sprinkled with semolina or flour, and with a rolling pin, flatten dough portions one after the other, into circles 8in/20cm in diameter, and ¼in/6mm thick. While working on a piece, keep unflattened portions covered. Place each disc on prepared parchment paper, and put it on a flat surface in a warm place to allow it to rise a little. Do not stack the flattened discs. Each piece will need about 10 minutes to rise, and while rising, keep discs from getting dry by covering them with kitchen towels.

- ☞ As soon as you are done flattening, bake the breads, starting with the ones you worked on first. This will give time to the latter ones to rise. Bake 2 or 3 at a time - depending on the size of your oven - by transferring discs with the paper from the working surface to the stone or inverted sheet.
- ☞ These breads cook fast, 5 to 6 minutes, within which they will puff and develop a pocket. They are done when bottom is slightly browned, and top is still almost white. Take breads out of the oven, and immediately put them in a big paper bag lined with a kitchen towel. Partially close the bag to allow some of the steam to escape. Repeat with the rest of pieces. When breads are cool, keep them in sealed plastic bags. Freeze any amount you cannot consume within 2 days, and then heat as needed.

Note:

If parchment paper is not available, flatten pieces as directed in the sixth step above, arrange them on greased baking sheets, and let them rise and bake as directed above.

LAWASH

(flat thin bread)

Khubz Rgaag/Rqaaq/Rgoog Makes 12 pieces

Using the basic Arabic Bread dough given above, you can make thin and pliable *lawash* bread, good for making wrap sandwiches. In Iraq, it is called *khubuz rgag, rqaaq, or rgoog*, depending on whether you live in Baghdad, Mosul, or Basra, respectively. *Rqaaq*, as it is made in northern Iraq, is crisp and brittle. Traditionally a dowel is used to roll out unleavened dough into huge thin sheets, around 24 in./61 cm in diameter. A large domed metal plate, called *saj*, placed on direct heat, is used to bake the bread. When first peeled off the *saj*, the bread is soft and pliable, and while still warm, it is folded for easy storage. Once they cool off and harden, they can be stored for months. The bread is used as needed, by reviving it, so to speak, with a sprinkle of water, and covering it with a kitchen towel to soften.

These giant breads are not easy to make, and they require special expertise, a long dowel, and a big working space. In Iraq, you cannot buy *khubuz rqaaq* from the regular commercial bakeries, but rather from the small home-run 'bakeries.' In Baghdad, we used to buy ours from women vendors who stacked their featherweight breads in cage-like baskets. Medium-size breads, thin and pliable, can be made quite easily, using simple equipment available in the kitchen. For baking them, I first tried using a pancake pan, but they tended to shrink as they bake, due to the flat surface of the pan. A big all-metal Chinese wok, turned upside down, is the best substitute to the *saj*. I got mine from a garage sale for a dollar, and it has become an indispensable gadget in the kitchen, and even outside it. You may put the wok on the grill and have fresh baked bread cooked outside the house. This is a bonus in summer if you do not want to generate heat inside the house. This bread is great for picnics, too. All you need is a wok put on campfire, and a rolling pin, and there you go, first class bread, fresh, warm, and fragrant, right in the middle of the wilderness. Here is how to make it:



Lawash dough spread over an upturned wok.

- ☞ Prepare basic dough of Arabic Bread (00 above), and let it rise as directed.
- ☞ Punch the dough down and divide it into 12 pieces. Place them on a surface sprinkled with semolina or flour. Keep them covered with kitchen towels, and let them rest for about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Meanwhile, invert a wok on top of a stove burner, set on high heat. To check whether it has reached the right temperature, sprinkle a tiny bit of water on the surface. It is ready when the water immediately turns into sizzling and dancing drops.
- ☞ On a surface sprinkled with semolina or flour, roll out a piece of dough, as thin as possible. Then drape it on the back of the hand and try to stretch it, especially the thick areas, taking care not to make holes. Immediately spread it on the hot wok. After a few minutes, turn the piece over and let it cook for a few more minutes until it develops blisters on the surface. (Total cooking time for a piece is 5 to 6 minutes.) You might need to lower heat to medium high, if pieces are browned quickly.
- ☞ Immediately, put baked bread in a paper bag, lined with a kitchen towel, and close the opening. Repeat with the rest of the pieces. As soon as breads are cold enough, put them in sealed plastic bags, keep them refrigerated, or freeze for future use.

How Lavash Came into Being

In medieval Baghdad, *ruqaaq* (thin sheets of bread) were synonymous with luxurious fine living. In an anecdote on the experience of a Bedouin in the urban city of Aleppo, the Bedouin describes how within the course of a wedding meal he attended, he and the other diners were handed white pieces of cloth for which one can see neither woof nor warp. He wanted to make a shirt of the 'fabric.' As he was about to ask some of the guests to give him their share of it, he saw that they started tearing pieces from it quite easily. To his surprise, it turned out to be bread, the likes of which he had never seen (al-Dinawari *'Uyoun al-Akhbar* 358).

In his 10th-century cookbook, al-Warraq mentions two types: *ruqaaq labiq*, extremely thin and malleable; and *ruqaaq kazmazaj*, much larger thin bread, seasoned with seeds of the tamarisk tree, and dried. It is popular because the added seeds were believed to have the power to sweeten the breath, and add glow and luster to the eater's complexion. According to al-Warraq's instructions, the *tannour* is heated before flattening the bread, because it does not have to rise. As soon as one piece is flattened, it is stuck into the inside of the *tannour*, which is to remain hot all the time. Because these breads are thin and bake fast, al-Warraq says no more than one bread can be baked at a time. To keep the bread soft (for *labiq* variety), the moment it is taken out of the *tannour*, it should be wiped with water (Chapter 13).

Small *ruqaaq* was made the size of the palm of the hand, and even smaller. Sometimes, *ruqaaq* was broken into smaller pieces, and then fried and served as chips/crisps (as in the last recipe in al-Warraq Chapter 89). To serve, *ruqaaq* bread was spread flat overlappingly all around the table, rolled, or put in stacks. It was also used as part of the dish presentation. The blackened *narjisiyya* (egg dish) pan was carried to the table skirted with a large *ruqaaqa* (al-Warraq Chapter 73). Besides, it was used to cover the serving bowl instead of a piece of cloth *mindeel*.

The large and dry variety, *ruqaaq kazmazaj*, was served folded. Judging from today's practices, the thin bread must have been folded the moment it came out of the *tannour*, and was left to dry in this form for easier storage and to protect it from breaking. Etymologically, the Arabic *ruqaaq* has its origin in the Akkadian *'raqaqu'* (thin). As for why this thin soft bread is now called *lavash* in Arab countries and *lavash* in non-Arab Middle-Eastern countries, such as Turkey, here is my explanation:

As mentioned above, thin pliable bread was called *ruqaaq labiq* in medieval times. I looked up the root *labaqa* in the medieval dictionary *Taj al-'Arous*, and discovered it was synonymous with *lawaaqa* and *lawasha*. Now, at some point in time, *labiq* must have been replaced with *lawish*, and later metamorphosed to *lavash* in Ottoman Turkish. In Iraq, we kept to the indigenous *ruqaaq* and its variants *rgaag/rgoug*.

ARABIAN PIZZA

Laham b-'Ajeen Makes about 20 breads 7in/17.5cm across

This is the Arabic counterpart of pizza, and it is what it literally means - "meat in dough." To my knowledge, the earliest medieval *lahm bi 'ajeen* recipe is given in 13th-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*. Here is the recipe: "meat is sliced, spread on flattened discs of dough, and then put in the brick oven furn" (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 556).

When I was a child in Baghdad, not many people knew of it. We used to get it by order from the neighborhood bakery owned by an Armenian, but his version was very basic. The topping consisted of just meat, onions, salt, and black pepper. By the seventies, this delicious bread started to gain tremendous popularity. A large number of carryout *Laham b-'Ajeen* restaurants mushroomed out in all the major cities in Iraq, to meet the increasing demand. They were baked in brick ovens, and were lusciously moist and tender, but unfortunately too greasy. The following recipe is a much leaner version, in which olive oil replaces animal meat.

1 recipe of basic Arabic Bread Dough (00 above)

For the topping:

3 medium onions (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), finely chopped

2 tablespoons olive oil

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can)

1½ pounds (675g) ground/minced lean meat, beef, lamb, or turkey

¾ cup (36g) chopped parsley

2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped

1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary) or lemon juice

1 to 2 garlic cloves, grated, optional

2 teaspoons *baharat* (see Glossary)

2 teaspoons salt, or to taste

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

Olive oil for flattening and brushing the dough

Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8



☞ While waiting for the dough to rise, prepare the topping: sauté the onion in the oil, about 5 minutes, and then stir in tomato paste until it emits a nice aroma, about a minute. Set aside until it cools down to room temperature. Then mix in the rest of the topping ingredients.

☞ Position one of the oven shelves at the lowest level if oven is electric, and put on it an inverted baking sheet. If oven is gas, remove the lowest shelf, and place a pizza stone right on the oven floor. Position the second shelf at the highest level, and preheat the oven.

FILLED PASTRIES

Fatayir Makes 24 pieces

As soon as dough rises, punch it down and divide it into 20 pieces, which you shape into neat balls by tucking in the sides with slightly oiled hands. Place portions on surface dusted with semolina or flour, and cover with kitchen towels.

Since dough does not need to rise again, you can start shaping, filling, and baking right away. Lightly cover work surface and rolling pin with olive oil, and roll out a dough portion a disc, 7in/17.5cm in diameter, about ¼in/3mm thick. Place flattened dough on a piece of parchment paper, a little bigger than the dough disc. Spread about ¼ to ½ cup (60-80ml) of the filling on it. The filling should cover the surface in a thin layer, leaving a ¼in/6mm border uncovered. Lightly brush uncovered border with olive oil. (If parchment paper is not available, use greased baking sheets)

Immediately, and with the help of the paper, slide discs into the hot stone or the inverted baking sheet. Dough is not supposed to puff, and it will take about 8 minutes to bake. You can bake 2 or 3 at a time depending on oven size. While this batch is baking, start working on the other batch. You might transfer half-baked ones to the upper shelf, and put some new ones on lower shelf to expedite the procedure.

As soon as you take the baked ones out of the oven, stack them with the parchment paper, in a big paper bag, lined with a kitchen towel, and partially close the bag. The parchment paper will prevent the topping from sticking to the bottom of the piece above it. Best when eaten hot right from the oven, but also good at room temperature. Any leftovers may be refrigerated or frozen, and warmed up in the oven.

A Vegetarian Option:

Meat can be replaced with two 10-ounce packages of frozen spinach, thawed and excess moisture squeezed out, or 1½ cups (12 Oz/ 350 g) of a mixture of crumbled feta cheese and grated Pecorino Romano cheese, or 2 cups (8 oz/ 225 g) cooked whole lentils, or whatever you fancy.

In the medieval sense, *fateer* (*khubz al-fateer*) is, strictly speaking, unleavened bread, rolled out thinly and baked on *taabaq* (large flat iron pan), or fried and dipped in syrup and served as a sweet. However, *fatayir* was also used in the same modern sense to designate collectively fried or baked filled-pastries, called so because the dough portions were flattened like *khubz al-fateer*. The much-loved medieval *sanbousaj* pastries - we still love them - are indeed a variety of *fatayir*, but the name *sanbousaj* is more commonly used due to their traditional triangular shape (see Chapter 14). The extant recipes we have of medieval *fatayir* are filled with a cheese-mix, and hence the name *mujabbanat* (made with *jubn* 'cheese'). For instance, in al-Warraq's 13th-century augmented version, the chapter on *mujabbanat* describes making such pastries by putting some of the cheese filling in a triangle of flattened dough, lifting the sides a little, and then twisting the three corners to keep it from opening up while baking. In another recipe, cheese filling is put in the middle of a round disc, and then the sides are folded and pinched to close in the filling, as is done today (Istanbul MS 234r-v).

These pastries make an elegant and tasty appetizer. Served warm or at room temperature, they are ideal for buffet parties. They are also quite handy as snacks. Keep them in the refrigerator and heat as needed, or freeze them for future use. Here is how to make them:

Follow directions for basic dough of Arabic bread using half the recipe (00 above), and while rising, prepare the filling, using any of the options given below.

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6.

When dough has risen, punch it down and divide into 24 pieces. Place them on surface sprinkled with semolina or flour. Keep covered the ones you are not working on.

On a surface sprinkled with semolina or flour, roll out each portion into a thin disc about 4in/10cm in diameter, ¼in/3mm thick. Put about 1 heaping tablespoon of the chosen filling in the middle of disc. Visually divide disc into 3 sections, and lift and seal 3 edges to form a triangle. Seal ridges of triangle by

pinching with fingertips. For the ones filled with meat mixture, do not close triangle completely so that the opening on top will allow more heat to get into the filling. Lift finished ones from the working surface into a greased baking sheet, with help of a pancake turner, if needed. Bake immediately. They will take around 15 minutes to brown nicely. If wished, lightly brush pastries with melted butter or oil immediately they are taken out of the oven. Serve warm.

Meat Filling:

Follow recipe for *Laham b-'Ajeen* Topping, 00 above.

Spinach Filling:

In a bowl, mix the following:

Two 10oz packages (285g) frozen spinach, thawed and excess moisture squeezed out
 2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g) finely chopped, and sautéed in 2 tablespoons olive oil
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) crumbled feta cheese, or grated Pecorino Romano cheese
 ¼ cup (15g) chopped fresh dill, or
 1 tablespoon dill weed
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) chopped dry tomatoes, optional
 1 tablespoon lemon juice
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) chopped toasted walnuts
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste (optional)
 1 teaspoon *za'tar* (see Glossary) or thyme, optional

Cheese Filling:

In a bowl mix, the following:

2 cups (8oz/225g) feta cheese, crumbled
 1 cup (4oz/115g) shredded mozzarella cheese
 1 egg, beaten
 1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley, chopped
 ¼ cup (15g) fresh dill, chopped, or
 1 tablespoon dill weed
 ¼ cup (15g) fresh mint, or 1 tablespoon dried mint, optional
 1 teaspoon *za'tar* (see Glossary) or thyme



SOURDOUGH TWISTED SESAME RINGS

Simeat Makes 20 pieces

Simeat is well known throughout the eastern Mediterranean countries. Despite some differences, they are all shaped as rings and are generously encrusted with sesame seeds. The authentic varieties, like Iraqi *simeat*, are closely related to bagels, in that they are poached in hot water before baking them. In fact, the name of these pastries was originally coined due to this practice because the root verb *smata* means 'dip briefly in hot water.' In one of the recipes for *ka'k* (ring cookies/biscuits) in the Aleppo 13th-century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*, the dough is shaped into rings, and then each ring is carried by a rolling pin and dipped in boiling water briefly. The pastries are arranged in a tray and then baked in a brick oven *furn* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 658).

In Iraq, they are shaped into attractive twisted small rings, encrusted with lots of fragrant toasted sesame, crispy in crust and chewy in texture. They are bought from wandering vendors who arrange the simeats on wicker baskets in tall piles and carry them on their heads.

The traditional method requires a starter, which is easy to make. All it needs is a little stirring, and waiting. Actually, if you plan baking your own bread regularly, it is a good idea to have a starter lurking in the refrigerator. It will be ready for you whenever you need it, provided you replenish it every time you use some of it. In fact, the starter can be used with all kinds of bread to enhance taste and texture.

For sourdough starter:

2 cups (8oz/225g) bread/strong flour
2 cups (475ml) water, room temperature
3 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon dry yeast

For the simeat:

2 tablespoons dry yeast
1 tablespoon sugar
½ cup (125ml) warm water
6¼ cups (25oz/705g) bread/ strong flour
1 tablespoon salt
½ (125ml) cup oil
1½ cups (375ml) warm water

For glaze:

1 egg white whisked with 1 tablespoon water
About 1 cup (4oz/115g) sesame seeds, dry toasted
Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

☞ In a medium glass or plastic container combine all starter ingredients and stir with a wooden spoon until smooth. Cover loosely to allow fresh air to get into the container, and let stand in a warm draft-free place for about 2 days. Stir mixture 2 to 3 times a day. Dough should rise; bubble, and separate and smell like sour yogurt. Stir well before using it. If you want dough to develop just a tinge of sourness, then keep starter for 24 hours only.

☞ In a small bowl dissolve dry yeast and sugar in ½ cup (125 ml) water, and set aside for 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl, mix flour and salt, and make a well in the middle. Pour 1 cup (250ml) of sourdough starter (replenish the rest with 1 cup water and 1 cup flour, stir well, then return to refrigerator for future use), yeast mixture, oil, and 1½ cups (375ml) water. Using a wooden spoon, stir in a circular movement to incorporate flour into liquids. Then with oiled hands knead for 6 to 7 minutes to make a somewhat soft dough.

Coat dough with oil on both sides and let rise in the bowl, covered, in a warm place for about 1 hour, or until it doubles in size.



Simeat sour dough twisted sesame rings: Iraqi bagels! ...'

☞ Punch down dough, and divide it into 20 portions. Let it rest for about 10 minutes, covered.

☞ On a slightly oiled surface, form into simeat rings as follows: Divide each piece into two parts. Roll each part into a rope about 9in/23cm long (if dough feels elastic and springs back, let it rest for 5 minutes). Lay 2 ropes next to each other, and wind each rope around the other, curve twist into a circle, matching ends to form a continuous circle. Make sure to seal the ends very well to prevent them from opening while rising and baking. Put shaped pieces aside on a flat surface. After making about 5 ones, brush them with the egg wash, and dip each, face down, in the toasted sesame. Arrange rings in a greased baking sheet. Leave space between pieces to allow for expansion. Repeat with other batches.

☞ Let rise in a warm place for 40 to 45 minutes, covered with a kitchen towel.

☞ Bake in the middle of the preheated oven. To create a good crust, spray simeat and the oven with some water. Repeat about 2 to 3 times, for the first 5 minutes. Total time of baking is about 15 minutes or until golden brown. Serve immediately or let pieces cool off in a wicker basket or a rack. Cooled ones can be kept in plastic bags in the refrigerator or freezer. Heat in the oven as needed.

SIMEAT

Made Easy Makes 28 pieces

Here is an easier version when you cannot afford the long wait. Though it does not have that characteristic tinge of sourness in it, it is equally delicious, and makes an excellent light snack.

3 tablespoons dry yeast
 4 tablespoons sugar
 1 cup (250ml) warm water
 10 cups (2½lb/1.25kg) bread/strong flour
 1 tablespoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon ginger powder
 ¼ cup (60ml) oil
 3 cups (715ml) warm water
 For glaze: 1 egg white whisked in 1 tablespoon water
 Sesame seeds, dry toasted, for sprinkling
 Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

- ☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in 1 cup (250ml) warm water, and set aside for 5 minutes.
- ☞ In a big bowl, combine flour, salt, and ginger. Make a well in the middle, and then pour yeast mixture, oil and the 3 cups/715ml warm water. Incorporate liquids into flour in a circular movement using a wooden spoon. With oiled hands, knead for 6 to 7 minutes until you get a smooth dough. Let rise in a warm draft-free place for about 1 hour.
- ☞ Punch dough down, and divide into 28 portions. Then Shape and bake as described in the Sourdough Twisted Sesame Rings given above.

Variation: Simeat with Cheese and Olives:

Prepare dough as directed above. After dough rises, punch it down, and add to half of it the following ingredients:

¾ cup (4oz/115g) pitted and chopped olives
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) crumbled feta cheese or mozzarella cheese
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh mint, parsley, and dill, each

Knead the ingredients into the dough. Let it rest for 10 minutes, and then divide it into 14 portions. Shape and bake as directed above.



Lovers' Window (Shibbach il-Habayib)

SWEET YEAST BREAD

Chureck

Chureck is slightly sweetened yeast pastry traditionally shaped like a wheel, about 12 in./30.5 cm across, with a cross-like double axis. Smaller flattish oval-shaped ones with no holes in them are stuffed with dates or cheese and parsley. *Chureck* is usually bought from specialized bakeries and enjoyed year-round. For history and etymology, see *Chureck and Ancient Ishtar*: Affinities below.

2 cups (475ml) milk (or one 12oz/350g can) evaporated milk, diluted with enough water to make 2 cups)
 ½ cup (80ml) oil, or ½ cup (4oz/115g) butter
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 2 eggs
 ½ cup (125 ml) milk
 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 1 teaspoon ground *mahleb* (see Glossary), optional
 ¼ teaspoon saffron
 2 tablespoons dry yeast
 1 cup (250ml) warm milk
 10 cups (2½lb/1.25kg) bread/strong flour
 1 teaspoon salt
 For glaze: 1 egg, beaten
 About ¾ cup (2½oz/75g) dry toasted sesame seeds
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ In a small saucepan, bring milk, oil or butter, and sugar to a boil, and keep hot.
- ☞ In a medium bowl, beat eggs, and whisk in ½ cup (125ml) milk. Add a little of the hot milk mixture, stirring all the time, to prevent it from curdling. Slowly pour in the rest of milk mixture, stirring constantly. Allow to cool, until comfortably warm. Add cardamom, vanilla, mahleb if used, and saffron.
- ☞ Dissolve yeast in 1 cup (250ml) warm milk, and set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.
- ☞ In a big bowl, mix flour and salt and make a well in the middle. Pour the milk-egg mixture prepared in the second step, and yeast mixture prepared in the third

step. With a wooden spoon, stir mixture in a circular movement to incorporate liquids into flour. With oiled hands, knead for about 7 minutes. The final dough should be somewhat soft and sticky in consistency. Coat dough with a little oil on both sides and let it rise in a warm draft-free place for about an hour.

- ☞ Punch down dough, let rest for about 10 minutes, then divide and shape as suggested below, on slightly floured surface.
- ☞ Arrange shaped pieces on greased baking sheets. Let rise, covered, in a warm place for about 30 minutes. When ready to bake, carefully brush the one/ones ready for the oven with beaten egg and sprinkle generously with sesame.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes, or until nicely browned. Repeat with the rest, brushing and sprinkling with sesame just before they go into the oven. Allow to cool on a rack or a flat wicker basket. Refrigerate or freeze any leftovers in sealed plastic bags.

Suggestions for Shaping Chureck

Lovers' Window (*Shibbach il-Habayib*): Makes 4 pieces, more if smaller ones are desired:
 To make this beautiful *chureck*, punch dough down and divide it into 4 pieces, and let it rest for about 10 minutes. On a slightly floured surface, roll out each piece into a disc or an oval, about 12in/30.5cm in diameter, and ¼in/6mm thick. Transfer the disc to a greased baking sheet. Visually divide it into 4 quarters, and with the index fingertip make a hole in the middle of each quarter, thus creating four holes. Widen and enlarge these holes with the fingers until the piece looks like a wheel with a cross-like axis, or a window frame, the panels of which are about 1½in/4cm wide. Set aside, covered, in a warm place, let rise for about 30 minutes. When ready to bake, carefully brush the piece/pieces with beaten egg, and sprinkle generously with dry toasted sesame. Bake and store as directed above.

Chureck with a Filling: Makes 12 pieces

After punching dough in the fifth step, divide it into 12 balls. Make a hollow in each ball, and fill it with about 4 tablespoons of one of the fillings suggested below. Close the ball very well, and with a rolling pin flatten it into an oval $\frac{1}{2}$ in/1cm thick and 8in/20cm long. Transfer pieces to a greased baking sheet, and let them rise for about 30 minutes. Just before baking, brush the pieces with beaten egg, and make impressions with the fingers on the surface of each, avoiding the borders.

Bake as directed above.

Cheese filling:

1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley or fresh mint, chopped, or a combination of both

2 cups (8oz/225g) shredded mozzarella cheese.

Get rid of extra salt by soaking cheese in cold water for 30 minutes, changing water at least once in the process. If available substitute with jibna hilwa (sweet cheese) available at Middle-Eastern grocery stores

Combine ingredients, and use as directed.

Date Filling:

2 cups (12oz/350g) dates, pitted and coarsely chopped

1 tablespoon butter

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon whole toasted coriander seeds

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cinnamon

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon toasted aniseed or fennel

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) water

Mix all ingredients in a skillet or a heavy medium pot, and cook on medium heat, stirring and mashing with a wooden spoon until mixture softens and looks like a thick paste.

Chureck with Currants or raisins: Makes 16 pieces

Add 1 cup (6oz/180g) currants or raisins to flour mixture in the fourth step. After punching dough in the fifth step, divide it into 16 portions, and shape into balls, knots, crescents, pretzels, or whatever. Arrange pieces on a greased baking sheet, and set aside, covered in a warm place to rise for about 30 minutes. When ready to bake carefully brush the pieces with beaten egg, and sprinkle with sesame seeds. Bake and store as directed above.



Traditional Chureck. Here it is shaped like a wheel, with a cross-like double axis.

Chureck and Ancient Ishtar: Affinities

The etymological key to chureck is its shape - round. In medieval Islam, *jarq* was a kind of bread shaped into rings. The name is the Arabized form of Persian *jarg* 'circle,' and *charka* 'wheel' (Steingass *Persian-English Dictionary*).

Chureck is known in other countries, where it is traditionally associated with Easter. In Greece and Cyprus, for instance, it is called *tsoureki*, and is shaped into braided bread. In Armenian it is *choreg*, and in Turkish, *çöregi*. Its counterpart in traditional Eastern European Easter baking is *kulich*/*kolach*. The Bulgarians, for instance, call it *kolach*, but they more traditionally shape it like a ring or a wheel, which is more like our *chureck* without the cross. The name is claimed to be of Slavic origin, closely connected with the bread's round shape - *kolo* means 'circle' (Ingram *The Cook's Guide to Bread* 92, 210).

Now, the Jewish *challah* (variants: *chalah*, *hallah*, *cholla*) is said to have affinities with *kulich*. For the Sabbath, this yeasted bread is usually made braided but for *Rosh Hashana* (Jewish New Year), it is made round, to symbolize the yearly cycle and the wheel of time, which, etymologically, is in perfect agreement with one of the possible meanings of *challah* - round. The prototype of all these yeasted pastries may be traced back to the ancient Mesopotamian New Year festivities of the Akkadian mythical goddess *Ishtar* (Sumerian *Inana* 'Lady of Heaven'). She was the most important goddess, daughter of the moon god *Sin*, and sister of the sun god *Shamash*. She was goddess of love, war, sexuality, and fertility in humankind. Interestingly, she was also described as goddess of the grains, which explains why women kneaded dough to make cakes to her. Her planet was Venus, she was called the Morning and Evening star, and her name was often strongly associated with the moon. Besides, due to her journey to the underworld to bring back her shepherd-husband *Dumuzi* (biblical *Tammuz*), she was also responsible for the mysteries

of death and rebirth. Her spring festivals celebrated the return of life, announced by the first New Moon of the season, around the end of March and beginning of April. In celebration of the goddess *Ishtar* and the New Year, special pastries were baked as offerings to her. Of these temple pastries, we are fortunate to have specific descriptions of round pastries called *qullupu* (Levey 49). The name is suggestive of their shape - round, which used to symbolize *Ishtar* and her associations with the moon, as well as the circle and the wheel, which signified the cycle of the year and renewal of life. The term was derived from the Semitic roots *kll* and *kly* meaning 'to complete', and *kull*, 'whole.' We can clearly see affinities - in etymology and shape - between the ancient Mesopotamian *qullupu* pastries and the modern East European pastries *kulich*/*kolach*/*challah* and their counterpart *tsoureki*/*choreg*/*çöregi*, and the Iraqi *chureck* (and even *kleicha*, see Chapter 18). *Ishtar*'s fame spread far and wide. She had her Phoenician, Syrian, and Canaanite counterparts, and consequently most of the rituals and ceremonies involved in worshipping her were adopted and adapted, one way or another, in most parts of the ancient Old World. In the Bible, *Ishtar* was called *Ashtoreth*, and it is conjectured that the name of Esther, heroine of the Book of Esther, is a Hebrew rendition of a form of *Ishtar*.

Likewise, the name of the Christian feast 'Easter' is ultimately associated with the goddess *Ishtar*. Today, Easter, falling on the first Sunday after the first full moon following March 20 celebrates the resurrection of Christ, just as *Ishtar*'s festivals, falling on the first evening of the first crescent moon following the Spring Equinox, marked the New Year by commemorating the resurrection of the god *Dumuzi*, *Ishtar*'s husband. It has also been suggested that the crucifixion cross symbol in the 'bouns' (buns) of the ancient Saxon Feast of Eostre - origin of the modern British hot cross buns - harkens back to the ancient Mesopotamian cross, believed to symbolize the sun or the four quarters of the moon, one of *Ishtar*'s symbols.

THE SULTAN'S TURBAN

'Imamat il-Sultan Makes 12 pieces

Forming pastries and confections into turbans is as old as the Mesopotamian cuisine itself. Such shapes were called *'kubbushu'* (rounded) in the Akkadian language (Levey, 49). Our modern direct inspiration is the sultan's huge turban.

This recipe will guarantee you splendidly shaped buns, delicately flavored with cardamom, with a hint of sweetness. Due to the way it is handled, this pastry is as flaky as croissant but without the excess fat. The handling technique is not new either. In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala*, a pastry recipe called *musamma* (made with clarified butter), also called *muwarraqa* (literally 'layered') describes a similar technique: dough is rolled out thinly, smeared with melted butter, then it is rolled up like a rug, which is to be twisted into a coil (179). According to this medieval recipe, the coil was then flattened into a thin disc, but we are not going to do this, because we want the pastry to puff up and look like a turban, but it will still be *muwarraqa* in texture.

Sumerian Spite

Who would have thought our Sumerian grandmas could have been that spiteful?

The following are curses, which in all probability were uttered by women. We incidentally learn that baking was a woman's job, and that a menstruating woman was considered unclean, and hence not fit to make bread (Gordon 457):

May her bread be as bread (made by an) unclean woman, so no man eats it!

May his food, though it be plain eggs, clog his wind-pipe.

May his food, though it be plain 'bone' (fish), pierce his wind-pipe.

2 tablespoons dry yeast
 2 teaspoons sugar
 Two 12oz cans (350g) evaporated milk, warmed (may be substituted with 3 cups/715ml whole milk)
 8 cups (2lb/900g) bread/strong flour
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
 2 beaten eggs, at room temperature
 ½ cup (125ml) oil
 ¼ cup (60ml) melted butter
 For glaze: ¼ cup (60ml) milk, for glossier look use egg-white wash
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- Dissolve yeast and sugar in warmed evaporated milk, and set aside for 5 minutes.
- Mix flour, salt, and cardamom in a big bowl, and make a well in the middle. Pour in yeast mixture, beaten eggs, and oil. With a wooden spoon, and in a circular movement, incorporate liquids into flour. With slightly oiled hands, knead dough for about 7 minutes. The final dough should be on the soft side. If it is too sticky to handle sprinkle it with a little flour as you knead. Let dough rise, covered, in a warm draft-free place for about an hour.
- Punch dough down, and divide it into 12 portions. Let rest for 10 minutes.
- With a rolling pin, roll out each portion into a circle, about 8in/20cm across and ¼in/6mm thick. Lightly brush surface with melted butter. Roll circle in a jelly/Swiss roll fashion. Then elongate the roll as much as you can without tearing it, by holding it from both ends, and swinging it up and down allowing it to hit the working surface lightly as it swings down, until it is about 15in/38cm long. Coil the rope, and secure the end by tucking it underneath the coil, so that it will not open up while rising and baking.
- Arrange pieces on a greased baking sheet, leaving space between pieces to allow for expansion. Let rise for about 45 minutes. The pieces will rise and form a turban-like shape.



- When ready to bake brush pieces with milk or egg-white wash, and bake in the preheated oven, on the middle shelf, for 12 to 15 minutes or until golden brown. If wished brush them lightly with butter as soon as they come out of the oven. Let pieces cool off a little on a rack or a flat wicker basket. Serve warm, and refrigerate or freeze leftovers in sealed plastic bags.

Sultan,s turbans: coil shaped buns, delicately flavored with cardamom, with a hint of sweetness. Serve them with your very best jam.



Homemade Yogurt 00
 Drained Yogurt
 White Cheese
 Geymer 'Slabs of Thick Cream'

Muntagat 'I-alban

منجابات الابان

*Above: Kunafa Cream
 Opposite: Illustration
 showing agricultural
 workers with cattle.*

Up until the sixties, city people did not have to go to the stores to buy milk. A moveable dairy, so to speak, used to deliver fresh unadulterated milk every evening. *Um al-haleeb* (the milkmaid) would come with her cow, her bucket, and funnel, and milk the cow right in front of her customers' eyes, and using a funnel, she would pour foamy warm milk into their bottles. But all that ended with the advent of commercially pasteurized milk products.

Whereas milking in the contemporary scene is an exclusively feminine occupation, in ancient Mesopotamia it was allotted to men. In the Sumerian milking scene frieze, which goes back to the period around 2900 BC, a calf is placed at its mother's head to make the cow yield milk more readily. A milkman is sitting at a stool behind the cow near a shed made of reeds. A little way off, another man sits at a stool rocking a large narrow-necked jar lying on its side to make butter fat coagulate. To his left, two men are shown as straining the resulting buttermilk. Today's peasants make butter by rhythmically swinging suspended *shichwa*, a bag made of dried sheepskin. In the ancient texts, best quality milk, rich and creamy, was referred to as 'yellow milk.' Milk in general was mostly consumed as soured milk (yogurt), butter, and cheese. Fresh milk has a short shelf life, so to speak, in hot climates. Judging from the Babylonian recipes, it was frequently used in making rich and nourishing white sauces for their meat stews and bird 'pies.' To prolong the shelf life of butter, and prevent it from getting rancid, it was made into '*samnu*' (clarified butter), from which the Arabic *samn* was derived. By the Middle Ages, manufacturing dairy products was already a booming business. In Baghdad's markets the shoppers had the leisure to choose from a wide selection of cheeses, ranging from fresh white cheeses to aged varieties, such as *jubn abyadh* (white cheese, both soft and dry crumbly varieties), *jubn dhan* (sheep cheese), *jubn abyadh jamousi hilu* (sweet and white cow-cheese), *halloum* (semi-soft Egyptian and Levantine cheese), *jubin Roumi* (Byzantine cheese, a hard variety used grated), and *qareesha* (ricotta cheese made from cheese whey). Indeed, so available and affordable was it that having a meal of "hot bread and a slice of cheese" was an emblem of simple and unpretentious living (Burton *Arabian Nights* 6: 235).

A Socialist Cow

It came to the ears of the socialist Iraqi government of the seventies that a farmer had a cow, which produced legendary amounts of milk daily. So the government coveted it and bought it for its dairy factory Maslahat al-Alban. The workers were surprised that their newly acquired cow did not produce any milk at all ever since she was brought there. So they urged her to please show them her magic and produce the promised milk. The cow's answer was, "Are you out of your minds? I work for the government now!"

The Ancient City of Arbela

The only map left to us from ancient Mesopotamian times showed the city of Babylon as the center of the universe. It was indeed the most famous political and cultural center. Nonetheless, other cities, though smaller and politically less important, were also exalted. Here is an ancient song on the city of Arbela in Assyria (modern Kurdish city Arbeel):

Arbela, Arbela!
Heaven without rival, Arbela!
City of joyful music, Arbela!
City of festivals, Arbela!
City of happy households, Arbela!

(M. Van De Mierop *The Ancient Mesopotamian City* 43)

HOMEMADE YOGURT

Liban

Yogurt is commonly made from cow's milk, but in the southern region, a richer variety is made from buffalo's milk. Prior to the days of pasteurization, the sight of *labbanaat* (female yogurt-sellers) balancing six or seven piers of yogurt containers on their heads was quite a familiar sight in the market places. This is a thing of the past now, only to be seen in folkloric pictures and dances.

In the northern region, an excellent quality yogurt is made from sheep's milk. It is abundant in springtime when the pastures are luscious green. It usually comes with a creamy top, about $\frac{1}{4}$ in/6mm thick, with slightly smoky taste that is intoxicatingly delicious. It is known as *liban Arbeel* (yogurt of *Arbeel*, a northern Kurdish city). Indeed, so well-known and loved is *liban Arbeel* throughout Iraq that, according to a standing joke, when a stranger in Baghdad asked for directions to the Ministry of Defense, he was told it was behind *Liban Arbeel* dairy-shop.

During the hot summer, a thirst-quenching drink, called *shineena*, is made from diluted yogurt. A dish of rice with a side of yogurt makes a light and cool summer meal, enjoyed by high and low. To some foreigners this might sound a little strange. The Englishman, for instance, who spent some time in the southern marshes of Iraq, in the fifties, protested that a dish of rice and yogurt was the most primitive food he had yet encountered (Maxwell 135). In fact, it is the simplest and healthiest dish ever devised by man. People have faith in its medicinal value as a cure for diarrhea, and, if we are to believe old wives' tales, rice and yogurt taken together negate each other's calories. I have not seen this scientifically verified anywhere, but I'd like to believe in it.

Though yogurt is readily available in the supermarkets, the homemade variety is tastier and cheaper. The key to good yogurt is temperature. You need to experiment with it until you get the hang of it. Start by making a small batch (2 to 3 servings) following instructions below. Powdered milk, called for in the recipe, will thicken yogurt and give it a creamier texture, especially when low fat milk is used.



2 cups (475ml) milk, whole or low fat
4 tablespoons powdered milk
2 heaping tablespoons yogurt, beaten, and at room temperature

- Bring milk and powdered milk slowly to boil, and set aside and let cool to 110°F/ 45°C. If you do not have a thermometer, use one of the following means: put a few drops of the milk on the inner side of your wrist; it should feel comfortably warm. Or immerse two thirds of your little finger in the milk you should be able to count up to 10 before you feel a gentle sting of heat.
- Gently stir in the prepared yogurt. Transfer milk into a glass bowl or keep it in the same pot. Set aside at a warm draft-free place. Cover pot or bowl with several layers of cloth, such as clean kitchen towels, and leave undisturbed for 6 to 8 hours. My favorite place is the oven (do not turn heat on). When set, remove covers and refrigerate.

If yogurt fails to curdle and set, it could be that milk was not warm enough to begin with, or the place was not warm enough. The remedy is to expose it to more warmth. Put it on top of a warm stove, or in a barely warmed oven.

If yogurt develops small curds with lots of whey, it could be that milk was too hot, or the place where it was kept was too warm. In this case, you'd better use it for making cheese following instructions in White Cheese recipe below.

Note:

After you gain more experience in making yogurt, you can make a bigger quantity as in the following:

1 gallon (16 cups/3.8 liters) milk
3 cups (12oz/350g) powdered milk
2 cups (475ml) yogurt, beaten, and at room temperature

Follow the same method suggested above.

A Medieval Battle of the Bulge

I was surprised to learn that medieval Baghdadi women had their own fights with the bulge. In al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, a regimen is given for *niswan* (women) who want to lose some weight. The key ingredient is *laban ra'ib* (defatted yogurt made without rennet). Here is how it works:

Let the woman have 2 cups (475ml) of diluted *ra'ib* early in the morning and nothing else with it. After three hours let her drink, once again, the same amount of the yogurt drink. At midday let her eat *zirbaja* stew (delicate, light bird stew) cooked with meat of francolin, kid, or pullets. After that, she may drink 3 glasses of diluted yogurt drink. She may also sniff on sweet-smelling herbs and chew on aromatic spice seeds to while her hunger away. Thus, for ten days, she can only have bread with *zirbaja* stew cooked with meat of francolin and partridge, and the yogurt drink (Chapter 16).

A Sumerian Proverb on the Obvious

Can one conceive without intercourse?
Can one get fat without food?
 (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 118)

DRAINED YOGURT

Yogurt Cream Cheese *Liban Nashif*

Making cheese can be traced back to prehistoric man who kept milk in bags made of skins and stomachs of different animals, thus accidentally bringing milk into contact with rennet, an important substance in making cheese.

To circumvent the highly perishable quality of milk, the ancient Mesopotamians preserved it as cheese. They knew about twenty kinds of cheese, a clear indication of their sophistication in processing dairy products. For the royal table, many varieties were offered, such as white, fresh, rich, flavored, sweetened, and sharp cheese. The basic variety might well have been similar to our fresh cream cheese. It was also molded into decorative shapes, as one can tell from the several fired, porous clay molds, discovered in the kitchens of the palace of the ancient city of Mari. (Though some believe they were bread molds, *Ebla to Damascus* 229--33)

Cheese was even considered a treat that has a healing power. In an elaborate Sumerian composition, believed to be the oldest lullaby known from the ancient Near East, the wife of the Sumerian King Shulgi, is bribing her sick child into sleeping:

U-aa-u-a

Sleep will fill your lap with emmer,

I-I will make sweet for you the little cheeses,

Those little cheeses that are the healer of man.

(Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 330)

Drained yogurt (cream cheese) is the most basic, and it keeps fresh much longer. This is especially important in springtime when milk is abundant and villagers have to be versatile in processing their dairy products. Nowadays, yogurt is drained in cotton sacks. In medieval times; however, besides sacks, unglazed earthenware jars were sprinkled with salt and used. Yogurt whey was given the time to filter through the pores over a period. This variety of 'cream cheese' was called qanbarees, described in the 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* as delicious, rich,

and sour. This Egyptian cookbook provides some simple recipes for making it (190, 194). *Shiraz* was another variety, particularly made with rennet-yogurt, called *mast* (al-Warraq, recipe in Chapter 39). In his 13th-century Andalusian cookbook, al-Tujibi suggests serving it spread on a dish, garnished with capers, pickled lemon, lightly sprinkled with nigella seeds, drizzled with olive oil, and eaten with green spring onions. It is best, he adds, when the yogurt used is somewhat sweet (*Fidhalat al-Khiwan* 217).

Start with a small batch at first until you get the cheese consistency desired. Your choice of yogurt will determine the richness of the resulting cheese.

Cheesecloth/butter muslin or 1 layer of big coffee filter
2 cups (475ml) yogurt
½ teaspoon salt

☞ Line a small sieve with 3 to 4 layers of cheesecloth or a coffee filter. Fit sieve into a bowl.

☞ Put yogurt and salt in the lined sieve; and with a spoon make a kind of well in the middle to facilitate the dripping process. Let yogurt drain overnight or until it becomes thick. Let it drain in the refrigerator if you want a mild tasting cheese, or keep it at room temperature for a tart taste.



Above: Drained
yoghurt roll
Below: White cheese

Suggestions for Serving Drained Yogurt:

Drained yogurt is served as a breakfast dish or an appetizer. The following are nice ways for serving it:

☞ Spread drained cheese on a small plate (about 1in/2.5cm-thick layer). Drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with za'tar (see Glossary). Garnish with olives and wedges of tomatoes. Serve with warm bread. Makes 2 servings.

☞ Yogurt Balls: Form it into 6 walnut-size balls (handle with slightly oiled hands). Roll them in toasted chopped walnut and za'tar, arrange them on a tray in one layer, to dry out a little, about an hour. Drizzle yogurt balls generously with olive oil, and serve them with crackers/savory biscuits. (Makes 3 servings). Yogurt balls would stay much longer if you put them in a clean jar, cover them with olive oil and some nigella seeds (see Glossary). Keep them in the refrigerator until needed.

*Yogurt Log: You may also shape drained yogurt like a butter stick, coat it with a mixture of toasted chopped nuts and za'tar, and let it dry out a little for about an hour. To serve, drizzle with olive oil.

WHITE CHEESE

Jibin

White cheese sandwiches are traditionally served for breakfasts and light suppers. It is usually served with sliced cucumber, olives, and sprigs of fresh mint. The saltiness of the cheese is nicely balanced with sweet tea in winter and chilled watermelon cubes in the summer.

In the local markets, you can find the mild soft white cheese, *jibin Arab* 'cheese of the Arabs,' which, unlike feta cheese, has gas holes and does not crumble. *Jibin dhafayir*, is braided white cheese, usually studded with the aromatic nigella seeds (see Glossary). In texture, it is similar to mozzarella cheese. Its homeland is the southern port city of Basra. In the Western supermarkets, it is sold as Armenian cheese. The aged and hard *jibin Akrad* 'cheese of the Kurds' is similar in texture to Romano cheese, and is mostly used grated for cooking purposes. It is brought to Baghdad from the northern cities of Arbeel, Kerkuk, and Sulaymaniyya. A special variety of cheese called *jibin mthawwam* (cheese flavored with garlic) is the specialty of the Christian Chaldeans of the northern city of Duhok. The Iraqi version of blue cheese is called *jibin mshari* (also *jibin wushari*, called *jibin beza* in Mosul). It is a Kurdish specialty of the people of Arbeel. The green veins are created by adding wild leeks (*kurrath barri*, similar to garlic chives or Korean chives) and the green stalks - not the heads - of fresh garlic (information via correspondence with *Mahmoud Sa'eed*, a friend from Mosul). It is usually kept in sheepskin bags. It is pungent, and has a sharp and mellow taste, which you either love or hate. At any rate, you wouldn't catch a child eating it.

In trying to adapt the recipes in the book to what is readily available in markets outside Iraq, the best substitute for white fresh cheese may be 'Akkawi, halloum, Spanish white cheese, or feta cheese. For cooking purposes, a combination of crumbled feta, grated Pecorino Romano cheese, and shredded mozzarella cheese may be used.

You can make a small chunk of white cheese using yogurt (2 servings):

2 cups (475ml) yogurt

2 tablespoons lemon juice or white vinegar

- ☞ Put yogurt and lemon or vinegar in a small pot. On medium heat, bring to a boil stirring gently until it starts to curdle. Turn off heat and let it stand aside until cool enough to handle.
- ☞ Line a colander with 3 to 4 layers of cheesecloth/ butter muslin and let it hang over the sides. Fit colander into a bowl.
- ☞ Pour curdled yogurt into the colander, and let whey drain into the bowl. Gently stir yogurt to help drain more of the liquid. Gather ends of cheesecloth and twist them to help curds form into a disc. Put a heavy weight on the disc. A bowl with some water in it will do the trick. Leave for a few hours. When set, remove cloth, and sprinkle cheese with a little salt, if desired. Keep cheese in a covered container. For softer cheese, weigh down the cheese with a plate only.

Making Cheese Using Rennet

In supermarkets, rennet is usually stacked with jam-making ingredients. To make one pound (450g) of cheese, you need:

10 cups (2.50 liters) milk

2 tablets rennet, dissolved in a little cold water

- ☞ Heat milk until it is warm enough to the touch. Test by putting a few drops on the inner side of the wrist. If it just feels warm without scorching, this is the right temperature. Or dip your little finger in the milk for 10 seconds, you should feel noticeable warmth.
- ☞ Away from heat quietly stir in the dissolved tablets, and set pot aside, covered and draped with a big towel or a small blanket, or whatever, to keep it warm, for a few hours. This will allow milk to solidify. Drain as described in the second and third steps above.

GEYMER

'Slabs of Thick Cream' (Clotted Cream)

If, for some reason, milk fails to solidify, return the pot to heat, and bring it to a quick boil. You will notice that milk solids separate from whey. Set aside until cool enough to handle, and then drain as in the second and third steps above.

Tip:

The best way to keep feta cheese fresh as long as possible after opening the package is to keep it submerged in brine (1 teaspoon salt for 4 cups /950ml water), and sprinkle it with a few nigella seeds (see Glossary). Keep covered under refrigeration. To serve it, take the amount needed and rinse it in water to get rid of salt.

Bribery in Ancient Mesopotamia

Clarified butter must have been a desirable commodity in ancient Mesopotamia. Here is a letter written about 3500 years ago in which the writer is trying to bribe his brother with clarified butter and a ram:

A letter from *Nabu-ahhu-iddina*:

To my brother Nabu-usallim:

May the gods Bel and Nabu, the Lady of Uruk, and the goddess Nana ordain well-being and good health for my brother.

See, I am sending you... one container with clarified butter, and at the same time, I have

sent you a beautiful ram. But you too must do something to help me; go into the office of the scribe of the palace and investigate those complaints that are being made there (against me), and report to me. Do not be negligent.

What is this that I keep hearing every day about the gold? (Oppenheim 192-3)

Geymer is the skimmed solidified upper layer of cream of the heated and then cooled off buffalo or cow's milk. I have called it 'slabs of cream' because the cream layer at the top is taken in one flat piece, and cut as needed. In the medieval Islamic world there was mention of biraaf, which at investigation, turned out to be the prototype of our modern *geymer*. *Biraaf* is a loan Persian word which means 'snow,' or as 'white as snow.' In the anonymous 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, a recipe called *sifat 'amal al- biraaf*, describes how to collect it. Freshly drawn warm milk is poured into wide and shallow earthenware containers. They are covered and left outside overnight to allow the cream to accumulate on the surface. In the morning, the cream is gathered with a large long shell and put on a plate. The same procedure is repeated to accumulate more cream (187).

Buffalo milk yields a thicker and richer cream, more commonly available in the southern region, where buffaloes are more abundant. People in the northern city of Mosul pride themselves on their *geymer abu sha'ra*. It is thick and yet so pleasantly chewy, that when you lift a small amount with a spoon it makes an elastic trail, as fine as a hair.

Geymer is made into sandwiches with date syrup, honey, or jam. A winter breakfast treat may be *geymer* and *kahi*, which is thin sheets of unleavened dough (similar to Egyptian *fateer* dough), folded, fried, or baked, drenched in syrup, and decked with a generous slab of cream. *Kahi* is usually bought from specialized bakeries.

Since *Geymer* is white, creamy, and luscious, comparing the beloved's cheeks to *geymer* is a common metaphor in folkloric songs and poems. I recall a song, in particular, in which the lover vows to make his beloved's *geymer*-like cheeks, his breakfast.

Geymer is a definite no for people watching their cholesterol and weight, but I am including it here because it is a very traditional breakfast item in Iraq. In the pre-cholesterol-conscious days, people used to have it almost every day, especially in winter. It would be bought early in the morning from the neighborhood

grocery shop, or from the door-to-door female peasant vendors. As they go from one street to another, balancing their big trays of *geymer* on their heads, they would periodically announce their merchandise at the top of their shrill voices, "*Geymer Yooo.*" They would cut slabs of cream with a knife, sometimes with a safety pin, and as a treat, would pour on it some milk. Nostalgic Iraqis outside their homeland have been trying to make this breakfast delicacy, and some have been able to duplicate the original with great success. I have tried many of their versions, but the best recipe, so far, is the one developed by my hospitable friend *Khaura Dhiyab*, who in her turn learnt the basics from an Iraqi cook. The key to good *geymer* is using unpasteurized milk, as pasteurization makes the separation of the fatty solids from the milk not so easy. If you are lucky enough to have access to a dairy farm, go ahead and use it unpasteurized. Boiling the milk will definitely kill the germs. However, if you have access to supermarket milk only, the pasteurized variety is preferred to the ultra pasteurized. Geymer is quite easy to make. All it needs is patience:

☞ Have ready equal amounts of heavy cream and whole milk (pasteurized gives better results than ultra-pasteurized). To make 4 servings, use 1 pint (2 cups/475ml) heavy/double cream and 1 pint (2 cups/475ml) whole milk. You may use the empty heavy cream container to measure milk, to have equal amounts of both.

☞ Put milk and cream in a heavy pot. Size of pot will determine the thickness of the *geymer* slab you will be getting. A wide pot will yield a thin layer; a relatively smaller one will yield a thicker slab. Stir the mixture and heat it on slow fire until it starts to rise, but do not let it boil over, so you need to watch it.

☞ Away from heat and in a draft-free warm place, cover the pot with a colander turned upside down to create a dome on top of the pot. Cover the pot very well with a big towel or a small blanket, or whatever, and set it aside for about 6 hours. The function of the colander here is to prevent the rising condensed steam from

Iraqi Folk Song

Your luscious cream-like cheeks, I will my breakfast make.

From behind the tannour, she tosses me the bread,

The bread my beautiful one bakes will sustain me for a year.



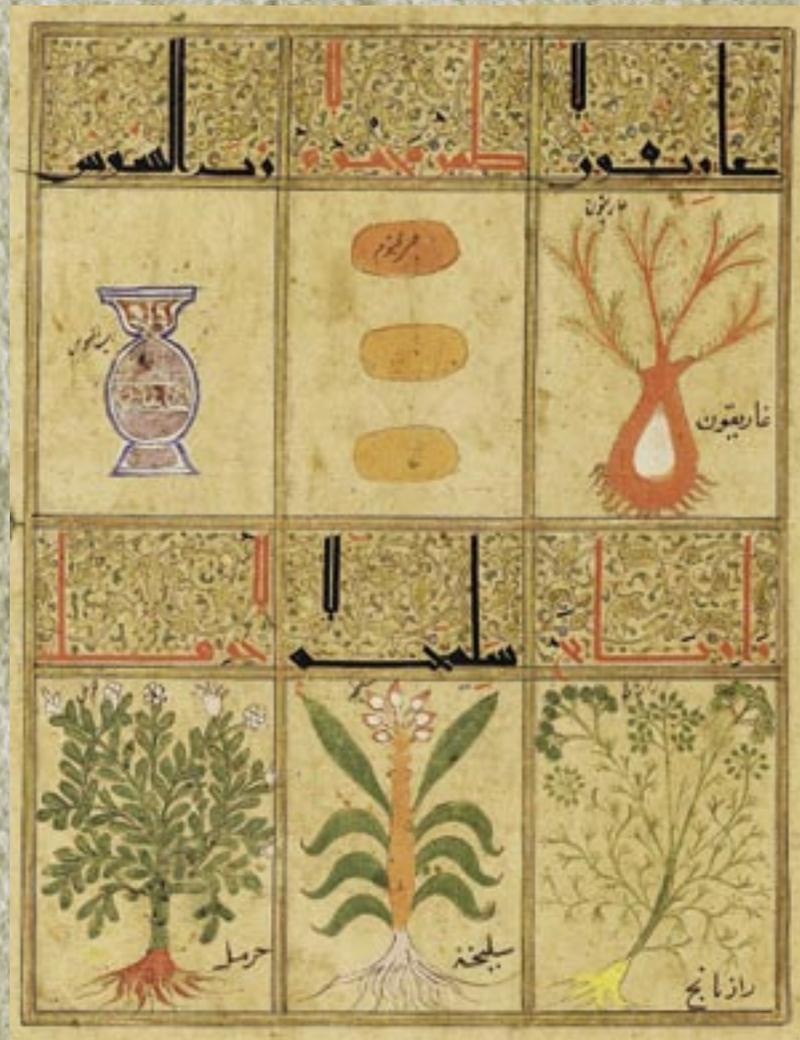
falling down to the surface of the milk-cream mixture.

☞ Remove coverings and colander, put regular lid on pot, and refrigerate for 24 to 36 hours.

☞ Run a knife around the entire edge of the solidified top to dislodge it from the pot. Then use a pancake flipper to push the disc down from one side to let it fold into a half disc. This will enable you to have a neat slab of *geymer*. Transfer it to a slightly deep dish, and drizzle with some of the remaining milk. Serve immediately along with warm bread and jam, honey or date syrup, or refrigerate it for later use.

☞ Repeat the same procedure with the remaining milk. Whatever milk remains from the second time you can make cheese or yogurt with it, following the recipes provided in this chapter.

VEGETARIAN APPETIZERS AND SALADS



I Vegetarian Appetizers

- Puréed Chickpeas with *Tahini*, *Hummus* 00
- Puréed Eggplant/Aubergine with *Tahini*, *Baba Ghannouj*
- Spicy Puréed Eggplant/Aubergine, *Msaqua'at Betinjan*
- Browned Eggplant/Aubergine with Yogurt
- Spinach or Swiss Chard with Yogurt
- Puréed Fava/Broad Beans, Medieval Style
- Fava/Broad Beans with Vinegar
- Simmered Chickpeas, *Lablabi*
- Simmered Fresh Black-eyed Peas, *Loubya Maslouga*
- A Medieval Appetizer of Black-Eyed Peas

II Salads

- Tossed Colorful Salad 00
- Spicy Orange Juice Dressing
- Easy Salad Platter
- Bulgur Salad, *Tabboula*
- Salad with Toasted Pita Croutons, *Zalaatat Fattoush*
- Lentil Salad
- Yogurt Salad, *Jajeek*
- Beets/Beetroot Salad
- Radish and Beets/Beetroot Salad
- Carrot and Cabbage Salad
- Simple Potato Salad



Zalatat Wa Muquabbilat

زلاتات ومقبلات

When everything is cooked, remove the meat from the fire, and before the broth cools, serve it accompanied by garlic, greens and vinegar

(From a Babylonian recipe of pigeon stew, c.1700 BC)
(Bottéro, *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 12)

With all the vegetables and greens the ancient Mesopotamian kitchen garden offered, it should not be surprising to learn that salads and appetizers were an important component of their menus. The vegetables were the mainstay of the poor people's diet who could not afford the more expensive meat. When a person was utterly poor they said, "In his stomach the vegetables are too little" (Levey 50).



Members of the onion family such as onions, leeks, shallots, and garlic were basic ingredients in their diet. The excavated lexical and economic texts sometimes specified different characteristics for these crops. For instance they had sharp onions, sweet onions, and those “which have a strong odor.” It is amazing how many of the ‘table’ or salad vegetables, with their names, survived to this day. Lettuce, for instance, was called ‘*khassu*’ in Akkadian, from which the Arabic *khass* was derived. Apparently, romaine/cos lettuce with its characteristic tender heart (known as *lib* in the Iraqi dialect, cf. Akkadian ‘*libbu*’) is the only variety that stood to the test of time. Of the vegetables, we may mention roots and leaves of radishes, cucumber, and greens such as mint (Akk. ‘*ninu*’, Arabic. *ni’na*), leeks (Akk. ‘*karasu*,’ Arabic. *kurrath*), thyme (Akk. ‘*zateru*,’ Arabic. *za’tar*), and an herb, which grows exclusively in the region, called garden cress/garden peppergrass *rishshaad* (Akk. ‘*erishtu*’). These and many more have always been staple items in the Mesopotamian diet, especially for the not well-to-do families who had to eke out their meals with them.

The medieval diners did not think much of vegetarian dishes. They called them *muzawwarat* (fake, simulated dishes), good enough for the fasting days of Lent and the sick. Nevertheless, they valued them as accompaniments to the main meat dishes. Vegetables, they said, were the ornament of the table. Sliced cucumber and lemon, olives, mint, parsley, seeds of

sour pomegranate, and much more were arranged artistically so that the dish would look like *bustan* ‘orchard,’ as they said.

They also loved to nibble on all sorts of *bawarid*, which were cold dishes with and without meat. They were served before the main hot meal, which explains why they were nicknamed *bara’id al-khayr* (harbingers of good news). Poultry and fish cold dishes were grilled, and red meat was pot-roasted. They were all served with dipping sauces, such as *murri* (fermented sauce) and *sibagh*, which were vinegar-based unfermented sauces and relishes (see *Salsa: A Bit of History* 000). Vegetables, such as fava/broad beans and string beans, were generally simmered with olive oil, vinegar, spices, and herbs. Some vegetables were prepared with yogurt; they were called *jajaq* (cf. today’s *jajeek*). All these, in addition to salted toasted nuts, raisins, and sour fruits such as pomegranate, and a lot more, were served in the medieval drinking parties, as well. They were collectively called *naql* because the drinkers alternated between nibbling on them and sipping their wine. They were indeed the precursors of the modern meze platters customarily served in drinking parties, such as *Hummus*, *Baba Ghannouj*, *Tabboula*, *Lablabi* (boiled chickpeas), *Bagilla* (boiled fava/broad beans), *jajeek* (yogurt salad), sliced cucumbers, pickles, hearts of romaine/cos lettuce, olives, and other vegetables (more details in *Mezze: A Bit of History* 000).

Salad today is usually served with the main dishes. Dressing for the daily bowl of salad is quite simple - a squeeze of *rarinj/narinj* (orange of Seville), with a little olive oil, salt, and pepper. When *rarinj* is not in season, lemon juice, or date vinegar (somewhat similar to balsamic vinegar) might replace it.

Tip:

When handling a big amount of eggplant/aubergine, pomegranate, beets/beetroot, or hot peppers, it is advisable to protect your hands by wearing disposable kitchen gloves, as they cause discoloration or irritation to the skin.

I VEGETARIAN APPETIZERS

PURÉED CHICKPEAS WITH TAHINI/SESAME PASTE

Hummus bi-Tahina Makes 8 servings

They dug a pit in the sunlight.

Then Gilgamesh went up on the mountain.

He poured out his chickpeas into the pit.

“Oh, Mountain, grant (me) a dream...”

(Epic of Gilgamesh Levey 50)

The nutritious potential of chickpeas (*hummus*) was acknowledged when in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* it was chosen as one of the victuals he carried with him on his journeys. In the medieval times, other potentialities were attributed to it such as aphrodisiac ones. It was believed to possess the three essential elements required to achieve this Viagra-effect. Food has to be hot in nature, it has to be nutritious and moist enough to increase sperm, and it has to have the power to generate enough wind to fill and stiffen the veins of the ‘equipment’ (*al-Isra’ili* 2:106-107). It was also recommended for nursing mothers. As for cooking purposes, it was sometimes crushed and used as a thickening agent in stew dishes, and was boiled to tenderness and served with vinegar and oil, as we do today.

The medieval cooks also discovered its compatibility with *tahini* (sesame paste). In medieval Iraq *tahini* was called *rahshi* (today’s *rashi*), and in other Arab countries, such as the Levant and Egypt, it was *tahina*. Both names literally refer to the act of ‘grinding into paste.’ Preparations similar to today’s *hummus bi tahina* were named *hummus kisa*, as in the 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa’id*, which provides ten such recipes. *Kisa* literally is a woolen garment or cloth, which corresponds to *mahshi* (literally ‘garment or cloth to cover the body’), which medieval Baghdadi cookbooks use to designate cold dressed dishes, such as *badhinjan mahshi* (dressed eggplant).

According to one of *hummus kisa* recipes, cooked chickpeas are mashed and then *tahini* is mixed with vinegar and added to them. Toasted walnut is pounded and mixed with fresh lemon juice and vinegar and blended into the chickpea-mix. Then pounded rue and chopped parsley and mint are added, enough is used

to give the chickpea-mix a nice color. Then olive oil is stirred in along with some *atraf al-teeb* (spice blend, see Glossary, s.v. *baharat*), coriander, caraway, cinnamon, black pepper, and ginger. The mix is spread on a platter and garnished with lots of olive oil, chopped parsley, and ground pistachio, which may also be added to the *hummus* mix itself (219-20). By comparison, our modern version is simpler and not as spicy.

Although *hummus*, fresh or canned, is readily available in stores, homemade variety is definitely tastier and cheaper. You may use whole chickpeas, which you soak and cook yourself. However, canned chickpeas can be very handy if you want to make *hummus* in just five minutes. For a smoother texture, use dried yellow split chickpeas (dried split peas will give similar taste).

1½ cups (12oz/350g) yellow split chickpeas, picked over and washed (will make about 3 cups mashed chickpeas); or two 15½oz/439g cans chickpeas, drained, reserve liquid

2 cloves garlic, grated

1 teaspoon ground cumin, optional

½ cup (125ml) fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon salt, less if using canned chickpeas

2 tablespoons olive oil

½ to ¾ cup (125-180 ml) tahini (see Glossary)

For garnish: olive oil, olives, chopped parsley, chili powder, sliced tomato, 1 tablespoon whole cooked chickpeas (optional)

➤ In a medium pot, add to the split chickpeas about 3½ cups (860ml) cold water. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Turn heat to low, and simmer, covered, about 30 minutes, or until chickpeas look mushy, and most of the liquid has evaporated. Do not drain. Let cool completely. Mixture will look watery when hot, but it will be firmer when cold.

➤ If using a blender or a food processor, put cooled chickpeas or canned variety in a blender or food processor, and purée for a minute or two. If canned chickpeas look rather dry, add about ¼ cup (60ml) of



the reserved liquid. Then add garlic, cumin if used, lemon juice, salt, and olive oil. Add *tahini*, and blend for a minute or two until mixture looks smooth, lighter in color, and of spreading consistency. If it looks rather dry, add a small amount of the reserved liquid or just plain cold water. Check for salt and lemon juice. Refrigerate at least one hour before serving.

☞ If making *hummus* by hand (This method is not recommended for canned chickpeas, because the masher is not strong enough to mash skins of chickpeas), crush chickpeas with a potato masher until smooth. Add garlic, cumin if used, lemon juice, salt, and olive oil. Add *tahini* and mix well with a wooden spoon or an electric mixer until smooth, lighter in color, and of spreading consistency. Refrigerate at least 1 hour before serving.

☞ To serve, spread *hummus* on a plate in a layer about 1in/2.5cm thick. Smooth surface with back of spoon, making trenches as you do so. Pour a little olive oil in trenches, sprinkle with chili, and decorate with parsley, tomato slices, and whole cooked chickpeas, if wished. Serve with warm flat bread. Romaine/cos lettuce leaves can also be used as garnish and as scoops.

Remedies for not so perfect hummus:

If it is a little thick and heavy in texture, add some cold water or reserved chickpeas liquid, and adjust seasoning.

If the consistency is good but it still needs more tartness, use a little of the unsweetened lemonade powder (see Glossary).

If the taste of chickpeas still overpowers, add a little more *tahini*, until you get a balanced taste.

Under refrigeration, *Hummus* will keep well for about a week. Garnish the amount needed just before serving. It also freezes well.

Variations:

Spicy Hummus, the Medieval Way:

Lightly dry toast in a skillet 1 teaspoon whole cumin seeds, ½ teaspoon whole coriander seeds, ½ teaspoon caraway seeds (until fragrant), and then coarsely crush them, and add them to the ingredients.

Try *Hummus* recipe given above with other kinds of beans of your choice.

Above: *Hummus spread on a plate in a layer with a little olive oil in trenches, sprinkled with chili and decorated with parsley, tomato slices, and whole cooked chickpeas.*

PURÉED EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE WITH TAHINI/ SESAME PASTE

Baba Ghannouj Makes 6 servings

This is a tasty and healthy way of serving eggplant/aubergine. Traditionally eggplant is roasted to tenderness in the clay oven, *tannour*, which gives the vegetable a delightful smoky flavor. It is also grilled in smoldering charcoal. For convenience, most people bake it in the oven, which gives a satisfactory result, but unfortunately without the smoky taste. I have also tried a very short cut by cooking it in the microwave, but I do not recommend it. The eggplant does not like to be rushed.

As for the name *baba ghannouj*, meaning 'the pampered father,' Lebanese folklore has it that it was originated by a dutiful daughter who used to pamper her old toothless father by fixing him a treat of puréed eggplant.

Apparently, combining eggplant with *tahini* was a familiar dish in medieval times. In the 13th-century augmented version of al-Warraq's cookbook, eggplant was prepared as *mutajjan* (fried): peeled and pricked eggplant was fried in a *tajin* 'frying pan,' and then taken out. To the remaining oil, chopped onion, *murri* 'fermented sauce,' and vinegar were added. Next, caraway seeds, black pepper, *cassia dar Sini*, and ginger - all pounded - were added along with fresh *tahini*. Then, the set-aside eggplant was returned to the pan. To serve, the mix was spread on a platter and sprinkled with cinnamon *qarfa* (fol. 181r).

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g)

¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice

1 garlic clove, grated

½ teaspoon salt, or to taste

½ teaspoon cumin, ground

¼ to ½ cup (60-125 ml) tahini (see Glossary)

For garnish: olive oil, pitted olives, chili powder, chopped parsley, sliced tomato, and pomegranate seeds (optional)

☞ Wash the eggplant and pierce it at 2 or 3 places so that it will not burst in the oven. Bake in a preheated oven at 450°F (230°C/ gas mark 8) for about 45 minutes.



After it cools off, cut off the stem, and peel. Discard the liquids and as much as you can of the seeds. Mash pulp with a fork.

☞ Put mashed eggplant in a medium bowl. Add lemon juice, garlic, salt, and cumin. Mix with a fork or spoon until well blended. Stir in tahini. Refrigerate at least 1 hour before serving.

☞ For a creamier texture, use blender or food processor. After peeling the eggplant as directed in the first step, purée it for a few seconds. Add rest of ingredients as in the second step. Blend for a minute or two until smooth. Refrigerate for at least 1 hour before serving.

☞ Spread mixture on plate in a layer about 1in/2.5cm thick, drizzle with olive oil, sprinkle with chili, and garnish to taste. It will keep well for 3 to 4 days under refrigeration. Spread and garnish just before serving.

Variations:

For a lighter touch, replace tahini with yogurt or sour cream. You may also use half the amount of tahini, and replace the other half with yogurt or sour cream. To give some depth to the taste, add 1 teaspoon balsamic or red wine vinegar to the mix.

For elegant presentations cut big celery stalks crosswise into about 1½in/4cm pieces, and fill ridges with the mixture.

Eggplant: Loved and Dispraised

Despite the fact that eggplant has been growing in Iraq ever since ancient times, it has always been a controversial vegetable. Eggplant was mentioned in Akkadian cuneiform tablets on herbal medicines. Its name was given as 'pillu,' which also designated 'egg' and *luffah* 'mandrake fruit,' and as we know today, both eggplant and mandrake belong to the nightshade family (*Solanaceae*), a family of dubious history. Mandrake has long been associated with witchcraft and magic rituals and potions. It was mentioned as 'love plant' in the Bible (*Genesis* and *Songs of Songs*). In medieval sources, the name given to eggplant *badhinjan* (*beidh al-jinn*) was said to mean 'eggs of demons,' which incidentally is the same name given to mandrake (Arabic *luffah*). In Persian, it was *ibdhanj* 'beaks of demons' (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 250). Eggplant was still a controversial vegetable in medieval times. It was the least favorite among their physicians, who unanimously condemned eating it, and the bitterness of the vegetable has a lot to do with this. It was said to generate black bile, cancer, melasma (*kalaf*), and blockages. But people ate it and loved it anyway. To gastronomes, it was the most acclaimed and inspiring vegetable. Medieval cookbooks offer a generous number of sumptuous eggplant dishes, the most famous of which were *Buraniyyat* named after Buran (d.884), wife of Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun. Here are verses by the famous Abbasid gourmet poet Kushajim (d.c. 961) on eggplant (al-Warraq, Chapter 45, my translation):

Eggplant has a taste like saliva a generous lover freely offers.

A pearl in a black gown, with an emerald set, from which a stem extends.

In taste 'tis like no other, whether hurriedly cooked or well done.

Yearning for this little wonder, the witty in hosts hasten to it.

Only fools have no appetite for it. As for the smart, they just love it.

To lessen the harms of eggplant, the medieval physician al-Razi (d.923) for instance, recommended parboiling it before incorporating it into the dishes, as this would get rid of most of its harmful stuff. The best way for cooking it after this initial step was frying it in light oils such as almond oil or sesame oil. He also recommended peeling and slashing the eggplant then stuffing it with salt and soaking it in cold water for a while, and then used (187). Grilling was not recommended because it would not rid the eggplant of its bitter, hot, and sharp taste. This explains the absence of recipes for grilled eggplant in extant medieval sources. The closest recipe we have to our modern *baba ghannouj* was a 13th-century *Buran* dish, in which fried eggplant was mashed and mixed with garlic, coriander seeds, salt, and yogurt (al-Baghdadi 191). Grilling eggplant must have gained popularity at some point, say after the 15th-century, as people got over their fears of the vegetable. Perhaps not quite. In Iraq today eggplant is a summer plant, and when people get quick-tempered in the heat of the sun, they put the blame on eating it. We also believe that a distressed person should not eat it because it will cause hives.

SPICY PURÉED EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE

Msaqqa'at Betinjan Makes 4 servings

The versatility of the eggplant was fully exploited by the medieval cooks of Baghdad, that is, once they learnt how to get rid of its bitterness, which caused many people to be suspicious of it at first and avoid it. It was used in stews, stuffed, fried, pickled, and made into vegetarian *bawarid* 'cold side dishes,' which brings us to the name of the dish '*musaqqa'a*'.

Msaqqa'a in Iraq is used to designate two dishes:

☞ A cold appetizer, as the one described here and in the following recipe with yogurt. It has significant affinities with the medieval *Buran*, which is an eggplant cold dish. We have a recipe for it in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook according to which fried eggplant was mashed and mixed with garlic, coriander seeds, salt, and yogurt (Arberry 191).

☞ A casserole dish made by layering fried eggplant with meat and onion, usually served hot, is also called *musaqqa'a*, which has striking affinities with the medieval *Buraniyya*.

Now, the original *Buran* and *Buraniyya* dishes are usually attributed to Buran (d.884), wife of Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun. At some point after the Abbasid era, people in the region replaced the names *Buran* and *Buraniyya* with *musaqqa'a*, which indeed applies to both. It replaced *Buran* the cold dish because one of the meanings of *musaqqa'a* is 'the chilled.' It also replaced *Buraniyya*, the layered eggplant casserole dish, because *musaqqa'a* also means 'the spread out/the flattened' (meanings for *musaqqa'a* culled from medieval Arabic lexicons, s.v. ).

Now what concerns us here is the cooled off variety, in medieval times tucked under the category of *bawarid al-buqoul* 'cold vegetable dishes' (for the casserole, see Al-Buraniyya: *The Mother of all Musakkas* 000). In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, dishes similar to *Buran* are identified by the more generic name *badhinjan mahshi* (dressed eggplant). According to one of the recipes, small eggplants were soaked in salted water

first, then drained and fried in oil, and sprinkled with a little pepper, murri (fermented sauce), and caraway. In another *badhinjan mahshi*, eggplant was boiled until fully cooked, then finely chopped, and mixed with fried onion, a little vinegar, sugar, ground almonds, saffron, caraway, and cinnamon. The whole mixture was then drizzled with olive oil (Chapter 45).

This recipe of mine featured in *The Best American Recipes 2004-2005*, a collection of "the year's top picks from books, magazines, newspapers, and the internet" (McCullough and Stevens 4-5)

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g)

2 tablespoons olive oil

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon pepper

1 garlic clove, grated

½ teaspoon ground cumin

½ teaspoon coriander

½ teaspoon coarsely crushed chili pepper

For garnish: chopped parsley, tomato slices, and pomegranate seeds (optional)

- ☞ Grill or bake eggplant as instructed in the first step, in Puréed Eggplant with Tahini, above. Put it in a medium bowl.
- ☞ Heat oil until it sizzles, and pour it on eggplant.
- ☞ Add salt, pepper, garlic, cumin, coriander and chili. Mix well.
- ☞ Spread mixture on a plate in a layer about 1in/2.5cm thick. Garnish with parsley, tomato, and pomegranate seeds. Serve cold with warm bread.

Variation:

As in the medieval version, coarsely chop 1 medium onion and sauté it in the oil in the second step, and add it to the eggplant with the oil.

BROWNEG EGGPLANT/ AUBERGINE WITH YOGURT

Msaqua'at Betinjan bil-Liban Makes 4 to 6 servings



In medieval times, pairing fried eggplant with yogurt was a popular way for consuming eggplant as a side dish. It still is our favorite. In al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, *Buran* (named after Buran wife of Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun) was composed of fried eggplant, peeled and mashed, and mixed with garlic, coriander, salt and thick yogurt. It was served with fried meatballs. In the same cookbook, another recipe called *badhinjan bil laban* (eggplant and yogurt) is prepared by parboiling eggplant and adding it to yogurt-garlic sauce, then the dish was drizzled with sizzling hot sesame oil spiced with cumin and coriander seeds (Arberry 191, 206). Like in the above eggplant recipe, the name *musaqqa'a*, I take to mean 'the cooled off dish,' as I see such dishes more akin to the medieval cold side dishes *bawarid/sing. barida* (see also Al-Buraniyya: *The Mother of all Musakkas* 000).

Above: *Browned Eggplant/
Aubergine with yogurt.*

Today, we take the best of each medieval recipe. We keep our fried eggplant slices intact, arrange them on a plate, and drench them with the same yogurt-garlic sauce. It is a simple and beautiful dish, great for hot summer days. Today, similar dishes, called *Burani*, are still cooking in countries as far removed from Baghdad as Afghanistan.

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g)
Flour for coating eggplant slices, optional
Oil for frying
1½ cups (12oz/350g) yogurt
1 garlic clove, grated
½ teaspoon salt
For garnish: Chili pepper, chopped parsley, sliced tomato

- ☞ Wash the eggplant, cut off stem, and peel it in stripes. Cut it crosswise into 2 parts, then cut each part lengthwise into ¼in/6mm thick pieces.
- ☞ Soak eggplant pieces in warm salted water for about 30 minutes. Put a heavy plate on the pieces to keep them submerged.
- ☞ Drain eggplant pieces and fry them in a skillet. To prevent eggplant slices from soaking up a lot of fat while frying, lightly coat them on all sides with flour. Alternatively, oven-fry them by brushing or spraying them with oil, and then baking them in a hot oven or broiling them, turning once.
- ☞ Mix together yogurt, garlic, and salt.
- ☞ On a flat big platter, arrange eggplant pieces in a thin layer (they may overlap), and spoon yogurt mixture all over them. Garnish with chili pepper, parsley, and tomato slices. Serve with warm bread.

If the amount is more than you can consume in one sitting, refrigerate eggplant pieces and yogurt in two separate containers. When needed, warm up the eggplant slices and assemble the platter as directed, just before serving.

SPINACH OR SWISS CHARD WITH YOGURT

Sbenagh/ Silig bil-Liban Makes 4 servings

One of the popular medieval ways of serving *bawarid al-buqoul* (cold vegetable dishes) was to boil the vegetables, mix them with yogurt, and drizzle them with oil. Such dishes were recommended as relishes "to awaken and stimulate the appetite" (Arberry 206). The most commonly used vegetables were gourd, eggplant/aubergine, fava/broad beans, purslane, spinach, and stalks and leaves of Swiss chard (al-Warraaq, Chapter 45). A recipe called *silq bi laban* (Yogurt with chard) in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, for instance, describes how to make it:

Take [chard] with large ribs: cut off ends of the leaves, and chop into pieces a span long. Wash, and boil in salt and water until cooked. Dry, put into Persian milk [laban Farisi 'drained yogurt'] and garlic, sprinkle with [nigella seeds], and serve. (Arberry 206)

A similar recipe features in 15th-century Ottoman culinary records, such as Shirvani's *Kitabu't-Tabeeh* (cookbook), in which he translated into Turkish al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook *Kitab al-Tabeeh*, mentioned above (Yerasimos 213; more on this in Introduction, Section XIV).

The following recipe is inspired by such medieval yogurt dishes. Spinach or chard can be used. If chard is your choice, use the green part of the leaf only. The ribs and stalks can be used for something else, such as soup. The famous medieval physician al-Razi recommend "chard with yogurt" for hot-tempered people *mahrouréen* (195).



1 bunch fresh spinach (about 16oz/450g), coarse stems discarded, and leaves washed and drained. Swiss chard may be used instead
1 cup (250ml) plain yogurt
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 cloves garlic, grated ½ cup (3oz/85g) green onion, finely chopped with the tender green part (about 1 small bunch)
¼ cup (2oz/60g) shredded radish
2 teaspoons fresh tarragon or ¼ teaspoon dried
1 teaspoon vinegar, preferably balsamic
2 tablespoons olive oil

- ☞ In a medium pot, wilt spinach or chard leaves in the water clinging to it, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir once or twice. Sprinkle with cold water to refresh leaves, let drain well in a colander. Chop fine.
- ☞ In a big bowl mix spinach or Swiss chard with the rest of ingredients. Refrigerate for about an hour, and serve garnished with wedges of tomato, if wished.

Above: *Spinach or Swiss
Chard with Yogurt.*

PURÉED FAVA/BROAD BEANS, MEDIEVAL STYLE

Bagilla Mahrousa Makes 4 servings

The following is inspired by al-Warraq's *baridat al-baqilli* 'cold dish of fava/broad beans' (Chapter 45).

2 cups (12oz/350g) fresh or frozen fava/broad beans
 3 tablespoons olive oil
 1 medium onion, finely chopped
 2 to 3 garlic cloves, grated
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 ¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) ground pistachio
For garnish: chili powder, chopped parsley, olives, and slices of tomato

- ☞ Put fava beans in a medium pot and cover with cold water. Bring to a boil, then lower to medium, and let boil gently for about 15 minutes, or until tender. Drain beans and reserve some of the liquid, in case you need it. When beans are cool enough to handle, peel and mash with a fork.
- ☞ Sauté onion in oil until it starts to brown. Set aside 2 tablespoons of it for garnish, add the rest to the mashed beans along with garlic, salt, pepper, cumin, lemon juice, and ground pistachio. If mixture looks dry, add a little of the drained liquid in which beans were cooked.
- ☞ Spread mixture on a plate in a layer about 1 in./2.5 cm thick. Garnish with the browned onion, chili, parsley, olives, and tomato slices. Drizzle with olive oil, if wished. Serve with warm bread.

FAVA/BROAD BEANS WITH VINEGAR

Bagilla bil-Khal



One of the simple medieval methods for serving fava beans as a cold dish was to boil it, drain it, and drizzle it with olive oil and vinegar. Al-Warraq boils the vinegar first with onion juice, and then seasons it with coriander, cumin, cloves, caraway, and other spices. Chopped parsley is used as a garnish (Chapter 45). Al-Baghdadi's 13th-century version is even simpler:

Take green [fresh] beans as soon as firm, and peel off the outer skin [i.e. the jackets]: then boil in salt and water until cooked. Dry, and pour on a little sesame oil: cover with good vinegar, and serve. (Arberry 208)

SIMMERED CHICKPEAS

Lablabi Makes 6 servings

A popular snack and appetizer, especially in wintertime, when it smells as though there is a pot of *lablabi* cooking somewhere in the neighborhood. It is sold by vendors, whose catchy phrase *سالح وطيب البلبلي* (the chickpeas are deliciously seasoned with salt) is meant to attract the attention of passers-by. *Lablabi* is also given as a healthy snack at schools, cooked at home, and served as *mezze* with drinks at restaurants and bars. People believe in the magical power of its warm broth in curing colds and sore throats. It is an affordable source of protein and carbohydrates, a great energy booster. It is even reputed to be an aphrodisiac.

2 cups (16oz/450g) uncooked whole chickpeas, washed, soaked overnight, and drained
 1 cube chicken bouillon, or 2 cups (475ml) unsalted chicken broth, optional
 ¼ teaspoon turmeric
 1 teaspoon salt, use less if bouillon is used
For garnish: lemon juice, olive oil, chopped parsley or mint

- ☞ Put drained chickpeas in a medium pot, along with bouillon or broth, and turmeric. Add enough cold water to cover by about 4in/10cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to low and simmer gently, covered, until chickpeas are tender when squeezed, do not let them get mushy, about 45 minutes. Add salt half way through cooking.
- ☞ Serve steaming-hot in small bowls, with some of the liquid. Drizzle with olive oil and lemon juice, and garnish with chopped parsley or mint.

Lablabi Vendors

Here is a cheerful chant a *lablabi* vendor (*abu'l-lablabi*) would sing to lure children to his moveable stand:
Delicious lablabi! I will fill your pockets with it for just two pennies!

SIMMERED FRESH BLACK-EYED PEAS

Loubya Maslouga Makes 4 servings

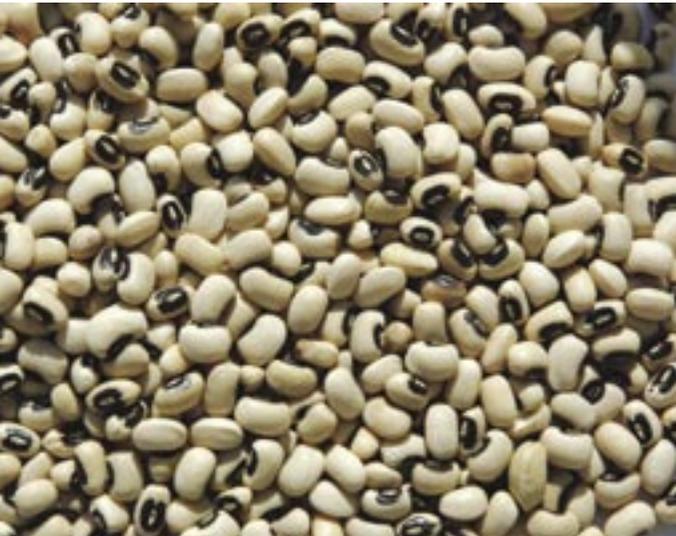
A favorite summertime appetizer or a side dish. While in season, fresh black-eyed peas in the pod (also known as cowpeas) are cooked almost every day to be devoured before the meal or with it. The best *loubya* grows on the small islands (*jazra*) that come into existence as the water level of the river Tigris declines in the summer. It has been growing in the region ever since antiquity. In Akkadian, it was known as '*lubu*.' The best substitute is asparagus beans or string beans sometimes found in farmers markets in the summer, or oriental stores year round.

1 pound (450g) fresh black-eyed peas in the pod
 1 teaspoon salt
 Crushed dry mint

- ☞ Wash beans, leave whole, and do not cut off ends. In a medium pot, arrange and stack beans lengthwise, like untied bunches, to prevent them from being squished while handling because they get very tender when cooked. Invert a plate on the beans to keep them submerged. Pour enough hot water to cover by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then lower heat to medium low, and simmer gently, covered, for 20 to 30 minutes or until tender but still intact. Add salt about 10 minutes before beans are done.
- ☞ Use a pancake turner to take beans out of the pot and into a flat dish. Sprinkle with mint and serve warm or cold with a drizzle of vinegar or lemon juice, if liked.
- ☞ These beans are usually eaten with the fingers since most of them come with tough strings that have to be discarded. The way to do it is to pick up a bean with the fingers, eat it until most of the bean is in the mouth, press it between the lips or front teeth, and pull the string with the index finger and thumb. Have fun!

A MEDIEVAL APPETIZER OF BLACK-EYED PEAS

Baridat al-Loubya



Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook includes two simple *bawarid* (cold) dishes that call for dried black-eyed peas. They are very good as they are, but you can improvise by adding chopped vegetables such as onion, tomatoes, grated garlic, and so on. The beans are boiled and drained first. They are then put in a bowl, and some lemon juice, sour grape juice, or sumac juice was poured on them. Sumac juice is made by soaking whole berries of sumac in hot water for 30 minutes, and drained. Juice is used, and seeds are discarded. A last touch would be a drizzle of oil.

In the second recipe, after cooking and draining the beans, they are put in a bowl, and sweet vinegar, mustard, and oil, in equal amounts, are poured on the beans. For garnish, a good amount of crushed walnut, chopped parsley and rue are sprinkled on them. The above recipes along with many more are included in a chapter dealing with vegetarian dishes, which Christians prepare for Lent (al-Warraq, Chapter 46).

II SALADS *Zalatat*

TOSSED COLORFUL SALAD

Zalaata Mshakkal

It seems that every culinary culture has its own favored combination of vegetables, or ways of presenting 'Tossed Salad.' The typical Iraqi salad is composed of a variety of vegetables finely chopped or shredded. Big chunks of vegetables in a salad are a sign of sloppy workmanship. Having a bowl of a variety of finely chopped vegetables, though, makes it easier to meet the 5-a-day servings requirement, and it makes the task of munching and crunching on the vegetables less tedious and a much faster and enjoyable one.



Choice of vegetables is determined by their availability, though it is customary to use romaine/cos *lettuce* in winter and *cucumber* in summer, in its two types, the regular dark green variety, and the pale green thin-skinned ribbed cucumber called *ta'rouzi*, identified in the West as Armenian or Japanese cucumbers. In my childhood neighborhood in Baghdad, we used to buy our vegetables from a vendor who pronounced this type of cucumber as *tar'ouzi*, and we would have a good laugh at him whenever he said it. About a year ago, I stumbled upon a very interesting detail in *Mu'jam al-Buldan* by the Geographer Yaqout al-Hamawi (d.1229). He calls this cucumber *tar'ouz*, like our vendor, and explains that it grows in a village belonging to Harran

SPICY ORANGE JUICE SALAD DRESSING

For every day use, a simple and light salad dressing is used. Olive oil and vinegar in the ratio of one part olive oil to two parts vinegar, with a bit of sugar are mixed with the salad before serving it. In wintertime, fresh lemon juice or the sweet and sour juice of orange of Seville (*rarinj/narinj*) would substitute the vinegar. A sprinkle of salt and black pepper are also added. Olive oil can be flavored with herbs. In a small glass jar, put washed and thoroughly dried sprigs of thyme, dill or mint, lemon zest, 2 skinned cloves of garlic, and a few olives. Use within a week.

Try this spicy, fruity, and chunky salad dressing for special occasions. The sweet and sour orange of Seville (*rarinj/narinj*) is perfect for making this dressing, but since it is hard to come by, orange juice mixed with a little lime/lemon juice can be substituted.

- 1 cup (250ml) orange juice
- 1 teaspoon whole cumin seeds
- 1 teaspoon whole anise or fennel seeds
- 1 teaspoon *za'tar* (see Glossary) or dried thyme
- 2 tablespoons lime or lemon juice
- ½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, finely chopped
- ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) pitted olives, chopped (about 8 olives)
- ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
- A dash of salt and black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon crushed chili pepper, optional

☞ On medium-high heat, reduce orange juice to ¼ cup (60ml), about 15 minutes. Set aside to cool thoroughly. Toast cumin and aniseeds in a small skillet until fragrant, and then grind then.

☞ Mix reduced orange juice and ground seeds with rest of ingredients. Let steep for about 15 minutes, and use.

(an ancient city in north Mesopotamia, said to be the first city built after the flood). Al-Hamawi adds that the village got its name from its temple, *tar'ouz* ترع عوز, meaning 'the gate of Venus' (407).

Tomatoes or boiled *beets/beetroot* are finely diced and added for their bright red colors, otherwise the salad would be considered anemic, and will be given two thumbs down. Also added are chopped or thinly sliced *onion*, shredded or thinly sliced green *cabbage*, chopped *parsley*, *lemon pulp*, cubed boiled *potatoes* or boiled *white beans*, shredded *yellow, orange or purple carrots*. Yes, purple carrots.

The purple carrot is crisp, and sweeter than the regular orange variety. It has been growing in the region ever since antiquity. The medieval botanist Ibn al-Baytar calls it *jazar ahmar* (red carrot), and describes it as juicy, tender, and delicious (164). I first became aware of the fact that the purple variety is not readily available in other parts of the world, when, in the late seventies, I took the American wife of a visiting professor on a tour in the college of Arts where I was teaching English in Baghdad. In one of our stops to take some refreshments, she was thrilled to see some of the female staff members were fighting the battle of the bulge by munching on purple carrots. She actually took a piece to show it to her husband. Later on in a letter, she told me that was the highlight of her visit.

As late as 1996, the purple carrot was still a news-making vegetable in the United States, and it still is in other regions. The purple carrot is given the name 'BetaSweet carrot.' This variety is believed to be even more beneficial to the body than the regular orange carrot. It is now sold in some of the American supermarkets as 'maroon carrot.' Occasionally the salad would be garnished with pitted *olives* and wedges of *boiled eggs*, or sprinkled with dried mint (you may substitute with *za'tar*, see Glossary). With a warm piece of bread, a salad prepared like this can make a healthy satisfying meal by itself.

EASY SALAD PLATTER

Ma'oun il-Khudhrawat

How to Get Lemon Pulp

Using lemon pulp in salads is more exciting than lemon juice. The easiest way to get it is to peel the entire lemon using a sharp paring knife. Then slash each section in half lengthwise, and scrape out pulp with the knife, discarding seeds if any.



A truly complete and colorful salad topped with a slice of egg and served in a bread bowl.

If you are not in a chopping, dicing, and shredding mood, you have the choice of preparing an easy salad platter of sliced vegetables and whole greens and herbs. Indeed, they are even sometimes rolled in a piece of flat bread and enjoyed as a quick snack by themselves. That was also the way greens and herbs were served during the medieval times. They were folded in *ruqaq* 'thin breads' and artistically arranged on the dining table, between platters and other breads. However, by devout lovers of meat dishes, they were nicknamed *zuham bila manfa'a* 'much ado about nothing' (al-Aabi 172).

The platter may include any of the following:

Tomato wedges

Sliced green pepper, hot or sweet

Green onions whole, or white onions cut into wedges.

Radish both red and white. The white variety tastes like daikon radish, and in Iraq it is called *fijil Amreeki* 'American radish,' for it is believed that the seeds are imported from the United States.

Radish leaves while still young and tender

Sprigs of flat-leaved parsley (Italian parsley)

Sprigs of tender mint and sweet basil (*rihaan*)

Two herbs exclusively Iraqi:

1 Kurrath, an ancient herb, relative of the onion, somewhat similar to Korean leeks/chives. It is a variety of leeks grown for its hot and pungent leaves only. They are vibrantly green tender stems, which grow in threes, fitted into each other and joined at the base.

2 Rishshad (garden cress/garden peppergrass). Its leaves are smaller and lighter in color than parsley and have a sharp peppery taste

BULGUR SALAD

Tabboula Makes 4 servings

This refreshing and nourishing salad is known almost everywhere. However, the vegetables to bulgur proportions might vary from one country to the other and even from one household to the other. In Iraq, it is the kind of salad reserved for parties and big gatherings. The secret to good *tabboula* is fine chopping, and perhaps that is why it was called *tabboula* in the first place. We are all familiar with *tawaabil* (ground spices) but do not know why they are called so. I found a key in the Akkadian '*tabilu*', which describes crushed dried herbs (Bottéro, *The Oldest Cuisine* 57). It is possible that this salad is called so because it is finely chopped (more evidence is needed here, I must confess).

¼ cup (4oz/115g) bulgur #1 (see Glossary)

2 cups (4oz/115g) parsley, finely chopped

1 cup (6oz/180g) tomatoes, finely diced (about 2 medium ones)

¼ cup (4½oz/125g) green onion, finely chopped, including the tender green stalks

¼ cup (½oz/15g) mint, finely chopped, optional

½ cup (125ml) fresh lemon juice

3 tablespoons olive oil, or to taste

Salt and pepper to taste

A dash of chili pepper, optional

For garnish: olives, leaves of the heart of romaine/cos lettuce

☞ Wash bulgur and soak it in warm water with a dash of salt until it softens, about 30 minutes. Drain very well, and set aside.

☞ Mix bulgur with the rest of ingredients except for garnishes. Refrigerate at least an hour before serving. This salad will stay good for about 2 days under refrigeration.

☞ To serve put salad in a bowl and garnish with olives and lettuce leaves, which you can use as scoops.



*Top: Tabboula
Below: Cooked bulgur wheat ready for the tabboula*

SALAD WITH TOASTED PITA CROUTONS

Zalaatat Fattoush Makes 4 servings

The word *fattoush* is closely linked to the old tradition of crumbling bread and using it in *thareed* dishes, with and without meat. Bread used for such purposes would be called *fateet*, or *khubz maftout*. From al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, we learn that Arab medieval cooks sometimes served *thareed* as cold side dishes or salads, collectively called *khal wa zeit* (literally, vinegar and olive oil). They were prepared to accompany grilled meats. Of these, he gives four recipes, the principal ingredients of which are a sour agent, oil, crumbled bread, and chopped vegetables and herbs.

In one of the recipes, for instance, *ka'k* (dried bread) is used. The recipe specifies that it should be of fine yeasted variety made with white flour. The other recipes call for *ragheef sameedh* (fine white bread) broken to pieces. The bread is first soaked in a sour liquid such as vinegar or sour grape juice chilled with ice and balanced with some sugar, then it is drained and mixed with olive oil. In some recipes, ground almond, mint, parsley, onion juice, or pieces of aged cheese are added. The dish is garnished with chopped cucumber pulp and fresh thyme and mint, and served with hot grilled chicken or *farareej* 'pullets' (Chapter 47). The benefit of using stale bread is that it can soak up the liquids without disintegrating. However, if you do not happen to have stale bread, fresh bread will be fine - just toast it in the oven until nicely crisp. If you like to use cheese as in the medieval recipes above, stuff the bread with cheese and toast it before using it in the salad, as directed below.

For the Bread (croutons):

1 pita (pocket) bread, separated to make 2 pieces
¼ cup (2oz/60g) crumbled feta cheese, and grated Pecorino Romano cheese, each
¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted and chopped walnuts
1 teaspoon za'tar (see Glossary) or thyme
2 cups (4oz/115g) parsley, finely chopped
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), diced
¾ cup (4½oz/125g) diced cucumber
¾ cup (4½oz/125g) diced green onion, including the tender green stalks
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh mint, optional
¼ cup (60ml) balsamic vinegar
¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
A dash of salt and black pepper
8 olives, pitted and chopped
1 tablespoon sumac (see Glossary)
Preheat oven 425°F/ 220°C/ gas mark 7

☞ Prepare croutons: Spread inner side of one half of pita bread with cheese, sprinkle with walnut and za'tar or thyme. Cap it with the other half. Press, and cut into 1 in./2.5 cm pieces. Arrange them in one layer on a baking sheet, and bake in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes, or until they are well toasted. Allow to cool.

☞ In a large bowl mix all the ingredients, along with the prepared bread, and refrigerate for about 30 minutes before serving.

LENTIL SALAD

Zalaatat 'Adas Makes 4 servings

A refreshing variation on tabboula in which whole lentils replace bulgur. The recipe was tested by Susan Selasky for the *Detroit Free Press Test Kitchen* (April 22, 2003). Her verdict: "the fresh mint adds a lot of pizzazz to the salad. This salad is a terrific source of fiber" (13 grams per serving).

1 cup (8oz/225g) uncooked whole lentil with shell on, picked over, washed and drained (2 cups/8oz/225g cooked)
2 to 3 garlic cloves, whole and unskinned
½ cup (3oz/85g) green onion, chopped (both white and green parts) or regular onion sliced thinly and sautéed in 1 tablespoon olive oil until it caramelizes
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), chopped
1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley, chopped
¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh mint, chopped, optional
1 medium carrot, peeled and grated
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons vinegar (cider or balsamic) or lemon juice
1 teaspoon cumin, ground
½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
For garnish: 2 hard-cooked eggs

☞ Place lentils and garlic in a medium pot. Cover them with cold water by 1 in./2.5cm. and bring the pot to a quick boil, skimming any foam that might form. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for about 20 minutes, or until lentils are cooked but still firm (al dente) and most of the liquid has evaporated. Avoid overcooking them. Add a little hot water if needed while simmering. Allow lentils to cool.

☞ Take out the cooked garlic cloves from the lentils. Squeeze out pulp and mash it with the back of a spoon. Return it to the lentils and mix it in.

☞ In a big bowl, combine lentils with green onion,



tomatoes, parsley, mint (if used), carrot, olive oil, vinegar or lemon, salt, pepper, and cumin. Garnish with wedges of cooked eggs. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes before serving.

Variation:

Bean Salad: Replace lentils with white beans, black-eyed peas, or fava/broad beans (small variety known as *fool mudammas*, see Glossary). Soak beans overnight, drain, cover by about 4 in./10 cm of cold water, bring to a quick boil, and then lower heat and simmer for about 35 to 40 minutes, or until cooked but intact (al dente). Or use two 15oz/425g cans of beans, rinsed and drained.

YOGURT SALAD

Jajeek Makes 4 servings



Apparently, yogurt salad was a popular appetizer during the middle ages. In al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, we come across a recipe intriguingly called *jajaq*. A closer look into it reveals the oldest *jajeek* recipe we have access to so far. Here it is:

Take a clean leather container and scent it [usually fumigated with aloe wood]. Pour yogurt into it and add salt. The outside of the container needs to be salted, too. Stir into the yogurt, chopped onion, whole skinned cloves of garlic, finely chopped parsley, na'na' (cultivated mint), tarragon, rue, khiyar (small, smooth cucumbers), and qiththa' (ribbed, long cucumber), peeled lettuce stems, and - when in season - some artichoke (harshaf). Use also fresh and tender [green] almonds.

The best [vegetables and herbs] added to it are a suitable amount of na'na' (cultivated mint), rue, parsley, onion, and garlic. Besides, you need to keep [the leather container] clean all the time [to allow liquids to drain]. When it is ready to eat [after you set it aside to allow flavors to blend and yogurt to drain and thicken], serve it with olive oil. (Chapter 39)

In addition to the above, there are three *jajaq* recipes in the 14th-century anonymous Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* (190-92). During the Ottoman period, this salad was called *mastabe* (Yerasimos 213). The first yogurt salad with the name *jajeek* occurs in 19th-century Ottoman cookbook by Turabi Efendi (207). Nowadays this simple salad is made throughout the entire Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern regions offered as *mezze* or a salad dish. It takes only a few minutes to make, and it is especially good in the summer as an appetizer, or a cool sauce served with hot dishes.

- 3 cups (475ml) plain yogurt**
- 2 cups (12oz/350g) finely diced cucumbers**
- 1 garlic clove, grated**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint, or**
- 1 teaspoon crushed dried mint**
- 1 teaspoon fresh dill finely chopped, or**
- ½ teaspoon dill weed, optional**

☞ Drain yogurt for 2 to 3 hours, using a sieve lined with cheesecloth/butter muslin or a coffee filter. Fit it into a bowl to receive the drained liquids. Next, stir it until smooth and add the rest of the ingredients. Mix well and refrigerate for about 30 minutes before serving. This salad does not keep well more than a day because cucumber loses its freshness and crunchiness fast.

Note:

You may use the yogurt undrained, but it will be a little thinner in consistency.

BEETS/BEETROOT SALAD

Zalaatat il-Shuwander Makes 4 servings

Beets/beetroot in Iraq is a wintertime vegetable, and it comes in very handy when tomatoes are scarce in that season. There is evidence that red beetroots existed in the ancient Mesopotamian region. In Akkadian, it was called '*shumundar*' (Thompson, *Dictionary of Assyrian Botany* 49, 51). Besides, one of the Babylonian stew recipes is cooked with beets. However, beets are nowhere to be found in the extant medieval cookbooks, although references to *jughandar* and *jukandar* in other sources do occur. It is quite possible that though the vegetable did exist, it had negligible culinary uses. They simply did not have the appetite for red stew, especially given the dietary prohibition of blood in Islam. The medieval cooks prided themselves on white stews, golden yellow, and even green stews, but not red stews, which can easily leave hard-to-remove spots on the fine clothes of the diners, who usually share a communal meal.

Today, we have many uses for the beets. It is simmered and eaten as a snack, its liquid is made into a delicious drink (see Chapter 20), and preserved into pickles and jam (see Chapter 19), and makes beautiful salads. Beets can be boiled or baked. I prefer the latter since it helps keep flavor and nutrients locked in. Beets contain a high amount of folate, fiber, and potassium. Some research studies even suggest that the substance, which gives the beets their crimson color, is a powerful cancer-fighting agent. So keep the good tradition going!

- 3 medium beets/beetroot (about 1½lb/675g)**
- 2 tablespoons olive oil**
- Juice of 1 lemon (about ¼ cup/60ml) or**
- ¼ cup (60ml) vinegar**
- ¼ teaspoon salt**
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper**
- 1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley, finely chopped**
- For garnish: ¼ cup (60ml) yogurt or sour cream, and**
- ¼ cup (1oz/30g) broken pieces of toasted walnut**

☞ Wash beets well (neither peel nor cut off the ends because this will cause them to bleed). Put them in a medium pot, and cover with cold water by 2 in./5 cm.



Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer on low heat, covered, for 40 to 45 minutes or until they are cooked but still firm. Test by inserting a fork. You have the option of baking them in the oven. Just wrap them very well in aluminum foil, and bake in a preheated oven at 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8 for 60 minutes or until tender. Let cool.

- ☞ Peel beets by rubbing the peel between the fingers under running water. You might need to use the knife if skin does not peel off easily. Cut off both ends, and chop beets into small pieces.
- ☞ In a big bowl, mix diced beets with oil, lemon juice or vinegar, salt, pepper, and parsley. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes.
- ☞ Serve cold in individual bowls, drizzled with yogurt or sour cream, and sprinkled with toasted walnuts.

This salad keeps well, under refrigeration, for 2 to 3 days. However, drizzle it with yogurt and walnuts just before serving it.

RADISH AND BEETS/ BEETROOT SALAD

Zalaatat Fijil wi-Shwander Makes 4 servings

A beautiful salad in which radish and beets/beetroot are combined to make a colorful platter. It is also a nice way of having radish, which is believed to aid digestion, especially starchy foods.

3 medium beets/beetroot (about 1½lb/675g)
½ head of romaine/cos lettuce, washed and drained
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 tablespoons vinegar, cider or balsamic
¼ teaspoon salt, sugar, black pepper, mustard powder, each
3 cooked eggs, cut into quarters
10 thin slices of daikon (white) radish
Chili pepper, to taste

☞ Cook beets and peel them as described above in Beets/Beetroot Salad. After you slice them, put aside 10 pieces of equal size. Chop the rest into small cubes.
 ☞ Thinly slice lettuce. Add to it diced beets, olive oil, vinegar, salt, sugar, pepper, and mustard. Gently mix, and spread on a big platter.
 ☞ Decorate edge of platter by alternating slices of beets with slices of daikon radish, overlapping a little. Arrange egg quarters in a decorative way in the middle. Sprinkle lightly with chili pepper.

This salad should be served immediately because beets might discolor the radish and the eggs.

Radish and Beets/Beetroot Salad A beautiful salad in which radish and beets/beetroot are combined to make a colorful platter

CABBAGE AND CARROT SALAD

Zalaatat Lahana w-Jizar Makes 4 servings

The following is a nice and easy way to consume these healthy vegetables, that is, other than serving them boiled or steamed.

3 cups (14 oz/ 400 g) white cabbage, finely shredded or thinly sliced
2 cup (12 oz/ 350 g) carrots, shredded
¼ cup (60 ml) vinegar, cider or balsamic
3 tablespoons olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste
1 cup (2 oz/ 60 g) parsley, finely chopped

☞ In a big bowl, mix all ingredients. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes. If wished drizzle with a little yogurt or sour cream.



SIMPLE POTATO SALAD

Zalaatat Puteta Makes 4 servings



Here is the Iraqi version of the potato salad. It can make a refreshing and nourishing lunch by itself.

4 medium potatoes, boiled with skin on
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), chopped
1 cup (6oz/180g) cucumber, chopped
½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, chopped
½ cup (3oz/85g) spring onion/scallion or white onion, finely diced
3 tablespoons olive oil
3 tablespoons vinegar, cider or balsamic
Salt and pepper to taste
For garnish: slices of boiled eggs, dilled yogurt (½ cup/4oz/45g yogurt combined with 1 tablespoon chopped dill), and chili pepper

☞ Skin boiled potatoes and cut them into small cubes, and then mix them with tomatoes, cucumber, parsley, onion, oil, vinegar, salt, and pepper. Refrigerate for about 30 minutes. Serve in a bowl, garnished with sliced eggs, drizzled with dilled yogurt, and sprinkled with chili pepper.

RELISH OF PICKLED MANGO WITH TOMATOES

'Anba w-Tamata Makes 4 servings

If you want to give a bland dish or a sandwich a good kick, make the following relish in a minute, provided you already have bought the 'anba (Indian pickled mango). For a homemade substitute for the pickled mango, see 000.

The Iraqis' love for this spicy-hot condiment is apparently not a new trend. Eleventh-century writer *al-Tha'alibi*, for instance, tells in his *Lata'if al-Ma'arif* (interesting tidbits of knowledge) that the Abbasid Caliphs used to import huge amounts of the preserved mango, called *anbijat* (128). The famous traveler Ibn Battuta (d.1377) describes how the Indians pickle the sour unripe fruit *anba/anbaj* (mango) in brine and vinegar and eat it as an appetizing condiment with food. He compares the taste of pickled mango to olives. Eating it, he adds, will improve bodily odors (492).

½ cup (3oz/85g) chopped tomato
½ cup (125ml) pickled mango, mild or hot, available at Middle-Eastern grocery stores

☞ Combine the ingredients, and serve in a small bowl. To be consumed sparingly.



Lentil Soup 00
 Meatballs, ras il-'asfour
 Creamy Mung Bean Soup
 Cream of Turnip and Swiss Chard Soup
 Cream of Squash/courgette soup
 Spinach soup
 Vegetable Soup
 Chicken soup with Vegetables
 Tomato Soup with Rice
 White Beans Soup

Soups *Shorbat*

An Excavated Sumerian-Akkadian lexicon attests to the fact that soup was an important dish on the menu of the ancient Mesopotamian diners. They knew the liquid form, such as broths, as well as the thick and nourishing soups (porridge soups). This Akkadian document included over a hundred kinds of soup, which by definition were dishes prepared by cooking food in water. Some soups contained sheep's tail fat or oil, honey, and meat broth. Others were made with a vegetable base (Limet 136, 145). They even made fish soups (Gordon 99). Of the starchy ingredients

incorporated were chickpeas, lentils, barley, and emmer flour. Such soups have always been popular ever since. 'Aseedā of medieval times, for instance, was composed of flour, fat, and water, like these ancient soups. A variety with a thinner consistency was called *hareera* (silk-smooth), which nowadays is the specialty of North African countries. Besides, the two Baghdadi medieval cookbooks available to us include many recipes for making thick soups (porridge soups), which incorporate grains and pulses, such as wheat, rice, varieties of beans, mung beans, and lentils. They might escape the attention of soup-seekers because they are mostly called after the name of the main ingredient used, such as *'adasiyyat* (cooked with lentil), or *hintiyyat* (cooked with wheat). You will find some of these recipes in Chapter 9, Section *Porridge Soups*, which deals with grains and beans.

There have been conjectures as to where the name of *shorba* came from. In the medieval books, many words were used to designate soup, such as *'aseeda*, *hareera*, *hasu/jihsaā*, and the generic *shourba*. Of these, the last one is the only name in use in the colloquial Iraqi nowadays, and evidently, it has its local ancient roots

in the region. According to Hanz Wehr's *Dictionary of Written Arabic*, *shourba* has a Syriac origin. The word might well be a combination of the Akkadian *sheer* (meat) + *pa* (juice/liquid, meaning found in Thompson's *Assyrian Herbal* 181). To my knowledge, the earliest mention of *shurba* designating soup is in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 2). The medieval physician Ibn Sina (d.1037) used the term *shourbaja* for soup, three times in his *Al-Qanoun fil-Tib* (158, 444, 1051). Al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook included a rice soup recipe called *shourba*, and another one named *shourba khadhra* 'green soup' (Arberry 44, 47). In Ibn al-Mubarrid's 15th-century Damascene cookbook, we find another recipe for *shourba* prepared with meat broth and *sha'eeriyya* noodles (374).

Therefore, in light of this information, I find the idea that *shourba* - the dish and the name - developed in the Ottoman kitchens, "maintained itself in Turkish and passed from it into the Balkan languages and into Arabic" (Algar 33), completely unfounded. I believe that *shorba* has been in the region from ancient Mesopotamian times.

Soups have the reputation of being the poor people's



Shourba Khadhra' (Green Soup)

A Thirteenth-Century Baghdadi Soup Recipe
This Medieval Baghdadi soup is made green by using a special variety of leeks, called *kurrath*, grown for its vibrantly green, tender, hot, and pungent stalks. It is somewhat similar to Korean leeks or chives. Here is the entire recipe:

Cut fat meat into middling pieces and fry lightly in dissolved tail. When brown, add salt to taste, fine-brayed dry coriander, pieces of cinnamon, and a handful of peeled chick-peas. Cover with water, and put on the fire: when boiling, throw away the scum. Take two bunches of fresh vegetable leeks, cut small with a knife, pound in the mortar, and throw into the saucepan. Take a portion of red meat, chop up fine with seasonings, adding a handful of peeled chick-peas, washed rice, and a little of the pounded leek: make into cabobs, and throw into the saucepan. When all is cooked, add more water as required. Then take rice, a quarter as much as the water, wash several times, and put into the saucepan: let it continue to boil until thoroughly cooked, a little on the light [thin] side. Leave over the fire to settle: then remove. (Arberry, 47)

favorite dish because they are filling and cheap. Nevertheless, they can be made wonderfully delicious, nutritious, and healthy, and fit for kings. In today's mad race for finding the surest and fastest diet to lose weight, soup should top the list. A bowl of lentil soup, for instance, with a piece of bread and a bowl of salad is all the body needs for a meal. We, like the rest of the world, also consider soup as a kind of comfort food, and believe in the magical healing power of the chicken soup. In fact, it has recently been proved that this is not a myth, chicken soup, especially when cooked with the skin, has some antiviral substances that can neutralize cold viruses.

Because most of the soups we usually consume are quite substantial, what with the vegetables, grains, pulses, optional cuts of meat on the bones and meatballs, it is not customary to serve the soup before the meal as an appetizer. It is the meal itself, to be had with salad and warm bread. Sometimes it is served to complement a scanty main dish. During the summer, it is hardly ever made, and there is no such thing as cold soup in our cuisine. Probably the only time soup may herald a main meal is during *Ramadhan*, the month of fasting. Lentil soup is customarily served on such occasions. It warms up the body and prepares it for the big meal after long hours of abstaining from food and drink.

LENTIL SOUP

Shorbat 'Adas Makes 6 servings

This is by far the mother of all soups, rich in nutrients, and a good source for iron. In *The Assyrian Herbal*, which deals with Akkadian cuneiform texts of vegetable drugs, there is frequent mention of lentils and lentil soup (Akk. 'mei ushshe' i.e. lentil cooked in liquid). The Assyrians also referred to it as "vegetable of the lungs," from which we learn that lentil soup was believed to be a remedy for colds (Thompson 114). In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, lentil dishes are said to be particularly good for the ailments of the chest (Chapter 22). We still swear by it. From the Baghdadi medieval cookbooks, we learn they used unshelled and yellow shelled lentils in cooking their *adasiyyat*, which had the consistency of thick soups. Al-Warraq gives four of these, with and without meat (Chapter 64). Following is al-Baghdadi's 13th-century recipe for *Adasiyya*:

Cut up meat, and dissolve the tail as usual. Put the meat into the oil, and fry lightly until browned: then throw in a little salt, cumin, and brayed dry coriander, and cover with water. When nearly cooked, add [silq 'chard'] washed and cut into pieces four fingers long. When thoroughly boiling, add as required lentils, cleaned and washed, and keep a steady fire going until the lentils are cooked. When set smooth and definitely cooked, add as required fine-bruised garlic, stirring with a ladle. Then leave over a slow fire: and remove. When serving, squeeze over it lemon juice. (Arberry 45)



They also added noodles to give body to the soup. In al-Baghdadi's *Rishta* soup recipe, besides lentil, he added peeled chickpeas, and *rishta*, which is fresh noodles "made by kneading flour and water well, then rolling out fine and cutting into thin threads four fingers long" (Arberry 45).

For making lentil soup today, we use shelled red/yellow lentil, which does not need any soaking. The following is the basic recipe. If you prefer it spicier, then follow suggestions in Variations below.

2 cups (16oz/450g) shelled red lentils, washed and drained
2 teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ cup (¾oz/23g) broken vermicelli noodles (2 balls), optional
2 tablespoons olive oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
 For garnish, chopped parsley

MEATBALLS
(SPARROWS' HEADS)*Ras il-'Asfour|Kuftayat*

☞ Put lentils in a medium heavy pot, and cover with cold water by about 4in/10cm (about 10 cups/ 2.5 liters). Bring to a quick boil, skimming froth as needed. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until lentil is thoroughly cooked, about 30 minutes. For a creamy texture, whisk the mixture with a wire whisk until smooth.

☞ Add salt, black pepper, and broken noodles if used. Stir well. Keep simmering, and stir occasionally to prevent soup from sticking to the bottom of the pot until soup is nicely thickened, about 15 minutes.

☞ About 10 minutes before soup is done, sauté the onion in a small skillet until it is golden brown and add it to the pot. Deglaze the skillet by adding to it some of the soup, and pour it back to the pot. Stir in lemon juice.
 ☞ Ladle soup into bowls, garnish with chopped parsley, and serve with warm bread.

Variations:

For a spicier version of lentil soup, when onion starts to brown in the last step, add the following and stir for a minute or two, and then add them to the lentil pot:

1 teaspoon crushed cumin
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
½ teaspoon curry powder
½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
2 tablespoons tomato paste, or
½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce, or 1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary), instead of lemon juice

☞ Toast bite-size pieces of flat bread, and scatter them on the soup in the bowl, just before serving.

☞ Add to the soup, chopped spinach, (one 10oz/285g package frozen, or 16oz/450g fresh) along with the rest of the ingredients in the second step.

The custom of adding small meatballs to soup and stew dishes goes back to the medieval times. They called them *kubab* (sing. *kubba*), and they ranged in size from the very small (as small as hazelnuts, and called them *bunduqiyyat*), to the big ones (as large as oranges of Seville, and called them *narinjiyyat*). Today, we make them as small as sparrows' heads, and hence the name *ras il-'asfour*, sometimes generically referred to as *kuftayat*.

Add these beautiful spicy meatballs to the soup about 10 minutes before it is done. Here is how to make them:

8oz/225g ground/minced lean meat
1 small onion, grated
1 garlic clove, grated, optional
3 tablespoons flour, breadcrumbs, or rice flour
2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
¾ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon ginger powder
¼ teaspoon curry powder
¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

☞ Combine all the ingredients and knead lightly. With wet fingers, form into small balls (as small as sparrows' heads). Shallow-fry them, or arrange them in one layer on a greased baking sheet, and broil/grill or bake in a preheated oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8. Turn pieces to brown on all sides, about 10 minutes.

☞ Prepare these balls while the soup is simmering. A time saving tip is to make a bigger number of these balls, and freeze them for future use.

CREAMY MUNG BEAN SOUP

Shorbat Mash Makes 6 servings

Here is another delicious and nutritious soup that comes only second to lentil soup in popularity, and is as ancient as lentil itself is. It looks attractively green with specks of broken white grains of rice. Traditionally, it used to be served as breakfast on cold winter mornings.

1½ (12oz/350g) cups whole mung beans, picked over, washed, soaked for an hour or two, and drained
 ½ cup (4oz/45g) rice, soaked for 30 minutes, broken into smaller pieces by rubbing between the fingers, no need to drain
 2 teaspoons salt
 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 1 medium onion, chopped
 1 rounded tablespoon flour
 ¼ teaspoon turmeric
 Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)

☞ In a medium heavy pot, put mung beans and cover with cold water by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming froth as needed, then reduce heat to low, and let beans simmer gently, covered, for about 30 minutes.

☞ Add rice, salt, pepper, and cumin. Stir well. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and continue simmering, covered, for about 30 minutes, or until beans and rice are cooked to tenderness and soup is nicely thickened. Stir occasionally to prevent soup from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

☞ In a small skillet, sauté onion in hot oil until golden brown. Stir in flour and turmeric and fold until flour starts to brown and is fragrant, less than a minute. Ladle some of the soup into the skillet, and stir to dislodge any flour and onion that might have stuck to the skillet. Return contents of the skillet to the soup pot along with lemon juice, and stir well. Simmer for additional 5 minutes, and serve with warm bread and salad.

Variation:

Mung Beans with Bread: By replacing one ingredient with another you will turn this basic soup into a heart-and-bone warming meal to be enjoyed in the deepest days of winter. Just omit rice from the recipe, and let soup thicken. Break a piece of flat bread into bite-size pieces, and add to the simmering pot when you add onion mixture in the third step.

CREAM OF TURNIP AND SWISS CHARD SOUP

Shorbat Hamudh Shalgham Makes 6 servings*Hamudh Shalgham: What's in a Name?*

The Iraqi name for this soup *hamudh shalgham* literally translates to 'sour turnip,' and to make it sour we add fresh lemon juice or tamarind. Apparently, *hamudh shalgham* is after all what it means - soured turnip. Originally, fermented soured turnips and their liquid were added to stews and soups for sourness and flavor. I discovered this while reading an entry on turnips in 10th-century *Al-Filaha al-Nabatiyya* (farming practices of the Nabateans/indigenous Iraqis) by Ibn Wahshiyya, a contemporary Chaldean himself, who in his introduction to the book claimed that it was an Arabic translation of ancient Babylonian sources dealing with their advanced knowledge on farming, originally written in Syriac Suryaniyya *qadeema*. His comments on turnip *saljam* included a recipe for *ma' al-saljam al-hamidh* 'sour turnip juice.' The recipe uses peeled and diced turnip, turnip juice, and baked sour bread. While the bread is still hot, it is whipped into the turnip mix until it dissolves completely. Herbs like rue, mint, and parsley are added. The mix is left until it matures and sours. Ibn Wahshiyya says it is eaten with bread and its juice is made into a digestive drink. He also says the sour turnip juice is used in meat dishes to make the sauce deliciously sour (1: 546-48). So we make the soup, call it *hamudh shalgham*, and we are completely oblivious to the long history of the indigenous ancient culinary practices involved in making it. Perhaps we still have remnants of such ancient practices in the traditional cooking of the northern region of Iraq. I have come across a *kishk* recipe in Iraqi Family Cookbook: From *Mosul to America* (Karim 32), which calls for 'fermented wheat juice' prepared by fermenting a mix of whole wheat, turnips, turnip leaves, mint, salt, and yeast.

Evidently, turnips have been used in cooking ever since antiquity. In one of the Babylonian stews, turnip was the principal ingredient in the recipe (see Introduction, Section VI.1). In Akkadian, it was called '*laptu*,' from which the Arabic *lift* was derived. During the medieval times, turnips were made into delicious white stews, sometimes adorned with spicy meatballs. In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, such dishes were collectively called *shaljamiyyat* (from *shaljam* 'turnip'). Meat was cooked in water, onion, crushed chickpeas, cilantro, salt, oil, and turnips. The sauce was thickened and enriched with ground almonds, mashed turnips, rice, and milk. Lean meat was pounded to paste, seasoned, formed into *kubabs* (meatballs), and thrown into the simmering stew (Chapter 54).

Turnip, a winter vegetable in Iraq, is believed to have the power to relieve cold symptoms. The sight of vendors selling turnips simmered in water and date syrup is quite common in wintertime. The aroma emitting from those steaming huge pots of turnips is unforgettable. Delicious and creamy soup is also made from turnips and Swiss chard, which is as ancient as turnip itself is. Its Arabic name *silq* derives from Akkadian '*silki*.' This same soup sometimes makes the basis for an elaborate dish called, *kubbat hamudh shalgham* (recipe 000 below).

My children nicknamed this soup, *Shorbat Kuluhu*, (eat it soup) after I told them how the prophet Muhammad recommended eating turnips to his followers saying, "Eat it, and do not tell your enemies about it." It is that good! So next time you catch a cold, you know what to do.

1 medium onion, chopped
 2 tablespoons oil
 3 to 4 medium turnips, (about 1½lb/675g) peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ½ teaspoon turmeric
 ¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg
 2 heaping tablespoons tomato paste, or
 1 cup (250ml) tomato sauce
 4 to 5 big leaves Swiss chard, thinly sliced with the stalks
 ½ cup (4oz/45g) rice soaked in cold water for 30 minutes and broken into small pieces by rubbing between the fingers. No need to drain. For a creamier texture substitute with 2 heaping tablespoons rice flour, dissolved in a little cold water
 One 15oz/425g can of chickpeas, drained, optional
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml), plus ½ teaspoon sugar

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until it starts to soften. Add turnip pieces and fold together for about 5 minutes.

☞ Add coriander, turmeric, and nutmeg, along with tomato paste or sauce, and pour enough hot water or broth to cover by about 5in/13cm (7-8 cups/ 1.7-2 liters). Mix well, and bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, covered, for 10 minutes.

☞ Stir in Swiss chard, rice, drained chickpeas, if using any, and salt and pepper. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat, and resume simmering, covered, 20 to 30 minutes, or until turnip is tender, and soup starts to nicely thicken. Stir occasionally to prevent soup from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

☞ Add lemon juice and sugar about 10 minutes before soup is done.

Variation:

Some people prefer to have the soup white. In this case, omit tomato paste or sauce and follow same instructions as above. You may replace lemon juice with 1 teaspoon tamarind concentrate and a dash of sugar. This will give the soup a lovely taste and a tan hue. In the summertime when turnips and Swiss chard are not available, this soup may be cooked with zucchinis/courgettes. In this case, use 3 medium zucchinis (about 1½lb/675g), cubed; and ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped fresh mint or 1½ teaspoons dried mint. The rest is the same.

Tip:

Wash, drain, and freeze a few cups of rice, and next time you need crushed or broken rice as recipes require, just take out the amount needed, add some water to it, and crush it between your fingers. The rice grains will break very easily.

The Story of Joha and Turnips

Joha is a popular comic character in Islamic folkloric literature. While at times he is shrewd and funny enough to play practical jokes on people, he is also presented as a naïve person who easily becomes the butt of numerous jokes. The following is my favorite:

Once Joha went to pay homage to the Caliph and as the custom required he took with him a present which comprised of a basketful of nabq/nabug (fruit of the medlar tree), which by common consent was a very humble fruit. Naturally, the Caliph was offended, and gave command that Joha be stoned with each medlar fruit he brought with him. Every time he was hit by one, Juha would say, "Alhamdu lil-lah wal-shukr" (may God be praised and thanked). The Caliph was surprised and asked for an explanation. Joha told him that he was thanking God for listening to his wife who suggested the medlar fruit as opposed to his initial choice, turnips.

CREAM OF SQUASH/ COURGETTE SOUP

Shorbat Shijar Makes 4 to 6 servings

In any of its types, this vegetable makes appetizing and attractive soup. We learn from al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook that, due to its mild flavor, it was made into light soups to feed the sick (Chapters 105, 107). They called it *qar'*.

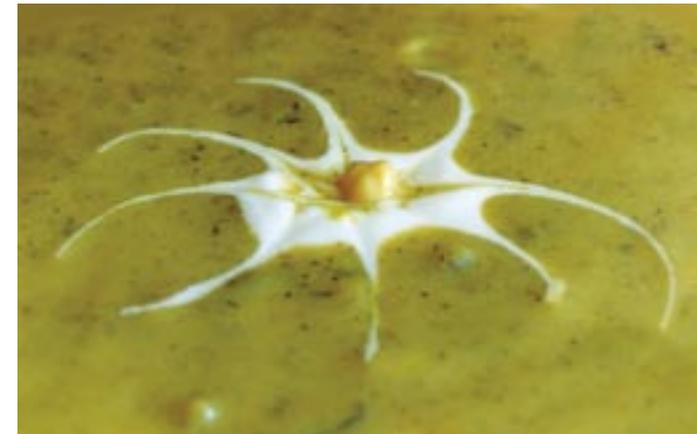
1 medium onion, chopped
 2 tablespoons oil
 3 cups (18oz/510g) chopped squash/courgette (any kind will do)
 ¼ teaspoon turmeric
 2 cups (475ml) hot water or broth
 2 cups (475ml) milk
 3 tablespoons flour, dissolved in ½ cup (80ml) cold water
 1 cup (8oz/225g) cooked whole chickpeas
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon nutmeg
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 2 tablespoons fresh dill, chopped, or
 1 teaspoon dried dill weed, optional
 3 tablespoons lemon juice

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil, until transparent. Add squash/courgette and fold together for about 5 minutes. Add turmeric in the last minute.

☞ Pour in hot water or broth, bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat and simmer, covered, until completely cooked, about 15 minutes. Coarsely purée the vegetable with a potato masher or a pot blender.

☞ Stir in milk, dissolved flour, chickpeas, salt, pepper, nutmeg, and coriander. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium low, and let soup simmer, covered, stirring occasionally, until it is creamy and nicely thickened, about 15 minutes.

☞ Add dill (if used) and lemon juice 5 minutes before soup is done. Serve in small bowls with warm bread.



A Short Cut:

2 cups (14oz/200g) of canned pure puréed pumpkin may replace fresh squash/courgette. In this case, sauté onion with turmeric as directed in the first step. Then add puréed pumpkin, water, milk, dissolved flour, chickpeas, salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Cook as directed in the fourth step. Add dill and lemon juice 5 minutes before soup is done.

VEGETABLE SOUP

Shorbat Khudhar Makes 4 to 6 servings

Do as directed in Squash/Courgette Soup, except replace squash with vegetables of your choice, such as carrots, green peas, potatoes, etc.

CHICKEN SOUP WITH VEGETABLES

Shorbat Dijaaj bil-Khudhar Makes 4 to 6 servings

Do as directed in Squash/Courgette Soup, except replace squash with other vegetables; and instead of water use chicken broth. In the third step, add about ½ cup (4oz/115g) shredded cooked chicken.

SPINACH SOUP

Shorbat Sbenagh Makes 4 servings

A light soup, healthy and easy to make. Milk and flour are used as the thickening agents, and this method of giving body to otherwise watery dishes is a very ancient one (see Introduction, Section VI).

1 medium onion, finely chopped
 1 tablespoon oil
 3 tablespoons flour
 3 cups (715ml) milk
 1 pound (450g) fresh spinach, finely chopped, or one 10oz/285g package frozen chopped spinach
 ½ teaspoon coriander
 ½ teaspoon salt, or to taste
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Add flour and stir for a few minutes until flour is fragrant. Slowly pour in milk, stirring all the time preferably with a wire whisk to prevent lumping.

☞ Stir in the prepared spinach, coriander, salt, and pepper. Bring to a quick boil, then let it simmer gently on low heat, covered, stirring occasionally until it is nicely thickened, about 15 minutes.

TOMATO SOUP WITH RICE

Shorbat Tamata bit-Timman Makes 4 to 6 servings

Before the arrival of tomato to the region around the 18th-century, this soup was made white, as described in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century recipe *Shorba* (Arberry 44). Try this modern version. It is smooth and comforting.

1 pound (450g) lamb chunks on the bone or chicken
 1 medium onion, chopped
 2 tablespoons oil
 ¾ cup (6oz/180g) rice, washed, soaked for 30 minutes and broken by rubbing between the fingers, no need to drain
 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
For garnish: chopped parsley

☞ Trim meat or chicken, put it in a medium pot, and cover with cold water by about 5 in/13 cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat to medium and let boil gently until meat is cooked, about 45 minutes, less for chicken. Fit a sieve on a bowl and pour meat broth to strain it. Set aside. (Tip: If you want to get rid of all fat released in the broth, refrigerate to solidify the fat.)

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until golden brown. Stir in rice, tomato paste, salt, pepper, cooked meat, and 5 cups (1.25 liter) broth. Add plain hot water to make 5 cups if broth is not enough. Mix well, and bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to low, and simmer gently, covered, until nicely thickened, about 30 minutes. Stir occasionally to prevent soup from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

☞ Serve garnished with chopped parsley.



Top: Tomato Rice soup garnished with freshly chopped parsley.

WHITE BEANS SOUP

Shorbat Fasoulya Yabsa Makes 4 to 6 servings

Beans make healthy and satisfying soups. They are high in fiber, carbohydrates, iron, B vitamins, and folic acid. They also provide a good supply of protein without the fat and cholesterol. Traditionally white beans are used, but other kinds of beans may be substituted.

1 cup (8oz/225g) white beans, soaked overnight and drained
 3 garlic cloves, whole and unskinned
 1 medium onion, chopped
 2 tablespoons oil
 4 tablespoons flour
 2 carrots, diced
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon ground cumin
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
For garnish: chopped parsley

☞ Put beans and garlic in a medium pot and cover with cold water by about 4 in/10 cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, for about 35 minutes. Set side until cool enough to handle.

☞ Squeeze pulp out of garlic cloves, discard skins. Purée beans and garlic with a potato masher or a pot blender.

☞ In a heavy medium pot, sauté onion in oil until golden, about 7 minutes. Stir in flour until fragrant. Add puréed beans slowly, and stir until smooth. If too thick, add hot water as needed.

☞ Add carrots, salt, pepper, cumin, coriander, and lemon juice. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium-low, and let soup simmer, covered, stirring occasionally until carrots are cooked and soup is smooth and nicely thickened.

☞ Serve in small bowls, garnished with plenty of chopped parsley.

SNACKS, SANDWICHES AND SIDE DISHES

WITH MEAT



Abbasid Sandwiches 00
Street Food in Medieval Baghdad
Iraqi Sausages, *Bastirma*
Iraqi Omelet, *Makhlama*
Iraqi Fried Meat Patties
Fried Meat Patties with Vegetables, '*Uroog*
The Ancient Kebab
Iraqi Grilled Kebab
Shish Kebab, *Tikka*
Grilled Liver, Heart, lungs, and Kidneys
Beef Tongue Sandwich
Shredded Roasted Meat (Gyro Sandwiches)
Homemade *Guss* (Gyro) Sandwiches

Sauces and Relishes:

Onion Relish (*Feathered Onion*)
Tahini/sesame paste Sauce
Yogurt and Garlic Sauce
Buran: Eggplant/Aubergine Relish
Pepper Sauce
Hot Pepper Sauce
Mustard and Vinegar Relish
Salsa: A Bit of History



Snacks, Sandwiches and Side Dishes

Wajbat Khafifa

وجبات خفيفة

Dry Dishes with Meat

Nawashif bil-Laham

نواشيف باللحم

*Opposite: Women
having a picnic*

In his *Supplement aux Dictionnaires Arabes* (2: 673), the Arabist Dozy states that he does not know the exact meaning of *nashif* (dry) as applied to dishes. For the Iraqis, however, the term has always been commonly used to designate a wide array of dishes that have no sauce in them, to begin with, or in which sauce is reduced in the course of cooking. They are all invariably served with bread.

In the 10th-century cookbook, al-Warraq gives an extensive number of *bawarid* (cold dishes) of various kinds of meat, which were meant to be served as a preliminary course before the hot dishes. They were usually accompanied with *sibagh* and *kawamikh* (sauces, dips, and condiments) to help the digestion (see also Introduction, Section XI; *Salsa: A Bit of History* 000).

With all the varieties of breads that have been baking in the region (more details in Chapter 1), it is inevitable that sandwiches have always been an indispensable way of serving food. Three major types were popular in medieval times: *bazmaward* (thin bread rolled and sliced), *awsat* (pithy brick-oven bread, slashed and filled), and *wast mashtour* or *shata'ir* (open-faced sandwich). From al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes, we learn how they were made.

Abbasid Sandwiches

سندويح عجمية

Some claim that John Montague, fourth Earl of Sandwich, invented the sandwich about two hundred years ago, so that he could eat a meal without having to leave the gambling table. However, judging from frequent references and descriptions of sandwiches in medieval Arabic literature, as well as recipes given in medieval cookbooks, the origin of the sandwiches can be pushed back to the eighth or ninth century, the beginning of the golden age of the Baghdadi cuisine. To my knowledge, the earliest sandwich recipes occur in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, Chapter 23, where we have five recipes and a sandwich-poem in. This chapter describes three types of sandwiches:

1 *Bazmaward* was made by spreading sandwich filling all over the surface of *ruqag* (similar to *lawash* thin bread) which was then rolled tightly, and sliced into discs using a special long knife, called *sikkeen al-bazmaward*, perhaps similar to our modern bread knife. One of these recipes is attributed to Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d.861).

2 *Awsat* (sing. *wast*) were made with *furrani* bread (round and thick bread with crust), which was slit open horizontally, and then the bottom layer was spread with the filling. The top layer was put back and firmly pressed. For presentation, it was sliced into finger-like pieces or other shapes. The recipe is attributed to boon companion Ibn Dihqana (d.891).

3 *Wast mashtour* was an open-faced sandwich. The top crust and the edges of *furrani* bread were discarded, then the surface was slathered with a fermented sauce called *binn*, which was sometimes replaced with *rahshi tahini*/sesame paste, along with walnut oil. It was then toasted on the brazier and spread with yolk of soft-cooked eggs *nimbarisht*. An optional sprinkle of grated cheese will make it even more delicious, the recipe assures. This scrumptious sandwich is attributed to the gourmet Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839).

Another early source (al-Mas'udi's 10th-century *Muruj al-Dhahab*), provides us with a verse-recipe of an elaborate *wast* (pl. *awsat*) sandwich by the famous Baghdadi Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi (d.896). The poem describes how to make it: take two fine quality pithy round breads, remove the top crust of each, and then artistically arrange the stuffing on the bread surface, which is roasted chicken with garnishes of almonds, walnuts, cheese, olives, mint, tarragon, sliced eggs, and salt. Then cap the stuffing with the other bread, and there you have it - a sandwich so much similar to today's version made with two slices of loaf bread. The last part of the poem is an invitation to admire the aesthetic beauty of the sandwich for a few seconds and then, *With gusto chew, and let thy teeth be filled: Destroy in haste the structure thou didst build.* (Arberry 24-25)

Etymologically, the name chosen for the rolled sandwich, *bazmaward*, poses some problems for us modern readers, unlike the Arabic names of the other sandwich types - *wast*, *awsat*, *wast mashtour*. Al-Warraq was consistent in using the word *bazmaward* in relation to sandwiches made from *ruqag* breads, filled, rolled tightly, then sliced into discs. Possibly, the name *bazmaward* is descriptive of the shape of the sandwich itself. For instance, in his dessert recipe for *khabees* with nuts and sugar, al-Warraq instructs that the mixture should be spread out flat with a rolling pin, and then rolled and sliced like *bazmaward* (Chapter 96). Therefore, I am convinced that the word is not a combination of *bazm* + *award* (something that brings joy in a party) as Arberry contends (202). More plausibly, it is a combination of *bazm* (tightly wrapped) + *warid* (long) = tightly wrapped log (meanings culled from *Lisan al-'Arab*). Interestingly, *al-bazma* also means *al-akla*, i.e. food eaten in a small quantity, weighing 30 *dirhams* (3 ounces), to be had in one bite or morsel. That might well explain why the sandwich was also called *muyassar wa muhanni* (delightful and easy to eat). By the time we come to the 13th-century as represented by al-Baghdadi's cookbook, the terms *wast* and *bazmaward* seem to have been used interchangeably. Evidently, the commercial bakers devised some gadgets to accommodate to the needs of their sandwich-loving customers. For instance in al-Baghdadi's 14th-century augmented version, we come across a sandwich recipe, which requires the baker to make rounds of bread in which they put a sort of metal device called *warda mushabbaka*, which should be slightly domed with not so high sides (381-82). An unusual devise indeed, nowhere else to be found. I already know the meaning of *mushabbak* (latticed), so I looked up *warda* in Hanz Wehr's Arabic-English dictionary, and was pleasantly surprised to see that one of the meanings he gives, which is 'washer (flat disc),' applies here. Mystery solved. This latticed domed metal ring was put inside the bread while baking, so that when taken out, it would leave behind a cavity for the sandwich filling.

During the medieval times, sandwiches were part of a long list of *bawarid* (cold dishes) or *nawashif* (dry dishes), served before the main hot meal. Cut into small portions, these sandwiches were also good for nibbling, passed around on a tray to guests like today's *hors d'oeuvres*. They were also consumed as fast food and hurried meals, bought from the food markets. Today the generic word for sandwich is *laffa* (bread roll), which originally came from rolling the traditional flat bread around the filling. The other type of bread, *sammoun*, is used more like the medieval *awsat*, described above. The bread is first slashed horizontally but not quite separated. The pith is taken out and replaced with the filling. For a more authentic Iraqi sandwich, use the Italian ciabatta bread, or any crusty pithy bread.

Sandwiches are an integral part of our menu today. We make sandwiches for breakfast with a cup of tea, or have them for brunches, or light suppers. Sandwiches are made at home, or bought from small carryout small or vendors at the corners of busy streets. The fillings vary, depending upon time, place, and occasion. The sandwich of my growing years was *laffat 'anba w'sammoun*, (sandwich of pickled mango, see Glossary). It was the kind of thing to have when you are not hungry, but would like to snack on something spicy and appetizing. A treat would be to add to it sliced tomatoes and hard-cooked eggs. I remember my friends and I used to buy it from a street vendor outside the school building and munch it on our way home, despite our parents' warning that it was not good to eat it on an empty stomach, what with the spices and all. We were always betrayed by the distinctive aroma of the pickled mango, which had clung to our mouths, hands, and clothes.

The sandwich filling can be as simple as greens and herbs, as common as cheese, *kebab*, and *guss* (shredded meat), as scrumptious as geymer (clotted cream) and honey, or as exotic as toasted walnuts.

Street Food in Medieval Baghdad

أكل السوق في بغداد القديمة

Ready-made food was a booming business in medieval Baghdad, AD. It was very convenient for travelers and visitors, as well as residents themselves. It was relatively affordable and even poor people sometimes preferred to eat out rather than put money on fuel in cooking their food at home. Therefore, people who frequented the ready-made food markets were mostly 'awam 'commoners,' and it was not fit for the refined upper class people "to patronize the shop of a 'mincer of meats and pies'" (Guthrie 94). The 10th-century writer Abu Hayyan al-Tawheedi gave us a glimpse of the eating-out situation through his protagonist, who vilified supposedly respectable people that go after the *shawayya* and *qalaya* 'grilled and fried foods', and *bazmaward* 'sandwiches' (56).

Generally, cooked foods available in the markets were regarded as inferior in quality to homemade varieties, even though they looked more tempting. All the same, ready-cooked foods were acceptable options to feed surprise guests. Describing a dish of market-roasted meat *shiwaa* 'al-souq, a poet once said:

بقر من خضيق من سواد ابن زنبور

طرا طاري، عند العشاء فجمته

When unexpectedly at dinnertime a guest came by,
I bought him meat, sweet and tender, roasted by
son of a bee

(al-Tha'alibi 537, my translation)

From contemporary chronicles we learn that *Souq al-Shawwa'een*, for instance, was specialized in selling all kinds of meat grilled on coals, such as the famous *al-kebab al-Rasheedi* (after Caliph Harun al-Rasheed) and *kardanaaj* 'rotisserie chicken.' They were served with bread and appetizing condiments and relishes, collectively called *sibagh* (literally 'dipping sauces'). *Judhaba* was another delicious choice to make. It was meat or chicken grilled in the *tannour*, and served with a sweet bread preparation, enriched with the juices and fat of meat it received while baking under the grilling meat. In the cold days of winter, a wise choice would be a bowl of *hareesa* (porridge of shelled wheat with meat) drizzled with sizzling *samn* 'clarified butter,' and generously sprinkled with cinnamon, cumin, and sugar. A dish of *thareed* (pieces of bread sopped in rich broth) served with *akari* 'trotters,' *qibbayaat* 'stuffed tripe,' and sheep's head, similar to today's *pacha*, would be a good choice, too. These would more likely be served early in the morning.

The diners also had the option of ordering fried foods such as *sanbousaj*, sausages, meat, and fish, collectively called *qalaya*. The *bawarid* (cold dishes) were the dishes to order during the hot days of summer, especially the ones prepared with vegetables and yogurt, such as *jajaj*, and *awsat* and *bazmaward* 'rolled sandwiches.'

For dessert there was an overwhelming number of pastries to choose from, but the most popular were the *lawzeenaj* (similar to *baklawa*), *zalabya* 'fried fritters,' *kunafa* 'shredded dough,' and *qata'if* 'pancakes.' They were all invariably fried and drenched in honey or *jullab* 'rose water syrup,' depending on the buyer's pocket. All this food was washed down simply with cold water, or a thirst quenching sweet drink such as *sharab al-zabeeb* 'raisin drink,' *jujube* or pomegranate drink.

Following is a unique episode from the 10th-century Arabic picaresque narrative, *Maqamaat* by Badi'il-Zaman al-Hamadani. It is an amusing anecdote, which incidentally throws vivid light on what eating out was like in medieval Baghdad.

The parasitic protagonist 'Isa bin-Hisham, at this point in the narrative, is broke and hungry, and is wandering in the market places of Baghdad, on the lookout for a prey. With his trained eyes, he spies a nervous *sawadi* (peasant from rural areas) who obviously has some money on him. He walks towards him, calling him Abu Zayd. The peasant corrects him, saying his name in fact is Abu 'Ubayd, but 'Isa reproaches him for having forgotten him, and immediately asks about his father. The peasant tells him that it has been a long while since his father died. At hearing this 'Isa pretends that he is smitten with the news, and makes as if he is about to tear his garment. The peasant takes hold of his hands, beseeching him not to do this. Having thus broken the ice, 'Isa invites him to have lunch with him at home, but why bother go there since the food market is nearby. They go to a *judhaba* cookshop, where 'Isa asks the cook to prepare a dish of his juicy grilled meat, sprinkled with sumac water, and decked with *awraq al-ruqq*

'very thin bread.' They sit and eat to their fill as if there is no tomorrow. 'Isa then orders two pounds of *lawzeenaj*, made the night before, thin crusted, well-stuffed, and drenched in oil, so that Abu Zayd may eat to his heart's desire. They sit down, roll up their sleeves, and eat until they finish the whole thing. Now 'Isa suggests that after such a meal what else will they need but a glass of ice water, and he volunteers to fetch some. He goes out and hides where he can see the peasant at a distance. The peasant waits and waits but to no avail, so he decides to leave. The food master prevents him by clutching his sleeves, asking for his money. The peasant tries to explain that he was invited, but the master does not buy this. So the peasant has no other choice but untie his purse with his teeth, and pay for the hefty meal they had together, saying, "How many times have I told that monkey that I am not Abu Zayd, I am Abu 'Ubayd, but he relentlessly insisted that I am Abu Zayd." (*Al-Maqama al-Baghdadiyya* 70-73, English paraphrase mine)

Below: A kabab sandwich



IRAQI SAUSAGES

Bastirma Makes eight 6 in./15 cm-long sausages

A brief satiric Sumerian text reveals that the ancient Mesopotamians knew how to fill intestine casings with meat of some kind (Bottéro "The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia" 37). In the medieval period, small sausages were called *maqaniq* and *laqaniq*. They were small intestines stuffed with a spicy mix of pounded meat, using a sausage stuffer. The bigger ones were *mabaa'ir*, and the largest, *mahaashi*. Some were made for immediate consumption, such as the ones filled with a mixture of meat and eggs, or chicken. These were usually boiled and then fried. These are called *mumbar* today (recipe Chapter 10). Others were dried and stored for future use. Nowadays, we call these *bastirma*, a Turkish loan word, which means 'compress, press.'

Bastirma makes a hearty delicious breakfast sandwich, usually enjoyed in wintertime. The way we make it today is more or less the same. Meat is ground, mixed with lots of spices and garlic, stuffed in intestine casings. Then they are flattened by pressing them by hand, and in this shape, they are hung in ventilated areas for a while, away from direct sunlight. The dehydrating process, however, requires dry environment; otherwise, meat will go bad. I do not recommend drying the sausages out in the open air, especially in humid areas. It is safer to keep them in the freezer, in which case, instead of sausage casings, plastic bags may be used. A dehydrator will do the job just fine, provided you use intestine casings.

2 pounds (900g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add

3 tablespoons olive oil

4 cloves garlic, or to taste, grated

2 teaspoons salt

1 teaspoon black pepper

1 tablespoon cumin

2 teaspoons ground coriander

½ teaspoon allspice

½ teaspoon cinnamon

¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

3 to 4 ounces sausage casings (available at meat departments in grocery stores, plastic bags can be substituted, see below)

☞ In a big bowl, combine all ingredients except the casings. Cover the bowl and refrigerate overnight to allow flavors to blend.

☞ Fill sausage casings as follows: if you do not have a sausage maker, then use a big funnel or cut-off top of a 1 liter soda bottle. Transfer sausage casing to the spout of the funnel or neck of the bottle. Tie the end of the casing and start filling it until all the stuffing is used up. Close the other end, and divide the long sausage into 6in/15cm long pieces either by twisting or using a white kitchen thread. (Do not over-fill pieces) Flatten sausages by pressing with the fingers to make them ½in/1cm thick.

☞ Arrange sausages on a tray in a single layer, and freeze. When solid enough, store them in sealed plastic bags, and keep them in the freezer until needed.

☞ If you do not choose to use intestine casings, then do as follows:

After you mix ingredients and refrigerate them overnight as directed in the first step, take small amounts of the meat mixture, and with wet hands, form them into small patties. Arrange these on a tray in a single layer, and put them in the freezer. When they are solid enough, freeze them in a sealed plastic bag, and use as directed below.

An even easier way of doing it is to put the prepared meat mixture in plastic bags, and flatten them by pressing with the fingers into ½in/1cm thinness. Seal bags and freeze. Whenever you want to cook some, break away the pieces you need, and cook as directed below.

How to Cook *Bastirma*

☞ Take the amount needed out of the freezer a few hours before the actual time of cooking, and let it thaw in the refrigerator.

☞ With a sharp knife, cut sausage crosswise into ½in/1cm wide pieces.

☞ Put slices in a skillet, and cook, stirring frequently, for about 5 minutes or until they are nicely browned. Traditionally made *bastirma* will ooze out fat while cooking. When lean meat is used, you might need to help it with a little bit of oil.

How to Serve *Bastirma*

You can have the cooked pieces wrapped in bread as a sandwich, with slices of salad vegetables, and a squeeze of lemon.

☞ Chop a tomato, and cook it with the sausage pieces. Have it as a sandwich with sliced salad vegetables.

☞ Prepare it with eggs: Slightly beat a few eggs in a bowl. The number of eggs used depends on the amount of *bastirma* you are cooking. Pour eggs on the cooked pieces of *bastirma*. Reduce heat to low, cover skillet and cook for about 5 minutes or until eggs are set. Divide into wedges and make into sandwiches along with salad vegetables and a squeeze of lemon.



Top: *Bastirma* served with eggs

Above: Links of prepared *bastirma* before cooking

Hanging Out in Ancient Babylon

Have you ever wondered what life looked like in ancient times, how people used to pass the time, and what the favorite hangouts for ancient Babylonian youths were? Here are some glimpses as conjectured by some of the experts in ancient history:

Muddy in winter, dusty in summer...the roads [in ancient Babylon] wind without much planning between compact blocks of houses, blank windowless facades pierced by occasional small doors. Here and there, however, little shops grouped in bazaars or set among the houses throw a note of gaiety in the austere scenery. Like the shops of modern oriental suq, they consist of a showroom opening widely on to the street, and of one or several back rooms for the storage of goods. Food, clothes, rugs, pots, spices and perfumes are sold in disorderly, colorful and aromatic displays. At intervals, the red glow of a furnace in the smithy's dark workshop, the brick counter of a "restaurant" where one can purchase and eat from clay bowls onions, cucumbers, fried fish or tasty slices of grilled meat, or a small chapel advertised by terra-cotta figurines hung on either side of the doorway. To enter the courtyard, drop a handful of dates or flour on the altar and address a short prayer to the god smiling in his niche takes only a few minutes and confers long-lasting blessings.

Very little traffic in the streets: they are too narrow

for carts and even a donkey carrying a bulky load would obstruct most of them. Servants who go shopping, water-carriers, peddlers avoid the sun and hug the shadows of the walls, but in the early morning or late afternoon, a public writer, or a story-teller reciting [epic of] Gilgamesh would gather small crowds around him at the crossroads, while two or three times a day, flocks of noisy children invade the streets on their way to or from one of the schools. (Roux 182)

The most popular hangouts for the Mesopotamian juveniles were the public squares, the streets, and the boulevards. We are told that they loitered in such places "perhaps even in gangs." Juvenile rebelliousness, ungratefulness, hatred of education, and dropping out of school, were all problems the Mesopotamian parents had to deal with. We know all this from a Sumerian text, which dates back to around 3,700 BC (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 14).

The inns and taverns of ancient times were the places to go to if the ancient youths wanted to hang out with friends or dine out. They were usually run by women, called the alewives. The combination of beer, sex, and crime earned those ancient inns a bad reputation. Babylonian nuns, for instance, were not allowed to frequent such places. Young men were cautioned against them, such as in the Babylonian wisdom text which warns the youth not to "hasten to a banquet in the tavern lest [he] be tied up with lead-rope," or the father who tells his son, "You must check your appetite and abstain from beer" (Moor, 216-17)

IRAQI OMELET

Makhlama Makes 4-5 servings

'Ujaj 'omelet' dishes were quite popular in medieval times, and in terms of recipes we are fortunate to have a considerable number, which fall into two categories: 'ujaj *mudawwarat* (shaped into discs) and *makhloutat/ mubahtharat* (scrambled). In some of the recipes, the eggs were left undisturbed, sunny-side up, as in *narjisiyya* (like narcissus flowers). Al-Warraaq compares them to 'uyoun *al-baqar* (cows' eyes). The yolk was sometimes poked with a knife, and lightly mixed with the white to give it a marbled look.

Today we still cook the dish pretty much the same way, but we call it *makhlama*. It makes a very convenient side dish or a sandwich for brunch, light suppers, and picnic lunches. The following basic recipe is with meat, vegetarian variations are in the following chapter.

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat

2 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon curry powder

1 medium tomato chopped

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

6 eggs

Chili pepper, to taste

For garnish: chopped parsley

☞ In a big non-stick skillet, cook meat in oil, stirring frequently, breaking down lumps until all moisture evaporates and meat is cooked, about 10 minutes.

☞ Stir in onion and fold until transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Add salt, pepper, curry powder, tomatoes, and parsley. Mix well and let cook for a few more minutes.

☞ With the back of a spoon, level surface, make six dents in which you break the eggs. Sprinkle surface with chili pepper, if desired. Leave eggs whole, sunny-side up, or zigzag surface with a knife to break yolks and let them mingle slightly with the whites.

☞ Reduce heat to low, cover skillet, and let eggs cook slowly until they are set, 5 to 7 minutes. Do not overcook; otherwise, eggs will develop a leathery texture.

Alternatively, the dish can be cooked in the oven. Simply transfer meat mixture into a greased baking pan, big enough to spread mixture in about ½ in./1 cm-thick layer. Then add eggs as described above, and bake in a preheated oven at 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6 until set. No need to cover.

☞ Cut into wedges, garnish with parsley, and serve as a sandwich, with salad vegetables, and pickles or pickled mango (see Glossary '*anba*').

Variation:

Scrambled *Makhlama*: Another way of presenting the dish, is to beat the eggs, add them to the meat mixture, and fold, scrambling gently, over low heat until egg is just set.

IRAQI FRIED MEAT PATTIES

Kufta Maqliyya Makes 10 Patties

Although the Ottoman cooks take the credit for creating the sumptuous meat patties *köfte*, which feature in many of their stew dishes (*yahni*) and soups, the fact of the matter is, centuries before the flourishing of the Ottoman cuisine, such *kufta* was already incorporated into the Baghdadi dishes as early as the 9th century and possibly earlier. Back then, they called them *kubab/kubaab* (sing. *kubba*), and the fried flat ones were *maqloubat* (the flipped) or *muqarrasat* (shaped into discs). What's more, I discovered two recipes in Ibn al-'Adeem's 13th century *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* (550-51), where the meatballs were actually called *kuftawaat*, plural of *kufta*, which is of Arabic origin by the way (كفتة k-f-t 'press and gather something in your hand,' synonymous with كفتة k-b-b). The following is a recipe for simple *kufta*. A friend of mine adds a little powdered dried milk for extra calcium, not a bad idea.

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
 1 medium onion (½ cup/3oz/85g), grated or finely chopped
 ½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, chopped
 1 garlic clove, grated, optional
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) breadcrumbs
 1 egg, slightly beaten
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 1 teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary) or
 ½ teaspoon cinnamon
 ½ teaspoon ground ginger
 ½ teaspoon cumin
 ½ teaspoon coriander
 Oil for shallow frying



☞ Mix all ingredients except for oil. Knead briefly just to combine ingredients. With wet hands, divide meat dough into 10 portions and shape into patties, about ½in/1cm thick.
 ☞ Shallow-fry the pieces, pressing them gently with a hamburger flipper to help keep them flat, until golden brown. Turn once to brown both sides, about 5 minutes. Drain on white paper towels/kitchen paper.
 ☞ To serve, make into sandwiches with salad vegetables. If wished, serve the sandwich spread with a sauce of your choice given in Sauces and Relishes below.

IRAQI FRIED MEAT PATTIES WITH VEGETABLES

'Uroog/Kebab Tawa/Shiftayat Makes 26 small patties

Wiles of Women

Arabic words used in the story:

Tawa: frying pan, in standard Arabic *miqlat*

Khala: aunt, on the mother's side; *khalti* 'my aunt'

The story shows that despite the restrictions put on women in the past, they had their way, taking advantage of the same tactics used against them. In this story, they are segregation and the veil. They tell of a beautiful playful wife who had a lover, and wanted to enjoy the forbidden fruits of the affair in her own house. She instigated the lover to visit her in the house, wearing women's clothes, pretending to be her *khala*. The lover started visiting her fully clad. He would be ushered to the wife's room, and the husband had no right to intrude. When the visit was over, the husband, with all due respect, would usher the *khala* back to her donkey, and escort her home. One day while the husband was on such a mission, he struck the donkey with his stick, a little bit harder than usual, urging it to speed up. The poor animal made a sudden lurch that threw the *khala* overboard, on her back, her legs flailing in the air, and wide apart. The husband caught sight of something that made him suspicious, so he immediately turned back home. When the wife looked at her husband's eyes, she instantly realized what had happened. Before he even had the time to open up his lips, she ran to him crying and wailing at the top of her voice, "My *tawa* is gone, I cannot find my *tawa*, I want my *tawa* back. I wish to God that whatever happened to *khalti* will happen to whoever has stolen my *tawa*." The neighbors heard her, and rushed and gathered around her to ask her what had happened. She, between sobs and sniffs, explained that her poor *khala* got ill with a mysterious disease, which caused a hump to develop on her parts. (Zalzala 3: 82-84, my translation)
 Whether the husband bought this explanation or not, I will leave it to you to figure out.

In Iraq, we make two things that bear the name '*uroog*/*'uroog*, one is the flat bread with meat and vegetables (recipe Chapter 1), and the other is meat and vegetables mixed with dough and fried as patties, and hence the name *kebab tawa* (cooked in a frying pan). The difference is in the proportion of meat and vegetables to dough.

In the northern city of Mosul, these patties are called *sheftayat*. The name in all probability stemmed from a medieval practice of wrapping ground/minced meat mixture in caul fat (transparent thin layer that surrounds the stomach). The Arabic word for transparent is *shef* (from which, for instance, the name of the fabric chiffon was derived). In Cypress today, sausage wrapped in sheets of caul is called '*sheftalia*' (Wright 74), which belies its indebtedness to the Arab medieval cuisine.

The medieval cooks knew the technique of lightening up the texture of meat patties by mixing ground/minced meat with eggs and fermented dough. In 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala* (3-4), *isfeeriya* was made by combining pounded lean meat, a piece of fermented dough dissolved in eggs, salt, saffron, cumin, pepper, coriander, and enough water so that the mix has the consistency of soft dough. A ladleful of the mix would be poured into hot oil, and fried into thin discs, and hence the name *isfeeriyya* (looking like a thin disc).

'Uroog is traditionally made with fermented dough. Some cooks more conveniently use flour and a small amount of dried yeast or baking powder, instead. Although parsley is the traditional herb used, feel free to add other herbs like mint, basil, dill, or chives. *'Uroog* is a delicious variation on the regular hamburgers. They are usually served for supper, along with scrumptious slices of fried eggplant/aubergine and potatoes, with lots of fresh herbs and vegetables.

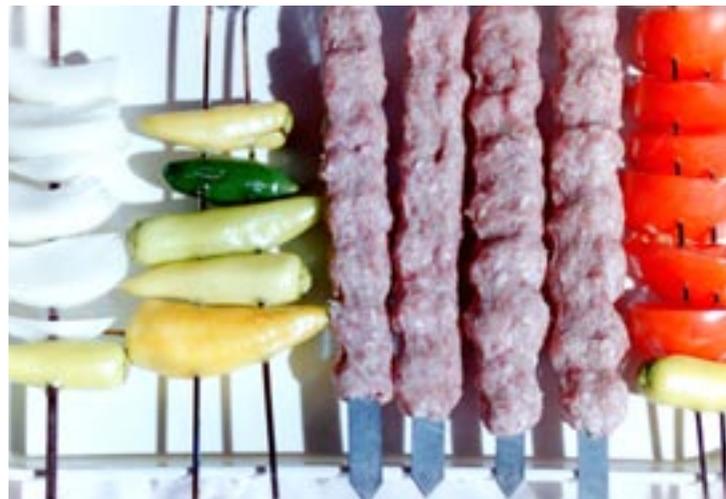
1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
 1½ medium onions (about 1 cup/6oz/180g),
 finely chopped
 ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) finely chopped parsley
 1 egg, optional
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 1 teaspoon curry powder
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ½ teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)
 ½ teaspoon baking powder or dry yeast, optional
 1 cup (250ml) water, room temperature
 1 cup (4oz/115g) flour

Oil for frying

For garnish: onion relish (recipe Sauces and Relishes below), sumac, and chopped parsley

☞ In a big bowl, mix meat, onion, parsley, salt, pepper, egg if used, curry powder, coriander, and baharat.

☞ Dissolve baking powder or yeast in water, if used. Add water to the meat mix, and fold well. Add the flour, and knead lightly with one hand for a few minutes until well combined. The final mix will be a little soft but it should hold its shape when formed into patties. Add a small amount of flour if needed. This dough is easier to handle with wet hands.



☞ Heat ½in/1cm deep oil in a medium-size frying pan. With wet hands, take a piece of the dough, size of a golf ball. Put it on the palm of one hand, and with the other, form it into an oblong patty, about 3in/7.5cm long and ⅓in/8mm thick. Carefully slide the piece to the hot oil the moment you finish shaping it, and repeat until you fill the frying pan comfortably. Let patties fry until golden brown, turning only once to fry on both sides. Remember to wet your hands while handling this dough to prevent it from sticking to your fingers. Drain fried pieces on white paper towels/kitchen paper put in a colander (this will prevent them from getting soggy). Repeat the process with the rest of dough. These patties cook very fast. Frying them will not take more than 15 minutes.

☞ For presentation: Line a platter with the onion relish, arrange 'uroog patties all over, and sprinkle with sumac and chopped parsley. Or serve them already stuffed into bread, along with sliced tomatoes, onion, relish, and chopped parsley. Also delicious with fried slices of eggplant/aubergine (recipes Chapter 6) and potatoes.

IRAQI GRILLED KEBAB

Kebab Meshwi Makes 6 kebabs

Let me start by clearing some of the confusions the name *kebab* sometimes causes. In Iraq, *kebab* is seasoned ground/minced meat, skewered and grilled. In other Arab countries, it is called *kufta mashwiyya* (grilled). The Iraqi *Tikka* is cubed chunks of meat skewered and grilled. This is known as *kebab* all over the world.

The confusion might be traced back to the medieval times when *kubab* (pl. *kubaab*) was used to designate into dishes as we do today with meatballs, and *kebab*, which designated meat cubes threaded into skewers and grilled on open fire, such as a brazier *manqala*. Iraqi *kebab* combines both senses - meat is ground, and it is grilled on open fire.

Kebab (in the Iraqi sense) to the Iraqis is what hamburgers are to the Americans. Specialized restaurants are everywhere in the region. There was a time in downtown Baghdad where two major *Kebab* restaurants competed with each other, *Tajiraan* and *Al-Shabaab*. They were like McDonald's and Burger King of the United States. However, the best *kebab* was bought from the small carryout restaurants at the *soug* (marketplace) next to the holy shrine of *Al-Imam-Al-Kadhum*, a descendant of the prophet Muhammad. As children, our eagerness to pay homage to the place was not motivated by our religious zeal as much as by a much more mundane desire to once again enjoy those delicious *kebab* sandwiches. They came with lots of greens, herbs, onion, pickles, and ice-cold creamy yogurt drink. We would devour those goodies in a picnic-like fashion, sitting on a spread blanket at one of the cool and breezy roofed niches surrounding the huge yard of the shrine. These sandwiches were very greasy, but who cared, they were moist, juicy, and delicious, and that was what mattered at the time. I still recall the feeling of the solidifying fat at the roof of my mouth when sipping the cold yogurt drink after having a bite of the warm *kebab* sandwich. I guess that's the way it is

with fast foods everywhere.

The following recipe is a much lighter version than the traditional *kebab*. Spices are traditionally kept to the minimum, but if you like your *kebab* spicier, add the optional ingredients, too. The way this *kebab* is shaped, as you'll see, will ensure even cooking inside and out, and will give it a much lighter texture than the solid patties of the regular ground/minced meat burgers. Fat in *kebab* works the same way solid fats work for pie dough. When the solids melt by the effect of the heat, they drip down, leaving small cavities behind, which gives *kebab* the characteristic light texture. Eighty-per-cent lean meat would give a more genuine texture. Lean meat helped with a little olive oil would give juicier *kebab*. Traditionally skewered *kebab* is suspended on the glowing coals of a brazier *manqala*, which is a very ancient gadget. The brazier in ancient Akkadian was called '*kinunu*' (cf. classical Arabic *kanoun*).

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat (the best is a combination of lamb and beef). If meat is lean, add 2 tablespoons oil

1 small onion, grated

¼ cup (1oz/30g) flour or breadcrumbs

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

Optional spices: ½ teaspoon sumac, ½ teaspoon allspice, ½ teaspoon ginger, ¼ teaspoon chili pepper

For assembling the sandwiches: any kind of sandwich bread, flat breads can be wrapped around the kebab
 Onion relish (recipe in Sauces and Relishes below), slices of tomato, chopped parsley, leaves of sweet basil (*rihaan*) and sliced pickles

☞ In a medium bowl, combine meat, onion, flour, salt, pepper, and the optional spices, if using any. With wet fingers, knead lightly to combine. Divide dough into 6 portions.

☞ For shaping and grilling *kebab* 1in/2.5cm wide sword-like skewers are traditionally used. If they are available, follow this method: Moisten skewer with water and, with wet hands, pierce one meat portion into it. Hold skewer in one hand and hug meat portion with the other, pressing and elongating with the fingers until it is about 6in/15cm long. Make dents by pressing between thumb and index finger, so that the shaped *kebab* will not look smooth on surface. Secure the two ends by pressing them well to the skewer. Repeat with the rest of the pieces.

☞ Traditionally, *kebab* skewers are grilled suspended on a brazier with glowing coals. However, if this is not available, use a regular grill. To prevent skewers from touching grid of grill, suspend them by crumpling aluminum foil along the two sides of the grid, about 8in/20cm apart. Fan *kebabs* as they cook to hasten process of cooking. (Meat might fall off skewers if not enough flour is used in meat dough, or the ends of the shaped meat dough are not well pressed to the skewer as directed above.) These *kebabs* cook fast, about 5 minutes for each side, or until nicely browned, turning once. You may also broil/grill them hassle-free: Suspend skewers on a baking pan, and broil/grill until golden brown, turning once to bake both sides.

☞ When *kebab* is done, immediately hold the skewer (protect your hand with a kitchen mitten), put kebab between a folded piece of bread placed on a plate, hold bread down with one hand and pull the skewer with the other, leaving *kebab* behind. Repeat with the rest.

☞ If you do not have the traditional wide skewers, then do as follows: Turn on broiler/grill and wipe surface of broiling/grilling pan with cold water. Use a dinner knife with a straight handle to shape *kebab* as follows: Hold the blade with one hand, and with the other, moisten handle with water, and pierce a meat portion into it. Shape as described in the second step.

Carefully and swiftly, take the shaped piece out of the knife, by lightly hugging it between palm and fingers and pulling it out. Arrange shaped pieces on broiling/grilling pan, leaving a little space between pieces to allow heat to circulate all around them. Broil until surface is browned, turning only once, about 10 minutes.

☞ To assemble the sandwich, fill a sandwich bread (as long as the *kebab* piece) with one piece of *kebab*. Put some of the onion relish, tomato slices, parsley, sweet basil, and pickles. Have it with a glass of diluted yogurt (recipe 000).

The Ancient Kebab

الكباب: شيء من التاريخ

The medieval cooks of Baghdad used a specialized set of terms related to grilling and roasting activities. *Shawi* (شوي) was reserved for roasting marinated large cuts of meat in the clay oven *tannour*, such as whole sides of ribs, whole stuffed kids or birds, marinated slices of meat, probably a span long, dangling by means of large skewers. Thus enclosed in the *tannour*, all these big meat-cuts get all the moisture they need for slow prolonged roasting. Etymologically, the grilling technique *shawi* as well as the oven itself, *tannour*, both derive directly from the ancient Akkadian, 'shuwu' and 'tinuru,' respectively.

Now we come to the realm of open grilling. Sometimes whole birds were inserted in roasting spits and rotated constantly above burning coals. This was called *kardanaj*, the prototype of our modern-day rotisserie chicken. It was mostly done on picnics and while traveling.

The term *kebab* was strictly reserved for meat cut up into small portions and grilled skewered on coals burning in a brazier. Thinly sliced meat griddled in a heavy flat pan is also called *kebab*. It was called *kebab khalis*, i.e. *kebab* at its purest and simplest, the earliest recipe for which occurs in al-Warraq's 10-century

Baghdadi cookbook (Chapter 42). The term was also used to designate truffles cut up into smaller pieces and grilled this way. Meat and truffles cooked thus were alluded to as *mukabbab* (مكباب), which is derived from the verb *kabba* 'lay meat on the fire,' presumably on a grill. Ultimately, the word has its roots in the ancient Akkadian word 'kababu,' which meant 'to burn fire or wood, to grill.' Even the brazier itself used in grilling derives from Akkadian, cf. the Arabic *kanoun* and Akkadian 'kinunu.'

Now, *mukabbab* in the medieval cooks' terminology also designated ground/minced spicy meat-mix clumped together and formed into balls *kubab* (كباب), also called *kubaab* (كباب), which once again derives from the Akkadian (cf. the ancient *kubbusu* 'formed like turban,' Levey 49). The medieval Baghdadi cooks were especially fond of these meatballs. They used to add them to the simmering stew pots, which already have in them a good amount of fatty chunks of meat on the bone. The meatballs were valued as dainty garnishes. They also reveal the cooks' ingenious ways to use up the not so tender cuts of meat. It looks to me that the modern day Iraqi *kebab* evolved in name and substance from the centuries-old *kebab* and *kubaab*, which gave it its distinguished character.

In the booming carryout food business in medieval Baghdad, *kebab* was king in the grillers market *souq al-shawwa'een*. Especially popular was *al-kebab al-Rasheedi* named after the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rasheed. It was usually served with thin flat bread, rolled as a sandwich, and served with appetizing condiments and relishes, such as sumac and vinegar-based dips. In fact, that was the recommended way to consume the dish. Grilled meat was believed to be hard and slow to digest. Therefore, the physicians' recommendation was to marinate it in vinegar before grilling it. Having it with vinegar-based dips and sauce, collectively called *sibagh* was equally beneficial (al-Razi 146).

Follow the Ring: Kebab Allure

A penniless man was wandering in the streets of Baghdad, and happened to pass by a *kebab* vendor grilling meat. The aroma was so irresistible, that he took bread out of his pocket, and started eating a piece of that, followed by a sniff of the *kebab* aroma. The *kebabchi* (person who sells *kebab*) took notice of what the man was doing, and decided to take advantage of him. He asked the poor man to pay for the *kebab* aroma. The man refused, the vendor insisted, they quarreled, and ended up at court. The judge was surprised at the greediness of the vendor and decided to teach him a lesson. He showed him two *dirhams* (metal coins), and struck one with the other, saying, "Do you hear that?" The vendor replied that it was the ring of the *dirhams*. The judge said, "That ring you've just heard is the price of the aroma of your *kebab*. Go and get it." (Zalzala, 1: 199-200, my translation)

In the amusing book *Maqamat al-Hariri* of 12th-century Baghdad, the protagonist Abu Zayd, a roguish wanderer, playfully enumerates *kaffaat al-shita'* (the seven *Kafs* of winter, i.e. the seven comforting and soul-warming items, which in Arabic all begin with the k-sound. He contends they have the power to drive away all the discomforts of cold and soggy wintry days, and they are a home, a purse full of money, a brazier, a soft 'pussy,' warm clothes, and a glass of wine after having *kebab* (Al-Maqama al-Kurjiya 147).

SHISH KEBAB

Tikkah Makes 6 servings



In Iraq and India *tikka* is what 'shish kebab' is to the rest of the Arab and Western World. The name is nowhere mentioned in the medieval Arabic cookbooks, but the dish itself was quite familiar - it was called *kebab*.

Interestingly, the Arabic verb *takka* means 'to cut' (Taj al-'Arous, s.v. **تَكَكَ**), which is indeed what *kebab* proper is all about - meat cut into pieces and grilled. It is quite likely we picked up the name *tikka* from Hindi, sometime during the period of the British colonization at the beginning of the twentieth century. But how the Indians got to use this Arabic word to designate *kebab*, in the first place, that's another story.

Tikka is simply grilled on a brazier like *kebab*. A regular charcoal or gas grill or a hot broiler/grill may be used, but nothing beats *tikka* roasted in the *tanour* to succulent tenderness. In Iraq *tikkah* is usually served as a sandwich, unlike the Iranians who prefer to serve it with rice.

Above: A mixed platter, the traditional way to serve kebabs

3½ pounds (1.5kg) boneless leg of lamb, fat and sinews trimmed, and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes

For marinade:

1 small onion, grated

1 garlic clove, grated

¼ cup (180ml) milk, yogurt, or buttermilk

½ cup (125ml) olive oil

Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml) or 1 tablespoon

pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon za'tar (see Glossary) or thyme

½ teaspoon cumin

¼ teaspoon black pepper, cinnamon, cardamom, each

Crushed chili pepper, to taste

Coarse salt

6 small tomatoes, or 3 big ones, quartered

6 small onions, outer skin removed

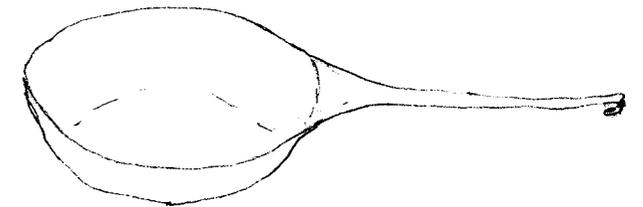
6 hot peppers or 2 bell peppers cut into large pieces

- ☞ Combine marinade ingredients in a glass container. Add meat cubes and let marinate, covered, for 2 hours at room temperature, or refrigerate overnight, but bring to room temperature before grilling.
- ☞ Preheat broiler/grill or light the charcoal or gas grill (medium-high heat).
- ☞ Drain meat but keep marinade aside, and thread into 12 skewers. Sprinkle lightly with salt.
- ☞ Thread tomatoes, onions, and peppers in separate skewers since they have different cooking times.
- ☞ Grill or broil the meat, brushing several times with the marinade. Discard any remaining quantity. Turn frequently for about 12 minutes or to desired doneness. Grill or broil vegetables until tender and charred at spots.
- ☞ Transfer to a plate, and make into sandwiches with garnishes as instructed in *Kebab* sandwich above. Alternatively, serve it with vegetarian side dishes (Chapter 6). Any of the delicious sauces and relishes given in Sauces and Relishes at the end of this chapter may be served with grilled meat.

GRILLED LIVER, HEART, LUNGS, AND KIDNEYS

Mi'lag w'Fashafeesh

Organ meats in Iraq are valued delicacies. Vendors in street stalls and parlors make appetizing sandwiches by grilling cubed livers and hearts of lamb, sprinkled with coarse salt and pepper. They are then stuffed in freshly baked bread with some salad vegetables. The kidneys require special preparations before grilling them. First, remove the membrane surrounding them. Then cut them in half and remove internal fat and blood vessels. To eliminate odor, soak them in salted water (1 tablespoon salt per 1 quart/1 liter water) 1 to 2 hours under refrigeration. Rinse under running cold water, then dry and grill. As for *fashafeesh*, they are cheaper and less desirable organs, such as lungs and spleens. When prepared at home, the organs would mostly be prepared by frying, called *hamees* or *mahmous*.



A Sumerian frying pan, circa 3500 BC

Al-Hisba: The FDA of Medieval Times

The *hisba* was a system devised during the Islamic Middle Ages to organize and supervise crafts, standardize and control quality of products, and protect consumer interests against fraud. The *muhtasib*, a government official, was the one responsible for carrying out such duties, with the help of his aids and written manuals and guidebooks. Foods sold in markets such as sausages, cured meats, and desserts were no exception. The food manuals would guide the *muhtasib* as to how to detect adulterated food by giving means and ways for doing so. For instance, the manual would describe how to make artificial honey, *samn* (ghee/clarified butter), vinegar, olive oil or sesame oil, and milk (Hassan and Hill, 230). Interestingly, some of the medieval cookbooks and food manuals contained recipes for 'adulterated' dishes. However, their intention was most probably not to cheat others as much as to show one's skill in making a certain dish by substituting a key ingredient with a cheaper and commoner one. Another motive was to meet some health restrictions or religious dietary regulations such as fasting during Lent. These dishes were collectively called *muzawwarat* 'simulated/mock.' In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, for instance, we are given recipes for making an omelet by substituting eggs with mashed chickpeas, milk not obtained from udders, or a fish condiment without fish (Chapter 46).

Locusts: Food Fit for Kings

A banquet scene in an Assyrian bas-relief depicts servants carrying choice delicacies to the royal table such as pomegranates and locusts en brochette, which were appreciated by high and low. Locusts attacked the lands in devastatingly huge numbers, and one of the ways of eliminating them was to eat them. This, and their allegedly pleasant taste and the relative ease with which they were caught made them a convenient source of food. They were also made into pickles, and fermented into sauce, called 'siqqu' in Akkadian. And the tradition continued.

In medieval times, it was the indigenous Iraqis, the Nabateans, who were the specialists in making the famous condiment *sihnaat* and *rabeetha* (names of Syriac origin), prepared with small fish, shrimp, or locusts, following the ancient tradition. A recipe in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, for instance, describes how to make *sihnaat al-jaraad* (locusts pickled in brine), using locusts that have just been caught and still alive, because these are permissible according to the Muslim *halal* dietary regulations. The dead ones were discarded. So the locusts are

put in brine to suffocate in it, then strained, and put in a big wide jar, layered with coriander and fennel seeds, and dried leaves of asafetida. The drained brine is poured to submerge the locusts, and the jar is then completely sealed with mud. The recipe's final instruction, "Now be patient and wait for them until they mature and become delicious and eat them" (Chapter 40). Their taste may be comparable to shrimp, as one of its medieval names was *jarad al-bahr* (locusts of the sea). By the way, locusts are still eaten in parts of Africa, where they are called shrimp of the desert. They are dipped in batter and fried.

In his chronicle of Baghdad in the 1920s, Baghdad fil 'Ishreenat, Abbas al-Baghdadi remembers the varieties of locusts, which used to invade the region. The small ones were harmless, but other types would swarm in millions coming from the Sahara, Sudan, southern Arabian Peninsula, or Iran. They would eat everything, even tree barks. He also remembers how with other children he used to compete with the birds to feast on these creatures. After discarding their heads, the locusts were boiled in salted water and preserved for winter provisions. He says they tasted like egg yolk or shrimp (43-44).

Sketch showing the ancient preparation of grilled locusts

Right: Beef tongue served as an appetiser



BEEF TONGUE SANDWICH

Sandaweesh Lisaan

Beef tongue makes exquisite sandwiches, juicier and more delicate in taste than beef. Unfortunately not many people know how to cook it or serve it, and quite often than not, it ends up being boiled to toughness, and cut into cubes to be picked up with toothpicks as an appetizer. It deserves a better treatment, and here is how to do it.

1 medium beef tongue

Salt and flour

For Marinade:

¼ cup (60ml) olive oil

¼ cup (60ml) vinegar

1 teaspoon za'tar or thyme (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon black pepper, marjoram, caraway seeds, ground ginger, each

1 onion pierced with 6 to 8 whole cloves

2-3 pods cardamom

1 bay leaf

1 teaspoon salt

Breaded 'Mountain Oysters' (*Beidh Ghanam*)

Euphemistically known as lamb's eggs in Iraq, these delicacies are usually nibbled on as a snack, not more than 3 to 4 pieces per serving. The way to prepare them is to cut the 'eggs' into halves, remove the outer skin, and wash the pieces very well. Roll them in seasoned breadcrumbs, and brown them in hot oil. Drain them on a white paper towel/kitchen paper, and serve immediately.

This delicacy is known in the United States as "Mountain Oyster Fry." It is prepared pretty much the same way, and then incorporated into scrambled eggs. According to the food writer M.F.K. Fisher they are believed to be "aphrodisiac and restorative," adding that she likes to eat them but "never sought them out either on a fixed hour or for a fixed purpose, other than plain pleasurable hunger" (130).



☞ Strike the tongue on a hard surface several times until it looks limp and a little longer. This is done to break the muscles. Wash it very well, rub it with salt and flour, and wash it again. Mix marinade ingredients in a glass bowl, and let tongue stay in it, overnight.

☞ Put the tongue in a big pot with marinade, and rest of ingredients except for salt. Cover it by about 5in/13cm of cold water. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat to medium- low and simmer, covered, until it feels tender when pierced with a fork, about 2 hours. Add salt about 10 minutes before it is done.

☞ Take tongue out of the liquid, and let it cool completely. Peel off skin and refrigerate for at least 2 hours. With a thin sharp knife cut it into thin slices and make into sandwiches, with salad vegetables, pickles, and olives.

SHREDDED ROASTED MEAT (GYRO SANDWICHES)

Sandaweech Guss Makes 10 sandwiches

The medieval Baghdadi cooks knew how to grill meat the rotisserie way, or as they called it *kardhabaj*. They skewered chunks of meat or whole chickens, suspended them horizontally on open fire, and let them rotate until meat grilled to succulence and almost fell off the bones. It was more like a picnic food where they enjoyed the sight of the revolving meat and the aromas it spread all around the place. The earliest recipes for preparing meat this way occur in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 90).

Another exciting grilled dish is *judhaba*, made by suspending a chicken or a chunk of meat above a bread-pudding-like casserole, to roast in the *tannour*. This dish was readily available in the food markets of medieval Baghdad (see *Street Food in Medieval Baghdad* 000). We know that meat prepared this way was served thinly shaved like *shawirma*.

We do not know exactly when cooks started to rotate stacks of meat steaks on a spit vertically in front of the fire. It must have happened during the time of the Ottoman era, definitely by the 19th century. Yerisimos, author of *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine*, assures us that she has a picture, an anonymous lithograph taken in the 1850s, which shows a man selling *kebab doner* (83). Today, sandwiches of shredded meat of rotisserie lamb, beef, and chicken are known in the entire Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern region, albeit served under different names, and there are some differences in preparing them, too. The Greek gyro is a sandwich filled with shaved layers of marinated compressed ground/minced meat, and is drizzled with sour cream sauce. In Turkey, it is *kebab doner*, *shawirma* in the Arab countries surrounding Iraq, and *guss* (cut) in Iraq. In the Arab countries, it is prepared by first marinating large steaks of lamb and/or beef in a mix of oil,

vinegar, onion, garlic, bay leaves, and some spices and herbs. Then they are threaded into a long heavy spit, alternating 3 layers of meat with 1 layer of fat, and arranging them so that they form a conical shape. The bottom layer is kept in place by a special clasp, and the top is garnished with green pepper and tomatoes. The spit is then fixed in a vertical rotisserie, gas or electric. As the meat revolves and roasts, the grilled parts are thinly sliced diagonally into a container, using a sharp long knife. The shredded meat is immediately made into sandwiches by wrapping it in pita bread, after drizzling it with *tahini* sauce. In Iraq, *sammoun* (recipe Chapter 1) is usually used in filling this sandwich. There is no reason why you cannot enjoy this delicious sandwich in the convenience of your home. The following are downsized recipes, prepared without the rotisserie.

How to Prepare the Meat, Method 1:

2 pounds (900g) lean roast beef, or trimmed lamb, or skinless and boneless chicken, trimmed

For marinade:

¼ cup (60ml) vinegar

4 tablespoons olive oil

1 medium onion, grated

1 garlic clove, grated

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

½ teaspoon marjoram

½ teaspoon ground cardamom

½ teaspoon whole aniseeds or fennel

½ teaspoon thyme or za'atar (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon hot red pepper flakes

1 tablespoon prepared mustard

2 tablespoons pomegranate syrup (see Glossary) or

Worcestershire sauce

2 tablespoons ketchup

1 bay leaves

1 teaspoon salt

➤ Using a sharp, knife cut beef crosswise into ¼ in./6 mm-thick slices. Then cut each portion into thin strips, as thin as possible. If using chicken cut it into thin strips. It would help a lot if you let pieces of meat solidify a little in the freezer before cutting.

➤ In a big bowl, mix ingredients for marinade, except for salt. Add meat and mix well. Let it marinade for about 1 hour at room temperature.

➤ Put meat and marinade in a big skillet, or divide between 2 skillets, and cook on high heat, folding and stirring frequently, until all liquid evaporates, and meat starts to brown nicely, about 10 minutes for chicken, but a bit longer for beef and lamb. Add salt half way through cooking. Discard bay leaves.

Alternatively, you can spread meat mixture in a thin layer on a baking sheet, and bake in a hot oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8, turning several times while baking, until liquid evaporates, and meat is nicely browned.

How to Prepare the Meat, Method 2:

Although the following method is a bit more of a hassle than the previous one, it nevertheless, yields a more authentic texture.

➤ Use 2 pounds (900g) lean roast beef. Slice it into thin steaks, and marinate in:

¾ cup (180ml) buttermilk, or diluted yogurt

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 teaspoon grated lemon rind

Let meat marinate for 1 hour at room temperature, or refrigerate overnight, but bring to room temperature before using.

➤ Stack the slices in threes on a broiling/grilling pan to allow liquid to drip down. Discard remaining marinade. Cover loosely with aluminum foil, and roast in a hot oven until just done, about 20 minutes. Meat does not have to be thoroughly done, since it is going to be further cooked.

➤ When cool enough to handle, cut stacks of meat diagonally into very thin slices.

➤ Mix meat with the marinade ingredients given in Method 1, and immediately sauté in a big skillet, folding frequently until moisture evaporates and meat begins to nicely brown, about 7 minutes.

To Assemble the Sandwich

10 pieces of sandwich bread, pita or lawash may also be used

Thin slices of tomatoes

Chopped parsley

Chopped pickles, optional

Thinly sliced onion mixed with some sumac

Tahini/sesame paste sauce, or sour cream sauce (recipes below)

➤ If using sandwich bread, make a slash along one side and scoop out some of the pith, if needed. Fill bread with a suitable amount of the prepared meat and cover with slices of tomato. Sprinkle with parsley, pickles, and onion. Drizzle with one of the suggested sauces.

➤ To make a neat mess-free bundle of a sandwich using pita bread or *lawash*, place bread half way up on a triangle of aluminum foil. Put prepared meat on one half of the bread and cover with slices of tomato. Sprinkle with parsley, pickles, and onion. Drizzle with one of the suggested sauces. Fold the other half of bread on the filling, wrap foil around to prevent it from opening up, and tuck in the bottom of the paper very well to prevent sauce from dripping down while eating.

SAUCES AND RELISHES

ONION RELISH

Feathered Onion



Guss: Shredded roasted meat shown here served as a platter with onion relish and sliced tomatoes

Onion cut into thin slices, as done here, is called *busal mrayyash* (feathered onion) in the Iraqi culinary terminology. It is a simple relish and yet so delicious with all kinds of grilled meat:

- ☞ Cut a medium onion in half lengthwise, then thinly (as thin as possible) slice it crosswise.
- ☞ Put it in a small bowl, add 1 teaspoon vinegar and a very generous sprinkle of *sumac* (see Glossary), then fluff the onion between your fingers. Set it aside, covered, for about 10 minutes and use as directed.

TAHINI/SESAME PASTE SAUCE

☞ In a medium bowl, mix the following ingredients until smooth:

- ½ cup (125 ml) *tahini* (see Glossary)
- Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
- ¼ cup (60ml) cold water
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Variation: Sour Cream Sauce

☞ In a medium bowl, mix the following ingredients until smooth:

- ½ cup (125ml) sour cream, low fat may be used
- ½ cup (3oz/85g) finely chopped cucumber
- 3 tablespoons *tahini*
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- ¼ teaspoon salt

YOGURT AND GARLIC SAUCE

Salsat il-Liban

This is a variation on the appetizing Jajeek salad (recipe Chapter 3), closer in consistency to al-Warraq's tenth-century jajaq (recipe 000 above). Because yogurt is drained, sauce will be of spreading consistency:

- 3 cups (715ml) yogurt drained for 3 hours at room temperature or overnight under refrigeration.
- Use cheesecloth/butter muslin or a coffee filter
- 1 cup (6oz/180g) cucumber, grated and drained for 3 hours, or kept under refrigeration overnight
- ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed, optional
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- 1 medium tomato, drained and finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon salt

☞ Combine all ingredients and use as a spread for sandwiches.

BURAN

Eggplant/Aubergine Relish

This relish is named after Buran (d.884), wife of Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun. As given in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, it was served as a bed for meatballs. Here is the original version:

- ☞ Take eggplant, and boil lightly in water and salt, then take out and dry for an hour. Fry this in fresh sesame oil until cooked
- ☞ Peel, put into a dish or a large cup, and beat well with a ladle. Add a little salt and dry coriander. Take some yogurt, mix in garlic, pour over the eggplant, and mix together well. (Arberry 191)

Following is a modified version to suit the cooking methods of modern times:



- 1 cup (250ml) yogurt, drained for 3 hours at room temperature, or overnight under refrigeration, use cheesecloth/butter muslin or a coffee filter
- 1 big eggplant (about 16oz/450g) pricked and grilled or baked until cooked and skin charred at some places.
- Skin and purée
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper, cumin, and coriander, each
- Chili pepper, to taste

☞ Mix all the ingredients and use as a bed for grilled meat.

PEPPER SAUCE



1 small onion, finely chopped
 2 cloves garlic, grated
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 1 teaspoon flour
 1/3 cup (80ml) hot water
 1/4 teaspoon salt
 1/2 teaspoon cumin
 6 fresh medium hot chilies, broiled or grilled until they develop some charred spots. Skin and finely chop (handle with gloved hands)

☞ In a medium skillet, sauté onion and garlic in oil until just softened, about 4 minutes. Sprinkle flour on onion and stir briefly.

☞ Gradually add 1/3 cup (80 ml) hot water, and stir well. Let mixture simmer on low heat until it thickens, about 3 minutes. Then add salt, cumin, and prepared chilies, and stir until just heated through.

HOT PEPPER SAUCE

Salsat il-Filfil il-Har

The following sauce can replace the relish given above. Because it is hot and thick in consistency, it stays in the refrigerator for a long time. The color of salsa will greatly depend on type of pepper used

1 pound (450g) fresh red chili pepper, cored and seeded
 1 pound (450g) fresh red bell pepper, cored and seeded
 1 teaspoon honey
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon cumin seeds, toasted and crushed
 1 teaspoon za'tar (see Glossary) or dried thyme
 2 cloves garlic, grated
 2 tablespoons white or cider vinegar
 2 tablespoons olive oil

☞ In a medium pot cover peppers in hot water, and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to medium and cook gently for 15 minutes. Drain peppers, and set aside, cool.

☞ Purée peppers in a blender or food processor. Then transfer them to a medium pot. Add honey, salt, cumin, za'tar or thyme, and garlic. Simmer uncovered, for 25 minutes. Stir several times while cooking.

Cool completely.

☞ Pour mixture in a glass jar. Stir in vinegar. Pour olive oil on top to cover the entire surface. Refrigerated, it will keep for about three months. To serve, stir the mixture in the jar and spoon out the amount needed.

Note:

If you want to use this salsa as a dip, add to it small amounts of white vinegar and cold water until the desired consistency is attained. Adjust seasonings. Do this just before serving.

MUSTARD AND VINEGAR RELISH

Khal wa Khardal

This is an adaptation of a medieval condiment, usually served with grilled meat, from al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook (Arberry 207).

1/2 cup (2oz/60g) whole almonds, toasted and cooled
 1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped parsley
 2 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
 1/4 cup (60ml) olive oil
 1/4 cup (60ml) vinegar
 2 tablespoons mustard sauce
 1 teaspoon thyme or za'tar (see Glossary)
 1/2 teaspoon salt
 1/4 teaspoon black pepper
 1/2 teaspoon chili pepper if hot sauce is desired

☞ Put almonds, parsley, and garlic in a blender or food processor. Blend, adding oil gradually until mixture is well puréed.

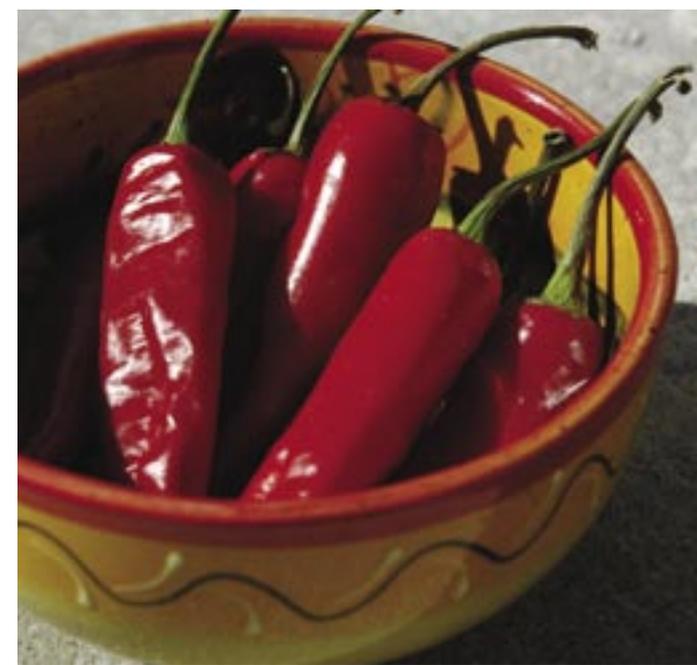
☞ Add vinegar, mustard, thyme, salt, pepper, and chili if used. Pulse mixture for a few seconds to blend. Use this relish with all kinds of grilled meat.

Salsa: A Bit of History

الصَّلصة: تسمى من التاريخ

In modern Iraq what first comes to one's mind at the mention of the words sauce and salsa is a store-bought bottle of steak sauce similar to A1, which we use primarily for hamburger sandwiches. We think of salsa as a loan word and concept. Other store-bought sauces are more commonly known by their names, such as *khardal* (yellow mustard sauce), ketchup, and mayonnaise. Homemade dips and sauces are more commonly given names, such as *hummus bi-tihina* 'tahini/sesame paste,' *jajeek* 'yogurt sauce.'

Now, etymologically the words *salsa* and *sauce* are said to have been borrowed into English from Spanish and French, respectively, and that both ultimately come from Latin *salsus* 'salted,' which stems from *sal* 'salt,' which indeed is an important ingredient in making



sauce and salsa (*American Heritage Dictionary* 4th edition).

Serving dishes with some sort of sauce, relish, or condiment is an ancient custom going back to the ancient world. In one of the Babylonian recipes preserved on cuneiform tablets written c.1700 BC, and at the end of an elaborate recipe for cooking pigeons, there are directions for the cook to send the dish to the table accompanied with "garlic, greens, and vinegar" (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 12). Given the high level of sophistication the ancient Mesopotamian cuisine achieved, it is highly likely that these ingredients were presented in the form of a relish, or what we call today *salsa*, i.e. chopped and mixed with vinegar. Otherwise, there is no logic in

imagining that these ingredients were presented to the aristocratic diners in separate containers, so that they munch on whole garlic cloves and vegetables, and sip vinegar. In fact, judging from the Akkadian herbal texts and related medicinal practices, such relishes and sauces were meant to function as appetizers and digestives. The ancient Greeks and the Romans showed the same tendencies as exemplified in *Apicius*, the only cookbook which came down to us from classical antiquity, believed to have been compiled around late 4th or early 5th century AD. The book abounds with sauce recipes oenogarum, served with all kinds of meat and vegetables, such as in the recipe "Herb sauce for fried fish":

Prepare, wash, and fry whatever fish you like. Pound pepper, cumin, coriander seed, laser root [asafetida], oregano, rue, pound again; pour on vinegar, add date, honey, defrutum [reduced grape juice, similar to medieval Arabic tila طلاء], oil, flavor with liquamen [fermented fish sauce]. Put into a pan, bring it to heat; when it is simmering, pour it over the fried fish, sprinkle with pepper and serve. (Grococck and Grainger Apicius 301).

The tradition of serving meat and vegetable dishes with the suitable dips and sauces continued well into the medieval times. The Arabs used to call them *idam* and *sibagh*. To my knowledge, the earliest record occurs in the *Qur'an* (revealed between 610-32 AD), where the olive tree is said to provide people with oil used as *sibgh* (صبغ) condiment (*Al-Mu'minoun* Chapter xxiii: verse 20). Indeed, olive oil, along with vinegar, was deemed the most basic of all condiments. We still relish a dip of seasoned olive oil with bread after the Italian way. Then we have al-Warraq's 10th century Baghdadi cookbook, which covers the Abbasid cuisine from late 8th-century to the middle of the 10th-century. It contains many recipes for condiments called *sibagh* (سباغ), which are similar to what we have in *Apicius*. They are served as dips and sauces with meat and

vegetable dishes, as an aid to digestion. A chapter dealing with properties of sauces used for fish dishes explains their benefits: sauce cooked with asafetida, onion, and spices aid digestion, sauce cooked with raisins and pomegranate seeds whet the appetite and help purge the food out of the system fast. The best are those cooked with sumac and almonds, because they digest very fast (Chapter 25). By way of example, a *sibagh* recipe taken from the copy of Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tamid (d.892) runs as follows:

Take fatty fish, boil it, and rinse it in cold water. Put in large flat pan, a little vinegar, murri (liquid fermented sauce), ground coriander seeds, and finely chopped onion. Cook the mixture until done then take it out and while still hot, add a little olive oil and caraway seeds. [Pour sauce on the fish while it is still hot]. Set it aside until it cools down and [the fish] picks up the flavor of the sauce, God willing.

Another *sibagh* recipe calls for wine vinegar, parsley, rue, mint, thyme, black pepper, cumin, caraway, cassia, a lump of sugar, olive oil, and coarse salt, to be mixed and used (Chapter 34). The gourmet prince Ibn al-Mahdi (d.839), half brother of Harun al-Rasheed, composed a poem on a perfect fish dish (Chapter 33):

On a hot summer day, the cook brought a dish of shabbut (carp) fish, a golden kid resembled. Masterly roasted, with parsley, leeks, olive oil, and thyme stuffed. Then its sibagh he made of pomegranate juice, sugar, and almond, Vinegar, murri, asafetida leaves, black pepper, olive oil, walnut, and coriander. He brought it in like the sun, a radiant delight, redolent with aloe wood, musk, and amber.

All meat dishes required *sibagh* to be served with them, especially fish. It was deemed particularly bad for the digestion, due to its cold properties, unless aided with the suitable *sibagh*. Al-Warraq cited a poem in which an unreliable liar was compared to a fish dish served without *sibagh*:

Abu Ishaq has got no damagh (brain) and his skin is without dibagh (tan). His words are like cooked fresh fish presented without sibagh.

Sibagh was sometimes served as a dip alongside the grilled or fried dishes in small bowls called *sakarij* (sing. *uskurruja*), to be used communally by the eaters, which necessitated that they should stay clean for all eaters. Diners were strongly cautioned against what we call today double dipping - dip a morsel into the *sibagh* bowl, have a bite, then dip it again. Such a person was disparagingly called *al-qattaa'* 'the cutter' (al-Warraq 131; al-Jahiz 25).

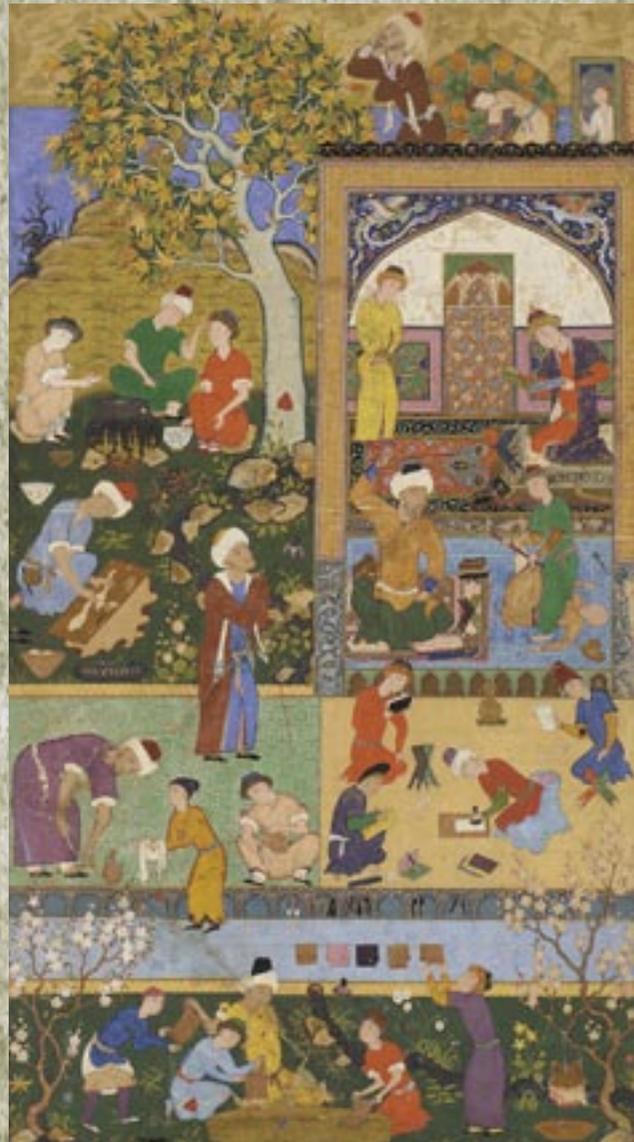
Etymologically, one of the medieval meanings of *sibagh* was 'a dip,' from verb *sabagha* 'to dip,' which was also applied to the Christians' rite of baptizing children, and explains why John the Baptist was given the name *Yohanna al-Sabbagh* (*Taj al-'Arous*) It turns out the word ultimately derives from the ancient Mesopotamian language. In the Akkadian dictionary, the verb *sapu* (variant *saba'u*) means 'to soak, drench' (www.premiumwanadoo.com/cuneiform.languages/dictionary/index.php). Interestingly, this also sheds light on the meaning of the name of an ancient religious group that still exists in modern Iraq, the Sabians. In the Iraqi dialect, they are called *Subba*, followers of John the Baptist, who choose to live close to rivers. To resume the subject of sauces and dips, as we come to the 13th century, we notice some kind of development. In al-Baghdadi's cookbook, *sibagh* recipes given are no longer poured all over the cooked meat and vegetables. Instead, they were presented as separate appetizers to be eaten with bread. According to al-Baghdadi, they are given between dishes, to cleanse the palate, sharpen the appetite, and aid digestion. They are all vegetarian (eggplant/aubergine, squash/courgette, chard, herbs, and spinach), and of the five recipes given, only one does not use drained yogurt. In the other two cookbooks of the Eastern Muslim World, which belong more or less to the same era, the Aleppo Al-

Wusla ila'l-Habeeb by Ibn al-'Adeem and the Egyptian *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, we come across condiments known by the name *suls/ sulusaat* (sing. *sals*). From the recipes, we realize we are dealing with condiments - in content and function - similar to those of *sibagh*. However, from the *sulusaat* recipes we infer that the dips and sauces started to be made smoother and uniform in consistency. The ingredients were pounded until they resembled *marham* (ointment), as one of the recipes specified. The cook was also instructed to adjust the liquid added until the mixture attains *qiwam al-sals* (sauce consistency), which I take to be neither runny nor too thick, the eater should be able to pick up some of the sauce with a piece of bread. Some of the sauces were meant for immediate use, such the one prepared by mixing yogurt with pounded garlic and mint. Others were sealed in containers for up to a month. In one of the recipes the prepared sauce was kept in one-time-use bottles, because the sauce molds after the bottle is opened (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 698-701; *Kanz al-Fawa'id* 179-85).

It is still unresolved whether the above *suls* condiments were indigenous to the region, etymologically and in substance, or whether they were an imported concept during the time of the Crusades. However, I venture here to side with the former. The condiment in all its varieties has a long established history in the region. Besides, the name, after all, might not necessarily be Latin in origin (from *salsus* and *sal*). In the major medieval Arabic dictionaries, *salaas* (pl. *suls*) is descriptive of the consistency of 'soft mud,' which indeed is applicable to the consistency of the sauces *qiwam al-suls*, described above.

SNACKS, SANDWICHES AND SIDE DISHES

VEGETARIAN



Falafel 00
Baked Falafel
Lentil Patties
Lentil and Rice patties
Boiled Eggs with Fresh Black-eyed Peas,
Abyadh wa Beidh
Turnips simmered in Date Syrup, *Maye' al-Shalgham*
Sandwiches of Truffles and Eggs, *Chima wa Beidh*
Iraqi Omelet with Potatoes and Herbs
Spinach Omelet
Baked Spinach
Spinach simmered in Olive Oil
Green/French Beans in Vinegar
Baked Green/French Beans
Green/French Beans simmered in Olive Oil
Fresh Fava/broad Beans Simmered in Olive Oil,
White Beans Simmered in Olive Oil
Fried Breaded Cauliflower
Cauliflower casserole
Macaroni and Cheese Casserole
Pancakes of Golden Vermicelli Noodles
Eggplant/Aubergine simmered in Olive Oil
Eggplant/Aubergine Sandwich
Breaded Eggplant/Aubergine Delights
Herbed Zucchini/Courgette Pancakes
Baked Zucchini/Courgette Squares



Snacks, Sandwiches and Side Dishes

Wajbat Khafifa

وجبات خفيفة

Vegetarian Dry Dishes

Nawashif Bidoon Laham

نواشيف بدون لحم

Up until recently, people did not think much of meatless dishes, a legacy we inherited from our ancestors. In the medieval menu, the category of vegetarian dishes was dubbed *muzawwarat* (fake, simulated dishes), usually recommended for the sick and for fasting Christians during Lent. However, eating vegetarian dishes as appetizers or snacks was perfectly acceptable. A variety of cold vegetable dishes, generally called

Unusual Nuts from of Mosul

The commercial center for distributing nuts and seeds, collectively called *karazāt*, to other Iraqi markets, is the northern city of Mosul. Nut trees growing on the mountains of northern Iraq have always been the source for nuts like pistachio, walnuts, chestnuts, acorn, and the like. However, some other varieties of nuts also grow there, but they are unknown to outsiders, such as *habbat khadhra*, *butum*, and *sissi*.

Habbat khadhra and *butum* are the dried berries of varieties of the terebinth trees, which have been growing in the region ever since ancient times. One of the 1700 BC Babylonian recipes written on cuneiform tablets calls for '*butumtu*' described as green. The decipherer of the tablets, Jean Bottéro, left it as unidentified, with a possibility of it being green wheat or barley (*Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 5, 15), but to me it looks suspiciously like our *butum* (*Pistacia atlantica*), the kernel of the tree's berries, the size of a pea each, and tastes like the regular pistachio (*Pistacia vera*). The bunches of *butum* berries are left to dry on the trees, then they are kept in brine for a while, after removing the outer skin, to make them easier to crack by teeth. The resin of the tree is also used as gum, which we call '*ilich mei* (literally, 'water gum') to differentiate it from the imported sweet gum '*ilich ingileez* (English gum). Medieval Arabic sources describe the plant - its fruit and resin - in similar terms, except that they called the gum '*ilk a-butm* and '*ilk al-Anbaat* (gum of the indigenous Iraqis) to differentiate it from '*ilk*

al-Roum, also called *mastaka* (mastic gum). *Habbat khadhra* (literally 'green seed') is *Pistacia terebinthus*. It is a bit smaller than *butum*, and unlike *butum* it is not salted. The terebinth berry bunches are left to dry on the tress, and sent directly to the markets with the dried wrinkled green outer skin still on. From medieval Arabic sources, we learn that the immature bunches of the green berries were preserved in vinegar and salt, or just salted, similar to what was done to capers. In al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes, the berries are toasted and used whole in making seasoned salt (Chapter 21). Both *habbat khadhra* and *butum* were also used medicinally in medieval times, and they were valued as aphrodisiac. Today, people eat them for fun oblivious to their potential powers in other fields. *Sissi* is a nut with a kind of fibrous, hard, but brittle outer skin, rectangular, with a thorny stem. It is bought salted and toasted. That was all I knew about this delicious mysterious nut. After asking some friends familiar with the northern region, I learnt that *sissi* is the seed of *ka'oub l'akkoub* (*Gundelia tournefortii*, common name 'tumble thistle'), a spiny, thistle-like flowering plant of the sunflower family. Its spiky head is edible, and people in northern Iraq like to cook it dipped in eggs, and then breaded and fried. Unfortunately, it needs a lot of cleaning, and the thistles are a pain to remove. The plant grows in other parts of the eastern Mediterranean countries (in identifying the plant, I am indebted to friends Mahmoud Sa'eed and Sarah Melamed).

FALAFEL

Makes 30 patties



Falafel is a Middle-Eastern dish well known and loved in most parts of the world. It is ground beans mixed with herbs and spices, shaped into balls or small patties, and deep-fried. Some people use chickpeas only, but using a blend of chickpeas and fava/broad beans would yield falafel that is less dry in texture.

1 cup (8oz/225g) shelled dry fava/broad beans, washed, soaked overnight and drained,
1 cup (8oz/225g) whole chickpeas, washed, soaked overnight, and drained
1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley, finely chopped
¼ cup (½oz/15g) cilantro/ fresh coriander, finely chopped
¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh mint, finely chopped, optional
3 - 4 garlic cloves, grated
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) grated onion
1 teaspoon za'tar (see Glossary)
1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
1 teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon chili powder, or to taste
1 teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
3 tablespoons breadcrumbs
Breadcrumbs for coating, optional
Oil for deep-frying

bawarid al-buqoul, was prepared by boiling or frying vegetables, such as eggplant/aubergine, gourd, or fava/ broad beans. They were drizzled with vinegar and olive oil or mixed with yogurt.

We still make more or less the same side dishes, albeit with less oil, and occasionally enjoy simple snacks. A winter favorite is a dip of *rashi w'dibis* (*tahini*/sesame paste and date syrup) served with warm fresh bread, or even a small head of romaine/cos lettuce. In the summertime, a snack could be fresh dates, cucumber, and yogurt.

Toasted mixed nuts, such as pistachios, almonds, peanuts, chickpeas, hazelnuts, and toasted pumpkin and watermelon seeds, collectively called *karazaat*, is the snack for family gatherings, and movie theatres. I particularly remember how we used to anxiously await the exciting chasing scenes in cowboy movies. Not that we were particularly interested in the scenes themselves as much as to hearken to the increasing tempo of the seed cracking caused by the mounting excitement of the audience, whose eyes were glued to the screen. Indeed, those mixed nuts are always associated with fun and happy times. That explains why people on mourning are not supposed to be seen eating them in public, except perhaps for almonds, believed to be beneficial for the digestion. The northern city of Mosul is the major market for *karazāt*, where unusual nuts like *habbat khadhra* and *butum* (terebinth berries) are abundant. *Lhoom*, which is ground toasted chickpeas or sesame seeds mixed with sugar, makes a satisfactory snack for children, especially those with poor appetites. The medieval counterpart for this was the travelers' victual, *saweeq*, made of toasted grains, ground with almonds and sugar. It was valued as nourishing food for travelers. When diluted with water, it also made a refreshing drink for them (recipes in al-Warraq, Chapter 13).

Back in the old days when families used to gather around braziers in the cold of winter, walnuts in the shell and chestnuts were roasted among the glowing coals. It was not unusual for some chestnuts to burst all of a sudden, and scatter all over the place.

BAKED FALAFEL

Makes 18 bars

☞ In a food processor or blender, finely grind shelled fava beans and chickpeas.

☞ In a big bowl mix ground beans with parsley, cilantro, mint, garlic, onion, coriander, cumin, salt, pepper, chili, baking soda, and breadcrumbs. Knead briefly to combine. Let rest for an hour.

☞ With wet hands, take walnut-size portions, and form them into rounded discs about 2in/5cm in diameter. Traditional *falafel* are shaped into balls, but I find rounded discs cook more evenly inside and out. Dip in breadcrumbs if using any. Arrange on a tray in one layer. Allow to rest for 15 minutes.

☞ Deep fry in hot oil until golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes. (Hot oil will prevent patties from absorbing too much oil)

☞ Drain on paper towels/kitchen paper put on a rack or a colander to prevent pieces from getting soggy. Serve as an appetizer by itself, or make into sandwiches as follows:

☞ Fill a warm freshly baked *sammoun* (recipe Chapter 1) or similar bread with three pieces of *falafel*. Add chopped parsley, and salad vegetables. Drizzle with *tahini* sauce (recipe 000).

☞ If using pita or *lawash*, put bread on a triangle of aluminum foil, half way up. Put three pieces of *falafel* on one half of the bread. Cover with chopped salad vegetables, and chopped parsley. Drizzle with *tahini* sauce, and fold the other half of bread on the filling. Wrap with the paper, and tuck in the bottom to prevent sauce from dripping.

To give *falafel* a lighter touch, you may bake them, and save yourself the trouble of frying.

☞ After soaking beans as directed above, do not grind them, but boil them separately by covering them by about 2in/5cm of cold water. Bring them to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer until tender. Drain excess liquid, and mash with a potato masher. Mix beans with the rest of the ingredients as directed in Falafel recipe. Grease and coat with breadcrumbs a 12-by-8-inch (30.5x20cm) baking pan. Spread mixture and brush surface with olive oil, and sprinkle with breadcrumbs.

☞ Bake in a preheated oven at 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark for about 20 minutes or until golden brown. Cut into bars or squares, and arrange on a platter with chopped vegetables, accompanied with a bowl of tahini/sesame paste sauce as a dip (recipe 000).

Nibble at Home and Join Me for Supper

A man visited a friend who happened to be having his supper at the time. The friend invited him to join in, but he apologized, saying he is full; he had already had supper at home. The friend insisted that at least he could nibble with him. So the man joined in, and 'nibbled' so earnestly that he almost finished the food. The friend could not help but say, "Next time, my friend, nibble at home and join me for supper." (Zalzala, 3: 321-22, my translation)

LENTIL PATTIES

Kuftat Adas Makes 12 patties

If you are in the mood for a quick uplifting sandwich or snack, this is the recipe for you, since it requires no beforehand soaking or preparation. The fried patties will develop a crisp shell, while the inside will be melt-in-mouth soft.

½ cup (4oz/115g) shelled lentils, picked over, washed and drained
1 cup (250ml) water
2 tablespoons rice flour (see Glossary)
1 medium tomato, finely chopped (½ cup/3oz/85g)
1 small onion, finely chopped (about ½ cup/3oz/85 g)
¼ cup (½oz/15g) finely chopped parsley
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins
½ teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper, chili pepper, each
1 egg, beaten
Breadcrumbs for coating
Oil for frying

☞ In a small pot, add water to lentils and bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer on low heat until lentils are cooked and all moisture has evaporated, stirring occasionally, about 15 minutes. Add rice flour, and mix and mash with lentils. Set aside until cool enough to handle.

☞ Transfer to bowl, and add tomatoes, onion, parsley, currants, *baharat*, cumin, salt, black pepper, and chili. Mix well, and with moist fingers form into 12 well-rounded patties.

☞ Dip patties in beaten egg, and then roll in breadcrumbs. Fry in about 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil until golden brown, turning once to brown the other side. They will cook very fast, so you need to watch them.

☞ Drain pieces on white paper towels/kitchen paper put on a rack or a colander to prevent them from getting soggy. Serve warm as a sandwich with vegetables and *tahini*/sesame paste sauce (recipe 000) as described in *falafel* sandwiches, or arrange them on a platter with sliced salad vegetables and a bowl of *tahini* sauce.

LENTIL AND RICE PATTIES

Kuftat Adas wa Timman Makes 24 patties

A healthy and tasty fast snack. It can also be served with meat dishes.

1 cup (8oz/225g) shelled red lentils, picked over, washed, and drained
¾ cup (6oz/180g) rice, washed and drained
2½ cups (625ml) water
1 medium onion, finely chopped
2 tablespoons olive oil
1½ tablespoon tomato paste
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins
½ cup (3oz/85g) chopped spring onion/scallion, with the green stalks
¾ cup (1½oz/45g) parsley, finely chopped
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
¾ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cumin
¼ teaspoon chili pepper
½ cup (2oz/60g) sesame seeds, dry toasted and coarsely ground

☞ Put lentils, rice, and water in a medium pot, and bring to a boil, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat, and let grains simmer for 15 to 20 minutes, or until they are cooked, folding several times while simmering. Set aside until cool enough to handle.

☞ In a small skillet sauté onion in oil until it starts to brown, about 5 minutes. Add tomato paste and raisins, and stir together for a few minutes.

☞ Transfer cooked lentils and rice to a big bowl. Add onion mixture along with spring onion, parsley, lemon juice, salt, pepper, cumin, and chili. Knead briefly.

☞ Make into 24 patties, or shape like eggs with pointed ends (like rugby balls).

☞ Roll the pieces in prepared sesame, and arrange them on a serving platter. Serve with sliced vegetables, and tahini/sesame paste sauce as a dip (recipe 000).

BOILED EGGS WITH FRESH BLACK-EYED PEAS

Abyadh w' - Beidh A Sandwich for the Nostalgic

A simple sandwich, which could only have been created by a people to whom everything and anything may be eligible for a filling. It is basically made of flat white bread (this is the *abyadh*), rolled around a filling of sliced boiled eggs (*the beidh*) along with simmered fresh black-eyed peas in the pod, salad vegetables and pickles. Here is a description of how it was served by vendors, as seen through the eyes of a foreign visitor, in the late 1950s AD:

In Baghdad, there is a sort of public smorgasbord called the abiadh al bedh, a moving stand piled unbelievably high with hard-cooked eggs, pickles, beets/beetroot, tomatoes, spring onion [scallion], and other appetizers. It is gaily decorated and makes a colorful sight on the street corners. A short-order snack from this Oriental hot dog stand is called a laffa. The proprietor slices anything you want and rolls it up in a piece of khubz or Arabic bread for you to munch as you explore Baghdad. (Rowland 141-42)

TURNIPS SIMMERED IN DATE SYRUP

Mayi' il-Shalgham Makes 4 servings



A street-food snack of turnips simmered to tenderness, and hence the *epithet maye'* (literally 'melting'). The small amount of date syrup traditionally used in this food helps give the turnips a delicately sweet taste. Molasses will give almost the same delicious taste and lovely hue.

2 pounds (450g) turnips

¼ cup (60ml) date syrup or molasses/treacle

¼ teaspoon salt

☞ Wash turnips, cut off both ends, and cut each horizontally into halves, but not all the way through, leave them intact. Put turnips, date syrup or molasses, and salt in a medium pot and cover them by about 2 in./5 cm cold water. Bring to a boil, then lower heat and let them simmer until tender, about 30 minutes.

☞ Serve warm sprinkled with a dash of coarse salt.

SANDWICH OF EGGS AND TRUFFLES

Sandaweech Beidh w' - Chima

The early Mesopotamians knew the poisonous and the edible mushrooms as well as the truffles, which are still found in the desert area in the west. In the early Babylonian times, they were regarded as a great delicacy and were dispatched to the king by the basketful.

From medieval sources, we learn they knew the white as well as the black variety, which were usually cooked with meat, aromatic spices, and eggs. They were sometimes used with other ingredients for stuffing roasted kids and sheep, or for garnishes. For Christians during Lent, they were a God-sent vegetable, as they substituted meat in what they called *muzzawarat* (simulated dishes). Truffles were treated like meat: boiled, fried, grilled, and pounded and made into fried thin patties, called *muraqqaqat* (al-Warraq, Chapter 46). The truffle season is very short in the region. They appear only during springtime, the season of showers, thunder, and lightning. It was believed that such weather conditions played a role in the formation of these delicacies. They actually play an indirect role - when it thunders, it rains, and when it rains in the desert, the force of the falling water reveals the truffles buried in the sand. They are then picked up by the Bedouins and sold in the markets of the big cities. Nowadays they are usually simmered in salted water, cut into slices, and made into sandwiches along with slices of boiled eggs, tomatoes, and pickles. They are also chopped and cooked with rice (see Chapter 8).

IRAQI OMELET WITH POTATOES AND HERBS

Makhlamat Puteta Makes 6 servings

A delicious vegetarian variation on the traditional Iraqi omelet, usually cooked with meat (recipe Chapter 5).

2 cups (12oz/350g) cubed potatoes, fresh or frozen

2 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, chopped

½ teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 medium tomato, chopped

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or

1 tablespoon dried dill weed

½ cup (1oz/30g) fresh mint leaves, chopped

6 eggs

Chili powder to taste

For garnish: slices of lemon and chopped parsley

☞ Spread potato cubes on a baking dish, spray with oil and broil/grill or bake in a hot oven, turning once to allow both sides to brown, about 15 minutes (or brown in oil in a skillet).

☞ In a big non-stick skillet, heat oil and sauté onion until transparent, about 7 minutes. Add potatoes, curry powder, salt, pepper, tomatoes, parsley, dill, and mint. Mix well and let cook for a few minutes.

☞ Level surface with the back of a spoon, and make six dents in which you break the eggs. You may leave eggs whole, sunny-side-up, or zigzag surface with a knife to break yolks and let them mingle slightly with the whites. Lightly sprinkle the surface with chili powder.

☞ Lower heat and let eggs cook slowly, covered, until they are just set, about 5 minutes. Do not overcook; otherwise eggs will develop a leathery texture.

Alternatively, you can bake the dish. Simply transfer potato mixture to a greased baking pan, big enough to spread the mix in about ½ in./1 cm layer. Then add eggs as described above, and bake in a preheated oven at 400°F/200°C/ gas mark 6 until set for about 10 minutes.

☞ Cut into wedges and serve as a sandwich, with chopped parsley and a squeeze of lemon, along with other sliced salad vegetables of your choice.

SPINACH OMELET

Makhlamat Sbenagh Makes 6 servings

Another beautiful variation on the traditional Iraqi omelet, *makhlama*, usually cooked with meat (recipe Chapter 5).

2 tablespoons oil
 1 medium onion, chopped
 ½ teaspoon curry powder
 1 pound (450g) coarsely chopped fresh spinach
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or
 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
 ¾ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 6 eggs
 Chili powder, to taste

☞ In a big non-stick skillet heat oil and sauté onion, about 5 minutes. Add curry powder, spinach, parsley, dill, salt, and pepper. Stir gently until most of the moisture evaporates.

☞ Level surface with the back of a spoon, and make six dents in which you break the eggs. You may leave eggs whole, sunny-side-up, or zigzag surface with a knife to break yolks and let them mingle slightly with the whites.

☞ Lower heat and let eggs cook slowly, covered, until they are just set, about 5 minutes. Do not overcook; otherwise, eggs will develop a leathery texture. Alternatively, you may bake the dish. Simply transfer spinach mixture to a greased baking pan, big enough to spread in about ½in/1cm layer. Then add eggs as described above, and bake in a preheated oven at 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6 until set, about 10 minutes. No need to cover.

BAKED SPINACH

Sbenagh bil-Firin Makes 6 servings

A dish for a lazy-day snack, simple and yet so delicious. It is a variation on the traditional Spinach Omelet above.

Two 10oz/285g packages frozen spinach, thawed, and extra moisture squeezed out
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped or
 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
 2 medium potatoes, boiled and mashed (about 1 cup/250ml)
 1 medium onion, chopped and sautéed in
 2 tablespoons of oil
 4 eggs, beaten
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) crumbled feta cheese
 ¼ cup (2oz/60g) grated Pecorino Romano cheese
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Mix spinach, dill and mashed potatoes. Spread in a 7-by-9-inch (18x23cm) glass baking dish that has been greased and lined with breadcrumbs.

☞ Mix eggs, cheeses, salt, black pepper, coriander, and chili. Spread over spinach mixture, and sprinkle breadcrumbs on surface. Drizzle with olive oil.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until dish is set and top is golden. Allow to cool for 10 minutes, and then cut into squares and serve warm.

SPINACH SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Sbenagh bil-Zeit Makes 4 servings

A fast and simple side dish. Have it warm or cold with meat dishes.

1 medium onion, finely chopped
 ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon chili pepper
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds, optional
 2 pounds (900g) fresh spinach, washed and coarsely chopped, or two
 10oz/285g packages frozen spinach
 2 tablespoons lemon juice, or to taste

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in olive oil until transparent, 4 to 5 minutes. Add salt, black pepper, chili, and coriander if used. Stir together for a few seconds.

☞ Add spinach. Bring to a quick boil, then lower heat, and allow spinach to simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated, stirring occasionally, about 10 minutes. Spread on a platter and drizzle with lemon juice.

Eyes of Eggs *Beidh 'ein*

Some of the Medieval Baghdadi cooks used to break some eggs on a cooking stew the moment they stop fueling the fire underneath the pot. They let the eggs set with the remaining heat. The set eggs resemble what people in the Western world might call "sunny-side-up eggs." Medieval Baghdadi cooks called them "eyes of eggs," and sometimes compared them to cow's eyes '*uyoun al-baqar* (al-Warraq, Chapter 71). Today, we still call fried eggs prepared this way, *beidh 'ein* (eggs like eyes)

GREEN/FRENCH BEANS IN VINEGAR

Fasoulya Khadhra bil-Khal Makes 4 servings

On the medieval table, *bawarid al-buqoul* (cold vegetarian dishes) were welcome and enjoyed as harbingers to the more serious courses of hot meat dishes. They were made simple and appetizing. *Barida* of dried beans, for instance, was made by putting drained boiled beans in a bowl, and drizzling them with equal amounts of mustard, vinegar, and olive oil. A generous amount of pounded walnut, along with chopped parsley and rue were sprinkled on it (al-Warraq, Chapters 45, 46).

8 ounces (225 g) tender green/French beans, boiled and drained. May be substituted with one drained 14.5-oz/ 415-g can green beans

1 onion, finely chopped
 1 garlic clove, grated
 ¼ cup (1½ oz/ 45 g) parsley, chopped
 4 tablespoons vinegar
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 Salt and pepper, to taste
 For garnish: 2 tablespoons ground walnut

☞ Mix all ingredients, except for walnut, in a bowl and refrigerate for an hour. Before serving, sprinkle walnuts all over it. Delicious with meat dishes.

BAKED GREEN/FRENCH BEANS

Fasoulya Khadhra bil-Firin Makes 6 servings

A simple and easy way to prepare beans. It can be served as a side dish or by itself as a snack.

1 pound (450g) tender green/French beans, both ends cut off but left whole, boiled and drained. May be substituted with two drained 14½oz/415g cans green beans
 2 eggs, beaten
 ¼ cup (180ml) milk
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) mozzarella cheese
 ¼ cup (2oz/60 g) feta cheese, crumbled, or grated Pecorino Romano cheese
 2 tablespoons breadcrumbs
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ Put beans in an 8-by-6-inch (20x15cm) greased baking pan. Whisk eggs, milk, salt and pepper and pour on beans. Sprinkle the cheeses first and then the breadcrumbs all over the surface.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 20 to 25 minutes, or until casserole is set and top is golden brown in patches.
- ☞ Divide into 6 portions and serve with meat dishes, if wished.

GREEN/FRENCH BEANS SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Fasoulya bil-Zeit Makes 4 servings

Simmering fresh green/French beans in olive oil will bring out their delicate taste.

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
 1 pound (450g) tender green/French beans, both ends cut off. Leave whole or cut into 2in/5cm long pieces
 2 - 5 cloves garlic, whole and unskinned
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon ground ginger
 1 teaspoon sugar
 3 medium tomatoes (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), coarsely chopped; or one 15oz/425g can diced tomatoes, do not drain
 Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml), adjust to taste
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
For garnish: Lemon slices

- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in olive oil, until it starts to change color, about 7 minutes. Add the prepared beans and stir for 5 minutes.
- ☞ Add garlic, salt, pepper, ginger, sugar, and tomatoes. Pour hot water just enough to cover the mixture, about 1½ cups (375ml). Bring to a quick boil, then lower heat and simmer gently for about 30 minutes, or until beans are tender, and sauce is noticeably reduced.
- ☞ Five minutes before beans are done, add lemon juice and parsley. Also, squeeze pulp out of the cooked garlic cloves, and mash and mix it with the beans.
- ☞ Serve hot or cold, garnished with lemon slices. Drizzle with yogurt, if wished.

FRESH FAVA/BROAD BEANS SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Bagilla Khadhra bil-Zeit Makes 4 servings

The season for fresh fava beans is short, so make the most of it while you can. When not available, it may be substituted with the frozen variety or even frozen lima/butter beans. When fresh fava beans are still tender and young at the beginning of their season, use the whole pod with the beans inside.

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
 3 cups (18oz/510g) fresh fava/broad beans, jacket and skin removed, or 3 cups frozen lima/butter beans, no need to skin. (Or 1 pound (450g) tender and young fresh fava/broad beans with jacket on, just cut off both ends and pull off the strings from both sides if there are any)
 2 cloves garlic, whole and unskinned
 1 teaspoon sugar
 ¾ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper, cumin, coriander, each
 ¼ teaspoon chili powder, or to taste
 ¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
 ¼ up (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or
 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
For yogurt-dill sauce:
 1 cup (250ml) yogurt
 2 tablespoons fresh dill, chopped or
 1 teaspoon dried dill weed
 1 garlic clove, grated
 ¼ teaspoon salt

- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until soft, about 5 minutes. Add prepared fava beans and garlic, and stir for a few minutes.



- ☞ Stir in sugar, salt, black pepper, cumin, coriander, and chili. Add hot water just enough to cover the vegetables. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, until beans are tender, about 20 minutes.
- ☞ Add lemon juice and dill 5 minutes before beans are done.
- ☞ Stir together sauce ingredients until smooth, and serve beans hot or cold, drizzled with yogurt sauce.

WHITE BEANS SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Fasoulya Yabsa bil-Zeit Makes 6 servings

Commonly served as a side dish, but I find it quite satisfying as a light meal by itself, served with warm bread.

1 cup (8oz/225g) white beans, washed, soaked overnight, and drained
2 cloves garlic, whole and unskinned
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
2 medium carrots, chopped
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), chopped
1 tablespoon tomato paste
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon sugar
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/ 60 ml)

☞ In a medium pot, combine beans and garlic. Cover with cold water by 1in/2.5cm. Bring to a boil then reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until beans are just done, about 30 minutes.

☞ In a small skillet sauté onion in oil until soft, about 5 minutes. Add it to the bean pot along with carrots, tomatoes, tomato paste, salt, sugar, pepper, ginger, and chili. Continue simmering, until beans are tender and little liquid is left, about 20 minutes.

☞ Add parsley and lemon juice 5 minutes before the finished cooking time. Serve hot or cold.

FRIED BREADED CAULIFLOWER

Qirnabeet Maqli Makes 6 servings

It is not easy to make people get excited about the humble cauliflower, neither in the past when they thought it generated bad blood and caused *qaraqir* (rumbling stomach noises), nor in the present. However, preparing it this way does elevate it a lot. The egg-and-crumbs coating makes it deliciously crispy from the outside, leaving the inside soft and succulent. If you want to avoid frying, simply brush or spray them with oil and bake them in a hot oven.

1 small head of cauliflower, broken into florets
2 eggs, beaten
Breadcrumbs seasoned with salt, chili powder, ground ginger, and black pepper (¼ teaspoon of each for 1 cup/40oz/115g breadcrumbs)
Oil for frying

☞ Cook cauliflower in salted water until just done, and then drain them and let them cool off. Dip the florets in beaten eggs first, and then coat with breadcrumbs.

☞ Fry in 2in/5cm deep hot oil until golden brown, turning once to allow to brown on all sides, a few minutes. Drain on a white paper towel/kitchen paper put on a colander or a rack to prevent pieces from getting soggy.

☞ Serve hot as a snack or with meat dishes.

CAULIFLOWER CASSEROLE

Tabsi 'l-Qirnabeet Makes 6 servings

Cauliflower here is made succulent by baking it in a light and tasty white sauce. Chopped cabbage may be easily substituted.

2 tablespoons oil
1 medium onion, chopped
½ cup (2oz/60g) flour
4 cups (950ml) milk
½ cup (2oz/60ml) cheddar cheese, shredded
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon ginger powder
¼ teaspoon chili powder
1 medium head of cauliflower, broken into florets, and partially boiled in salted water, and drained
2 cups (10oz/285g) elbow macaroni, cooked al dente (1 cup/5oz/140g uncooked)
½ cup (2oz/60g) breadcrumbs
2 tablespoons oil
Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil, until it softens, about 5 minutes. Stir in flour and brown lightly.

☞ Gradually add milk, stirring with a wire whisk to prevent sauce from getting lumpy. Add cheese, salt, pepper, ginger, and chili. Stir over medium-high heat until sauce is smooth and starts to thicken, about 5 minutes.

☞ Spread cauliflower florets and macaroni in a 9-by-11-inch (23x28cm) casserole. Pour the sauce all over cauliflower and macaroni. There should be enough sauce to cover both. Add a little milk if needed. Sprinkle surface with breadcrumbs and drizzle with oil.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 25 to 30 minutes, or until sauce bubbles, and top is golden brown.

☞ Serve warm, as a side dish, or as a snack by itself.

MACARONI AND CHEESE CASSEROLE

Qalab Ma'caroni bil-Jibin Makes 4 servings

Almost every country has its own version of this classic dish, but what distinguishes one from the other is the kind of cheese used. The Iraqi variety is made with the local hard white cheese *jibin Akrad* (Kurds' cheese). A mixture of Pecorino Romano cheese and mozzarella would give almost the same taste and texture. I was first acquainted with the dish as a sixth-grader in a home economics class in my elementary schools in Baghdad, and it was love at first bite.

1½ cups (8 oz/ 225 g) ziti or elbow macaroni, cooked al dente according to package directions, and drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) Pecorino Romano cheese, grated
½ cup (2oz/60g) mozzarella cheese, shredded
¾ cup (1½oz/45g) parsley, chopped
4 eggs
2 cups (475ml) milk
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ In a greased 10-by-12-inch (25.5x30.5cm) casserole, layer third of the macaroni, third of cheese, and thirds of herbs (in the order mentioned). Repeat the layering two more times.

☞ In a medium bowl, whisk eggs, milk, salt, and pepper. Pour all over the layers. There should be enough liquid to cover macaroni and cheese. If needed, add a little more milk.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for the first 10 minutes. Then reduce heat to 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5, and bake for 20 more minutes, or until it is set and top is golden brown.

☞ Serve as a side dish, a light lunch, or a snack with salad.

PANCAKES OF GOLDEN VERMICELLI NOODLES

Aqras il-Sha'riyya Makes 6 pancakes

Fine vermicelli noodles make fabulous crisp pancakes, fit for formal occasions.

6 ounces (180g) vermicelli noodle balls, keep the balls whole
½ teaspoon turmeric
½ cup (3oz/85g) spring onion/scallion, finely chopped; or regular onion, grated
1 garlic clove, grated
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) fresh sweet or hot pepper, finely diced, optional
1 medium tomato, finely diced
½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, finely chopped
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ cup (4oz/115g) Pecorino Romano cheese, grated
½ cup (2oz/60g) mozzarella cheese, shredded
4 eggs, beaten
Oil for shallow frying
Thick yogurt for garnish, optional

☞ Put noodles and turmeric in a medium pot of boiling salted water. Let cook gently for about 5 minutes or until al dente, stirring frequently but gently to encourage the balls to unravel. Watch noodles carefully lest they should overcook. Drain and allow to cool off.

☞ In a big bowl mix noodles with the rest of ingredients, except for oil and garnish.

☞ Heat about 3 tablespoons oil in a non-stick skillet, and with the help of two spoons put some of the noodle mixture in the skillet, enough to make discs about 3in/7.5cm in diameter and ½in/8mm thick. Flatten and shape the pieces with the back of the spoon. Let brown on one side, and then carefully flip with a pancake turner to brown the other side. Transfer pieces to a plate, and keep warm until other batches are browned. Drizzle with yogurt, if wished.

☞ The pancakes are very nice with grilled meat dishes. They can also be enjoyed by themselves as a snack.

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Betinjan bil-Zeit Makes 4 servings

This is one of the many scrumptious ways in which eggplant finds itself manifested on the Middle-Eastern table. Traditionally small eggplants are cooked with lots of olive oil. The following recipe is a slimmed down version that calls for the more readily available large eggplants.

Baghdadi medieval cooks were still a little suspicious of eggplant. The worst thing to do was to eat it raw, next came roasting it, and the lesser of the evils was frying it (al-Warraq, Chapter 22). Their main concern was how to rid them of their unpleasant bitter after taste. The surest method was to parboil them first. Another method was soaking them in salted water as we do today. After this preliminary stage, eggplant was simply fried and served with vinegar sauce (mainly containing vinegar, oil, and garlic), which they believed made it easier to digest. Apparently, this method worked well enough to warrant some sexy analogies on the part of the eggplant lovers, such as comparing it to saliva exchanged by kissing lovers (al-Warraq, Chapter 45). Eggplant was also an important item in the medieval *bawarid* cold dishes, prepared with lots of oil and vinegar, reminiscent of today's cold vegetable dishes, such as the following:

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g) or 8 small ones
1 medium onion, thinly sliced or coarsely chopped
¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced lengthwise
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), chopped
¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh mint, chopped, or
1 teaspoon dried mint, optional
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon sugar
For garnish: One lemon and one tomato thinly sliced
Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE SANDWICH

Sandaweech Betinjan Makes 6 sandwiches

Eggplant makes an easy but bewitchingly delightful sandwich. The only drawback is that when fried, it could get too oily. To prevent it from soaking up oil like a sponge, sprinkle the slices with a little flour before frying them, as this will help block most of the pores. Our medieval ancestors used to do the same thing. Interestingly, I have learnt that Baghdadi Jews traditionally ate eggplant sandwiches for the Sabbath morning meal, they called it *sabich* (from *subuh* morning).

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g)
About ¼ cup (3oz/85g) flour for coating
Oil for frying
For assembling sandwiches:
2 tomatoes, thickly sliced
1 garlic clove, grated
¼ teaspoon chili pepper
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
2 tablespoons lemon juice, or vinegar
½ cup (125ml) drained yogurt (for instructions see Chapter 2), optional

☞ Cut off stem of eggplant, and peel lengthwise to give it a striped look. Cut into 2 parts crosswise, and then cut each part into ¼in/6mm thick slices lengthwise.

☞ Soak pieces in salted warm water and top with a plate to keep them submerged. Set aside for 30 minutes. Soaking the eggplant in this way will prevent it from absorbing lots of oil while frying.

☞ Drain eggplant pieces, and coat with flour on all sides to prevent eggplant from absorbing excess oil. Fry pieces in ½in/1cm deep oil until golden brown, turning once, about 7 minutes. Drain on a rack or in a colander to prevent fried pieces from getting soggy.

☞ Brown tomato slices in a small amount of oil.

☞ Arrange eggplant pieces on a big platter in one layer. Arrange fried tomato slices on top. Sprinkle garlic, chili pepper, parsley, and lemon juice or vinegar. Dot with drained yogurt if wished.

☞ Serve the arranged platter as a side dish by itself, or make into sandwiches by filling a piece of bread with some of the layered vegetables.

☞ Cut off stem of the eggplant, and peel it lengthwise to give a striped look. Cut it into ¼in/6mm slices crosswise, and soak in salted warm water for 30 minutes. Drain and fry pieces in a small amount of oil in a skillet. Alternatively, arrange them on a baking sheet in one layer, spray them with oil, and bake or broil/grill them in a hot oven until golden, turning once, about 20 minutes. If small eggplants are used just cut off the long stems but keep the heads. Peel eggplants in a striped fashion, and make a slash along each eggplant. Fry, bake, or broil/grill them as suggested above, and enlarge the slashes with your fingers, so that each eggplant looks like a boat.

☞ In a medium skillet, sauté onion in oil until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic, tomatoes, parsley, mint, if using any, salt, pepper and sugar. Cook for about 3 minutes on high heat, folding frequently to mix well.

☞ In a 10-by-8 glass baking pan (or any other pan of similar capacity) arrange half the eggplant slices in the bottom, cover with half of the onion mixture. Repeat the layering. If small eggplants are used, arrange them in a single layer in the baking pan, and stuff the enlarged slashes with as much of the onion mixture as they can hold. Scatter the remaining mixture around the eggplants. Decorate with lemon and tomato slices.

☞ Add enough hot water to barely reach three quarters of the depth of the vegetables. Then bake in the preheated oven for about 90 minutes, or until only 2 to 3 tablespoons of the liquid are left, and the eggplant is tender. Do not rush it.

☞ Serve warm or cold with grilled meat and cooked bulgur.

Variation:

Substitute zucchini/courgette for the eggplant, and follow instructions given above.

MYOB Of Flies, Blabbers, and other Things

A Sumerian proverb, cautioning against saying too much and advising folks to mind their own business, throws light on the fly situation back then. It goes:

Into an open mouth, a fly enters

Obviously, flies in ancient times were a source of nuisance that had to be swatted or fanned away from the leisurely upper class diners and their food. Such scenes were repeatedly depicted in the excavated Mesopotamian bas-reliefs and seals. Interestingly, the fans we see in these artifacts are identical with the present-day hand woven fans, made from date palm fronds. A fly-free place was most welcome by all. In an ancient Sumerian poem, a fisherman tried to lure a fish to his bait by telling it he has built a house for it, where “no flies swarm about the liquor bar” (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 349).

In ancient Mesopotamian mythology, flies were “believed to be associated with images from death.” In the Atrahasis myth of the great flood, the mother goddess Tiamat weeps for the multitudes of the dead humans, and swears by the flies in her necklace that she would never forget the flood. Interestingly, a necklace with gold and lapis lazuli flies was found at the Royal Tombs of Ur (Zettler and Horne 47).

Flies have long been associated with evil. *Ba'al Zebub/Beelzebub* means ‘Lord of the Flies,’ and stands for Satan/Lucifer in Judaism and

Christianity. The reason for this connection between Satan and flies has not been convincingly established yet. However, I know from extant descriptions of the ancient idols the pagan Arabs used to worship long before the advent of Islam that it was the custom to pamper the idols by smearing them with honey. Expectedly, the flies would be attracted to them, and after a while, they would be all covered with flies. I wonder if there is a connection.

Here is a medieval piece of wisdom, which humans need to heed (al-Dhahabi 1224, my translation):

Life is like a bread smeared with honey.

A fly fell for it, got stuck, and lost its wings and died.

Had it been content with plain dry bread, it would have survived.

One of the reasons why Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun (d.833) preferred to have his lunch early in the day was fewer flies (al-Warraq, Chapter 6). There was also some talk about a stone, which had the quality to repel flies so that fans and fly swatters might be dispensed with. It was called the ‘flystone,’ “pretty to look at, and weighing five *dirhams*.” We learn this from the 10th-century judge al-Tannukhi in his anecdote of a Persian connoisseur of stones who had been on the lookout for the flystone for years and accidentally found it at a peddler's. To demonstrate its magical power, he went to a “huckster who was selling dates out of a dish, and the flies were buzzing all around.” He put it on the plate and all the flies flew away, and “for a time there was not a single fly there” (al-Tannukhi 205).

FRIED EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE DELIGHTS

Betinjan Maqli Makes 5 to 6 servings

As in the previous recipe, this way of preparing and frying the eggplant yields crispy pieces, with the minimum amount of oil absorbed. In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook, slices of eggplant were parboiled in salted water first, left to drain, and then dipped in a batter composed of white flour, eggs, black pepper, coriander, saffron, and a small amount of *murri* (fermented sauce); and fried (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 145)

1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g)

2 eggs, beaten

1¼ cups (5oz/140g) breadcrumbs seasoned with ½ teaspoon salt, ¼ teaspoon black pepper and ¼ teaspoon garlic powder

Oil for frying

For garnish:

¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley chopped

1 medium tomato, thinly sliced

Fresh hot chilies, broiled/grilled, and then skinned, optional

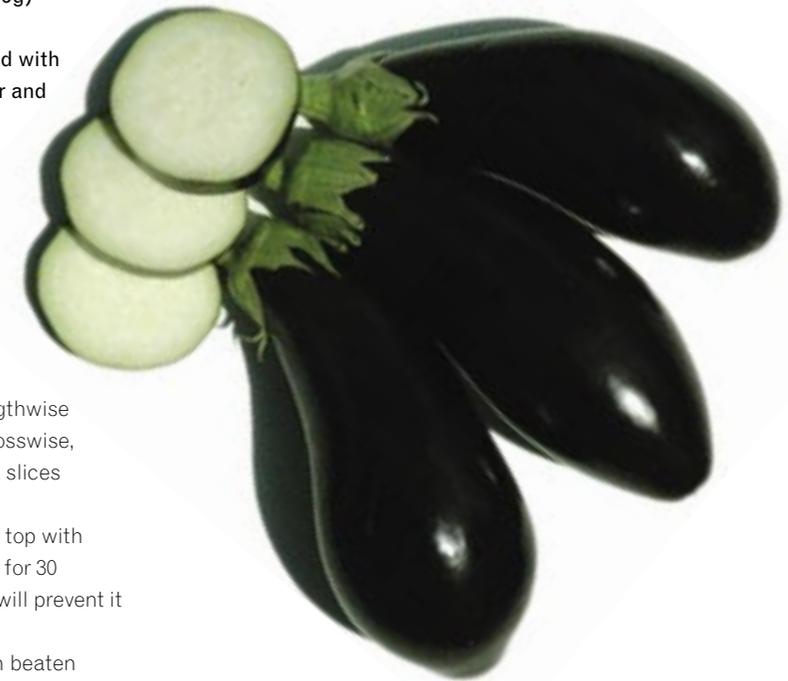
Yogurt, optional

- ✎ Cut off stem of eggplant, and peel lengthwise to give it a striped look. Cut into 2 parts crosswise, and then cut each part into ¼in/6mm thick slices lengthwise.
- ✎ Soak pieces in salted warm water and top with a plate to keep them submerged. Set aside for 30 minutes. Soaking the eggplant in this way will prevent it from absorbing lots of oil while frying.
- ✎ Drain eggplant pieces, and dip each in beaten eggs, then coat with seasoned breadcrumbs. When both sides are well coated, press each piece down against the crumbs in the plate with your palm, and then turn it and press down on the other side.
- ✎ Fry pieces in ½in/1cm deep oil on high to medium-high heat until golden brown, turning only once, about 5 minutes. Drain fried pieces on a rack or a colander to keep them crisp.
- ✎ Arrange pieces on a platter, garnished with parsley, sliced tomato, and skinned chilies if used. Drizzle with yogurt, if wished.

Variations:

Replace eggplant with zucchini/courgettes (3 to 4 medium ones). Peel them and cut lengthwise into ¼ in./6 mm-thick slices. The rest is the same.

Instead of frying, you may broil/grill the prepared eggplant/zucchini slices. Just generously brush them with oil, on both sides, arrange them in one layer in a large baking sheet, and broil/grill, turning only once (about 10 minutes).



HERBED ZUCCHINI/COURGETTE PANCAKES

Aqras il-Shijar Makes 12 pieces

Zucchini/courgette is as versatile as eggplant/aubergine, and in the Baghdadi medieval recipes, it was always given as a substitute for it. The zucchini pancakes are a byproduct, so to speak, of the many stuffed dishes that require the vegetables to be cored out. Instead of throwing the pulp away, it is made into delicious pancakes, to be enjoyed as a snack, or as a side dish.

Similar pancakes in the medieval cuisine were named *isfeeriyat*, because they were made round and flat. In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook, parboiled eggplant was mashed and mixed with breadcrumbs, eggs, pepper, coriander, cinnamon, and a little bit of *murri* (fermented sauce). Then the mix was fried into round pancakes (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 146).



3 medium zucchinis/courgettes
(about 1½lb/675g), grated
1 teaspoon salt
½ cup (3oz/85g) spring onion/scallion or white onion, finely chopped
1 garlic clove, grated
¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
½ cup (4oz/115g) Pecorino Romano cheese, grated
¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs
4 eggs, beaten
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
¼ teaspoon chili pepper, optional
Oil for shallow-frying

☞ In a colander set over a bowl, toss zucchini with salt. Set a plate directly on zucchini, and weigh it down with a heavy pot or a bowl filled with water. Let it drain for 30 minutes, and then press out any excess moisture.

☞ Put zucchini in a big bowl, and thoroughly mix in the rest of the ingredients, except for the oil.

☞ Heat about 3 tablespoons oil in a medium non-stick skillet. Drop about 2 tablespoons of mixture into skillet. With a pancake turner flatten into ¼in/6mm thick pancakes. Cook 2 to 3 minutes on each side, or until golden and through cooked. Fry in batches, adding oil and adjusting heat as needed. Transfer pancakes to a plate and keep warm. Serve warm with meat dishes, or as a snack

BAKED ZUCCHINI/COURGETTE SQUARES

Makes 8 squares

To avoid the hassle of frying the traditional zucchini pancakes, you can enjoy them baked, but the recipe is to be adjusted as follows:

3 medium zucchinis/courgettes
(about 1½lb/675g), grated
1 teaspoon salt
1 medium onion, chopped
2 tablespoons oil
¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
4 eggs, beaten
½ cup (4oz/115g) Pecorino Romano cheese, grated
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon baking powder
¼ teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
¾ cup (3oz/85g) breadcrumbs, divided
Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ In a colander set over a bowl, toss zucchini with salt. Set a plate directly on zucchini, and weigh it down with a heavy pot or a bowl filled with water. Let it drain for 30 minutes, and then press out any excess moisture.

☞ Sauté onion in oil until it softens, about 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl mix zucchini and sautéed onion with the rest of the ingredients, using only ½ cup (2oz/60g) of the breadcrumbs.

☞ Generously grease a 12-by-8-inch (30.3x20cm) baking pan, and coat with about 2 tablespoons of the remaining breadcrumbs.



☞ Spread zucchini mixture evenly, and sprinkle surface with the rest of the breadcrumbs. Drizzle surface with oil.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 35 to 40, or until mixture is set and top is golden brown. Let cool in pan for 10 minutes, and then cut into 8 squares.



Suggested Cuts of Meat for Cooking Stews 00

Okra stew

Stew of White Beans

Spinach Stew

Green/French Beans Stew

Pea Stew

Casserole of Green/French Beans
and Potato Cubes

Fresh Fava/Broad Beans Stew

Fresh Black-eyed Peas in the Pod
with Diced Meat, *Qeemat il-Loubya*

Stew of Chickpeas and

Diced Meat, *Margat Qeema*

Cabbage Stew

Cauliflower Stew

Casserole of Cauliflower and Meatballs

Potato Stew

Eggplant/Aubergine Casserole, *Tabsi 'I-Betinjan*

Al-Buraniyya: The Mother of all Musakkas

Eggplant/Aubergine Stew

Zucchini/Courgette Stew

Dried Apricot stew, *Margat Turshana*

Pomegranate and Walnut Stew, *Fasanjoon*

Stews

Marga/Marag

مرقة [مرق]

A friend of mine never tires of telling us how she once tried to break away from the routine of preparing the familiar dish of *timman wa marag* (rice and stew) for her family of four. She cooked juicy creamed chops with a side of French fries, instead. "They ate these, all right," she would say chuckling, but then came the inevitable question, "Okay, now, where is our *timman wa marag*?" This shows how futile it is to attempt to depart from a routine, which has been ingrained in our eating habits, and sustained us for more than five thousand years (see Introduction VI.1, 2). Indeed, why try to do so in the first place? *Timman wa marag* is delicious, healthy, easy, convenient, and economic.

Above: Qima stew

Opposite: Stew for the Sultan

Marga or *marag* is vegetables and meat simmered in tomato sauce. The stew is customarily served in a bowl, to be spooned and mixed with rice or sometimes bulgur, with plenty of salad or green onion, fresh herbs, greens, and sometimes spicy condiments such as home-made pickles and pickled mango (*'anba*). Such a combination of nutrients makes a reasonably balanced meal. Besides, it can easily be converted into a low-fat meal, or even into a vegetarian dish by passing the meat. Another advantage, it provides the body with the much-needed liquids. Taken on a regular basis and as a way of dietary life-style it is a sure guard against 'irregularity.' *Marga* is an economical dish since it uses a relatively small amount of meat. Big families with a limited budget daily prepare it for lunch, the main meal of the day. Variety is achieved by using different kinds of vegetables, cuts of meat, and rice.

It is easy to assemble and does not need much attention on the part of the cook. It can be prepared ahead of time, and some of the stews even improve when refrigerated overnight and then heated, such as okra and white bean stew. With rice and stew nothing is wasted, leftovers are sometimes heated together, with broken pieces of bread to absorb the moisture of the stew. It is not too spicy. In fact spices are either not used at all as in okra stew, or are kept to a minimum, which might explain why we can have this food almost every day. However, for the lovers of spicy food, there is always the complementary bowl of spicy pickles, or pickled mangos.



Tomato the Great

Tomatoes are an essential component in the modern Iraqi cuisine, as they are indeed in the rest of the Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean countries. It is not known exactly when the tomatoes made their appearance in the Middle East, but broadly speaking that must have happened in the 16th century. The tomatoes were brought from Peru or Mexico to Europe after 1522, and the earliest record of their consumption in Seville was in 1608. Cooks at first were reluctant to incorporate tomato into their dishes because they thought it caused poisoning, which is understandable given the fact that most of their pots were made of copper. Besides, tomato was recognized as a member of the solanaceous family, a mistrusted group of plants with a very dubious name in medieval times. By the 19th century, however, cooking with tomatoes in the Middle East was already established and widely used. Recipes for soups and stews incorporating tomato were documented in 19th century Ottoman cookbooks, where once it was called "European aubergine" (Yerasimos 57, 82, 176).

The tomato revolutionized cooking techniques of the Arab cuisine. It gradually replaced most of the thickening, souring, and coloring agents used in making the stews, such as nuts, sour juices of fruits and vegetables, and saffron, or pomegranate juice. Another important ingredient it replaced was *murri*. *Murri* was a popular food additive in medieval times and earlier. It was cereal-based fermented sauce, incorporated into the dishes to help digest food. *Murri* might have been popular due to another factor, of which perhaps the ancient and medieval cooks were aware but could not pinpoint, let alone name, and that is what we call today 'umami taste.' Umami taste is believed to add depth to the dishes and enhance them. All fermented sauces, old and new, have this MSG (monosodium glutamate)

property, as do meat, cheese, mushrooms, and tomato. By replacing *murri* with tomato, the cooks replaced one umami taste with another, and instead of using many ingredients to achieve the desired consistency, color, and taste, tomato by itself was enough.

Today, we cannot imagine life without tomato, and its versatility is well appreciated. In Iraqi folk sayings, an accommodating easy-going, people-person is compared to a tomato. We would say:

He is like a tomato, which goes with everything.

According to modern dietary findings, consuming tomatoes in all its forms, especially cooked, is a healthy choice. It is maintained that what makes tomatoes red is a phytochemical called lycopene, which has significant antioxidant qualities. Scientists have found that cooking tomatoes makes them even more beneficial, because heat breaks down the fibrous material within the produce, and makes it release the full potential of the lycopene. Tomatoes also contain folic acid, vitamin C, potassium and beta-carotene. It has also been found that the pale yellow jelly-like substance surrounding the tomato seeds might help prevent clots from forming.

So in the light of modern scientific discoveries, serving the traditional dish of rice and stew, garnished with meat and served with lots of fresh vegetables almost every day, is not a bad idea after all.

Note:

When using tomato paste it is always a good idea (but not a must) to let the tomato paste sauté for about 30 seconds or so in oil. This will give a pleasant depth to its taste, and help get rid of the raw metallic taste of the paste. When you sauté the chopped onion for the stew, add the tomato paste just before onion is done, and stir and mix the two, until tomato paste starts to emit a pleasant caramelized aroma.

Suggested Cuts of Meat for Stews

The traditional cuts of meat usually used for stew are chops or shanks of lamb or veal, or any other cuts on the bone. Since stews in general require slow cooking, meat is fully cooked before adding the vegetables.

- ☞ Meat on the bone: shanks are a good choice. They have that flavorful rich marrow, which will give the stew a delicious flavor. If possible, have the trimmed shanks cut into halves, crosswise (the butcher may do this for you). Alternatively, you may just cut the meat around the bone in the middle, crosswise.
- ☞ The secret of cooking shanks lies in prolonged simmering. First, brown them quickly in a small amount of oil for about 10 minutes, turning them to allow juices to seal in on all sides. Pour a small amount of hot water, just enough to cover the pieces. Cold water at this stage will cause meat to toughen. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Then reduce heat to low, and let it simmer, covered, about an hour or until meat is tender to the touch. The remaining liquid, if any, could be used as part of the liquid added to the stew after straining it. Because lamb shanks cannot be completely trimmed of all the fat, it is a good idea to refrigerate them after cooking to solidify and remove the animal fat.
- ☞ Lamb or veal chops, or any cuts of meat on the bone, are cooked like the shanks, but they require less cooking time.

☞ An easier way to cook meat-on-the-bone cuts is to put them in a pot, cover them with cold water, bring to a boil, skim as needed, then lower heat and let the meat simmer until cooked, about an hour or so. After the pot cools off a little, remove the meat and put it aside, then strain the broth and use it for the stew liquid. Some cooks are reluctant to follow this method because they say it does not remove the undesirable smell of meat (*zufar/zufra*).

Other varieties of meat can be substituted, such as:

- ☞ Cubes of trimmed boneless lamb or beef, or lean ground/minced meat. Sauté them in a small amount of oil, and let them simmer, covered, in the liquid they emit, until they are tender. Add a little more hot water if needed.
- ☞ Fried, broiled/grilled or baked small meatballs, called *ras il-'asfour*, (recipe 000) can be added to the stew about 15 minutes before it is done.
- ☞ Skinned and trimmed chicken pieces, such as thighs, drumsticks, tender loins or breasts can be substituted in some of the stews. Sauté them in a small amount of oil, and let them simmer, covered, in the liquid they emit, until they are tender. Add a little more hot water if needed. As a rule, the breasts cook faster than the thighs.

In the following recipes, I will mention the best variety of meat used for the stew. Besides, you can always omit the meat altogether and turn the stews into equally delicious vegetarian dishes.

OKRA STEW

Margat Bamy Makes 4 servings

In the modern Iraqi cuisine, okra is the queen of all stews. It is surprising, however, that of all the extant Arabic medieval cookbooks only the anonymous 14th-century *Egyptian Kanz al-Fawa'id* includes an okra recipe *sifat al-bamya*. It calls for cooking meat and then adding to it diced onion, pepper, cilantro, garlic, chopped okra, and fresh lemon juice (273). The other citation is by the famous botanist Ibn al-Baytar (d.1248) in his entry on okra in *Al-Jami' li Mufradat al-Adwiya wa'l-Aghdhiya*. He describes okra as an Egyptian vegetable with pointed tips and hairy skins. He says people of Egypt cook it with meat while it is still small and tender.

We know that okra has been growing in the Mesopotamian region ever since ancient times. *Bamya* 'hibiscus esculentus' was mentioned in ancient Assyrian cuneiform tablets on herbal medicines. It was called '*ubanu*', literally 'finger' (Thompson *Assyrian Herbal* 39), which brings to mind the English name for okra, 'lady's fingers,' and Iraqi vernacular for okra *banya*. However, the medieval medical verdict on okra was quite discouraging indeed. It was classified as the coldest and moistest of all vegetables in properties. It was believed to generate bad blood and was said to be lacking in nutritious value. Probably such a low opinion of the vegetable, coupled with its copiously mucilaginous nature, explain its absence from the menus of the elegant tables of the affluent and their cookbooks.

Okra is a summer vegetable, and before the season is over, people usually freeze big quantities to use all winter long. In Iraq, *bamya* stew is cooked at least once a week. In pre-freezer times, people used to store it dried, threaded like necklaces.

What puts off many people from dealing with *bamya* is the sticky substance that comes out when it is cut open. It will give the stew a glue-like consistency if not properly treated. The traditional way to get rid of most



of the slime is to cut off both ends of the okra making sure some of the holes show, and then wash it under running water for a long time. I find this tedious and time consuming. A better way to deal with it is to cut off both ends making sure some of the holes show, wash it briefly, and then parboil it for no more than 5 minutes. Strain it and use it immediately. Alternatively, let it cool off, and freeze it for future use. When buying okra from the market, look for medium-sized ones, about 2in/5cm long. Choose the ones that do not sound crunchy when gently squeezed between the fingers, these will more likely be fibrous in texture.

4 to 6 chunks of meat (2-2½lb/900g-1.25kg). Traditional cuts are trimmed lamb chops, may be substituted with any lamb or veal cuts on the bone
1 tablespoon oil
5 to 6 cloves garlic, whole and unskinned
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
1 pound (450g) okra, prepared as described above
1½ teaspoons salt
1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup, may be substituted with ½ teaspoon sugar and 2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 to 3 small dried hot peppers, for lovers of hot food, leave them whole

☞ In a medium heavy pot, (4 quart), sauté meat pieces in oil, until browned on all sides, about 10 minutes. Add 1 cup (250ml) hot water, or just enough to barely cover the meat. Bring pot to a quick boil, skimming as needed, and then let meat simmer gently, covered, on low heat, until meat is tender, and moisture evaporates, about 45 minutes. If meat is tender and there is still some liquid in the pot, strain it and use it as part of liquid required in the recipe.

☞ Add garlic cloves, and stir with the meat on medium heat for a about 30 seconds.

☞ Stir in diluted tomato paste, sauce, or juice, and prepared okra. If frozen okra is used, just rinse it under running water and add it. Also add salt, pomegranate syrup, and hot peppers, if using any. Bring pot to a quick boil, skimming as needed, then reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer gently, covered, until okra is done and sauce is delicately rich and thickened. Stir stew gently 2 to 3 times while simmering to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot, 35 to 40 minutes.

☞ Serve stew with white plain rice or bulgur with slices of onion and green pepper. The fun part in this dish is eating the cooked whole garlic cloves. There should be at least 1 clove for each serving. To eat it, hold the whole garlic clove between your thumb and index finger and squeeze out the soft pulp into your mouth, discard the skin.

☞ Another popular way of serving okra stew is having it the *tashreeb* way, i.e. putting bite-size pieces of Iraqi flat bread or Arabic bread in a deep dish (bread recipes, Chapter 1). Drench bread pieces with the stew sauce, and arrange meat pieces and garlic on top.

All You Can Eat

A peasant came to Baghdad once for some business, and he had only *two rupies* (Ottoman money) on him. He passed by a restaurant where he saw displayed, aromatic dishes of rice, many kinds of stew, and lots of vegetable and meat dishes. It was lunchtime and he was starving, so he desperately tried to strike a deal with the owner, saying, "How much will you charge for feeding me until I am full?"

It was a new business and the owner wanted to attract clientele to his place. He figured out that all the money he had put into that food was not more *four rupies*, and calculated that the man could not possibly eat more than half his food. So he said, "*Two rupies!*" The peasant gladly accepted, gave him the money, rolled up his sleeves, and fell to the food eating and demanding more and more, until he devoured more than half the food in the whole restaurant. The owner, as a last resort, suggested that perhaps he might be interested in drinking some water. The peasant said, "No thanks, I am not used to drinking water before my stomach is half full." The owner gave him back his money and asked him to leave. (Zalzala, 3: 440-41, my translation)

STEW OF WHITE BEANS

Margat Fasoulya Yabsa Makes 4 servings

Fasoulya yabsa (dried beans) is a staple pulse in Iraq. The white beans cannellini is the only white variety people inside Iraq know. *Margat fasoulaya* - often referred to as *margat yabsa* - is a wintertime favorite dish with rice. You may use other varieties of white beans for this stew.

2 cups (16oz/450g) white beans, picked over, washed, soaked overnight, then drained
4 chunks of meat, best choice: trimmed lamb or veal shanks (2-2½lb/900g-1.25kg). Other options in Suggested Cuts (000) will work too
1 tablespoon oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
2 tablespoons lemon juice, or to taste
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 to 3 small dried hot peppers, for lovers of hot food, leave them whole

☞ In a medium pot cover beans by 2 in./5 cm of cold water. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat and let it cook gently, covered, just until beans are almost tender, about 45 minutes. They will cook further in the stew.

☞ In another medium heavy 4-quart pot, prepare and cook meat as directed in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step.

☞ Add onion to the meat and stir until it is transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Stir in diluted tomato paste or sauce, lemon juice, salt, pepper, and hot peppers if used.

☞ Add beans and enough of the remaining liquid in which they were boiled to cover meat and beans by about 1in/2.5cm. Stir pot and bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat to medium-low and simmer gently, covered, until meat and beans are



tender, and sauce is nicely thickened, about 40 minutes. Stir stew carefully 2 to 3 times while simmering. Adjust seasoning and lemon juice if needed. Do not let beans get mushy.

☞ This stew goes well with all kinds of rice, but especially rice with noodles. Serve it with salad and pickles.

Variations:

When you get to the last step, in addition to beans, add 1 chopped carrot, ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds, ½ teaspoon crushed cumin, and 3 garlic cloves, grated. Garnish with chopped parsley.

Try the stew with other kinds of dried beans.

Short Cut:

Instead of dried white beans, use two 15oz/425g cans great northern beans, rinsed and drained. Add them in the last step.

SPINACH STEW

Margat Sbenagh Makes 4 servings

Spinach in Iraq is an exclusively winter vegetable, and quite often than not, it is made into a popular delicious stew. It is one of the few stews traditionally cooked without tomatoes. Still, some people do prefer to have it red. I personally like it green and serve it with yellow saffron rice (see Chapter 8). Traditionally, herbs collectively called *ala* are used to give spinach stew a distinctive appetizing aroma. They are chopped parsley, dill, leeks, fresh cilantro, and *hilba*, which is fresh fenugreek leaves (see Glossary, s.v. fenugreek).

4 chunks of meat (2-2½lb/900g-1.25 kg), the best cuts are trimmed lamb or veal shanks, other options given in Suggested Cuts (000) are also good

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 pounds (900g) fresh spinach, finely chopped, or two 10oz/285g packages chopped frozen spinach

½ cup (1oz/20 g) cilantro (fresh coriander), finely chopped

¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or

1 tablespoon dried dill weed

1 tablespoon dried leaves of *hilba* (see Glossary, s.v. fenugreek), optional, but it does add an authentic flavor

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water (optional)

½ cup (4oz/115 g) split chickpeas, washed and cooked in water enough to cover until they start to soften (about 15 minutes) or 1 cup (8oz/225g) frozen or canned black-eyed peas, or ½ cup (4oz/115g) dried black-eyed peas, soaked overnight, then drained

1½ teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

½ teaspoon ground cumin

1 tablespoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) prunes or apricots, halved, optional

2 to 3 small dried hot peppers, for lovers of hot food, leave them whole

☞ Prepare meat as given in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra stew, the first step.

☞ Add onion to meat, and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Stir in spinach, cilantro, parsley, dill, and fenugreek. Fold for a few minutes or until greens are wilted. Add diluted tomato paste or sauce, if using any. Otherwise, add 4 cups (950ml) hot water.

☞ Mix in the rest of the ingredients, and bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat to medium-low, and allow stew to simmer, until beans are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened, about 40 minutes. Sauce in this stew is normally allowed to reduce more than the other kinds. Stir 2 to 3 times while simmering, and adjust salt and lemon juice, as needed.

☞ This stew goes very well with all kinds of rice. Have it with turnip pickles (recipe Chapter 19) and spring onion/scallion.

Variations:

Spinach-Lentil Stew

Instead of beans, use 1 cup (8oz/225g) shelled red lentils, picked over, washed, and drained; no need to soak. Follow same instructions given above.

Swiss Chard Stew *Margat Silig*

Replace spinach with an equal amount of chopped Swiss chard and follow the same directions, using the black-eyed peas option.

Purslane Stew *Margat Barbeeb*

Replace spinach with an equal amount of chopped purslane barbeen (use the leaves only), and follow the same directions, using the split chickpeas option. Barbeen growing in Iraq is more like the variety called 'golden purslane' or 'common purslane,' whose paddle-shaped leaves are flat, fleshy, juicy, but crisp and tender. Barbeen has a very mild flavor. Of its medieval names: *rijla*, *baqla hamqaa'* (foolish vegetable), and *barbaheen*.

GREEN/FRENCH BEANS STEW

Margat Fasoulya Khadhra Makes 4 servings

Another refreshing winter stew, which smells so good. Canned green/French beans may be used to save time, but I do not recommend the frozen variety. Freezing, somehow, makes beans rather stringy in texture.

4 chunks of meat (about 2lb/900g). Any variety of meat given in Suggested Cuts above will do

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, finely sliced

3 cloves garlic, sliced lengthwise

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in

3½ cups (860ml) hot water

1 pound (450g) green/French beans, washed, both ends cut off, and cut into 2in/5cm pieces; or

one 15oz/425g can green/French beans, drained

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1½ teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ teaspoon chili powder, optional

¼ teaspoon ground ginger

☞ Prepare meat as directed in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step.

☞ While meat is simmering, put prepared beans in another pot and pour water just enough to cover them. Bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to medium, and let cook gently until they start to change color and are almost cooked, about 15 minutes. Drain, but reserve the liquid to replace some of the water required in diluting tomato paste or sauce. If using canned beans, skip.

☞ When meat is done and moisture evaporates, stir in onion and fold until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic in the last minute.

PEA STEW

Margat Bazalya Makes 4 servings

☞ Add diluted tomato paste or sauce, along with the beans and the rest of the ingredients, and stir. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed, and then lower heat to medium-low, and let stew simmer, covered, until sauce is nicely thickened, about 30 minutes.

☞ This stew goes well with all kinds of rice. Serve it with salad and pickles.

Pea stew is cooked as described in Green beans Stew above, except replace 1 pound (450g) green/French beans with 1 pound shelled fresh peas. Frozen variety is also good. Since peas cook faster than green beans, there is no need to precook them before using them in the stew. Therefore, skip the second step, and add peas in the fourth step.



CASSEROLE OF GREEN/FRENCH BEANS AND POTATO CUBES

Tabsi Fasoulya Khadhra w' Puteta Makes 6 servings

A variation on the classic way of cooking Green Bean Stew. The vegetables here are cooked as tabsi, i.e. arranged in a casserole pan and baked in the oven. The final liquid is more condensed than regular marga. The stew may be served from oven to table, and is more suitable for formal presentations.

1 pound (450g) lean meat cut into small cubes or lean ground/minced meat, or 12 pieces of chicken tender loins or skinned drumsticks
 3 tablespoons oil, divided
 1 medium onion, chopped
 3 cloves garlic, grated
 ¼ teaspoon turmeric
 1 pound (450 g) green/French beans, washed, both ends cut off, and cut into 2 in./5 cm pieces or one 15oz/425g can green/French beans, drained
 3 to 4 medium potatoes (16oz/450g), peeled and cut into cubes, and kept in a bowl of cold water until used, or use 2 cups (12oz/350g) frozen cubed potatoes
 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce
 ½ teaspoons salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon ginger
 ¼ teaspoon chili pepper
 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ In a big skillet, sauté meat in 1 tablespoon oil, and stir until it browns and moisture evaporates. Time depends on kind of meat chosen, but drumsticks will definitely take longer than tender loins. Add onion and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Stir in garlic and turmeric in the last minute. Set aside.



☞ Put prepared beans in a medium pot and pour hot water just enough to cover them. Bring to a boil, and then reduce heat to medium, and let cook gently, until they start to change color and are almost cooked, about 15 minutes. If using canned beans, skip this step.

☞ Drain potatoes, and sauté them in a non-stick skillet in the remaining 2 tablespoons oil, stirring until browned. Alternatively, toss the potato cubes in the oil, and spread in a baking sheet. Bake or broil/grill them in a hot oven, stirring them at least once to allow all sides to crisp.

☞ In an ovenproof glass casserole 10-by-12-inch (25.5x30.5cm), spread meat mixture in the bottom, then cover it with the beans, and top it with the browned potato cubes.

☞ In a medium bowl, dilute tomato paste in 3 cups/ 715ml hot water (use liquid in which beans were boiled), or if using sauce, dilute it in 2 cups/473 ml hot water or the beans liquid. Add salt, pepper, ginger, chili, lemon juice, and mix well. Pour tomato mixture on the layered meat and vegetables. There should be enough liquid to cover them. Add a little bit more hot water if needed.

☞ Bake loosely covered in the preheated oven until vegetables and meat are tender and sauce thickens, 35 to 40 minutes. Garnish with chopped parsley, and serve with any kind of rice.

FRESH FAVA/BROAD BEANS STEW

Margat Bagilla Khadhra Makes 4 servings

Fresh fava beans are sometimes hard to come by. They start to make their appearance early in the summer, and when they are still young and tender, the whole vegetable can be used. When the pods of the fresh beans toughen, as they grow larger, fava beans in this case are usually shelled and skinned. Since the two kinds are dealt with differently, two separate recipes are given.

4 chunks of meat, best cuts: trimmed lamb or veal shanks (2-2½lb/900g-1.25kg), substitute with any cuts of meat on the bone

1 pound (450g) fresh and tender fava/broad beans, or use canned (one 15oz/425g can), drained
 1 tablespoon oil
 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 3 cloves garlic, sliced lengthwise
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill weed, chopped or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in a little hot water, or one 15oz/425g tomato sauce
 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
 2 to 3 fresh or dried small hot peppers, optional

☞ In a medium 4-quart heavy pot, cook shanks as described in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step. Cooking time is determined by your choice of meat.

☞ While meat is cooking, prepare fava beans as follows: Cut off both ends of the pods, and remove strings if any. Then bunch 4 to 5 pods together, and cut them crosswise into ½in/8mm thick slices. Put them in a medium pot with water, just enough to cover. Bring pot to a boil, then reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer for about 30 minutes, or until beans change color and are rather tender. If the canned variety is used, then skip this step.

The Emperor's Clothes

Here is the story of the sawyer who was daring enough the challenge the whimsical culinary escapades of the rich.

One day the sawyer was wandering the streets of Baghdad, hungry and desolate. While passing by a beautiful house, to his surprise, he was accosted by the servants of the house, and was invited to get in and have dinner with their master. He went in and there he saw the master sitting in the midst of a number of guests, and servants were coming and going carrying beautiful empty platters. The master would every now and then, and as a true host, entreat the guests to have their fill of the delicious 'foods' offered, while he himself made as if he were eating. He would describe the excellence and the beauty of the dishes as the empty platters were brought to the table, and encourage them to dig in. Meanwhile the servants 'replenished' the guests' glasses repeatedly with their master's illusive wine.

All the while, the guests were pretending to be enjoying the food and were commenting on its excellence, and our sawyer followed suit. By and by the acting made him feel hungrier than ever, and to the astonishment of everybody, he gave the master a slap on the back of his neck. Taken by surprise, the master harshly rebuked him for doing this. The sawyer apologetically explained that he could not help it, if anything was to blame, it should be the excellent aged 'wine' he guzzled, which made him behave irresponsibly. (*Arabian Nights* "The Story of the Sawyer, the Barber's Brother" 32nd Night, cited in al-Musawi 324-25, my translation)

- ☞ When meat is cooked, add onion and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic in the last minute.
- ☞ Stir in dill weed, diluted tomato paste or sauce, lemon juice, salt, pepper, ginger, and hot peppers if used. Also add the fava beans with the liquid in which they were cooked (there should not be much left). Add some more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil. Then lower heat to medium-low, and simmer for 40 minutes or until meat and beans are tender and sauce is nicely thickened.
- ☞ Delicious with White Rice with Noodles.

Stew of Shelled Fresh Fava/Broad Beans

Makes 4 servings

When the jackets of the fresh beans toughen as the pods grow larger, prepare fava beans stew this way:

- 4 chunks of meat, chosen and prepared as in Fresh and Tender Fava/Broad Bean Stew above
- 1 tablespoon oil
- 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
- 3 to 4 cloves of garlic, sliced lengthwise
- 2 pounds (900g) fully grown fava/broad bean pods or 1 pound (450g) frozen shelled fava beans
- ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill weed or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed
- 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon ground ginger
- 2 to 3 small hot peppers, optional

- ☞ Prepare meat as in the first step in Fresh and Tender Fava Bean Stew. Add onion and garlic, and stir until onion is transparent.
- ☞ While meat is cooking, prepare fava beans as follows: Discard jacket of pod, and skin beans by pouring boiling water over them. When beans are cool enough to handle, slash the skin from the top with a knife, and press out the beautiful bright green beans. As for frozen beans, let them thaw, and do the same, no need to pour hot water on them.
- ☞ To the meat and onion mixture, add the prepared fava beans, along with the rest of the ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover meat and beans. Add more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Lower heat to medium-low, and simmer for about 20 minutes or until meat and beans are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened. The shelled fava beans are very delicate, so watch it, lest they should get mushy.

Note:

If fresh or frozen fava beans are not available, you may substitute with dried, shelled variety. The shelled dried fava beans need to be soaked for several hours, then drained and added in the third step, but they need more cooking time than the fresh beans. A simple and versatile marga steeped in religious traditions. It derives its name from the way meat is prepared. *Qeema* means 'meat cut up into small pieces.' The term is used in al-Warraq's 13th-century augmented version (Istanbul MS, fol. 268v). Etymologically, *qeema* 'finely chopped' is of ancient Akkadian origin (Thompson Assyrian Herbal 64). The word carried the same sense in the late 15th-century cookbook *Ni'matnama* written in Urdu (35), as it still does in Iraq. Interestingly, the word found its way to the Greek cuisine, as in the dish *Macaronia me Kima* 'spaghetti with ground meat' (Wright *A Mediterranean Feast* 648-49).

STEW OF CHICKPEAS AND DICED MEAT

Margat Qeema Makes 4 servings

Margat qeema is traditionally associated with the holy month of *Muharram* (the first in the Islamic lunar calendar year). On '*ashour* - the tenth day of this month - this stew along with rice, *hareesa* (wheat porridge), and *zarda w'haleeb* (yellow and white rice pudding) are distributed to neighbors and passers-by in commemoration of the death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the prophet Mohammed, and religious leader at the time. When he went to Kufa to press his claim to the caliphate, he was killed in battle on the plains of Karbala on the tenth day of *Muharram*. In consistency, the stew is denser than the usual varieties. The added '*injas* prunes give it a lovely sweet-sour taste. Traditionally, a variety of small prunes, called *aloucha*, is used. They are tart dried plums, which might well have been the same variety used in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, called *khokh al-dub* (literally, 'bear's peach,'), also identified as *ijjas sighar hamidh* 'small sour prunes' (Chapter 40); or the ancient Akkadian '*antahsum*' (prune) used to sour the Babylonian recipes (see Introduction, Section VI).

- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 pound (450g) a trimmed boneless chunk of lamb or beef, diced *qeema*-style, i.e. into ¼in/6mm cubes (1 pound lean ground/minced meat may be substituted)
- 2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), finely sliced
- 3 cloves garlic, grated
- 1 teaspoon turmeric
- 1½ cups (12oz/350g) split chickpeas, washed, and cooked in water enough to cover until they start to soften (about 15 minutes)
- 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water

- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- ¼ teaspoon chili, or to taste
- ½ teaspoon ground coriander
- 2 teaspoons prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
- 1 teaspoon honey
- ¾ cup (4½oz/130g) bite-size prunes, halved

- ☞ In a medium 4-quart heavy pot sauté meat in oil, stirring occasionally, until all moisture has evaporated, and meat starts to brown, about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Add onion and stir until transparent, about 10 minutes. Add garlic and turmeric in the last minute.
- ☞ Fold in rest of ingredients. Mix well, making sure there is enough liquid to cover meat and beans. Add some more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium-low, and let stew simmer gently, covered, about 45 minutes, or until sauce is nicely thickened. Stir 3 to 4 times while cooking to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Sauce of this stew should be thicker in consistency than that of regular stews.
- ☞ This stew is particularly delicious with white rice and fresh radish and radish leaves.

FRESH BLACK-EYED PEAS IN THE POD WITH DICED MEAT

Margat Qeemat il-Loubya 'I-Khadhra Makes 6 servings

This stew calls for fresh black-eyed peas in the pod. Longer varieties of these beans are known as string or asparagus beans, available year round in Chinese grocery stores, sometimes in farmers markets in the summer. The asparagus beans plant grows successfully in home vegetable gardens. The nice flowers of this climbing plant would eventually turn into delicate beans. It is a very generous plant.

The way meat and beans are prepared in this recipe is what distinguishes it from other stews. It is diced into small cubes, and hence the name, *qeema*, which is of ancient Akkadian origin (see recipe above, for details). Even the bean *loubya* has its similar ancient roots. It was called '*lubbu*,' and it was a common culinary vegetable. From a cuneiform tablet, we learn it was used in a meat dish to which apricot, clean salt, bread, and other ingredients were also added (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 196-97)

Lentils added to the stew will help give the sauce a nice consistency, which is rather on the thick side.

2 tablespoons oil
1 pound (450g) a trimmed boneless chunk of lamb or beef, diced *qeema*-style, i.e. about ¼in/6mm cubes (1 pound lean ground/minced meat may be substituted)
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), coarsely chopped
3 cloves garlic, grated
1 teaspoon turmeric
1 pound (450g) fresh black-eyed peas in the pod (asparagus beans or string beans can be substituted), cut crosswise into 1¼in/6mm pieces
½ cup (4oz/115g) red lentils, picked over and washed
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon chili, or to taste
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
2 teaspoons prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
½ cup (3oz/85g) bite-size prunes, halved or left whole, optional

➤ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot sauté meat in oil, stirring occasionally, until all moisture has evaporated, and meat starts to brown, about 10 minutes.

➤ Add onion and stir until transparent, about 10 minutes. Add garlic and turmeric in the last minute.

➤ Fold in the rest of the ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover the meat and beans. Bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, and let stew simmer gently, covered, for about 40 minutes, or until beans are tender and sauce thickens. Stir 2 to 3 times while stew is simmering to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

➤ Serve with White Rice with Noodles (recipe Chapter 8) along with salad and pickles.

CABBAGE STEW

Margat Lahana Makes 4 servings

It is a universally accepted 'fact' that there is nothing exciting about cabbage, that homely vegetable, which fills the house with a distinctive odor when cooked. Well, this is so unfortunate, for it is indeed packed with goodness. Besides, it is amazing how many delicious things you can make with one big head of cabbage. The perfect leaves are good for stuffing (see Chapter 11), the core may be pickled (Chapter 19), and the torn leaves can be thinly sliced into an attractive salad (Chapter 3), or an aromatic stew as in the following.

4 chunks of meat, use any of the options given in

Suggested Cuts, 000

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 small head of green cabbage

(about 1½lb/675g), chopped

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste

(one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water

1½ teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

crushed coriander seeds

2 to 3 small hot peppers, for lovers of hot food

1 tablespoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary) or

2 tablespoons lime juice with 1 teaspoon sugar

½ cup (4oz/115g) split chickpeas, washed and cooked

in water enough to cover until they start to soften

(about 15 minutes)

➤ Prepare and cook meat as instructed in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step.

➤ Add onion to the meat and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add curry powder in the last minute.

➤ Fold in the rest of the ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover meat and cabbage. Add more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat, and let stew simmer, covered, until cabbage is tender and sauce thickens, about 30 minutes. Stir 2 to 3 times while stew is simmering to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

➤ This stew is delicious served with White Rice with Noodles (see Chapter 8).

CAULIFLOWER STEW

Margat Qirnabeet Makes 4 servings

Follow the same instructions given in Cabbage Stew. Only, instead of cabbage use 1 small head of cauliflower (about 2lb/900g), broken into florets. Cauliflower will require a little less cooking time than cabbage.

CASSEROLE OF CAULIFLOWER AND MEATBALLS

Tabsi Qirnabeet b-Ras il-'Asfour Makes 6 servings



The word *tabsi* rather than *marga* is used with stew dishes that are denser in consistency than the regular *marga*. Another characteristic is that meat and vegetables are layered in a wide shallow pan, like a casserole, and baked. Etymologically, the name *tabsi* is derived from the Turkish *tabs* 'tray.'

The following is an elaboration on the regular cauliflower stew. It is more suitable for formal presentations because it can be elegantly served from oven to table, garnished with parsley and lemon slices.

For the meatballs:

- 1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
- 1 small onion, grated
- 1 garlic clove, grated
- ¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
- ¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon each, black pepper, allspice, cumin, ginger powder
- ¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

For the sauce:

- 1 small head of cauliflower (about 2lb/900g) broken into florets
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 1 teaspoon curry powder
- 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- ¼ teaspoon chili, or to taste
- 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- ½ cup (4oz/115g) split chickpeas, washed, and cooked in water enough to cover until they start to soften (about 15 minutes)

For garnish: ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley and lemon slices

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Combine ingredients for meatballs. Knead briefly. With moistened fingers, form into meatballs, size of a small walnut each, or as small as *ras il-'asfour* (sparrow's head). Arrange them in a single layer in a greased baking pan, and broil/grill or bake in a hot oven, turning them around to allow other areas to brown, about 15 minutes. Alternatively, they may be fried in a skillet in a small amount of oil.

POTATO STEW

Margat Puteta Makes 4 servings

A delicious way for cooking potatoes. Practically all kinds of meat go well with this versatile vegetable, even fish, or I might say, especially fish (see Chapter 13, 000).

4 chunks of meat, see options given in

Suggested Cuts, 000 above

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

5 medium potatoes (about 1½lb/675g), peeled, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, and soaked in cold water until used

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste

(one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in

3½ cups (860ml) hot water

1½ teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

1 tablespoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary) or 2 tablespoons lime and 1 teaspoon sugar

2 to 3 fresh or dried small hot peppers

☞ Prepare and cook meat as directed in Suggested Cuts (p. 000) and Okra Stew, the first step. Time of cooking will vary according to type of meat chosen.

☞ Add onion and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Fold in drained potato pieces for a few minutes. Add curry powder in the last minute.

☞ Add the rest of ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover meat and potatoes. Add more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed, then reduce heat, and simmer, covered, until potatoes are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened, about 40 minutes. Stir 2 to 3 times while simmering to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

☞ This stew pairs well with White Rice with Noodles. Sprinkle with some toasted slivered/flaked almonds and currants or raisins (see Chapter 8 for recipe). Serve with turnip pickles and salad.

☞ In a big non-stick skillet, heat oil and add cauliflower and onion. Fold for about 10 minutes or until they start to slightly brown. Add curry powder in the last 2 or 3 minutes of browning.

☞ Spread meatballs and cauliflower-onion mix in an ovenproof glass baking dish 10-by-12-inch (25.5x30.5cm).

☞ In the same skillet used for browning cauliflower and onion, mix diluted tomato paste or sauce, salt, pepper, chili, coriander, lemon, and cooked chickpeas. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium, and simmer for about 10 minutes. Pour mixture on meatballs and cauliflower. There should be enough liquid to cover them. Add more hot water if needed.

☞ Bake the loosely covered casserole in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes or until sauce is nicely thickened.

☞ Garnish with parsley and lemon slices, and serve with rice and pickles.

Variation:

A vegetarian variety: Omit the meatballs, and start with the second step. After pouring the tomato liquid all over the cauliflower mix, sprinkle the surface generously with a mix of grated Romano cheese and breadcrumbs. Bake as directed.

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE CASSEROLE

Tabsi/M'saqqa'at Betinjan Makes 6 servings

The traditional *tabsi betinjan* (eggplant casserole) cooked nowadays is reminiscent of the medieval *Buraniyya* (see Al-Buraniyya: *The Mother of all Musakkas* below) and *maghmouma* (see poem below), except that nowadays we use tomato juice for its liquid instead of the medieval mix of water, vinegar, and saffron. Etymologically, the name *tabsi* is derived from the Turkish *tabs* 'tray.' Meat and vegetables are layered in a wide baking pan, like a casserole pan, and baked until a small amount of sauce remains. It is not as soupy as regular *marga*.

- 1 large eggplant/aubergine, or two medium ones (about 1½lb/675g)
- 1 pound (450g) trimmed chunks of lamb or beef, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
- 2 tablespoons oil
- 2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced
- 2 to 3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced lengthwise, or grated
- ½ teaspoon curry powder
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- 1 medium bell pepper, sliced, seeds and membranes removed
- 1 small hot pepper, sliced, for lovers of hot food
- 3 medium tomatoes, sliced or diced (about 12oz/350g); or one 15oz/425g can diced tomatoes, no need to drain
- For Sauce:*
- 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- 1 teaspoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
- For garnish:*
- chopped parsley and lemon slices
- Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

✎ Cut off stem of eggplant, and peel lengthwise to give it a striped look. Cut it into ¼in/6mm slices crosswise. Soak slices in warm salted water, for 30 minutes. Drain them well, and fry them in a small amount of oil, or arrange them in one layer in a generously greased baking sheet, spray or brush them with oil and broil/grill or bake them in a hot oven, turning once to allow both sides to brown, about 15 minutes.

✎ In a big non-stick skillet, sauté meat cubes in oil, stirring frequently until meat releases its moisture and then evaporates (about 10 minutes). Add onion and continue stirring until it softens (about 5 minutes). Add garlic, curry powder, and cumin. Stir in sliced fresh pepper and hot pepper if used, a few minutes.

✎ In a large ovenproof glass casserole pan 10-by-12-inch (25.5x30.5cm), arrange prepared meat and vegetables as follows: Spread the cooked meat mixture in the bottom of the casserole, and arrange the prepared eggplant pieces all over. Finally spread tomato slices on top.

✎ Prepare sauce as follows: In the same skillet used for sautéing the meat-mix, put diluted tomato paste or sauce, and add salt, pepper, basil, and pomegranate syrup. Bring to a quick boil and simmer for about 5 minutes.

✎ Pour simmered liquid all over arranged vegetables. There should be enough liquid to cover. Add some more hot water if needed.

✎ Bake in the preheated oven, loosely covered, for about 40 minutes, or until vegetables are tender, and sauce thickens. Garnish with parsley and lemon slices, and serve with rice, bulgur, or warm bread, with fresh greens and pickles.

Variations:

Turn this casserole into an exotic dish by replacing meat chunks with small discs of stuffed bulgur dough known as *Kubbat Burghul* (see 000 below, for an adapted version).

Turn it into a vegetarian dish by simply passing the meat. Equally satisfying and delicious.



Al-Buraniyya: The Mother of all Musakkas

البورانية أصل كل المنقعات

During the medieval Islamic period, some of the eggplant/aubergine dishes were given the name *Buraniyya*, and others, *Buran*. The credit for inventing such dishes is given to Buran, wife of the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'moun, who lived in Baghdad during the ninth century AD. What concerns us here is the *Buraniyya* casserole, al-Baghdadi gives in his 13th-century cookbook (Arberry 191).

It is a dish composed of a layer of finely chopped meat cooked with onion and cilantro, and seasoned with cumin, coriander and cinnamon, *murri* (fermented sauce), and colored with saffron. On the meat layer, meatballs are spread, and the entire surface is covered with fried eggplants and onions. The pot is sprinkled with a little rose water, and is left to simmer for a while. Two similar recipes, also attributed to Buran, are given in the Andalusian 13th-century *Anwa' al-Saydala* (140-41), and another one called *naql maleeh* (excellent *mezze* dish) is included in the Aleppo 13th-century *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* by Ibn al-'Adeem (2: 523-24). According to this recipe, eggplant was fried in rendered fat of sheep's tail. Ground/minced meat is cooked with vinegar, lemon juice, and hot spices (*abzar harra*), and some of the ground meat is made into spicy *banadiq* (small meatballs, size of a hazel nut, each). Then - and

here is an important detail - you take a skillet *miqla*, and arrange the prepared ingredients in layers, sprinkle them with lemon juice and a little vinegar, drizzle with rendered fat of sheep' tail, and simmer on low heat until cooked. The significance of the recipe is that it makes it quite clear that the dish is cooked not in a regular pot but in a shallow pan similar to a casserole pan - in today's Iraqi terminology, *tabsi*.

All the above-mentioned medieval recipes describe a dish, which is strikingly similar to the *musaqqa'a* casserole known nowadays throughout the Arab world, and Greece and Turkey, where it is called *musakka*. The dispute between the Turks and Greeks as to who started it is still raging. However, *Bouraniyya* casserole described here surely point to medieval Baghdad under the Abbasid rule.

Now, we know that al-Baghdadi's cookbook played a great role in transmitting the Arab cuisine to the Ottoman kitchens. During the Ottoman era, several *medfuna* (Arabic word 'buried') dishes were mentioned in their culinary records along the centuries, and they were no other than the layered casserole dishes of meat and vegetables - especially eggplant - of the Abbasid era. These dishes were called *maghmoumat* (literally, 'the covered'), of which *Buraniyya*, described above, is a variety. The difference is *maghmouma* layers the vegetables raw, whereas *Buraniyya* layers them fried. Recipes are given by al-Warraaq (Chapter 74), and al-Baghdadi (39-40).

The first time the term *muzakka* appears in Ottoman records is in a 19th-century cookbook by Turabi Efendi in a chapter dealing with *Bastillar* (dishes made with meat and vegetables). In the same chapter we also have *medkune* i.e. *medfuna* (32, 35). Like the difference between *Buraniyya* and *maghmouma*, *muzakka* layers fried meat and vegetables, whereas *madfuna* layers them unfried. Apparently, at some point, the Arab cooks dropped *maghmouma* and *Buraniyya* and replaced it with *musaqqa'a*. Etymologically, *musaqqa'a* might mean 'the covered' or 'the spread out' (meanings culled from medieval Arabic dictionaries). For another eggplant *musaqqa'a* dish prepared with yogurt, see 00 above.

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE STEW

Margat Betinjan Makes 4 servings

I add this recipe at the request of my daughter. I thought it was too simple to include, she thought it was too good to pass.

4 chunks of meat, best cuts: trimmed lamb or veal shanks (2-2½lb/ 900g-1.25kg)
1 tablespoon oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
2 garlic gloves, peeled and sliced thinly, lengthwise
½ teaspoon curry powder
1 large eggplant/aubergine (about 1½lb/675g), cut off stem, peel completely, and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
1 bay leaf
1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary), may be replaced with 2 tablespoons lime juice and 1 teaspoon sugar
2 to 3 whole fresh or dried small hot peppers, for lovers of hot food

- ☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot cook meat in oil as directed in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step.
- ☞ Add onion to meat and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and curry powder in the last minute.
- ☞ Add the rest of the ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover eggplant and meat. Add some more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Then reduce heat to low and simmer gently for about 30 minutes, or until eggplant and meat are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened. Carefully stir stew 2 to 3 times while simmering to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
- ☞ Serve with White Rice with Noodles, with lots of fresh greens and spring onion/scallion.

Maghmouma:**A 9th-Century Baghdadi Gastronomic Poem**

Maghmouma (literally, 'the covered') is a medieval dish of layered meat and vegetables simmered until a small condensed amount of the liquid remains. It is served by turning it over onto a large wide dish. This casserole-like dish was called *maghmouma* because the layered vegetables and meat were originally covered with a flat disc of bread while cooking. In today's Iraqi cuisine, it is called *tabsi* (see above recipe). The dish described in the following poem is called *farhana* (the happy one), and the poet Abbasid Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839) is playing on the meaning of the dish's name *maghmouma* - 'covered' and 'sad.' He says the dish is true to the first meaning and not to the second. The dish in fact is nicknamed '*Farhana*' (the happy one) because it brings joy to its eaters (al-Warraaq, Chapter 74, my translation).

What I really crave and desire, like an insomniac yearning for sleep, is farhana. It is always on my list. I lure my cooks with a handsome pay for it. Skillfully made in a pot, enhanced with vinegar and spices, in matching amounts. A layer of meat underneath of which lies a layer of its own fat, and another of sweet onion, another of rice (tumman). Another of peeled eggplant slices, each looking like a goodly coin honestly earned. If you couple eggplant with carrots, mind you, it would come out perfect, marvelously fragrant. Then aged murri (fermented sauce) is poured on it with whatever is stripped and chopped of cilantro tender sprigs. Thus layered, the pot is brought to a boil first, then enclosed with a disc of oven bread. On the glowing fire it is then put, thus giving it what it needs of heat and fat. When fully cooked and its fat is well up, turn it over onto a platter, big and wide. There you have it, maghmouma, but never a sad day has it seen. Farhana overwhelms the heart of the famished with joy, as it emerges in a bowl like a full moon in the darkest of nights.

ZUCCHINI/COURGETTE STEW

Margat Shijar Makes 4 servings

Zucchini and all its varieties (Old and New World) have always been a popular vegetable. In the medieval Baghdadi cookbook *qar'* (gourd) was used in many stew recipes, and it was often given as a substitute for eggplant, as we still do today. Zucchini makes a light and delicious stew, and the fragrance it imparts is wonderful even though spices are kept to the minimum.

4 chunks of meat, best cuts: trimmed lamb or veal shanks (2-2½lb/900g-1.25kg), substitute with any cuts of meat on the bone
1 tablespoon oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
½ teaspoon curry powder
½ cup (4oz/115g) split chickpeas, picked over, washed, and soaked for 30 minutes, then cooked until just done, about 15 minutes
3 medium zucchinis/courgettes, (about 1½lb/675g) both ends cut off, and cut into ½in/1cm slices crosswise
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
1 bay leaf
2 tablespoons lemon juice
2 to 3 whole fresh or dried small hot peppers, for lovers of hot food

- ☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot cook meat in oil as directed in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step.
- ☞ Add onion to meat and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add curry powder in the last minute.
- ☞ Add the rest of the ingredients. There should be enough liquid to cover zucchini and meat. Add some more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Then reduce heat to low and simmer gently for about 30 minutes, or until zucchini is tender, and sauce is nicely thickened. Carefully stir stew 2 to 3 times while simmering to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
- ☞ Serve with White Rice with Noodles, with lots of fresh greens and spring onion/scallion.



Entertainment in the Marshes

The marshes are in southern Iraq where the two rivers Tigris and Euphrates flow. As recently as Biblical times, the gulf in the south stretched far up the southern part of Iraq, and the two rivers flowed separately into the sea, and did not joint into *shut al-Arab*, as they do today. Life has little changed for the dwellers of these marshes. Their lives follow patterns established about six millennia ago, when the first nomadic tribes settled in this watery land. Their reed houses and their few possessions have been excavated at the level just above the virgin silt. Indeed, according to Sumerian myths it was the place where the world began, when the god Murdokh built a platform of reeds and earth on the face of the universe where all the lands at first were sea. As the centuries went by, the sea receded further south leaving behind areas of seasonal flooding, semi-permanent marshlands, fed by the many tributaries of the two rivers, and a central area of permanent marshes that lie low between the courses of the two rivers (Maxwell 16).

Like their ancient ancestors, the marsh people of today still build their houses on artificial islands of reeds and mud. Each household is an island by itself, with a barn built for the family's indispensable water buffalo. The modern marsh people, like their predecessors, catch fish, bake unleavened bread in crude ovens, weave mats from the marsh reeds, and build arched huts of reeds. Rice introduced about 1000 BC is still the food staple there. It is planted sprout by sprout in shallow paddies, harvested by hand, and carried in *mashhoufs* (canoes) to the neighboring villages and towns (Kramer *Cradle of Civilization* 87, 93).

The marsh people receive their guests in a guesthouse called *mudheef*, and they sometimes entertain them by singing and dancing, usually

performed by a male, called *sha'aar*. In other parts of Iraq, such entertainment is provided by male and female gypsies known as *kawliyya*. The following is a unique account of this sort of entertainment, as described by Maxwell:

I realized in the first few seconds that though the marshmen's singing required a co-operative effort from the listener a little akin to that demanded of a hypnotic subject, the impact of the dancing was full and complete and to me irresistible. The rhythm was staccato yet somehow fluid, each movement whether of limb or torso somehow resembling a pause and a pounce. The dance was a narrative, as are many of them, and song and mime was a part of it, all held within the framework of a tight unvarying iambic rhythm. Ti-tumti-tum, ti-tumti-tum; the audience took up the rhythm, each stamping out the tune with the heel of an extended right foot, each with his arms outstretched before him and his hands locked with extended fingers to produce a finger-click as loud, literally, as a man may make by clapping his palms together. Even the small children can do this; a shrimp of six years can with his soft baby fingers make a crack like the report of a small pistol.

It seems likely that many hundreds of generations of dancing in the tiny confined space about the hearth of reed huts, with the necessity for the maximum movement in the minimum space, have been responsible for the great development of body-movements opposed to footwork for which there would be inadequate room. An important part of every dancer's vocabulary, as it were, is a violent and prolonged shivering of one or both shoulders. Precise and almost acrobatic use of the pelvic muscles lends a sexual flavor to nearly all dancing, the movements ranging from direct crissation to sinuous rolling motions or plain high-speed bottom waggling; this last nearly always draws enthusiastic laughter from the

DRIED APRICOT STEW

Margat Mishmish/Turshana/Hamudh-Hilu Makes 4 servings

A delicious and exotic relic of pre-tomato times. In addition to the names given above (apricot stew, and sweet-sour stew), it is also known as *marga bedha* (white stew). It can be traced back to the Babylonian and Assyrian days, as seen in their apricot and bean stew (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 196-97). It is also reminiscent of the many sweet-sour stews given in al-Warraq's and al-Baghdadi's *mishmishiyya*, which called for sour variety of ripe apricot *mishmsish baligh asfar hamidh* (al-Warraq Chapter 62; Arberry 40). Nowadays this stew is mostly popular among people living in the middle and southern parts of Iraq, where dried apricot is more commonly known as *turshana* to differentiate it from the fresh *mishmish*.

1 pound (450g) lamb, trimmed and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, beef can be substituted
2 tablespoons oil
1 medium onion, thinly sliced
1 cup (6oz/180g) dried apricots
½ teaspoon turmeric
¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds, or walnut coarsely broken
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) raisins, optional
½ cup (2oz/60g) sugar
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon chili pepper
¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
¼ teaspoon ginger
¼ teaspoon coriander
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
½ cup (4oz/115g) split chickpeas, washed, soaked for 30 minutes, and cooked until just done, about 20 minutes, optional

➤ In a medium 4-quart heavy pot, sauté meat pieces in oil, stirring frequently until cooked, and all liquid evaporates, about 15 minutes.

➤ Add onion and apricots, and stir until they start to slightly brown, about 7 minutes. Add turmeric in the last minute.

➤ Stir in the rest of the ingredients, and add 3 cups (715 ml) hot water. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and let it simmer, covered, until meat and apricots are tender, and sauce has considerably reduced, about 45 minutes.

➤ Serve with white rice, and salad vegetables and greens.

Variations:

Originally, a few threads of saffron are used to give the stew an attractive golden hue. If using saffron, omit turmeric and add it in the third step.

Cook the stew after the medieval style: put apricots in a small pot, cover them with water, and bring them to a boil. Lower heat and let pot simmer for 10 minutes. Then purée apricots with the remaining liquid in a blender (medieval cooks mashed it by hand), and add to the cooking stew.

Khirret: Gift of the Marshes**What does Moses have to do with it?**

In his description of street foods in the markets of Baghdad in the twenties, Abbas Baghdadi mentions in passing that amongst the foods that Jewish Baghdadi vendors used to sell was *khirret*, which he describes as dried yellow mud with no distinctive taste or smell. He says it is extracted from roots of reeds, and it is an exclusively Jewish food. Besides, in his chapter on feasts, he mentions that one of the foods Baghdadi Jews used to eat for the joyous festival of Purim in March was *khirret* (*Baghdad fi'l-'Ishreenat* 119, 160).

I remember having crunched on chalky clumps of *khirret* several times as a snack food when I was a child. It was light mustard in color, and faintly sweet, but addictive. None of my school friends in Baghdad knew it. They thought the name was funny. Besides, this Jewish connection never occurred to us. In fact, until I came across this mention of *khirret* in the above-cited book, I thought it was another name for carob (*kharnoub*).

Intrigued by what I read, I investigated into the matter, and here is what I came up with:

Through correspondence with Dr. Suzie Alwash, director of *Eden Again Project*, *khirret* turned out to be the yellow pollen of the aquatic plant Typha, which grows wild in abundance in *al-ahwar* (southern marshes of Iraq). Typha is also known as bulrush, cattail, and reedmace. In Iraq, it is usually called *bardi* or *gisab/qasab* (reed). It is a tall erect plant with lance-shaped leaves, and long poker-like brown seed heads. The plant bears unisexual flowers, with the male flower spike develops at

the top of the vertical stem, above the female flower spike. To the marsh people, the plant is God-sent. The rhizomes make a source of nutritious starch, the bases of the leaves are eaten raw or cooked, the young flower spikes are cut off and eaten, and in mid-summer, the yellow pollen is collected and made into *khirret*. In medieval Arabic lexicons, such as *Taj al-'Arus*, the plant was called *khurra*, most probably after the characteristic elongated flower spikes. The pollen is "obtained by gently beating it out of the dense flowering spikes" into sacks. In this loose raw state, the gathered pollen looks like ground yellow mustard powder. Then the pollen was cooked by mixing it with a little sugar and steaming it in bags, which causes the pollen particles to clump together ("Plant Portraits: Pollen Cakes of Typha," 254). Now as to why this candy-like *khirret* was especially valued by Jewish Iraqis, here is what I think happened: Prophet Moses was found in a basket among the Egyptian Papyrus reeds, and like the Typha reeds in southern Iraq, they were called *bardi* in Arabic. The reeds in a sense were Moses' saviors. When the captive Jews settled in ancient Babylon, they eyed the region's reeds with the same reverence, and the pollen candy *khirret* developed a religious significance in Judaism in Iraq ever since ancient times, especially during the spring Purim festival of life, that is up until the mid-20th century when there still was a thriving community there. As for non-Jews, *khirret* was enjoyed as snack food by those who knew of it. Through correspondence with Dr. Susan Weingarten, I learnt that Jewish Iraqis never took the *khirret* tradition with them to Israel. In their minds, it is just a faint memory now. It is quite likely that the yellow coconut sweets they make for Purim there, is a substitute for the yellow *khirret*.

POMEGRANATE AND WALNUT STEW

Margat Sharab il-Rumman | *Fasanjoon bil-Laham* Makes 4 servings



As we have seen in the Introduction, the love for the sour and the sweet-sour goes back to ancient times. To sour stews, the ancients added vinegar, and sometimes, sour fruits such as green plums and apricots. As for the sweet, they added honey. During the Abbasid era this stew category was fully exploited using all kinds of sour vegetables and fruits available at the time. Stews soured with *rumman* (pomegranate) were called *rummaniyyat*. The same stew was sometimes given the exotic Persian names, *narbaja* or *narsirk*.

They were all cooked more or less the same way. Fat meat both red or/and white was simmered in water, soured with pomegranate juice and wine vinegar, balanced with a little sugar, and seasoned with onion, garlic, cumin, coriander, pepper, cinnamon, ginger, and mastic. Sometimes vegetables were added, such as eggplant and gourd, and garnished with the dainty spicy *kubabs* (meatballs). The stew was thickened with ground almond or walnut, and was given a final sprinkle of crushed dried mint (al-Warraaq, Chapters 58, 67; al-Baghdadi, Arberry's translation 36, 38, 41).

Of all the sweet and sour stews, which were simmering in the medieval pots, only a few were handed down to us. In the middle and southern cities of modern Iraq and neighboring cities of Iran, people cook a delicate scrumptious stew known by the Iranian name *Fasanjoon*, or simply *margat sharab al-rumman* (stew of pomegranate juice). The following recipe is prepared with lamb, which can be substituted with meatballs *ras il-'asfour* (000); chicken (000); or fish (000).

4 chunks of meat on the bone such as trimmed lamb shanks
 2 tablespoons oil
 1 medium onion, chopped
 ½ teaspoon turmeric
 1 cup (4oz/115g) toasted walnuts, pulverized in a food processor or blender until oily
 3 cups (715ml) water
 ¼ cup (60ml) pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon cardamom
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon cumin
 ¼ teaspoon chili powder, optional
 2 cups (12oz/350g) diced vegetables, such as potatoes, or one medium eggplant/auergine, peeled, cut into ¼in/6mm slices, and soaked in salted warm water for 30 minutes, then drained, and fried or sprayed with oil and broiled/grilled on both sides
For garnish: 4 tablespoons fresh pomegranate seeds, and chopped parsley or crumbled dried mint

➤ In a medium 4-quart heavy pot, cook cuts of meat following instructions given in Suggested Cuts (000) and Okra Stew, the first step. If using meatballs, add them in the third step.

➤ Add onion and fold until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add turmeric in the last minute. Sprinkle ground walnut on the onion, and fold for a few more minutes.

➤ (If using meatballs, add them at this stage.) Add the rest of the ingredients, except for garnish, and stir carefully. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer gently for about 40 minutes, or until meat and vegetables are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened.

➤ Garnish with chopped parsley and pomegranate seeds, and serve with white rice.



Plain White Rice, with Variations 000
 Rice with Vermicelli Noodles, with Variations
 Golden Yellow Rice, with Variations
 Rice with Meat and Vegetables, *Timman Tacheena*
 Rice with Carrots
 Rice with Truffles or Mushrooms
 Rice with Fresh Black-eyed Peas in the Pod
 Rice with Spinach
 Rice with Dried Apricots
 Simmered Lamb with rice, *Qouzi 'ala Timman*
 Red Rice
 Red Rice with shanks and Chickpeas
 Green Rice with Fresh Fava/Broad Beans
 Green rice with Dried Split Fava/Broad Beans
 Rice with Lentils
 Rice with Mung Beans
 Eggplant/Aubergine Upside Down,
Maqlubat Betinjan
 Spicy rice with Meat, *Biryani* Iraqi Style
 Vegetarian *Biryani*
 Chicken *Biryani*
 Rice Pies, *Parda Palau*

Rice

Timman/Ruzz

My grandmother, normally a reluctant socializer, used to go head before feet, as we say in Iraq, whenever we were invited to dinner at our young, newly married neighbor's house. "I like her rice," she used to say, "She still doesn't know how to cook." Taking into consideration my grandmother's remaining three or four teeth, perilously hanging on, it is understandable why our neighbor's sticky and soft rice, which by common standards is a failure, appealed to her. The perfect rice is the criterion of a good cook in Iraq, simply because it is prepared practically every day, and if the cook doesn't know how to prepare this daily staple properly, then what does she know?

Opposite: Rice being cooked for the Sultan Ghiyath.

Traditionally, the grains of the perfectly cooked rice should be separate and unsoggy, tender and yet have a bit of elasticity in them. In the medieval Arabic cookbooks, rice prepared this way was called *ruzz mufalfal*. The word *mufalfal* is sometimes wrongly translated as 'peppered rice.' Actually, it is not derived from *fulful* 'pepper,' but rather from the verb *falla* 'loosen,' and the adjective *mafloul* 'loose.' Loose tea in Iraqi Arabic, for instance, is *chai fal*. Rice cooked this way will result in grains that separate and not sticky. In her book *Guests of the Sheik*, Elizabeth Fernea tells us how during her first few months of her stay in the remote southern village of al-Nuhra, three local women stood at her door, and after greeting her, one of the women said, "We hear you can't cook rice." "I almost threw a rusty tin can at her," Elizabeth said, "I was so annoyed. But one of them said, 'If you will open your gate, we will come and show you how to cook rice, so your husband will be pleased with your food.'" She did, and they actually taught her how to cook rice:

We picked over and washed the rice, covered it with cold water, then sat down on the floor to drink tea while it soaked. A large pot of salted water was put on the stove to boil, and the rice was cooked in the boiling water until the grains were separate and tasted right. When the rice was drained, clarified butter was put in the dry pot over fire until it sizzled. Then the rice was poured back into the pot and stirred quickly until each grain was coated with the boiling butter. Then we covered the pot, turned down the heat, and let the buttered rice steam slowly. We drank another cup of tea, and I thanked the ladies profusely. "We don't want your husband to beat you," said one. "After all, you are here alone without your mother." (78-79)

What Elizabeth Fernea has described is the traditional way of cooking rice, which robs it of almost all nutrients, as the drained liquid is thrown away. I remember my mother used to give us a glass or two of this delicious liquid, and we loved it, but how much can one drink? A more up-dated and healthier method for cooking rice is to simmer it using a small amount of oil. The perfectly cooked rice requires the right amount of liquid, which is more or less determined by your choice of rice itself. Jasmine variety is aromatic, easy to handle and is good for every day use. With the right amount of water, you'll get firm but tender, and barely sticky rice. The Indian basmati rice is characterized by its long and slender grains, which when cooked would separate and expand even more, lengthwise. However, it is less aromatic than jasmine, and unfortunately, if not packaged well; it sometimes smells of the jute sack in which it is kept. When this happens, I get rid of the sack as soon as I buy the rice, let it air for a while, and keep it in a plastic bag. Because basmati rice is aged, you need to soak it longer than you do with jasmine, and you need to be a little more generous with oil when cooking it. All-purpose long grain American rice can be substituted, its grains nicely separate when cooked, but it lacks the aroma of the jasmine rice. No rice, however, compares with the native Iraqi *timman anber*, which grows in the marshes of southern Iraq. When lunchtime approaches, all the neighborhoods would be perfumed with the aroma of steaming pots of rice. It is not called *anber* for nothing. In this respect, Jasmine rice is the best alternative. You must have noticed how easily rice can stick and burn if left unmonitored, producing the most unwelcome smoky stench. Using a generous amount of oil or clarified butter will definitely help prevent such accidents from happening, and what's more, will result in a deliciously crispy crusty bottom layer, which we call *hikkaka* 'the scraped.' When offering rice to guests, there is a protocol which a hospitable hostess needs to heed. The crunchy crust, exciting as it might be, should not make its presence on the rice platter. The hostess

Timman versus Ruzz

Contrary to the entire Arab world, the majority of people in Iraq call rice, *timman*. The more familiar word *ruzz* is mostly used in the northern city of Mosul. Evidently, the two words were used interchangeably many centuries ago. The 9th-century Abbasid prince of epicures, Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi, half brother of Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rasheed, uses the word *tumman* rather than *ruzz* in his poem on a dish called, *maghmouma* 'covered.' (see *Maghmouma: A 9th-century Baghdadi Gastronomic Poem* (fourth line of the poem, 000). Another medieval citation of *tumman* occurs in *Kitab al-Saydana* by al-Biruni (d.1048), where he mentions it as an Arabic name for *aruzz* (28).

Variations:

Cinnamon Rice

Give plain rice an appealing color and aroma by adding one rounded teaspoon cinnamon, when you add the salt in the second step. It will do wonders to your rice, and pairs nicely with fish dishes.

Rice Cooked in Broth

Instead of plain water, use broth, which will make rice more flavorful and nutritious. Just substitute plain water with an equal amount of cold broth. You might need to adjust amount of salt, if broth has salt in it.

Rice Molds

Line a pan, such as *bundt* or tube pan, with browned finely sliced onions, toasted nuts, and raisins or currants. Press cooked rice on this layer. Unmold onto a serving dish. Fill the center with salad, or some kind of stew with thick sauce. For individual servings, use a medium cup or a small bowl as a mold. Simply press rice into the bowl, and then unmold it onto the dish. Ladle out some stew all around it, and garnish it with salad.



should always give the indication that there is more where that came from. However, informally served rice usually comes topped with pieces of golden-brown crunchy crust. The best way to take it out of the pot is to spoon rice out without disturbing the bottom, then scrape the crust and put it on the rice either in one piece or broken into chunks. Unfortunately, the rice and its crust come out loaded with fat. To avoid this, it is a good idea to invest in a dependable non-stick pot. You will keep oil to the minimum, and not a single grain of rice will go to waste. What's more, you will get a crust, golden and crunchy, which will come out in one piece by just inverting the pot.

Above: Rice with a crunchy crust

PLAIN WHITE RICE

Timman Abyadh Makes 4 servings

The amount of water used in cooking the rice is crucial, and eye measurement works better with experienced cooks. According to those eye measurements, there should be enough liquid to cover rice in the pot by one ½in/8mm. If you prefer to measure by cups then always remember that every cup of uncooked rice needs 1¾cups (430ml) liquid, and just follow the instructions below:

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice
3½ cups (860ml) cold water
1 tablespoon oil
1½ teaspoon salt

☞ In a fine-meshed sieve, big enough to hold rice comfortably, wash rice under running cold water. Let it drain then transfer it to a medium bowl. (If the package directions say there is no need to wash it, then skip this stage, and just put the measured rice in the bowl). Add cold water to rice, and let soak for 30 minutes.

☞ In a medium heavy non-stick pot, put rice with the water in which it was soaking. Add oil and salt, stir lightly with a wooden spoon. Bring to quick boil, covered, on high heat, for 5 minutes or until most of the moisture has evaporated and small holes start to appear.



☞ Turn heat to low and gently and lightly fold rice with a fork or a wooden spoon to allow rice grains to expand while cooking. Cover pot tightly, and simmer for 20 minutes. While simmering, fold rice lightly twice preferably with a fork to allow it to fluff. (Over stirring or folding the rice might cause the grains to break).

How to make the crispy crust:

Traditionally cooked rice with lots of fat will develop a crust with prolonged simmering. However, if you do not want to use oil more than is needed, then simply cook rice as directed above, and five minutes before cooking time is over, uncover the pot, and give heat a boost to high. However, you need to watch it at this stage. Let your nose be the judge.

This method will result in a thin but deliciously crispy crust. To prevent the crust from getting soft or soggy from the steam in the pot, it is essential to invert the rice immediately by putting a plate or tray on top of the pot, and holding both the pot and the plate turn over the pot. The beautiful delicious crust will be on top in one piece.

RICE WITH VERMICELLI NOODLES

Timman bil-Sha'riyya



Add ¼ cup (½oz/15g) broken vermicelli noodles (one ball of noodles, lightly crushed between the fingers) to the ingredients given in Plain White Rice. Put oil first in the pot, then add the noodles, and stir in the oil constantly until golden brown. Add rice and water as described in Plain White Rice. The rest is the same.

Variation:

Rice with Almonds and Raisins or Currants:
 For a more interesting presentation of rice with noodles, brown ¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds in a little oil, then add ¼ cup (1.5g/45g) raisins or currants and stir until currants are heated through. Sprinkle on top of the rice after it is mounded on the serving dish.

Top left: Rice with almonds and raisins

Top: Rice with vermicelli noodles

GOLDEN YELLOW RICE

Timman Asfar

Yellow Rice with Saffron:

Rice can be given an appealing color and fragrance by using saffron. For even distribution of color, steep ¼ teaspoon saffron in 2 tablespoons hot water for a few minutes, and add it to the rice pot in the second step of cooking Plain White Rice, above.

Yellow rice with Trumeric:

Put oil first in the pot, then add ¼ teaspoon turmeric and stir it until it is fragrant (a few moments). Add rice, salt and water as directed in Plain White Rice, second step.

White Rice Speckled with Yellow:

Five minutes before rice is done, sprinkle surface of rice with a mixture of ¼ teaspoon ground saffron, steeped in 2 tablespoons hot water for 5 minutes. Do not disturb the rice. Wait until it is, and then, gently fold it to allow color to touch more grains.

Aromatic Yellow Rice:

A subtle aroma can be given to yellow rice by adding ¼ teaspoon cinnamon, and 3 to 4 whole pods of cardamom, when you start cooking the rice. 1 teaspoon rose water may be sprinkled on the rice after it is cooked.

Yellow Rice with Almonds and Raisins or Currants:

Brown ¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds in a small amount of oil. Add ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) raisins or currants, and stir together until currants are heated through. Scatter this mixture on the rice after it is mounded on a serving plate.

RICE WITH MEAT AND VEGETABLES

Timman Tacheena Makes 4 servings

Instead of the usual rice and stew, rice is sometimes cooked and simmered with a variety of meats and vegetables in one pot. It is a convenient dish, usually served with yogurt and salad - an ideal meal for hot summer days. Some people call it *tacheen* others, *tacheena*, and I think it ultimately derives from *tajin*, the name of the pot used mostly for frying succulent meats in medieval times. In this sense, it is a one-pot dish. The following is a basic method for making *timman tacheena*, followed by variations. This dish is usually made with cubed lamb, but other kinds of meat can easily be substituted. Follow directions given after this recipe for preparing and cooking other kinds of meat. The dish may also be made vegetarian if you just pass the meat.

2 tablespoons oil

1 pound (450g) lamb or beef, trimmed and cut into ½in/8mm cubes (see below if other meats used)

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

1 recipe Plain White Rice 000

☞ In a medium skillet, heat oil, and sauté meat cubes, stirring frequently until all moisture evaporates, and meat starts to brown, about 15 minutes.

☞ Add onion, and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. In the last 2 minutes of cooking stir in curry powder, *noomi Basra*, turmeric, salt, pepper, *baharat*, and parsley. The mixture will emit a wonderful aroma.

☞ Cook white rice as directed in the recipe, and immediately empty it into a bowl. Then in the same rice pot, layer rice with the meat mixture, starting and ending with rice (i.e. rice-meat-rice-meat-rice-meat-rice). Cover the pot and resume simmering on low heat for additional 10 minutes.

☞ Serve with yogurt and salad.

Variations when meats other than lamb and beef are used:

Chicken or turkey skinless and boneless breasts, or tender loins: Cut meat (16oz/450g) into 1in/2.5cm cubes, wash and drain them. Lightly coat the pieces with some flour seasoned with salt and pepper. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a non-stick skillet, and sauté until they start to brown, about 10 minutes. Transfer to a dish, and keep warm. In the same skillet and using 1 tablespoon oil, sauté the onion and the rest of the ingredients mentioned in the second step above. Return chicken pieces in the last minute or two. The rest is the same.

Fish: Any leftover baked, fried, or poached fish may be added. Just break it into chunks, and remove bones or skin if any. Alternatively, you may sprinkle strips of boneless, skinless fish with a mixture of flour, curry powder, salt, and paprika; and fry them or brush them with oil and bake them or broil/grill for 7 to 10 minutes. Avoid overcooking. Add fish to the onion mixture in the second step above in the last minute or two. The rest is the same.

Shrimp: Clean and devein 1 pound (450 g) shrimp. Wash and drain them very well. Sprinkle with a little flour and curry powder, and cook them in a heated 1 tablespoon oil in a non-stick skillet. Stir frequently until they are opaque in color and firm to the touch, 4 to 5 minutes. If too much liquid is released, take shrimp out, allow liquid to reduce, and then return them. Add cooked shrimp to the onion mixture in the second step above in the last minute or two. The rest is the same.

In addition to the varieties of meat added to the basic recipe of *Timman Tacheena* given above, delicious and nutritious vegetables and dried fruits may also be incorporated, as in the following recipes:

RICE WITH TRUFFLES OR MUSHROOMS

Timman bil-Chima aw il-ftir



Traditionally, the exotic truffles *chima* are used in cooking this variety of rice, but mushrooms are substituted because they are more readily available and much cheaper.

☞ Follow same directions given in the basic recipe 000, using chopped lamb, or beef. Add 1 pound (450g) sliced mushrooms, after you sauté onion in the second step.

Above: Rice with mushrooms

RICE WITH CARROTS

Timman bil-Jizar

☞ To the ingredients specified in the basic recipe 000, use 2 big carrots, diced or cut into thin strips (about 1½ cups/375 ml). Add them to the meat in the first step, half way through cooking time, to allow the carrots to cook.

Note:

Other vegetables, such as cauliflower cut into florets, chopped cabbage, *kalam* (kohlrabi), or peas, may be used instead of carrots. Make colorful rice using an assortment of vegetables. Add these vegetables in the first step, half way through cooking time of meat.

RICE WITH FRESH BLACK-EYED PEAS IN THE POD

Timman bil-Loubya 'l-Khadhra

☞ Follow the same directions given in the basic recipe 000, but add 1 pound (450g) fresh black-eyed peas in the pod or green/French beans. Here is how to prepare them:

☞ Cut beans into ½in/1cm pieces. Put them in a small pot, and add enough water to cover them. Bring to a quick boil, then lower heat and let them cook, for about 15 minutes, or until they are just done. Drain and add them to the meat mixture in the second step along with the spices after you fry the onion. If wished, along with beans, add 3 medium tomatoes, chopped and well drained (about 2 cups/12oz/350g).

RICE WITH SPINACH

Timman bil-Sbenagh

☞ Follow the same directions given in the basic recipe 000, adding:

2 pounds (450g) fresh spinach, washed and chopped, or two 10oz/285g packs frozen chopped spinach, thawed
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh dill or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed.

☞ Add spinach to the meat mixture in the second step after you fry the onion. However, you need to let mixture cook until moisture evaporates.

RICE WITH DRIED APRICOTS

Timman bil-Mishmish

☞ Follow the same directions given in the basic recipe 000, but add ½ cup (3oz/85g) diced dried apricots, ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins, and ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg. Add them to the meat mixture in the second step after you fry the onion.



Simmered lamb shank... just add rice!

SIMMERED LAMB WITH RICE

Qouzi 'ala Timman Makes 4 servings

True *qouzi* is a whole suckling lamb, stuffed with rice, meat, nuts, and dried fruits, with lots of spices and herbs (see 000). However, in most of the restaurants in Iraq, *qouzi* is a much simpler and modest dish. For practical reasons, instead of a whole lamb, choice cuts of lamb are braised and simmered until the meat almost falls off the bones. It is usually served with rice topped with almonds and raisins. Cooked this way, meat stays lusciously moist in its own sauce. If wished, cook the rice with some of the lamb broth.

2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone)

1 tablespoon oil
1 large onion, thinly sliced
2 to 3 cloves garlic, whole
1 teaspoon curry powder
1 teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)
2 noomi Basra, whole and pricked at two or three places (see Glossary)
3 to 4 pods cardamom, whole
½ teaspoon ground coriander
½ teaspoon ground ginger
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1½ teaspoon salt
One recipe of cooked rice of your choice, recipes above

☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot, brown shanks in oil on all sides, about 10 minutes.

☞ Add onion and stir until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and curry powder in the last minute.

☞ Stir in *baharat*, *noomi Basra*, cardamom, coriander, ginger, and black pepper. Pour hot water, enough to cover meat pieces by 1in/2.5cm. Mix well, and bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Turn heat to low and let meat simmer, covered, for about an hour or until meat is very tender. Add salt about 15 minutes before meat is done because adding it at an early stage will

toughen it. For a lighter touch, cook the meat ahead of time and refrigerate it. Thus, you can easily remove the solidified fat.

☞ To serve, mound rice on a platter and arrange lamb shanks on top. Sprinkle almonds and currants or raisins all over, and drizzle with some of the sauce. Put the rest of sauce in a separate bowl. Serve with lots of fresh greens, onion wedges, pickles, and yogurt drink (000)

RED RICE

Timman Ahmar Makes 4 servings

Tomato juice will give this rice dish an attractive red-orange hue.

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained
2 rounded tablespoons tomato paste diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) water, or 1½ cups (375ml) tomato sauce diluted in 2 cups (475ml) hot water, or 3½ cups (860ml) tomato juice
1½ teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon oil

☞ About 5 minutes before the soaked rice is ready to use, prepare the tomato liquid: Put diluted tomato paste, sauce, or tomato juice in the pot you are going to use for cooking the rice. Let it boil gently for about five minutes.

☞ Add rice, salt, and oil to the pot. Allow to boil for about 5 minutes on high heat, or until most of the liquid evaporates. Then reduce heat to low, fold rice gently with a fork to allow for expansion. Let rice simmer, tightly covered, for about 20 minutes, or until grains are cooked. If, for some reason, the rice looks dry, sprinkle it with a little hot water and let it simmer for additional 4 to 5 minutes. While rice is simmering, fold it twice quickly but gently with a fork, to help it to fluff and expand while simmering. Because there is tomato in

the liquid, the rice might burn easier than plain rice, so watch it.

☞ Yogurt makes an excellent accompaniment.

RED RICE WITH SHANKS AND CHICKPEAS

Timman Ahmar bi-Znoud w-Hummus Makes 4 servings

I've always found this dish convenient to cook, for I do not have to worry about the stew. The leftover sauce will do just fine. It is a satisfying and nutritious meal when served with yogurt, and fresh greens and herbs. Moreover, it is the ideal dish for hot summer days. Though traditionally it is cooked with lamb shanks, chicken may be substituted, but you need to adjust cooking time accordingly.

2 tablespoons oil
2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone)
2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), quartered
½ teaspoon turmeric
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water
2 to 3 noomi Basra, pricked at several places (see Glossary)
1 cup (8oz/225g) whole chickpeas, picked over, soaked overnight, and drained, or one 15-ounce can whole chickpeas, drained
1 tablespoon salt
2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked for 30 minutes, then thoroughly drained in a fine-meshed sieve
For garnish: ¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds, and ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) raisins or currants

GREEN RICE WITH FRESH FAVA/BROAD BEANS

Timman Bagilla Makes 4 servings

☞ Heat oil in a medium pot, and quickly brown lamb shanks on all sides, about 5 minutes. Add onion and fold for a few minutes until onion softens. Fold in turmeric in the last few seconds

☞ Pour diluted tomato paste or sauce into the pot along with *noomi Basra* and drained chickpeas, and stir well (if canned chickpeas used, add in third step). There should be enough liquid to cover the meat by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, and then lower heat. Let the pot simmer gently, covered, until meat and chickpeas are tender, about 1 hour.

☞ Add salt (and canned chickpeas if used), about 15 minutes before meat is done cooking. If you want to get rid of the fat, refrigerate meat and liquid. Thus, you can easily remove the solidified fat. However, you will need to heat it before using it for cooking the rice.

☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart non-stick pot, put rice, and pour 3½ cups (860ml) of the cooked tomato liquid. If needed, add hot water to make this amount. Spoon out about half of the chickpeas, and add them to the rice. Stir gently, and let rice cook on medium-high heat until most of the liquid evaporates, about 5 minutes. Turn heat to low, fold rice gently with a fork, and let it simmer, covered tightly, for about 20 minutes. While rice is simmering, fluff it twice with a fork to help grains expand. This rice can burn fast because of the tomato juice, so you need to watch it.

☞ While rice is cooking, prepare the garnish. In a small skillet, brown almonds in a small amount of oil. Add raisins or currants and fold, until currants are heated through.

☞ To serve, mound rice in a serving platter, and surround it with pieces of meat. Sprinkle the surface with the prepared garnish. Put the rest of sauce in a bowl, and serve it with plain yogurt and a bowl of salad. Relish of Pickled Mango with Tomatoes (recipe 000) is especially good with this dish.

Dill and shelled fresh fava beans will give rice a fresh and appealing green color. When out of season, use frozen fava beans or lima/butter beans. The dish may be cooked with meat to make a hearty main meal. Lamb, veal shanks, or chicken, are delicious with this kind of rice. An option will be to pass the meat and serve it with yogurt sauce.

2 pounds (900g) fresh fully-grown fava/broad beans in the pod, or 1 pound (450g) frozen fava beans or giant lima/butter beans, thawed

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons oil

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped fresh dill, or

2 tablespoons dried dill weed

¼ teaspoon turmeric

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed in a fine-meshed sieve, drained, then soaked for 30 minutes in 3½ cups (860ml) cold water, do not drain

1½ teaspoons salt

⅓ cup (2oz/60g) raisins, optional

Optional meat:

2 boneless and skinless chicken breasts (about 1 pound/450g), cut into ¾in/2cm cubes, sprinkled with salt and pepper, lightly rolled in ½ cup (2oz/60g) flour and browned in 2 tablespoons oil in non-stick pan, for about 10 minutes, or until cooked.

Or, 2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), prepared as in Simmered Lamb with Rice, 000, follow the first three steps. (You might use the broth to substitute for plain water in cooking the rice)

Yogurt Sauce, see below

☞ Remove the pods/jackets, and skin fava beans by pouring boiling water over them. When cool enough to handle, break the skin from the top with a knife, and simply slip off the outer skin. If frozen fava beans are used, let them thaw, and skin them. Nothing needs to be done to lima/butter beans.

☞ In a medium, heavy, 4-quart non-stick pan, heat oil and stir in onion until it starts to change color, about 7 minutes. Add prepared fava beans or lima beans, dill, and turmeric, and fold for a minute or two.

☞ Add rice with the water in which it was soaked, along with salt and raisins, if using any. Mix well, and let boil on high heat, for 5 minutes, or until most of the moisture has been absorbed by the rice. Reduce heat to low, and fold gently with a fork to allow rice to expand and fluff while cooking. Let rice simmer, covered tightly, for 20 minutes, gently folding it twice with a fork.

☞ Serve rice with a bowl of Yogurt Sauce (recipe below) and fresh greens and radishes. If the optional meat is used, arrange it on or around the mounded rice.

Yogurt Sauce:

1 cup (250ml) yogurt

1 garlic clove, grated

1 tablespoon fresh mint, finely chopped, or

¼ teaspoon dried mint

¼ teaspoon salt

☞ Mix all the ingredients in a bowl, and use as directed above.

Variation:

Green Rice with Dried Split Fava/Broad Beans

If fresh fava beans are hard to come by, they may be substituted with dried shelled and split fava beans, available at Middle-Eastern grocery shops.

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

2 tablespoons oil

1½ cups (9oz/250g) dried split fava/broad beans soaked in cold water for a few hours, then drained.

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped fresh dill, or

2 tablespoons dried dill weed

¼ teaspoon turmeric

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice washed and soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained

1½ teaspoons salt

⅓ cup (2oz/60g) raisins, optional

Optional meat:

2 boneless and skinless chicken breasts (about 1 pound/450g), cut into ¾in/2cm cubes, sprinkled with salt and pepper, lightly rolled in ½ cup (2oz/60g) flour and browned in 2 tablespoons oil in non-stick pan, for about 10 minutes, or until cooked.

Or, 2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), prepared as in Simmered Lamb with Rice, 000, follow the first three steps. (You might use the broth to substitute for plain water in cooking the rice)

Yogurt Sauce, see recipe above

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until it starts to change color, about 7 minutes. Add drained fava beans, dill weed, and turmeric. Fold for a few minutes.

☞ Add 3¾ cups (875ml) hot water, bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium, and let beans boil gently, covered, until they are almost done, about 5 minutes. Do not let beans overcook. Test by biting into a piece.

☞ Gently fold in rice, salt, and raisins, if using any. There should be enough liquid to just cover the rice. Add a little more hot water if needed. Let rice boil for 5 minutes, or until it has absorbed most of the liquid, and then reduce heat to low. Fold rice gently with a fork, and simmer for 20 minutes, or until rice is cooked and beans are tender. Fluff the rice twice with a fork to allow it to expand while simmering.

☞ Serve dish as directed in the previous recipe.

RICE WITH LENTILS

Timman wa 'Adas/Kichree Makes 4 Servings

Nutritionists in the West have recently discovered that lentils and rice eaten together is the kind of food good for you - each helps the other to do its best in the human digestive system. It looks as though this discovery has been made much earlier in the eastern regions of the globe. Wasn't it a pottage of lentil and rice that Esau sold his birthright for? We even have a recipe for cooking it, which goes back around eight centuries ago. Equal amounts of rice and lentil were cooked the same way as *ruzz mufalfal* (rice with separated grains). The writer called it *mujaddara* (al-Baghdadi, Arberry's translation 45).

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

1¼ cups (10oz/285g) rice, washed in a fine-meshed sieve, drained, then soaked in 3½ cups (860ml) cold water, do not drain

¾ cup (6oz/180g) red lentils (the shelled variety), washed and drained, no need to soak it

1½ teaspoons salt

☞ In a medium, heavy, 4-quart pot, heat oil and sauté onion until it starts to brown, about 7 minutes.

☞ Stir in rice with the water in which it was soaked, drained lentils, and salt. Mix well but briefly, and let boil on high heat for about 5 minutes, or until rice absorbs most of the liquid.

☞ Reduce heat to low, and fold rice with a fork to help it fluff. Let it simmer, covered for 20 minutes or until grains are cooked. While rice is simmering, fold it gently twice with a fork, to allow grains to fluff.

☞ Serve hot with a bowl of yogurt, fresh greens, and radishes.

Variations:

This dish may be served simmered with lamb or veal shanks. In this case cook meat as directed in Simmered Lamb with Rice, 000.

Brown unshelled lentil may be used instead of the shelled variety. Because they take longer to cook, the recipe given above needs to be modified slightly, as follows:

☞ Soak ¾ cup (6oz/180g) unshelled lentils for about 2 hours, and drain.

☞ Soak 1¼ cups (10oz/285g) rice in 2¼ cups (550ml) cold water for 30 minutes. Do not drain.

☞ In a small pot, cover drained lentils with cold water by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce to low, and let lentils simmer for about 15 minutes, or until they are cooked al dente (i.e. cooked, but still firm). Drain lentils.

☞ Cook rice in the water in which it was soaked, as directed in the second and third steps of Rice with Lentils above. Add drained lentils half way through simmering time, in the third step.

RICE WITH MUNG BEANS

Timman wa Mash Makes 4 servings



Mung beans are less known in the West than lentils. The grains are a little bigger, and creamier and nuttier in taste (see Glossary). In the Arabic cuisine, it is as popular as lentil is. The recipe in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook calls for using rice and mung beans in the ratio of ¾ to ¼, and the instructions were to cook it the same way as *ruzz mufalfal* (rice with separated grains). The dish was simply called *mash 'mung beans'* (Arberry 47).

¾ cup (6oz/180g) mung beans, picked over, washed and soaked for a few hours, then drained

1¼ cups (10oz/285g) rice, soaked in 2¼ cups (550g) cold water for 30 minutes, do not drain

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

¼ teaspoon turmeric

1 tablespoon oil

1½ teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins, optional

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) chopped pitted dates, optional

☞ In a small pot, cover drained mung beans with cold water by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and simmer for about 15 minutes, or until beans are cooked but still firm. Drain.

☞ In a medium heavy, 4-quart pot, sauté onion in oil for about 5 minutes, or until onion is transparent. Add turmeric in the last minute.

☞ Stir in rice with the liquid in which it was soaked, along with salt and pepper. Let boil for about 5 minutes, or until rice has absorbed most of the moisture. Gently fold rice with a fork to allow it to expand. Reduce heat to low, and let it simmer for 20 minutes. While rice is simmering, fluff it with a fork to make room for expansion.

☞ Gently fold in the drained mung beans prepared in the first step, raisins and dates, if using any, half way through simmering time of rice.

☞ Serve with a bowl of yogurt and lots of fresh greens and radishes.

Variation:

For meat lovers, this rice may be accompanied with meat cooked as in Simmered Lamb with Rice, 000. Alternatively, you may use skinless and boneless chicken breasts, cubed, sprinkled with salt and black pepper, then drenched in flour and browned in small amount of oil.

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE UPSIDE DOWN

Maqlubat Betinjan Makes 6 servings

A dish for elegant occasions. Rice comes out as a mold enclosed in juicy slices of eggplant. Like the rest of the traditional eggplant dishes, it is a relic of the medieval times. In al-Warraqa's 10-century cookbook, *maghmouma* 'covered' is described in a poem by 9th-century Abbasid Prince Ibn al-Mahdi. The dish is constructed of a layer of meat spread on top of a bottom layer of chopped tallow. On top of this is spread a layer of sliced sweet onion, a layer of rice, a layer of rounds of peeled eggplant, and an optional layer of sliced carrots. The pot is sprinkled with aged *murri* (fermented sauce), and chopped fresh cilantro. When it comes to a boil, a whole disc of bread is put on top, and then simmered. When done, it is inverted on a big tray (see poem 000 above).

Today, there is no set rule for the order of layering so long as it is inverted in one piece like a mold. The following is the most popular arrangement.

2 medium eggplants/aubergine (about 2lb/900g)
 1 tablespoon oil
 1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat, or rump roast cut into thin strips
 1 onion, thinly sliced
 4 cloves garlic, grated
 ½ teaspoon turmeric
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 2 teaspoons *baharat* (see Glossary)
 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 ¼ teaspoon allspice
 ½ teaspoon cardamom
 2 teaspoons *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
For the rice:
 2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained
 2 rounded tablespoons tomato paste diluted in 3½ cups (875ml) water, or 1½ cups (375ml) tomato sauce diluted in 2 cups (475ml) hot water
 1½ teaspoons salt
 1 tablespoon oil



1 cup (3oz/85g) cooked tubular macaroni such as *zitis*, optional
 1 green pepper, thinly sliced, and 2 hot chilies, diced, if desired
 2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g) sliced, optional

Remove stems from eggplants, and peel lengthwise in a striped fashion. Slice lengthwise into ¼in/6mm thick slices, and immerse in salted warm water for 30 minutes. Drain, and fry in oil, or spray or brush with oil, and broil/grill on both sides for about 20 minutes.
 Heat oil in a big skillet, and sauté meat. Stir occasionally until all moisture evaporates, about 15 minutes. Add onion and garlic, and stir until onion softens, about 5 minutes. Add turmeric in the last minute.
 Add salt, pepper, baharat, cumin, allspice, cardamom, and *noomi Basra*. Stir for a few seconds to mix, and put away from heat.
 About 5 minutes before the soaked rice is ready to use, boil diluted tomato paste or sauce, using a medium heavy 4-quart non-stick pot, 5 minutes. Add rice, salt, and oil. Stir gently to mix, and let boil for 5 minutes or

IRAQI BIRYANI: SPICY RICE WITH MEAT AND VEGETABLES

Biryani Iraqi Style Makes 6 servings

until rice absorbs most of the moisture. Fold gently to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, for 20 minutes, or until cooked. While rice is simmering, fold it twice with a fork, to allow it to fluff.

Generously grease bottom and sides of a heavy medium pot. The rice pot will do, only you need to empty the cooked rice into a bowl, first. Line bottom and about 2 in./5 cm of the sides of the pot with eggplant pieces. Spread meat mixture, prepared in the second and third steps. Spread cooked macaroni, and arrange pepper and tomato slices if used, on the meat layer. Spoon red rice on top, and press it with the back of a big spoon.

Cover pot and let it simmer on low heat for about 15 minutes so that the bottom may brown slightly.

Let pot cool for 10 minutes, and then turn it upside down by inverting a big serving plate on the pot. Hold both tightly and invert rice pot. The rice mold will be transferred to the serving dish and the eggplant layer will be on top. Cut it into wedges, and serve with a bowl of yogurt, and lots of fresh greens, radishes, and pickles.

Variation:

Instead of red meat, chicken may be used.

Prepare it as follows:

Cut 1 pound (450g) chicken tender loins or skinless boneless breast into 1in/2.5cm cubes. Sprinkle with salt and black pepper and coat lightly with flour. Brown as directed in the second step for 10 minutes only. Remove chicken from the skillet, and sauté onion and garlic with the spices as directed in the second and third steps. Return chicken to onion mixture.

The rest is the same.

Chicken pieces, such as thighs or drumsticks, simmered to tenderness in salted water can be used instead. In this case, arrange them in the bottom of the pot as directed in the fifth step. Prepare the onion mixture as given in the second and third steps, without the meat. The rest is the same.



By the 13th-century, the Arab cooks got to know how to cook rice *mufalfal* way (with separated grains) as we love to have today. The basic rice was cooked with meat and broth, sometimes enhanced with chickpeas or pistachio, or colored yellow with saffron. In some of the recipes, meatballs were added, in others, grains, such as lentil or mung beans, were mixed with the rice (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 592-95; al-Baghdadi 44-45). It was at this developed stage that rice dishes migrated eastwards with the Mughals to India.

According to Lizzie Collingham in her fascinating *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, *biryani* dishes developed in India, as a fusion between Mughal culture and the indigenous India around the 16th century. That was where the rice dish got its kick. It was in this new garb, spicier and more pungent and aromatic, that it came back to us from India, most probably during the

period of the British colonization at the beginning of the twentieth century. Nowadays, *biryani* is a dish well known in the Arab countries, where each region has developed its own version. Apparently, the Iraqi contribution was adding *ras il-'asfour* meatballs and boiled eggs, and sometimes using chicken for its meat. The amount of aromatic and hot spices used is largely left to personal preference.

For the rice:

3 cups (1½lb/675g) rice, washed in a fine-meshed sieve, and drained, then soaked in 5¼ cups (1.25 liter) cold water, do not drain

2 tablespoon oil

1 ball vermicelli noodles (see glossary), optional

1 tablespoon salt

For the Biryani meat-vegetable mix:

3 tablespoons oil

2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced

4 cloves garlic, grated

1 ½ pounds (675g) meat. Any of the following will be good:

Lamb or beef cubes, sautéed in a little oil and ¼ teaspoon turmeric.

Ground/minced meat, made into small meatballs (*Ras il-'Asfour*), and fried or broiled/grilled (recipe 000).

Chicken breasts, boneless and skinless, or tender loins, cut into cubes, sprinkled with a little salt and pepper, rolled in flour, and browned in a little oil.

Fish pieces, sprinkled with salt and pepper, and poached or baked in foil until just done (about 10 minutes), and then boned and skinned, and broken into large chunks.

Shrimp coated with a little flour and browned in a small amount of oil, avoid overcooking.



½ cup (2½oz/75g) peas, frozen or canned, drained

2 medium carrots, diced

1 cup (4 ounces/115g) sliced mushrooms, optional

1½ tablespoons *baharat* (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

6 to 7 cardamom pods or 1 teaspoon, ground

1 tablespoon *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon cinnamon

1 teaspoon cumin

¼ teaspoon ground cloves

4 hard-cooked eggs, shelled

3 medium potatoes, cut into small cubes, or 2 cups (12oz/350g) frozen diced potatoes; browned in a little oil or sprayed with oil, and broiled/grilled

For garnish: Fry slivered almonds ½ cup (2oz/60g) in a little oil, and add ⅓ cup (2oz/60g) currants or raisins, and continue cooking for about a minute until raisins are heated through

CHICKEN BIRYANI

Biryani 'l-Dijaaj Makes 6 servings

☞ Cook rice as directed in Plain White Rice, 000. If vermicelli noodles are used then follow recipe, 000.

☞ Meanwhile, in a big skillet, heat 2 tablespoons oil, and sauté onion, stirring frequently, until it starts to brown a little, about 7 minutes. Add garlic in the last minute.

☞ Fold in your choice of meat (if chicken, fish, or shrimp are used, fold them in when you add the potato cubes, below). Add peas, carrots and mushrooms, *baharat*, salt, pepper, cardamom, *noomi Basra*, cinnamon, cumin, cloves, shelled eggs, and about ½ cup (125ml) hot water. Simmer to allow vegetables to cook and flavors to blend, about 10 minutes, or until most of the moisture has evaporated. Fold in potato cubes, (and chicken, fish, or shrimp if used). The potatoes are kept until last so that they do not get soggy.

☞ When rice is cooked, transfer it to a bowl. Layer rice with the meat-vegetables mix, prepared in the second and third steps, beginning and ending with a rice layer. Cover pot tightly, and resume simmering for additional 10 minutes.

☞ To serve, mound rice on a big platter, garnish with eggs and prepared almonds and raisins. Pickled mango or tossed salad is delicious with this rice.

Variations:

Vegetarian Biryani: Omit meat from list of ingredients, and follow instructions given above.

Opposite: Biryani with amba tomato relish

Instead of using cubed chicken with biryani, as described in the previous recipe, you can use one chicken (about 4lb/1.80kg), whole or quartered, leave skin on, and prepare as follows:

☞ Put the washed chicken in a medium pot with one whole onion pierced with 4 or 6 whole cloves, 2 bay leaves, 4 pods cardamom, and 1 tablespoon salt. Cover with cold water and bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Lower heat to medium and let chicken simmer for about 30 minutes or until cooked. Drain the chicken, spray or brush it with oil, and broil/grill until it is nicely browned on all sides. Keep warm until the rest of the dish is ready.

☞ Prepare the *biryani* mix as directed in the previous recipe without any meat.

☞ Cook rice as directed in previous recipe. You can use the broth in cooking the rice as follows: Replace the amount of water specified for cooking rice with cold chicken broth, after you strain it and remove most of the fat. Since broth is salted, leave out salt in rice ingredients.

☞ To serve, mound cooked rice and vegetables on a large serving platter, arrange chicken on top, and sprinkle the almond-raisin garnish all over.

RICE PIES

Parda Palau Makes 6 to 8 servings

This dish is an elaboration on *biryani* rice, described above. It is perfect for formal presentations. Today it is the specialty dish of the Kurds in northern Iraq. As the name suggests, it is rice with vegetables (*pilau*), hidden or enclosed (*parda*) in pastry.

However, covering food with thin bread is not a new technique in the Iraqi cuisine. Its roots go as far deep in history as the ancient Mesopotamian times, as reflected in the Babylonian culinary tablets (see Introduction, Section VI.3). By the time we come to the medieval times, the technique has already reached its zenith in a host of dishes, which come under the categories of *maghmoumat* and *judhabat*.

The idea of *maghmouma* is to cover with *ruqaq* (paper-thin) breads a prepared mixture of meat, vegetables, and sometimes rice. In 9th-century Ibn al-Mahdi's poem, cited in al-Warraq's chapter on *maghmoumat* 'the covered dishes,' the poet describes how it is prepared by layering meat with tallow, sweet onion, rice, and peeled eggplant cut into rounds, or carrots, with *murri* (fermented sauce), and cilantro. It is then covered with bread, and cooked until it is done. To serve, the dish is inverted on a platter (see 000 above).

As for *judhaba*, it is meat grilled in the *tannour*, suspended over a sweet-savory bread or rice preparation with nuts, vegetables, fruits, etc, and enclosed in *ruqaq* (thin) breads. Apparently, the bread part of the dish gradually attained autonomy and was often cooked without suspending meat over it, as in the 13th-century recipe *judhabat um al-faraj* (more details in Um al-Faraj: *An Eastern Dish* 000 below). For presentation, the prepared dish enclosed in *ruqaq* bread is inverted on a platter, letting the golden brown, crusty bottom layer of bread be on top (al-Warraq, Chapters 74, 91; al-Baghdadi, Arberrry's translation 208-09).

In the following recipe, you have the option of making your meat pie into one big mold fit for a big gathering, or you can divide it into 6 individual molds. The traditional meat cooked with the rice is usually chicken. Cooking it with shrimps or fish is my improvisation. The Kurds, mountain dwellers of northern Iraq, are not known as devout eaters of shrimp or fish.

1 recipe *Biryani* Rice, given above, using any of the meat options, or let it be vegetarian

1 recipe *Boureg* Dough 1, 000, or one 16oz/450g package fillo dough

About ½ cup (125ml) oil

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ Cook rice as directed in the recipe and cool slightly. Prepare dough as directed in the recipe, or follow directions for thawing fillo dough.
- ☞ If you want to make one big mold, generously grease 10in/25.5cm round pan. Flatten *boureg* dough on a floured surface, and make it as thin as possible. It should be big enough to cover the bottom and sides, and overhang down the edges. If making one large piece is difficult for you, divide it into two parts: One to line the bottom and sides of the pan, and another for covering the top after filling the pan with rice. Fill the lined pan with the prepared rice, pressing it gently with the back of a big spoon. Fold the overhanging dough on the rice to enclose it. Generously brush surface with oil.
- ☞ If using fillo dough, spread one layer on a working surface and lightly brush it with oil. Repeat spreading and brushing using 10 layers. Line half of the bottom and sides of the pan with those layers, letting the rest overhang down the edges. Make another stack of 10 sheet, (or the remaining sheets), repeating the same process of spreading and oiling. Line the other bottom half and sides of the pan with this stack. Make sure to allow the two stacks to overlap, to prevent filling from showing. Fill the lined pan with the prepared rice, pressing it gently with the back of a big spoon. Fold the overhanging dough on the rice to enclose it. Generously brush surface with oil.



- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven until dough is crisp and golden brown, about 20 minutes. Cool slightly, then unmold by inverting a big serving dish on the pan, and holding both with both hands, invert mold onto the plate. If bottom layer, which is now the top, is not crisp enough, return it to the oven and broil/grill it for a few more minutes until it is golden. You need to watch it, because this dough is thin and it might burn quite easily if left unattended. Cut it into wedges using a long sharp knife, and serve it along with salad, pickles, and yogurt; or your choice of stew.

Top: Finished rice pie showing the very thin baked crust.

Below: Rice pie, cooked and ready to serve

☞ If you choose to make smaller molds, then do as follows: The number of molds made depends upon the size of bowls you intend to use. Usually, I use 6 ovenproof cereal bowls to make 6 generous individual servings. In fact, this is how it is served in restaurants in northern cities, such as Arbeel.

☞ If using *boureg* dough, make 1½ recipes of the dough, and divide it into 6 portions, or according to the number of bowls you choose to use. Flatten each portion as thin as possible, and line the generously greased bowl with this dough. Let it overhang down the bowl's edge. Fill each bowl with the rice mixture, and press it with the back of a big spoon. Cover top completely with the overhanging dough. Brush surface generously with oil and bake as directed in the fourth step above. Baking time depends upon the size of bowls you have chosen, approximately 12 to 15 minutes.

☞ If using fillo dough, spread stack of sheets on a flat surface, and divide it into two parts crosswise. This will give you about 40 layers of fillo. Divide sheets among bowls used. Layer and oil as described in the third step above. Line the bowls with the layered sheets, letting the extra overhang down the bowl's edge. Fill with the prepared rice mixture, press and cover completely by folding the overhanging part on the top. Bake as directed in the fourth step above.

Interpretations of Dreams

Of the valuable sources, ancient and medieval, that provide us with unique glimpses into people's daily lives and details of their material existence are documents on interpretations of dreams. Objects seen or actions experienced in dreams were always taken as symbolic prognostications that need an interpreter. Here are some examples culled from the *Assyrian Dream-Book*, reconstructed from numerous cuneiform fragmented tablets:

If a man carries a sprout in his lap and kisses it repeatedly: this man will acquire barley and silver.

If he eats the innards (of an animal): peace of mind.

If he eats an apple: he will acquire what his heart wants.

If he eats raisins: he will experience bitterness.

If he eats [drinks] naphtha: a troubled mind.

If he eats his penis: his son will die

If he eats the penis of his friend: he will have a son.

If the penis of a man is long: he will have no rival.

If one gives him terebinth: the deity will present him with health.

If one gives him juniper: he will experience a pleasant year.

If one gives him wine: a friendly word; his days will be long.

If one gives him an empty goblet: the poor will become poorer.

If one gives him a full goblet: he will have a name and offspring.

If one gives him honey [date syrup?]: in his family there will be cases of death.

If one gives him mountain-honey; he will obtain his heart's desire.

If he seizes a fish in the river: he will obtain his heart's desire.

(Oppenheim *The Interpretations of Dreams in the Ancient Near East*)

As we see, not all dreams predict good things, so what was a man to do? The Mesopotamians did not leave anything to chance: there were some counter-magic rituals to remove the effects of bad dreams. One of the things to do was to say to oneself upon waking up and before setting one's feet upon the floor: "The dream I have had is good, good, verily good before Sin and Shamash! (gods of moon and sun, respectively)." Indeed, people in Iraq still do more or less the same thing. I knew that my mother had a bad dream when at waking up she would repeatedly say:

"ji'ala kheir in-shalla"

(Let the dream I had be a good omen by God's will)

Tafseer al-Ahlam (interpretations of dreams) is a famous medieval Arabic book on dreams by Ibn Sereen (d.729). Like the Assyrian book, this one is divided into chapters according to categories. The dreams do not predict the future only, they also reveal things about the present and the past. In the food and related items section, we come across the following:

Wheat bran predicts poverty and hardships. Kneading dough predicts the person will pay his relatives a hurried short visit. Bread in a dream symbolizes man's life. Each bread stands for 40 years. If the bread looks good and is perfect this predicts easy happy life. If it is not a whole bread, whatever is missing from it equals the will-be-lost years from the dreamer's life. Underbaked bread predicts fever, but warm bread made with excellent white flour means the person will have many sons. A man came to Ibn Sereen and told him he dreamt he was holding a thin

disc of bread (ruqaq) in each hand and he ate from both. Ibn Sereen told him that he would marry two sisters.

A pot of stew with lots of meat predicts prosperous honest life. Bazmaward (dainty sandwich of thin bread filled and rolled) foretells enjoying lots of easy money.

Vinegar means lots of money earned with hard work.

A succulent grilled calf means the dreamer will hear good news soon, and how good the news will be depends on how fat the calf is.

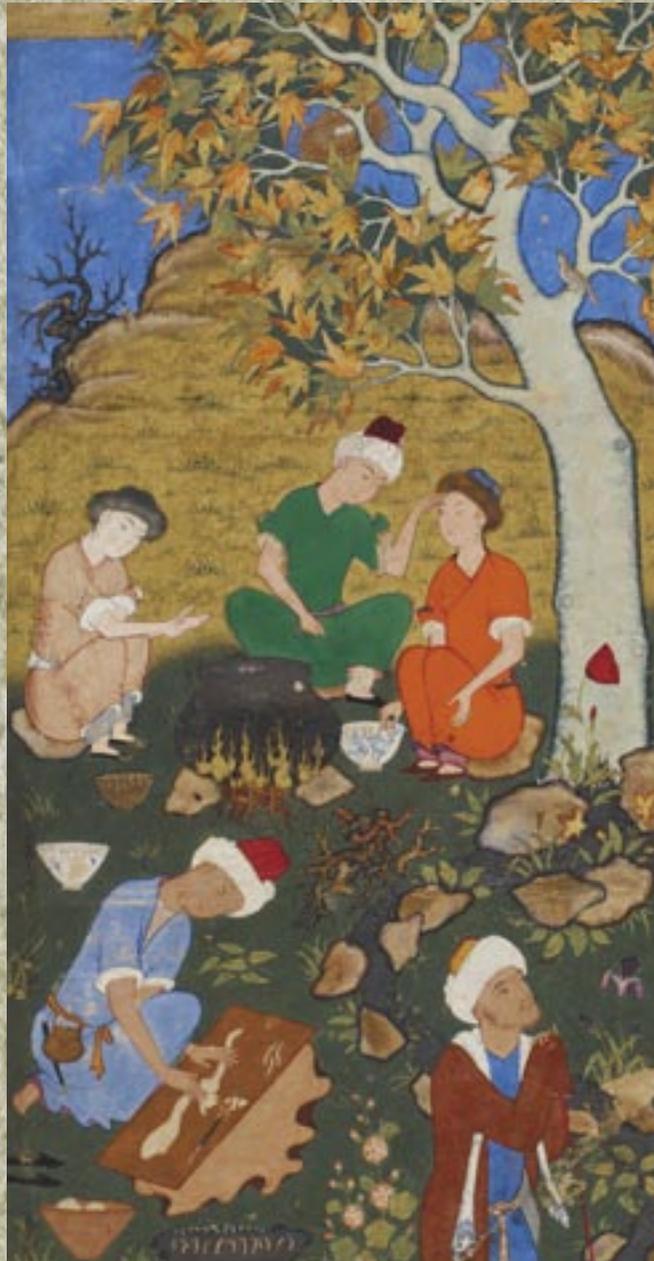
A grilled fresh fish: a good omen and lots of money to come. If a dreamer coats small fishes with flour and fries them in oil, this predicts he is going to spend his money on worthless things, which he will transform into worthy objects.

A lump of sugar predicts a kiss from the lover. If a person dreams he is dipping bread in honey and is eating it, he will be a scholar and proper from it.

Zalabiya (fritters dipped in syrup): the person will get out of trouble and will have a lot of fun. Dessert platters in general stand for beautiful slave girls.

The book also tells of a man who dreamt that he was at the table, and whenever he stretched his hand to take some of the food, a fair-haired hand of a dog would come out from underneath the table and eat with him. The interpreter of dreams told him that one of his Slavic slaves is sharing his wife with him. The man, we are told, investigated the matter and it turned out to be true (60-69).

OTHER GRAINS AND BEANS



I Grains Cooked like Rice

A Basic Method for Cooking Bulgur 000
Bulgur Simmered with lentils, *Kujari 'I-Burghul*
Shelled Wheat Berries Simmered with
Lamb, *Habbiyya*

II Porridge Soups

Shelled Wheat Porridge with Cinnamon
and Sugar, *Hareesa*
Beans and Grains Medley, *'Ashouriyya*
Grains and Beans Soup 1, *Shorbat Burma*
Mosuliyya
Grains and Beans Soup 2

III Curries with Beans and Pulses

Spicy Lentil, *Yakhni 'I-'Adas*
Curried Black-eyed Peas, *Kari 'I-Loubya*

IV Thareed with Beans

Flat Bread Sopped in Broth of
Fava/Broad Beans, *Tashreeb Bagilla*
Flat Bread Sopped in Broth of Creamy
Black-eyed Peas, *Tashreeb Loubya*

V Macaroni

Succulent Macaroni Simmered in
Spicy Tamarind Sauce
Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History

Above: *Cooked Bulgur*
Opposite: *An ancient
cookery school showing
students making rishta
and shaping pasta*



Other Grains and Beans

الجوب والبقول

I GRAINS COOKED LIKE RICE

A Basic Method for Cooking Bulgur

Makes 4 servings

Bulgur, or *burghul* as it is more commonly known in the Arab countries, makes a nice and nutritious change from rice. It is especially good with eggplant dishes, and stews like okra, potato, spinach, and green bean stew. Or enjoy it by itself as a snack. Most of the previous chapter rice dishes can be cooked with bulgur, thus giving the dishes a whole new look, color, taste, aroma, and texture.

In the fall, it is common to see people in northern Iraq preparing their annual winter *moona* (supply) of bulgur on their porches or sidewalks outside their houses.

BULGUR SIMMERED WITH LENTILS

Kujari 'I-Burghul | Mujaddara Makes 4 servings

They use huge pots to parboil whole-wheat grains with as little water as possible, and then toast and coarsely grind them. Indeed, that was the way bulgur has always been prepared ever since ancient times, as revealed by archaeological research conducted in Turkey and Iraq (Ellison "Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia" 90-91).

Bulgur comes in different grinds. Coarser grinds such as #2 and #3 are used in cooking bulgur *mufalfal* way, i.e. with grains separated like rice. It does not need to be soaked because it is parboiled.

1 tablespoon oil

¼ cup (½oz/15g) vermicelli noodles (one ball slightly crushed between the fingers)

2 cups (12oz/350g) bulgur, coarse grind #2 or #3

½ cup (4oz/115g) split or whole chickpeas, cooked

1 teaspoon salt

4 cups (950ml) hot water or broth (if salted, adjust accordingly)

☞ In a medium, heavy 4-quart non-stick pot, heat oil, and stir in noodles until golden brown, a minute or two.

☞ Add the rest of the ingredients, mix well, and boil until most of the visible moisture is absorbed, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, for 20 minutes, or until grains are cooked. Gently fold twice while simmering to allow grains to fluff.

☞ Serve as a side dish instead of rice.

A dish of brown lentils simmered with bulgur or rice is well-known throughout the Arab world, although it comes in different guises, and passes under different names. The Egyptians cook it with rice, lentil, and macaroni, and call it *Kushari*. In the Levant, it is cooked with lentils and rice or bulgur, and called *mujaddara* (literally, 'having smallpox'). The Iraqis call it *Kujari/ kichri*. In Hindi it is '*kedgerie*.' The earliest recipe for this dish can be traced back to al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook. He called it *mujaddara*, and it was a meat dish in which rice and lentils (ratio of two parts rice to one part lentil) are cooked *mufalfal* way, i.e. with the grains separated (Arberry 45).

Whatever it is called, this vegetarian dish is wholesome, satisfying, and delicious. Lentils, unlike dried beans, do not require soaking. However if you do soak them for two hours, you will cut down cooking time.

½ cups (12oz/350g) unshelled brown lentils, picked over, washed, soaked in cold water for 2 hours, and drained

2 cups (12oz/350g) bulgur, coarse grind #2 or #3

1 cup (8oz/225g) rice, soaked 30 minutes, and drained

2 teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ teaspoon chili, or to taste

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon ground coriander

¼ cup (60ml) olive oil

2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced

☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot, cover lentils by 2in/5cm cold water and bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to low and let lentils simmer gently until almost done, about 20 minutes.

SHELLED WHEAT BERRIES SIMMERED WITH LAMB

Habbiyya bil-Laham Makes 4 servings

☞ Add bulgur, rice, salt, pepper, chili, cumin, and coriander. There should be enough liquid to cover the grains by about ½in/8mm. Add a little more hot water if needed. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer until grains are cooked, but still intact, about 20 minutes. While simmering fold grains gently two or three times to allow them to fluff.

☞ In a medium skillet, heat oil, and fry onion slices until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Add to the pot two thirds of it, five minutes before grains are done.

☞ To serve, mound the simmered grains on a serving platter. Spread rest of the browned onion slices on top and drizzle it with any remaining oil.

Specialty of the northern region, known and loved all over the country. It calls for shelled wheat berries, usually available at Middle-Eastern or international grocery markets. Wheat cooked this way, results in a lusciously creamy texture. It is a meal by itself. Shelled barley may be substituted. Traditionally, lamb shanks are used in cooking these grains, but any cuts of meat on the bone, veal shanks, or chicken, skinned and trimmed, may be substituted. Alternatively, you can pass the meat altogether and have it as a vegetarian dish.

2 tablespoons oil

2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone)

½ teaspoon turmeric

1 onion quartered

½ cup (4oz/115g) whole chickpeas washed and soaked overnight, or 1 cup (8oz/225g) cooked whole chickpeas

1 tablespoon salt

2 cups (16oz/450g) shelled wheat berries, washed and soaked for a few hours, drained

2 cups (475ml) tomato sauce, optional

☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil and brown shanks on all sides, about 10 minutes. Add turmeric and onion, and stir until turmeric is aromatic, a few seconds. Cover meat pieces with hot water by 1in/2.5cm. Add chickpeas if they are uncooked. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, for about an hour, or until meat is tender. Add salt towards the end of cooking.

☞ Remove shanks from broth, and set aside. Strain the broth.

☞ Put together in a pot, 8 cups (2 liters) of the broth (add some hot water if needed), the drained wheat, and cooked chickpeas. If tomato sauce is used, then add it with 6 cups (1.50 liter) of the broth only.

☞ Bring pot to a quick boil, then reduce heat to



Red and brown lentils

II PORRIDGE SOUPS

medium, and let it cook gently, covered, until all visible moisture is absorbed, and wheat is cooked and puffed, about 40 minutes. Fold the wheat twice or thrice while cooking. It will be a little stickier and creamier in consistency than regularly cooked rice.

☞ Return the set-aside cooked shanks to the pot, about 5 minutes before wheat is done, to let them heat through.

☞ Pickles and salad are usually served with this dish.

Tafsheel: A Porridge Soup with an Ancient History

Of all the porridge soups mentioned above, tafsheel seems to be the one with the most ingredients, and medieval Arabic sources have some ancient historical (?) bits to tell about it. They connect *tafsheela* with one of the ancestors of Yehuda bin Ya'qoub, his name is Barkhiya bin Akhtiya bin zir Babil bin Shaltheel during the time of the Assyrian King Bakht Nasr (Nebuchadnezzar ruler of Babylon, c. 630-562 BC). It was after Barkhiya that *Tafsheel* was named, because it was his favorite dish (Al-Sam'ani *Al-Ansab* 464). In another anecdote, we learn that after the Exodus and while still wandering in the desert, one of the rabbis named Sheela asked for a dish of mixed grains and pulses to be cooked for him. He was offered *tafsheela* (Al-Marzibani *Nour al-Qabas* 51). Another source tells us that when Moses went to his mother and brother Harun before heading to the Pharaoh, they were eating *tafsheel*, and he shared it with them (Ibn Katheer *Al-Bidaya wal-Nihaya* 206).

Our modern-day counterpart for the ancient *tafsheel* could be 'ashouriyya and Burma porridge soups (see below).

Porridge-soups were known to the ancient dwellers of Mesopotamia ever since grains and pulses were successfully grown in the region. From ancient cuneiform lexical texts, we know that the Sumerians already knew about 100 varieties of thick and nourishing soups, similar to the ones documented in the Abbasid Baghdadi cookbooks, and the ones we still make today. Medieval Arab cookbooks abound with recipes for porridge-soups, collectively called *harayis* 'mashed dishes' and *tannouriyyat*, which were simmered overnight in the *tannour* (al-Baghdadi, Arberry's translation 198-99). Such dishes were made with a variety of grains and pulses, individually and mixed, along with fatty meat. Besides varieties of harayis of wheat and rice (*hintiyat*, *aruzziyyat*, respectively), they cooked *adasiyat* (with lentil), *loubyayat* (with beans), *makhoutat*, a medley of rice and beans, or white and red beans and lentil (al-Warraaq, Chapters 50, 51, 52, 55, 64, 65, 90). *Tafsheel* is another medley with many grains and pulses. A recipe al-Warraaq gives, for instance, contains lentil, beans, chickpeas, mung beans, and chard (Chapter 66).

SHELLED WHEAT PORRIDGE WITH CINNAMON AND SUGAR

Hareesa Makes 6 servings

This dish is not to be mistaken with the North-African *Hareesa*, a very hot condiment, made principally with mashed chilies, and served with couscous dishes. The word hareesa is derived from the Arabic *harasa* ('mash,' from Akkadian 'harasu'), and here the similarity ends between the two dishes. Our *Hareesa* is wheat simmered to tenderness and then mashed. This Arabian porridge was and still is a favorite food. Many medieval poems were recited in praise of its merits, and several recipes were given in their cookbooks. When traditionally cooked, this dish requires slow simmering and almost constant stirring. Here is how people used to cook it in medieval Baghdad:

Take 6 ratls [about 6lb/3kg] of fat meat, and cut into long strips: throw into the saucepan, and cover with water. Heat until almost cooked: then take out, strip the meat from the bone, shred, and put back into the saucepan. Take good, clean wheat, shell, clean, grind, and wash: weigh out 4 ratls [4lb/1.8kg], and put into the pot. Keep a steady fire going until the first quarter of the night is gone, stirring all the time: then leave over a good fire. Put in quartered chicken with cinnamon-bark, and leave until midnight: then beat well until set in a smooth paste- set hard it is spoilt- adding salt to taste. If water is needed, put in hot water. Leave until dawn: then stir again, and remove. Melt fresh tail, and pour this over when ladling out. Sprinkle with cumin and cinnamon ground fine separately. It is better when made in an oven [tannour] than over an open fire. (Al-Baghdadi, Arberry's translation 198-99)

This is how it is still cooked during the first ten days of *Muharram* (the first month in the Islamic lunar calendar). The pious Shiite Muslims in middle and southern Iraq commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Husein, the prophet's grandson. Passion plays are enacted, dramatizing the battles that led to his death, and the peak of these ceremonies is the tenth day, known as 'Ashoura (from 'ashra, number 10). In memorial of this tragic historical incident, *hareesa* is cooked in big cauldrons, outside the houses, and is simmered on wood fire. Men of the neighborhood take turns in stirring and mashing it all night long. By

the advent of dawn, it is distributed in big bowls to the neighborhood families.

Hareesa making is not restricted to that period only. People like to enjoy it more often, and make it year round for breakfasts, brunches and light suppers, albeit in smaller amounts and in the confinement of their own kitchens. Here is how to cook it the 'private' way:

1 pound (450g) lean trimmed pieces of meat, traditionally lamb, skinned chicken may be substituted
2 cups (16oz/450g) shelled wheat, washed, soaked for a few hours and drained
½ teaspoon salt
1 cup (8oz/225g) cooked whole chickpeas, optional
Butter, sugar, and cinnamon, for garnish

☞ Put meat pieces in a heavy big pot, and cover with 12 cups (3 quarts/ 2.75 liters) cold water. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to medium, and simmer gently until meat is almost cooked, about 45 minutes.

☞ Stir in the drained wheat and salt, and let the pot simmer gently until meat is thoroughly cooked, wheat is very tender, and the mixture is of medium consistency. Add some more hot water if needed. While simmering, stir occasionally to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot, about an hour.

☞ Take meat out, and when cool enough to handle, remove bones, if any, and shred it with the fingers into small pieces. Set aside.

☞ Mash wheat in the pot with a potato masher. A food processor or a blender may be used, but this is very unconventional.

☞ Return the shredded meat to the pot, add the cooked chickpeas if using any, and resume simmering on low heat. The final porridge should be of medium consistency. Add more hot water if it becomes thick. Stir frequently so that it does not stick to the bottom of the pot and burn.

☞ To serve, ladle the porridge into bowls. Drizzle with warm butter, generously sprinkle with cinnamon and sugar.

Note:

This dish can be cooked without meat, and sometimes some milk is added in the last step.

Qrayaat: A Mesopotamian Group Therapy

Qraya is a religious reading of the holy Qur'an and the story of martyrdom common in Shiite communities. Such religious ceremonies are performed in memorial of the death of Imam Hussein, grandson of the prophet Mohammed, and religious leader at the time. He went to Kufa to press his claim to the caliphate, and was killed in battle on the plains of Karbala, on the tenth day of *Muharram* (the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar year). His death greatly contributed to the split of Islam into Shiite and Sunni sects in the seventh century AD, which persists in Islam to this day.

Many of the customs of the Shiites are deeply rooted in an Iraqi past much earlier than the seventh century AD. One of these customs is the religious lamentation, especially in its female form, which "offers close parallels with the ancient world" (Wood 35). Although such occasions are primarily held for their religious significance, they nevertheless, offer an opportunity for the hardworking women to wear their best clothes, leave the house, socialize, and hence release some of the pressure off their chests. Following is a unique description of the *qraya*, as seen through the keen eyes of Elizabeth Fernea during her stay in one of the southern villages in Iraq, in the late 1950s:

For the occasion, the women wear their best black. There were some beautiful abayahs [black cloaks like garments covering the entire body only allowing hands and face to show] of heavy silk crepe, and a few of the black headscarves were heavily fringed. Many wore a wide-sleeved full net or sheer black dress, the hashmi,

the ceremonial gown worn for krayas and similar religious services. Underneath was a hint of color; as the women seated themselves cross-legged and arranged their hashmis over their knees, bright satin petticoats shimmered through the smoky net: green, blue, red. They wore black stockings, and the rows of clogs left at the door were almost all black.

There was a stir: the mullah [the professional woman who does the reading] had arrived, a tall woman with a hard, strong face, carrying worn copies of the Koran and her own Book of Krayas. The mulla sat down and the two young girls [trainees] stood to lead the congregation in a long, involved song with many responses. Gradually the women began to beat their breasts rhythmically, nodding their heads and beating in time to the pulse of the song, and occasionally joining in the choruses, or supplying spontaneous responses such as "A-hoo-ha!" or a long-drawn-out "Ooooooh!" This phase lasted perhaps ten minutes, the girls sank down into their places, and the mullah arose to deliver a short sermon. She began retelling the story of the killing and betrayal of the martyr Hussein, which is told every night during Ramadan and is the beginning of the important part of the kraya. At first two or three sobs could be heard, then perhaps twenty women covered their heads with their abayas and were weeping; in a few minutes the whole crowd was crying and sobbing loudly. When the mullah reached the most tragic parts of the story, she would stop and lead the congregation in a group chant, which started low and increased in volume until it reached the pitch of a full-fledged wail. Then she would stop dead again, and the result would be, by this time, a sincere sobbing and weeping as the women broke down after the tension of the wail.

Abruptly the weeping would stop and everyone would

BEANS AND GRAINS MEDLEY (POTTAGE)

'Ashouriyya Makes 10 servings

'Ashouriya is another dish related to the tenth day of *Muharram* (the first month of the Islamic lunar year). It is a variation on the hareesa, in which beans and nuts are added. However, according to a folktale deeply rooted in the ancient history of Mesopotamia, the dish might be related to the Deluge, when the dove returned to the ark of Noah and his family. Legend has it that they cooked all the remaining food on board into porridge, called *Ashurey* (Goodman, 82). In light of this, it might not be farfetched to relate the name of the dish to the ancient city of Ashur, located at the heartland of wheat and barley. See also Tafsheel: *A Porridge Soup with an Ancient History* 000.

1 cup (8oz/225g) shelled wheat, washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) white beans, navy or great northern, washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) whole chickpeas, washed and soaked overnight, drained
¼ cup (2oz/60g) rice, washed and soaked 30 minutes, drained
¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds, toasted
¼ teaspoon salt
Sugar, to taste
1 tablespoon rose water, optional
For garnish: walnuts, dried fruits such as raisins, dates, figs, and apricots

☞ Put wheat, beans, and chickpeas in a big pot and cover by about 12 cups (3 quarts/2.75 liters) cold water. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and let cook gently until wheat and beans are almost cooked, about 40 minutes.

☞ Add rice, bring to a boil, then reduce heat and continue simmering until rice is tender, about 15 minutes.

☞ Add almonds, salt, and sugar, to taste. Continue simmering until all ingredients are very tender, and mixture is of medium consistency. While simmering, stir occasionally to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Stir in rose water if wished

☞ To serve, ladle into soup bowls, and garnish with walnut pieces and dried fruits.

stand, to begin with the third stage. The mullah, flanked by her two novices, stood in the center of the court rocking forward with her whole body at each beat, slowly but regularly, until the crowds of women formed concentric circles around her, and they too rocked in unison, singing and beating their breasts. Three older women joined the mullah in the center, throwing aside their chin veils so they might slap their bared chests. "A-hoo-ha" sounded the responses.

All her veils flying as she rocked, the mullah struck her book with her right hand to indicate a faster tempo, and the novices clapped and watched to make sure that all were following correctly. The circles of women began to move counterclockwise in a near-ceremonial dance. A step to the left, accompanied by head-nodding, breast-beating, the clapping of the novices, the slap of the mulla's hard hand against the book, and the responses of "A-hoo-ah!" "Ya Hussein," they cried. The mullah increased the tempo again, the cries mounted in volume and intensity, the old women in the center bobbed in time to the beat, there was a loud slap against the book, a high long-drawn-out chant from the mullah, and everyone stopped in her tracks. The three old ladies who had bared their chests readjusted their veils, and many of the women stood silently for a moment, their eyes raised, their open hands held upward in an attitude of prayer and supplication. But the mullah was already conferring her novices. The kraya was over.

The women began to stream out, smiling and chattering. (108-112)

All I can say is who needs a shrink after all this!

GRAINS AND BEANS SOUP OF MOSUL 1

Shorbat Burma al-Mousiliyya Makes 6 servings

Modern Mosul is the cite of the ancient Assyrian capital, Nineva. The city was called Mosul because it was the middle-gate, which stood on the way where four great highways met, in particular the junction of Assyria and Babylon (Burton 1: 82). Mosul was renowned for producing a fabric known in English as 'muslin.' It is also renowned for some hearty dishes containing barley, wheat, and beans, for this is where they grow in abundance. This dish is named burma after the soapstone pot called *burma* in medieval times. Using such pots was necessary to prevent the simmering porridges from burning, and we know well enough how quickly they burn if left unattended.

1 cup (8oz/225g) shelled wheat or barley, washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) unshelled lentils, washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) dried red beans or black-eyed peas, washed and soaked overnight, drained
1 pound (450g) lamb chunks on the bone
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cumin
1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary) or juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
1 medium onion, chopped
2 tablespoons oil
For garnish: chopped parsley



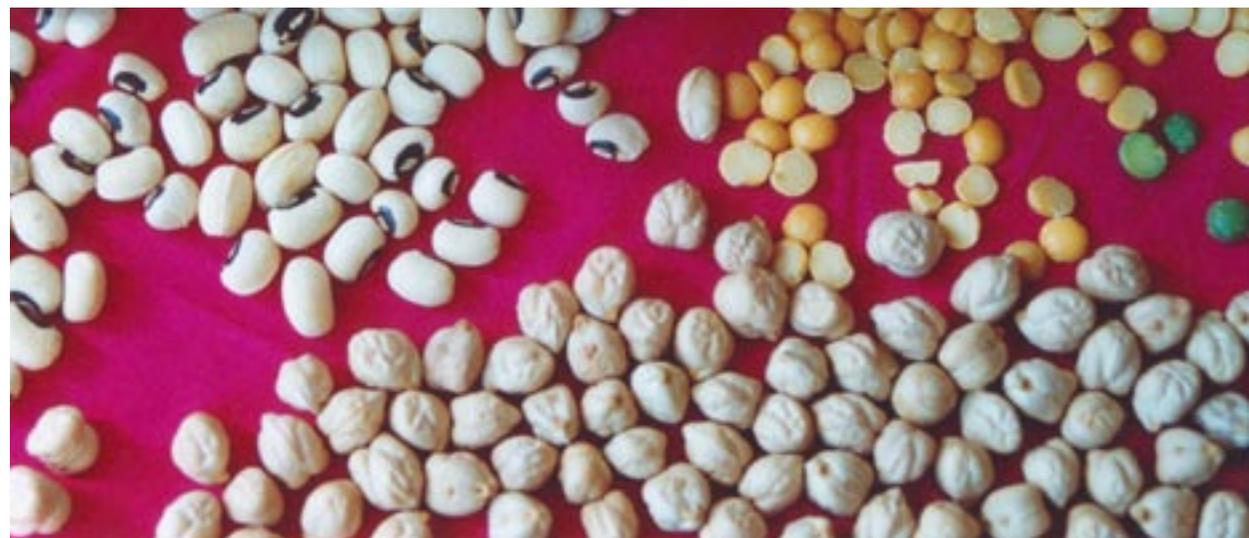
- ☞ Put prepared grains, beans, and soup bones in a medium heavy pot. Cover with cold water by about 5in/13cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until meat is cooked and beans are tender, about 45 minutes.
- ☞ Take out meat pieces. Discard bones and shred meat with the fingers. Slightly mash or bruise beans with a potato masher. Return meat to the pot. Add salt, pepper, cumin, and *noomi Basra* or lemon juice.
- ☞ In a small skillet, sauté onion in oil until golden, about 7 minutes. Add to soup pot.
- ☞ Resume simmering. If soup becomes too thick, add some hot water, and let it simmer, stirring occasionally for 10 to 15 minutes.
- ☞ Serve in small bowls, garnished with lots of chopped parsley.

Above: Noomi Basra

Opposite: Dried pulses

GRAINS AND BEANS SOUP OF MOSUL 2

Makes 6 servings



Another combination of beans and grains. It bears a striking resemblance to the medieval hearty pottage *tafsheel*, which was cooked with meat and a number of grains and legumes (see Introduction to this section, above).

½ cup (4oz/115g) dried red beans or black-eyed peas, washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) mung beans (see Glossary), washed and soaked overnight, drained
½ cup (4oz/115g) shelled red lentils, washed and drained (see Glossary)
½ cup (4oz/115g) rice, washed and soaked for 30 minutes
2 to 3 garlic cloves, whole and unskinned
½ cup (3oz/85g) peeled and diced tomatoes, fresh or canned
1 medium onion, chopped
2 tablespoons oil
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon ground cumin
Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
For garnish: chopped parsley, or fresh or dried dill

- ☞ Put red beans and mung beans in a medium heavy pot, and cover by about 5in/13cm with cold water. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and let it simmer, covered, for 15 minutes.
- ☞ Add lentils, rice, garlic, and tomatoes. Continue simmering until beans and grains are soft and tender, and soup is nicely thickened, about 20 minutes. Stir occasionally to prevent soup from sticking to the bottom of the pot. If soup gets too thick, add some more hot water.
- ☞ In a small skillet, sauté onion in oil until golden brown. Add to the simmering soup 10 minutes before it is done, along with salt, pepper, cumin, and lemon juice.
- ☞ Serve in small bowls garnished with lots of chopped parsley, or a small amount of dill.

SPICY LENTIL

Yakhni 'I-'Adas Makes 6 servings

Traditionally, this dish is cooked with lamb, but you can pass the meat and still have a nourishing and appetizing meal. Keep spices to the minimum, or use all the varieties suggested below, for a spicier and more aromatic dish. In the neighboring countries, such as Iran and Turkey, *yakhni* simply means stew. In Iraq, it is used to describe stews, which are thick and rather mushy in consistency, due to prolonged simmering. The word itself is sometimes used metaphorically. If we describe a piece of news, for instance, as *yakhni*, we mean it is an old bit of news. Nevertheless, do not let this discourage you from trying the dish. If prolonged simmering might spoil your news, it does wonders to your lentils.

2 tablespoons oil
1 pound (450g) lamb or beef cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), coarsely chopped
2 cloves garlic, grated
½ teaspoon turmeric
1 teaspoon each: ground cumin, ground coriander, and *baharat* (see Glossary)
½ teaspoon toasted whole aniseeds
½ teaspoon ground ginger
2 cups (16oz/450g) shelled red lentil, picked over and washed
½ cup (4oz/115g) whole, unshelled brown lentils, washed
1 heaping tablespoon tomato paste diluted in ¼ cup (60ml) hot water, or ¼ cup (60ml) tomato sauce
2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), peeled and chopped
¼ teaspoon chili powder, or to taste
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
Juice of one lemon/lime, or 1 teaspoon *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
For garnish: ¼ cup (1½ oz/ 45 g) chopped onion, browned in 1 tablespoon oil

☞ In a medium heavy 4-quart pot, heat oil and sauté meat cubes until all moisture evaporates, and meat starts to brown, about 15 minutes.
☞ Add onion, and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Stir in garlic, turmeric, cumin, coriander, *baharat*, aniseeds, and ginger. Stir until spices are fragrant.
☞ Stir in lentils, diluted tomato paste or sauce, chopped tomatoes, and chili. Add enough hot water to cover lentils and meat by about 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and simmer gently, covered, for about 30 minutes, stirring occasionally.
☞ Add salt, pepper, and lemon or *noomi Basra*, and resume simmering for about 15 more minutes, or until red lentils are mushy, whole brown lentils are tender, and sauce is nicely thickened. While simmering, stir frequently to prevent grains from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
☞ To serve, ladle into a big bowl, and sprinkle with the prepared browned diced onion. Warm bread or rice is the usual accompaniment to this dish.

Variations:

Spicy Lentils with Spinach

To the ingredients above, add 1 pound (450g) chopped spinach, or one 10oz/285g package frozen spinach. Add it to the pot about 10 minutes before dish is done, in the last step.

Spicy Lentils with Meatballs

Instead of meat cubes, prepare small meatballs (*Ras il-'Asfour* 000 above). Add them to the pot in the last step.

CURRIED BLACK-EYED PEAS

Kari 'I-Loubya Makes 4 servings

Since my mother used chilies sparingly in her cooking, my father, a devout lover of hot foods, felt the urge every now and then to prepare us a pot of hot and spicy curry. His dishes were memorably delicious, especially the one made with black-eyed peas. He made it so hot that we felt as if smoke was coming out of our ears while eating it.

1 cup (8oz/225 g) dried black-eyed peas, washed, soaked overnight, and drained. Alternatively, use frozen variety (1 pound/450g) or two 15oz/425g cans, drained
5 to 6 whole cloves of garlic, unskinned
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
2 tablespoons oil
1 teaspoon turmeric
½ teaspoon whole aniseed
2 tablespoons flour
1½ teaspoons salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1½ teaspoons ground cumin
1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
1 bay leaf
½ teaspoon chili flakes or powder, or to taste
1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

☞ In a medium pot, cover beans and garlic with cold water by 2in/5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, until tender to the touch, about 40 minutes (frozen beans will need less cooking time, so watch it). If canned variety is used, skip this step.

☞ While beans are simmering, heat oil in a medium skillet and sauté onion until it softens, about 5 minutes. Stir in turmeric, aniseeds, and flour until fragrant, 1 minute. Add 1 cup hot water, and mix well (easier with a wire whisk), set aside.

☞ When beans are cooked (if canned beans are used add them in this step with 1 cup/ 250ml hot water), add the onion mixture along with the rest of the ingredients. Mix well, and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to low, and let pot simmer gently for about 15 minutes, or until sauce is nicely thickened and beans are very tender, stirring occasionally to prevent ingredients from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
☞ A very satisfying dish, served with warm bread.



Above: Spicy Lentil

FLAT BREAD SOPPED IN BROTH OF FAVA/BROAD BEANS

Tashreeb/Thareed Bagilla Makes 4 servings

Bagilla, (fava/broad beans) is the Iraqi counterpart of the Egyptian *fool mudammas*. However, the Iraqi variety is larger and fleshier than the Egyptian beans. It is the dish to serve for brunch on Fridays, the weekend in Islamic countries.

The dish is invariably prepared without meat, and apparently, this was how it has always been served centuries ago. In the 14th-century augmented version of al-Baghdadi's cookbook, *Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada*, a variety of *thareed* recipe calls for boiling fava beans with salt, then sopping broken pieces of bread in its broth, with cumin, sumac, lemon juice, walnut, yogurt, clarified butter or oil (445-46). Indeed, the dish has always been associated with people content with the simplest needs of life.

There was a time, probably up until the mid-fifties, when people used to take their bread to be soaked in a big pot of simmering fava beans fixed by a woman vendor, at the corner of the neighborhood sidewalk. To distinguish which bread belongs to whom, people used to mark their breads with colored threads. When they came to pick up their dishes, *um il-bagilla* (literally 'mother of beans') would ask, "What's your color?" *Tashreeb bagilla* is not haute cuisine, but it can be served quite attractively, garnished with fried eggs sunny-side up, sprinkled with sumac and crushed *butnij* (river mint, see Glossary), with some chopped lemon pulp and green onion scattered all over, and drizzled with sizzling hot butter or oil.

Dried fava beans are normally used for making the dish except during the summertime when fully-grown fresh fava beans are available. In this case, the jacket is discarded, and the beans are simmered until tender. Alternatively, canned fava beans may be substituted. The dish is better made with slightly stale bread, so that it will not disintegrate when simmered in the broth. One last note, do your guests a favor, and remove the skins from the cooked beans before spreading them on the sopped bread in the serving platter. The skin will most likely be discarded anyway when eating the dish because it is hard on the digestion.

2 cups (12oz/350g) dried fava/broad beans, wash and soak in cold water for 24 hours, do not drain.

2 teaspoons salt

1½ Iraqi flat bread or 4 Arabic breads (see Chapter 1)

2 tablespoons olive oil

4 eggs

1 lemon

1 teaspoon *sumac* (see Glossary), optional

1 tablespoon dried and crushed *butnij*

(see Glossary mint)

☞ In a medium pot, put fava beans with water in which it was soaked, add more water if needed to cover beans by about 5in/13cm (up to ¾ of the pot). Bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed, 10 minutes. Reduce heat to low, and let beans simmer slowly and gently, covered, for about an hour, or until beans feel soft to the touch. Add salt about 10 minutes before beans are done, since adding it earlier will toughen the beans.

☞ To assemble the dish: with a slotted spoon, take out the beans and set them aside in a bowl. Break bread into smaller pieces, and add them to the bean liquid. Let them simmer for about 10 minutes.

☞ With a slotted spoon take out the bread pieces and place them on a big platter. Spread the reserved fava beans all over the bread. Some people prefer to remove the bean skins before spreading them over the bread.

☞ In a medium non-stick skillet, heat oil and fry eggs sunny-side up, until just set. It is a good idea to put a lid on the skillet while frying to help eggs set faster without burning. Separate eggs if possible, and arrange them on the beans.

☞ Squeeze lemon juice on the entire dish, and sprinkle crushed *butnij* and sumac all over. Serve with wedges of tomatoes and onions, and mixed pickles, preferably hot peppers.

☞ For an even prettier presentation, I sometimes use lemon pulp instead of lemon juice (see How to Get Lemon Pulp 000), mix it with chopped spring onion/scallion (white and green parts), and scatter them over the dish.

FLAT BREAD SOPPED IN BROTH OF CREAMY BLACK-EYED PEAS

Tashreeb Loubya Makes 4 servings

A variation on the fava/broad beans dish. Dried black-eyed peas or a variety we call *loubya hamra* 'red beans' are used in making this humble but delicious dish. Lamb or veal shanks are sometimes cooked with them, but it makes a satisfying meal even without the meat.

2 lamb shanks (about 2½ lb/1.25 kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone)

1 tablespoon oil, if meat is used

1 cup (8 oz/ 225 g) dried black-eyed peas, washed, soaked overnight, and drained. Alternatively, use frozen variety (1 pound/ 450 g) or two 15 oz/ 425 g cans, drained

1 onion, quartered

2 whole *noomi Basra* (see Glossary), pricked at several places

4 to 6 whole garlic cloves, unpeeled

1 teaspoon cumin

1 tablespoon salt

1½ Iraqi flat bread or 4 Arabic breads (see Chapter 1)

2 tablespoons oil

4 eggs, optional

1 tablespoon dried and crushed *butnij*

(see Glossary mint)

☞ If the optional meat is used, heat oil in a medium heavy pot and brown meat pieces on both sides, about 10 minutes. Cover with hot water by 1in/2.5cm. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low and simmer gently, until meat is tender, about an hour. This can be done ahead of time, since it is going to be added to the beans at a later stage. Besides, this will also enable you to remove fat after it solidifies in the refrigerator.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, put drained beans, onion, *noomi Basra*, and garlic. Cover with cold water by about 3in/7.5cm and bring to a quick boil, skimming if needed. Reduce heat to low, and let beans simmer, covered, until tender to the touch, about 40 minutes. Add salt, cumin, and the cooked meat, if using any, with whatever broth is left, about 10 minutes before beans are done. Stir gently. (Frozen beans will need less cooking time, so watch it). If canned variety is used, then let onion, *noomi Basra*, and garlic simmer in water for about 15 minutes, then add the drained canned beans, with cooked meat if used, and simmer for additional 10 minutes.

☞ To assemble the dish: take out the beans and meat (if used) with a slotted spoon and set aside.

☞ Break bread into smaller pieces and put them in the bean pot. Let them cook gently on medium heat, for about 10 minutes.

☞ Spoon out bread pieces into a big platter, with some of the beans liquid. Cover bread with the reserved beans, and arrange meat pieces if used, on top. Squeeze the juice of *noomi Basra* all over the surface, making sure to discard the seeds, as they will impart a bitter taste to the dish.

☞ Heat oil in a small pan, and sizzle it all over the dish. If eggs are used, which often is the case when meat is not used, heat the oil in a non-stick pan, and fry the eggs, sunny-side up. Putting a lid on the pan while frying will help the egg set quickly. Arrange the eggs on the dish, and sprinkle it generously with *butnij*. Serve it with tomatoes and onions cut into wedges along with pickles, preferably hot peppers.

The Problem with Beans

Beans are nutritious, versatile, tasty, and cheap. They are a good source of fiber and are believed to lower blood pressure and bad-cholesterol levels. They are low in fat and high in folic acid, which helps prevent some birth defects and cancers. The problem with beans is that our bodies lack the enzyme to break down bean sugars. Bacteria feed on the sugars in the intestines in a natural fermentation process producing, unfortunately, gas. To make the effects of beans on your body less devastating, some think that it helps a lot if you soak beans overnight, rinse them, and then cook them in fresh water. Let them boil for 10 minutes, then lower heat and simmer to tenderness. Then there is always the product 'Beano,' which comes to the rescue and helps digest these troublesome sugars. After all, didn't it help the monks keep their vow of silence, as the television commercial goes? Talking of beans, there is a funny story in the *Arabian Nights*, which deals with the by-product of beans. Richard Burton, the translator, finds the following story very curious, and thinks it is ethnologically valuable. It is the story of "How Abu Hasan Brake Wind." The story incidentally gives details on the elaborate wedding customs at the time. It begins with the wedding of Abu Hasan, a widower who is remarrying following the advice of his friends.

The whole house was thrown open to feasting; there were rices of five several colors, and sherbets of as many more; and kids stuffed with walnuts and almonds and pistachios and a camel colt roasted whole. So they ate and drank and made mirth and merriment; and the bride was displayed in her seven dresses and one more, to the women, who could not take their eyes off her. At last the bride groom was summoned to the chamber where she sat enthroned; and he rose slowly and with dignity from his divan; but in so doing, for that he was

over full of meat and drink, lo and behold, he let fly a fart, great and terrible. Thereupon the guest turned to his neighbor and talked aloud and made as though he had heard nothing, fearing for his life. But a consuming fire was lit in Abu Hasan's heart; so he pretended a call of nature; and, in lieu of seeking the bride-chamber, he went down to the house-court and saddled his mare and rode off, weeping bitterly, through the shadow of the night.

He fled to India, and after many years, he longed to go home. Disguised he went, and stayed at the outskirts of the city, listening to people to make sure that his case was forgotten by now. "He listened carefully for seven nights and seven days, till it so chanced that, as he was sitting at the door of a hut, he heard the voice of a young girl saying, "O my mother, tell me the day when I was born; for such an one of my companions is about to take an omen for me." The mother answered, "Thou was born, O my daughter, on the very night when Abu Hasan farted." Now the listener no sooner heard these words than he rose up from the bench, and fled away."

Burton explains that "a *Badawi* who eructates as a civility, has a hatred for this... and were a by-stander to laugh at its accidental occurrence, he would at once be cut down as a 'pundonor.'" To the western world, he explains, such an occurrence poses no point of honor, and is ignored (5:135-37). It seems that the ancient Mesopotamians' attitude towards the issue was as nonchalant as that of the modern Occidentals. Here is an Akkadian proverb, whose translator chose to give the title "Tempest in a Teapot" (Foster *Before the Muses* 430):

Something that has never happened from time immemorial: A young girl broke wind in her husband's embrace.

V MACARONI

SUCCULENT MACARONI SIMMERED IN SPICY TAMARIND OR POMEGRANATE SAUCE

Ma'karoni bi'l-Laham Makes 4 to 6 servings

In Iraq and most parts of the Arab world, especially the eastern region, pasta is not a staple food the way rice is. It is cooked every now and then for variety's sake. In my growing years, the only types of pasta we had access to was the long tubular macaroni, broken into smaller pieces before cooking them. Of the fine noodles, we had vermicelli (*sha'riyya*) and the local toasted small noodles called *rishta*. Spaghetti was the last to reach the region. Both *sha'riyya* and *rishta* are used in soups, and cooked with rice as garnish. Because *sha'riyya* is much finer and delicate in texture, it is also used in making desserts. The way macaroni is traditionally cooked nowadays is very basic, but the blend of spices added makes it very aromatic.

1 pound (450g) boneless lamb cut into small cubes, or lean ground/minced meat
2 to 3 tablespoons olive oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon turmeric
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can)
3 medium tomatoes, diced (about 2 cups/12oz/350g)
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) chopped pepper, preferably hot variety
1 cup (4oz/115g) sliced mushrooms, optional
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
½ teaspoon ground cumin
½ teaspoon ginger powder
½ teaspoon ground mustard seeds
1 bay leaf
1 tablespoon tamarind concentrate or pomegranate syrup
10 ounces ziti macaroni cooked al dente according to package directions. Drain, but keep 2 cups (475ml) of its liquid aside.

An Ancient Mesopotamian Incantation against Gas Pains

Wind is beneficial in its natural habitat, but when imprisoned in the body, according to the ancient and medieval medical doctrines, it can be very painful, causing all kinds of suffering such as headaches and joint and gastric pains. So next time you suffer similar discomforts, try this ancient Mesopotamian incantation (Foster *Before the Muses* 184):

Go out, wind! Go out, wind!
Go out, wind, offspring of the gods!
Go out, wind, abundance of the peoples!
Go out of the head, wind!
Go out of the eye, wind!
Go out of the mouth, wind!

☞ In a heavy medium pot, cook meat in oil, stirring occasionally until it starts to brown, about 10 minutes.
 ☞ Stir in onion, and cook until soft, about 5 minutes. Add turmeric and tomato paste, and stir for a minute until tomato paste emits a pleasant aroma.
 ☞ Fold in the rest of the ingredients except for the macaroni, and stir the mix on high heat for a few minutes.

4. Gently fold in the cooked macaroni, and add, at first, 1 cup (237ml) of the reserved macaroni liquid. Use the remaining amount as needed. Let pot simmer on low heat until ingredients are well blended, and a small amount of the thickened sauce remains, about 15 minutes. Serve with salad.

Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History

المعروني والتعريف: شيء من الناعم

Pasta, fresh and dried, is traditionally associated with Italian cooking. However, it has been plausibly argued that its homeland might be somewhere else. Clifford Wright's search, the most extensive so far, has led him to the "juncture of medieval Sicilian, Italian, and Arab cultures" as a possible origin for the pasta proper, made from hard durum wheat (622).

Indeed, Arabic medieval sources do make a clear distinction between soft wheat and hard wheat. The former was called *hinta baydhaa'* (white wheat), and the latter *hinta hamraa'* (red wheat), described as heavy, sweet, and high in gluten ('*alka*, literally 'chewy'), and it is said to be the best for making *sameedh* flour (best quality fine white flour), as described by Sulayman al-Isra'ili (d.932) in *Kitab al-Aghdhiya* (2:2-4). Besides, emmer wheat, which is closely related to hard durum wheat, was cultivated in the ancient Near East.



Now, macaroni, which specifically designates varieties of short curved tubes, is the name given to all kinds of dried pasta in the Arab world. Etymologically, there is the theory that the name is of Arabic origin; contrary to the belief that it is an Italian loan word. It describes, the argument proceeds, an old type of pasta made in Tunisia by joining (*qarana*) the two ends of vermicelli-like noodles and, hence the name *maqrana* (two ends attached), which became the generic name for macaroni. Wright withholds his judgment for lack of written evidence (627). It is my hunch, though, that there should be some credible grounds for this theory, and that calling pasta by this generic name was not exclusively Tunisian. Up until the fifties in Iraq, pasta in the southern region was called *maqarna*. In cosmopolitan areas such as Baghdad, that word was already passé. It was replaced with the classier italicized *ma'karoni*.

Back in the medieval times, many types of pasta, dried and fresh, were already familiar foods. They were incorporated into stews, soups, or eaten as a main hot dish cooked with meat, similar to what people used to do with *ruzz mufalfal* (rice with separated grains). There are also recipes for cooking them as dessert with milk and butter, and sweetened with honey. Following are all the pasta preparations mentioned in diverse documents, including cookbooks and lexicons, from the eastern and western medieval Islamic world: *iriya*, *rishta*, *lakhsha*, *tutmaj*, *salma*, *shishberek*, *sha'eeriyya*, *fiddawsh*, *muhammas*, and *tiltayn*.

The most common variety was *itriya*. It was thin strings of noodles made with stiff unfermented dough (*fateer*). References to it in cookbooks show that it was usually available as dried pasta. We are lucky to have a recipe for making it in the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan*: Semolina or regular flour is made into stiff dough with water and a little salt, and then rolled out thinly on a rectangular board. It is then cut into strings, and each string is rolled between the palms as thinly as possible (like thin spaghetti). These strings are left to dry out in the sun (al-Tujeebi 91). *Rishta* was said to be the Persian name for *itriya*, called so because it looks like fine strings (Ibn Sina 233). There are differences though. *Rishta* is usually used as fresh pasta, and there is no indication that the strings are rolled like *itriya* but just cut into thin strips, the length of each is the width of four fingers put together - something like linguini - and used right away, as described in al-Baghdadi's 13th century recipe (Arberry 45).

Rishta stayed with us. It is the specialty of the northern city of Mosul, sold as toasted, finger-long thin strands of pasta. We also have available a more delicate variety of noodles and much longer and thinner, called *sha'riyya* (like hair). But *itriya*, the name, fell out of use today, and it is still not settled what it means. Through the Andalusian Arabs, pasta migrated to Italy. The first pictorial representation of pasta occurred in the Medieval Latin translations of the Arabic medical eleventh-century treatise of Ibn-Butlan's *Taqweem al-Sihha*. In the manuscript's 14th-century translations of Venice and Rome, it was called '*trij*' (Wright 623). Apparently, *itriya* had a remarkably long history. According to al-Biruni (11th century), *itriya* was called *itreen* in Latin and Syriac (50). From non-Arab sources we know that before the Latin *itria* mentioned in Galen, it was *itrion* in Greek, and that the Jerusalem Talmud, which dates back to 5th-century AD, mentions "a kind of pasta known as *itrium* was common in Palestine from the 3rd to 5th centuries" (Silvano Serventi *Pasta* 17). I find this mention significant in our attempt to figure out what *itriya* means.

As early as the 8th century, the famous Arab linguist al-Khalil bin Ahmed in his *Al-'Ayn* describes *itriya* (إطرية) as the specialty food of Ahl al-Sham, that is, people of the Levant in the Eastern Mediterranean region. Now, in the medieval lexicon *Lisan al-'Arab* (s.v. اطرية) these people were called *turiyoun* (طوريون), i.e. from *al-Tur* (الطور) *al-Sham*. So in light of this, *itriya* quite possibly points to the place where it was most widely used.

Another legitimate etymological ancestor for *itriya* might well have been the Akkadian *turru*, which means 'rope,' possibly descriptive of the pasta strings. Indeed, earlier attempts for making pasta may plausibly be recognized in the cuisine of ancient Mesopotamia as registered in one of the Babylonian recipes, namely 'spleen stew,' where there were directions to throw into the cooking pot "bits of roasted *qaiatu*-dough" (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 10). These bits of roasted '*qaiatu*' dough might quite possibly have been some sort of noodles. The Akkadian "*qatanu*," from which "*qaiatu*" was possibly derived, means 'to become thin and fine,' usually used in relation to textiles (*Dictionary of American Heritage* 4th Edition). The Arabic *qitan*, with its plural, *qaiateen*, is ultimately derived from this Akkadian '*qatanu*,' which means strings or cords. Therefore, there is the possibility that the *qaiatu*-dough was flattened thin and cut into strips like '*qatanu*' (strips or cords). The detail in the recipe that they were to be toasted before throwing them into the simmering pot confirms the possibility that it was not regular bread dough. As we all know from our familiarity with *sha'riyya* (vermicelli noodles), toasting helps keep them intact and prevents them from getting doughy or disintegrating into the liquid.

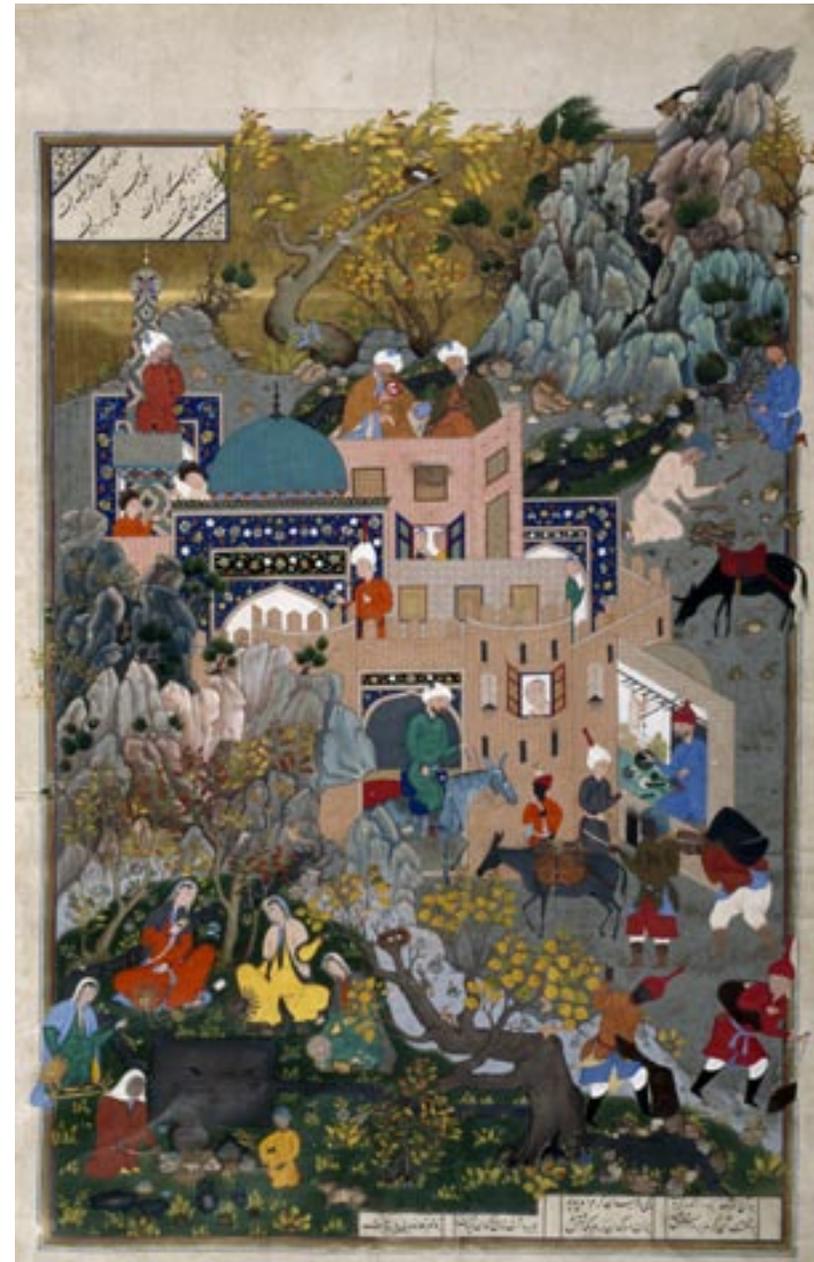
Now, besides the string noodles *rishta* and *itriya*, other varieties of dried pastas were used in the medieval Islamic region. *Sha'eeriyya* was small pasta shaped like barley grains (*sha'eer*), as the name suggests. In the western region and al-Andalus it was more commonly known as *fiddawsh*. According to a recipe in the Andalusian 13th-century cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan*, a recipe for making it goes as follows: $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of sameed (semolina flour) is kneaded with some water and salt into a hard ball of dough. It should be thoroughly pressed and kneaded. Then it is put in a bowl, and small pieces of pasta are made by taking a tiny amount and pressing it thinly between the fingers, wide in the middle and tapered towards both ends like a wheat grain. The resulting pasta is left out to dry in the sun, and stored. This pasta is what in Italy was known later as *orzo* (modern Italian for rice grain, but originally, barley). A variation on *fiddawsh* was *muhammasa*, shaped like small balls, size of a coriander seed each (al-Tujeebi 90-91).

There was also *lakhsha* (literally, 'the slippery'), which was thin small sheets of pasta, boiled in broth. The earliest *lakhsha* recipe occurs in al-Warraaq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 81), where it was said to be the Persian King Khosrau's favorite dish on a cold winter day (Khosrau d. 579). According to the recipe, stiff dough was rolled out thinly, and cut into triangles with a sharp knife. This fresh pasta was cooked in meat broth, drained and served in a platter along with the cooked meat and *sibagh* (dipping sauce) made by combining 2 parts dried whey (*masl*), 1 part ground walnut, and 1 part bruised garlic, and cooking them with broth, enough to cover them.

This same pasta was called *tutmaj* in Turkish, and we have several recipes for making it. In al-Warraaq's 13th-century augmented version of his cookbook, the recipe calls for stiff unfermented dough to be flattened thin, cut into strips, and spread outside to dry out in the air for half a day. The strips are then cut into 2-finger long pieces, cooked in a small amount of water, and served

with fried meat. The instruction is to eat the dish with a spoon *mil'aqa* or a fork *shawka* (fol. 168r). In the Andalusian 13th-century cookbooks, this fresh paper-thin pasta was considered so delicate that it was fit for women only (Anwa' al-Saydala 161-62), and in *Fidhalat al-Khiwan*, they were described as thin 2-finger-wide squares of pasta, and were dried and used as needed. In the 15th-century Syrian cookbook by Ibn al-Mubarrid, the boiled and drained *tutmaj* pasta was covered with yogurt sauce, seasoned with mint and garlic, drizzled with clarified butter, and garnished with fried meat. This Syrian cookbook mentions an interesting type of fresh pasta called *salma* (صلما). In the medieval lexicon *Lisan al-'Arab*, an ear is called *salmaa'* if it is small and rounded. The instructions in the recipe are to take the prepared stiff dough, roll it like a pencil, and then slice it crosswise into small discs. Each disc is then pressed flat like a *dirham* coin with the finger. This pasta is boiled in water, and then drained and drizzled with yogurt, and garnished with fried meat and onion, and chopped mint and garlic (374).

As for the stuffed pasta pieces, known in Italy as *ravioli*, the earliest description of similar pasta preparation occurs in al-Warraaq's cookbook. The recipe calls for stiff, well-kneaded plain bread dough, usually used for *sanbusaj* pastries. Small portions of the dough are thinly flattened into rounds and stuffed with cooked meat-mix, folded, and sides sealed, and then dropped into the boiling stew for a short while (Chapter 58). The recipe used to be prepared by the Abbasid prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839). In other medieval sources, *ravioli*-like pasta started to be called *shishberek*, specifically in the Levantine region. In the Aleppo 13th-century *Al-Wusla ila'l-Habeeb*, there is mention of *qalab al-shishberek*, a special round cutter (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 624). In the 15th century Syrian cookbook, it was quite clear that *tutmaj* pasta dough was used. It was thinly rolled out, stuffed, cut out, and dropped into the water. When done, they were served with yogurt sauce seasoned with mint and garlic (Ibn al-Mubarrid 374).



LAMB AND BEEF

AND GROUND/MINCED MEAT DISHES



- I Lamb and Beef Dishes**
Tashreeb of Lamb on a Bed of Succulent Flat Bread 000
Tashreeb of Lamb and Eggplant/Aubergine Simmered in Pomegranate sauce
 Head, Tripe, and Trotters, *Pacha* Stuffed Tripe, *Qibbayat* Simmered Lamb (pot roast), *Habeet*, Stuffed Lamb, *Qouzi* Aromatic Leg of Lamb
 Leg of lamb in Sweet-sour sauce
 Aromatic Shanks Braised in Vegetable Sauce
 Meat Simmered in Vinegar
 Curried Lamb or Beef
 Chilli Fry
 Breaded Lamb Chops
 Grilled Lamb Chops, *Kulbasti*
 Liver Simmered in Tomato Sauce
 Liver Simmered in Cumin Sauce
- II Dishes with Ground/Minced Meat**
 Scotch Eggs, Medieval Style,
Kebab Supreme,
 Eggplant/Aubergine Rolls,
 Necklaces of Eggplant/Aubergine and *Kebab, Maldhouma*,
 'Sparrows' Heads' Simmered in Dill Sauce,
 Zucchini/Courgette Simmered in White Sauce,



Lamb, Beef and Ground/Minced Meat Dishes

Al-luhoom
اللحم

I LAMB AND BEEF DISHES

Arab cuisine of today is generally characterized by a moderate consumption of meat, usually taken in combination with lots of vegetables, bread, grains, and beans. Indeed, in most of the dishes cooked on daily basis, meat is added as a flavoring agent or a condiment rather than the primary ingredient itself. The reason is primarily economical. Vegetables are comparatively speaking much cheaper than meat, and they are mostly used to eke the meat out. Fortunately, according to modern studies, this is the healthy thing to do.

With regard to consumption of meat, the medieval diners were much more demanding than their modern counterparts are. Vegetarian main dishes to them were not real food. They were called *muzawwarat* (fake dishes), served as side dishes, cooked for special religious purposes such as Lent, or given to sick people who could not handle meat.

However, when it comes to dinner invitations and other social gatherings, we are as medieval as medieval can be. According to the traditional codes of hospitality, meat is a status symbol. The more meat you offer your guests the more honored and welcomed they feel, and the more appreciated you will be. Vegetarian dishes are not the right stuff for such occasions. A classic Arab peasant feast in general might well be huge trays, heaped with rice and succulent lamb, with lots of flat breads. In urban areas dishes are more luxuriously prepared. On weddings, for instance, *qouzi* is the traditional dish to prepare. A whole lamb would be stuffed with rice, nuts, and raisins, and then rubbed from the outside with a paste of onion crushed with spices like cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom. It is browned first in hot clarified butter, and then roasted and served on a mound of fragrant *anber* rice, an excellent local variety of rice usually grown in the southern marshes of the region. Around the center tray of *qouzi*, numerous plates of stews, greens, salad vegetables, and pickles would be arranged.

The sheep is also a religious sacrificial symbol. It

is usually slaughtered when people perform the pilgrimage to Mecca, known as *Hajj*, or as a fulfillment of a wish called *nidhir*. Most of the sacrificed meat would be distributed among neighbors and the needy. Whether for religious sacrifice or regular consumption, according to the guidelines of the *halal* method, the Muslim butcher must say *bismillah* (in the name of God) before slaughtering the animals.

Beef is used but mostly in dishes requiring ground meat. Pork is not readily available for it is banned by Islam. There is evidence, however, that on the land of ancient pre-Islamic Mesopotamia, pigs along with sheep, cows, goats, and gazelles were consumed. The domestication of sheep started around the ninth millennium BC in northern Iraq. Cows and pigs were domesticated a little later. In Sumer, beef and mutton were popular with those who could afford them, but mutton was more commonly used. Of sheep, there were many breeds. About 200 Sumerian words designating the various types of sheep have come down to us, although most of them are still unidentified. Of the known types there were, for instance, the wiry-haired sheep, fattened sheep, mountain sheep, and fat-tailed sheep. Of all these kinds, only the fat-tailed sheep survived. It is this fat tail that has been providing the cooks for thousands of years with a valuable source of fat, looked upon as a great delicacy and high quality fat. In fact, it is not until recently that people in the region started to use less of this fat and more of vegetable oil for health reasons.

Rich ancient Assyrians used to keep herds of sheep. As for the poor, one or two were kept mainly for cheese making. In their records, they were referred to as 'sheep of the roof.' The indication is that they were kept on the flat roofs of their houses presumably for lack of pastures or room.

As for cows, they were kept for their meat as well as their milk, dung, and hide, in addition to being used as agricultural laborers. Those destined for food or sacrifice must have been fattened to a huge size. In one of the letters belonging to the second millennium BC there was mention of an ox intended for a palace offering, which had been made so fat that it could not stand. They were very much like part of the family. It is known, for instance, that in Old-Babylonian households, they were given names just like any other member of the family. Letters sometimes inquire about the health of the cow along with the rest of the household. Goats were normally herded with sheep, and their meat was acceptable but definitely not a delicacy. It was a regular part of peasant diet. In the modern northern regions of Iraq, goat meat is sold along with beef and lamb, but it is reputed to be hard on the digestion. Goats were mostly kept for their delicious milk and their hides, which made excellent containers to hold liquids. The gazelle was considered an important meat especially in the third millennium BC and earlier. As for pigs, archaeological evidence shows that in the third millennium BC they were a common sight on the streets of Mesopotamia, and indeed they were up until the 1950s AD. Wild pigs can still be found in the marshes in the south, and there is an island on the river Tigris near Baghdad called *Jazeera al-Khanazeer* (the pigs' island). Evidently, it was once inhabited by pigs. However, the pig was rarely presented in art. It was mostly valued for its fat meat. A Sumerian proverb



makes the point that pork was too good for a slave girl. She has to make do with the lean ham. With the advent of Judaism and later Islam, pork was tabooed. This religious prohibition, some argue, has its roots in medical doctrines - that pork was a dangerous meat in a hot climate, and that this must have been taken into account when the dietary regulations were being formulated.

Archaeological findings also point out to the fact that after the animals were slaughtered they were butchered into these cuts: head, neck, hind legs, breast, ribs, thighs, back tail, heart, stomach, liver, entrails, and kidneys. There is also evidence that it was made into soups, and stews. It was roasted, boiled, fried, ground, chopped, pickled, and dried, sometimes after being steeped in a solution of spices.

Above: Bastrima

TASHREEB OF LAMB ON A BED OF SUCCULENT FLAT BREAD

Thareed/Tashreeb bil-Laham Makes 4 servings

The idea of *thareed* - soaking bread in broth and serving it with meat - is an ancient one. In one of the Babylonian recipes, breadcrumbs were added to the pot as a last stage in the preparation of the dish (more details in Introduction, Section VI). Islamic tradition has it that the prophet Muhammad singled out *thareed* as the 'master' of all dishes. History has it too, that the prophet's great-grandfather got his nickname *al-Hashim* (the crumbler) when in a year of famine he made bread available for his tribe *Quraysh*. He brought it by caravan from Syria, and crumbled it and made *thareed* with it. *Thareed* was the most popular dish ever served at the tables of high and low. It was what they put in it and how they served it that elevated it or kept it a humble dish.

In today's cuisine, *thareed* or *tashreeb* is still popular as a traditional dish but it is usually reserved for informal gatherings. The way to eat it is to dig in with the hands, actually three fingers, and enjoy it with lots of condiments.

2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone). Any pieces of lamb with bone and substantial amount of meat will do.

1 tablespoon oil

1 tablespoon curry powder

5 to 6 cloves garlic, unskinned

2 medium onions, quartered

1 cup (4oz/45g) chickpeas, soaked overnight, and drained. Or 2 cups (16oz/450g) drained canned chickpeas

4 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into big cubes

½ teaspoon ground coriander

2 bay leaves

2 to 3 whole *noomi Basra*, pricked at several places (see Glossary)

2 whole chili peppers, optional

1 tablespoon salt

3 boiled eggs, shelled, optional

1½ big Iraqi flat breads, or 4 pita breads (see Chapter 1)

Yogurt Sauce (optional):

1 cup (250ml) yogurt

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

½ teaspoon salt

1 garlic clove, grated

¼ teaspoon crushed chili

☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil and brown meat pieces on all sides, about 10 minutes. Add curry powder, garlic, and onion. Stir for a minute until curry is fragrant.

☞ Add chickpeas, potatoes, coriander, bay leaves, dried limes, and chili peppers, if using any (Canned chickpeas are added about 10 minutes before meat is done). Stir in 5 to 6 cups hot water (1½ liters). There should be enough liquid to cover the meat by 1in/2.5cm. Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and let meat simmer, covered, until very tender and enough liquid is left, about 1½ hours, depending on your choice of meat cuts. Add salt and shelled boiled eggs, if using any, half way through cooking. Discard bay leaves.

☞ When ready to serve, break bread into small pieces, and put them in a big dish. Pour enough of the liquid to cover the bread, and arrange meat pieces and the rest of vegetables on top of the bread. Traditionally some sizzling hot oil is drizzled on the meat mixture, but this step can be skipped.

☞ Prepare the sauce if used, by putting all the ingredients together in a bowl and stirring until smooth. Spoon this sauce on top of the *tashreeb*. Serve with pickles, and sliced vegetables such as onion, tomatoes, and cucumber.

A Light Touch:

If you want to get rid as much as possible of the fat, cook meat the night before, and refrigerate the pot. The following day, and before heating it, remove the solidified layer of fat on top.

Variations:

Tashreeb Ahmar (Lamb Simmered in Tomato Sauce):

Stir 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) along with the curry powder, garlic, and onion, in the first step.

TASHREEB OF LAMB AND EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE SIMMERED IN POMEGRANATE SAUCE

Tashreeb b'Sharaab il-Rumman Makes 4 servings

A nice variation on the basic *tashreeb* dish. Instead of *noomi Basra*, pomegranate syrup is used to give the dish a delicious sweet-sour flavor and an attractive hue. Similar dishes, called *rummaniyyat* (pomegranate stews) are given in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 58), in which crushed chickpeas are added to the broth to thicken it. An adjusted version of this dish featured in *Food and Wine Magazine*, "Iraqi Lamb and Eggplant Stew with Pitas" (Nov. 2007 122). It was "one of wordsmith and perfect host Jesse Sheidlower's favorites."

2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg) prepared as instructed in the main *tashreeb* recipe above

2 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

¼ cup (60ml) pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

2 whole chili peppers, optional

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

4 small eggplants/aubergines, or 1 big eggplant

¼ cup (2oz/60g) yellow split chickpeas, washed, soaked, for 30 minutes, and cooked in water just enough to cover, until they start to soften,

about 15 minutes

1 tablespoon salt

1½ big Iraqi flat breads, or 4 pita breads

(see Chapter 1)

☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat the oil and brown meat pieces on all sides, about 10 minutes. Add onion and stir for a few more minutes.

☞ Stir in pomegranate syrup, *baharat*, chili peppers if used, and coriander. Pour about 5 cups (1¼ liters) hot water, or enough to cover the meat. Bring to a quick boil, then turn heat to low, and simmer pot, covered, until meat is very tender, about 1½ hours.

☞ While pot is simmering, prepare eggplant. Trim the stalks of the eggplants but do not remove them altogether. Peel eggplants completely, and quarter them lengthwise but not all the way through, i.e. leave them intact. Soak them in warm salted water for



30 minutes, drain well, and then lightly brown in a small amount of oil, or brush them with oil and broil/grill them.

☞ If using 1 big eggplant, peel it and cut it into thick slices. Soak in warm salted water for 30 minutes, then drain and lightly brown in a little oil, or brush with oil and broil/grill.

☞ Add the prepared eggplant half way through cooking along with the cooked split chickpeas (no need to drain them), and salt.

☞ In a big platter, break bread into smaller pieces. Pour enough of the hot liquid to soak bread. Arrange meat pieces and eggplant all over the bread. Serve with sliced salad vegetables.

HEAD, TRIPE, AND TROTTERS

Pacha

This dish is for the nostalgic, the curious, and the bold. As for the squeamish, I can only say, you don't know what you're missing! Here is a description of it through the eyes of an American couple, visiting Baghdad in the late sixties:

Nearby [the hotel] was a restaurant whose stock in trade was pacha, the boiled heads, stomachs and trotters of sheep. Outside, a boy cracked bones on a small anvil. Inside, a huge aluminum kettle steamed in anticipation of the midday rush. An early customer ordered a bowl of broth and a second bowl containing broth-soaked bread; he helped himself to side dishes of onion and turshi, a mixture of pickled vegetables made attractively pink with beets or beet juice. His meal looked like a balanced, nourishing one, and I reckoned that it cost about 30 cents; for another 15 cents, he could have had pieces of tongue or stomach as well. It suddenly occurred to me that Iraq could be a bargain paradise for retirement. (Nickles, 109)

Pacha is definitely not an haute cuisine dish, and you either love it or dread it. When I was a child, it was not the dish for me. The parts in it I was able to accept as consumable food were far less than the parts I would put aside untouched, with the result I would end up hungrier than when I started the meal. However, as I grew older and bolder, I discovered some of the joys of eating it. Though even to this day, there are parts I would never dream of eating, such as the eye of the sheep, which to some is considered a delicacy, and is reserved for the honored guests, as is the custom amongst the peasants and the Bedouins. When introducing a person to this dish for the first time, tripe and trotters pose less of a problem than the head, and if you want to enjoy it really, do not think about it, just eat it. Gavin Maxwell, the British writer who stayed in the marshes in the south of Iraq for some time in the mid fifties, describes his first encounter with this dish, which obviously was not carefully and meticulously cleaned the way it should be:

A hospitable sheikh will sometimes kill a sheep, whose boiled and nauseous head is placed among the other dishes to announce the fact. Pieces of flesh from the ears, the hair still attached, are esteemed as a delicacy, and hospitable fingers explore for a guest the gums and palate, producing strips and morsels which would be appetizing if the head were not staring at the eater with those dreadful boiled eyes. (24)

Apparently, *pacha* is one of those dishes that have to be introduced with an apology, everywhere. The American food writer M.F.K. Fisher, herself a tripe eater, dedicates in her book *With Bold Knife and Fork*, a chapter to tripe, entitled "The Trouble with Tripe." It is the kind of dish that requires a big pot and plenty of hungry people. She then relates in her familiar amusing manner how once in Dijon in France she went to a small restaurant all by herself. No other members of her family shared with her this interest in tripe. She ordered a dish of tripe for old time's sake. "They were as good as they had ever been some decades or centuries ago. They hissed and sizzled with delicate authority." The place was noisy, and an accordionist that she had last seen in Marseilles added to the wildness. "When he saw me digging into my little pot of tripe," she says, "he nodded, recognizing me as a fellow wanderer" (122, 125).

In the Middle East in general, and Iraq in particular, *pacha* is a very popular traditional dish. Actually, some people even have it for breakfast. A hefty filling breakfast, no doubt, that will last the whole day. Indeed, it is reputed to be so filling and nourishing that if a person talks too much, his friends will chide him saying, "What's the matter with you? Have you eaten *pacha* or what?"

In the old days, the anklebones (*astragali*) of trotters used to be 'collectible items' for children. After eating the trotters, these heel bones were washed and given to the children to play a very popular game called *ch'aab*. Indeed, in ancient times they were used as dices for board games. Not only that. Those same bones were

also used by spiteful women who wanted misfortune to befall a second favored wife (*dharra*), for instance. The *cha'ab*, in this case, would be put at the doorsteps or thrown over the fence of the target woman. This would do the magic, so they believed.

How to prepare *Pacha*

Thorough and meticulous cleansing of the sheep's head, tripe, and trotters is the key to good *pacha*. Luckily, in the local markets they can be bought readily cleaned from the butcher's, which makes the task of preparing this dish much easier. However, people who slaughter a lamb have to start from scratch, the same way our ancient ancestors used to do, as evident in the Babylonian recipe, "goat's kid stew" (Bottéro *Mesopotamian Culinary Texts* 9). The instructions were to singe the head, legs, and tail first on direct fire to burn the hairs, assumably after dipping the parts in boiling water several times to facilitate the plucking of the wool first. The tripe should be washed and washed until it becomes white in color, and then cut into pieces the size of the hand palm (details in the following recipe). Some people prefer to cook the trotters only, and a recipe for this dish is included in the 13th-century Baghdadi cookbook. It was simply called *akari*' (trotters).

The head requires further treatment. It should be struck on the nose on a hard surface to let all the mucus come out. I used to watch my mother clean the head. She would repeatedly bang it on the nose, saying never stop until you see the worm come out, and sure enough a white worm would eventually come out. As to why the worm was there in the first place, she could not satisfy my curiosity, it was just an inherited routine. The 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan* by Ibn Razin al-Tujibi, includes a passage, which specifies how to clean the heads of slaughtered sheep. He described exactly the same procedures we follow in cleaning them including an instruction to "hit the nose on a stone until the inside worm falls out" (40).

After all this washing, The cleaned parts should be sprinkled with a mixture of salt, curry powder and flour, then washed thoroughly to remove all traces of flour and curry. The cleaned parts are then put in a very big pot, and covered with lots of cold water. Any or all of the following can also be added:

2 to 3 whole onions, skinned
1 whole head of garlic, unskinned, washed
1 tablespoon curry powder
3 to 4 whole *noomi Basra*, pricked at several places (see Glossary)
3 bay leaves
1 cup (8oz/225g) chickpeas, washed and soaked overnight, and drained
1 tablespoon salt

➤ Put the pot on high heat at first to bring it to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low and let it simmer for 3 to 4 hours, or until tender, especially the tripe pieces. Add more hot water if needed. Do not rush it. In the old days when the tannour (clay oven) was still a common household oven, the pot was put inside it after the initial stage of boiling and skimming. There, it was be left to simmer gently overnight. Add salt half way through cooking. If some pieces cook earlier than others do, such as the brains, take them out of the pot and set them aside. To serve, put broken pieces of bread in a deep dish, and pour enough broth to cover them. Arrange pieces of meat on top, along with chickpeas and *noomi Basra*. Put the remaining pieces of meat with some broth in a big bowl, as a side dish. Drizzle with sizzling hot oil if wished, and/or yogurt sauce made by mixing 1 cup yogurt (250ml), ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley, and a grated clove of garlic. Serve with lots of greens, herbs, and pickles.

STUFFED TRIPE

Qibbayaat Makes 4 servings

Today this dish is the specialty of the northern city of Mosul. It is made of pieces of tripe stuffed with a mixture of ground/minced meat and rice, and simmered until tender, which takes hours. The naming of this delicious treat, *qibbayat*, goes back to the medieval practice of cooking the simple *ma' wa malh* dishes (literally 'water and salt.' meat simmered in broth). These dishes were mostly cooked during hunting sessions. The resourceful cooks would decorate them with an impressive *qibba mahshuwwa*, which was the omasum tripe stuffed with a spicy mix of meat and rice. This part of the tripe is the third compartment of the ruminant stomach, which is round like a ball.

In a *qibba* recipe al-Warraaq gives, meat was pounded with onion, and cilantro. Ground coriander, pepper, cinnamon, chopped leeks, a little rice, and optional liver chopped fine, were mixed with the meat. Tripe was stuffed with the mixture and was sewn closed with thin sticks, and added to the simmering pot of *ma' wa malh*. When served, it was cut open and sprinkled with cinnamon, a little *murri* (fermented sauce), and mustard (Chapter 48).

In al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, the dish has already been incorporated into the fine cuisine of good living. The tripe was cut into smaller pieces and stuffed with the same main ingredients, meat and rice. The result was daintier looking *qibbayat*. A fashion statement was made by calling them by the Persian name, *sukhtur*.

As directed in al-Baghdadi's recipe, much care should be taken in cleaning the tripe, "Take fine sheep's tripe, wash with hot water and soap, then with hot water and citron leaves, then with salt and water, until quite clean. Smear inside and out with saffron and rose water." Then small *kubabs* (meatballs) were prepared by mixing red meat, rice "twice as much as the meat and about a quarter as much chickpeas," salt, cinnamon, saffron, coriander, cumin, mastic, pepper, and ginger. Then tripe was "cut into middling pieces" and stuffed with the *kubabs*, "joining together and sewing up with cotton, or skewering with dry sticks." After initial boiling and

Pacha Becomes Ishtar

Pacha has always been one of those few dishes that transcended time, social barriers, gender, age, and even agelessness. A modern impression of an excavated Akkadian cylinder seal depicts a dish of a sheep's head placed on bread - as we do today with our *thareed* dishes. This dish was set at the table of no less than the famous Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar (Ellison *Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia* 93).

skimming, the pot was lowered into the *tannour* and was left covered "from nightfall until morning" (Arberry 199-200). The way to prepare it nowadays is more or less the same:

8 pieces of tripe, each cut into about 4in/10cm square, cleaned, and ready to be cooked

For the stuffing:

1 cup (8oz/225g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, and drained

8 ounces (225g) ground/minced meat

¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/flaked almonds, optional

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon allspice

¼ teaspoon black pepper

☞ With a white cotton thread, sew tripe pieces into triangles, leaving an opening for the stuffing. Mix stuffing ingredients. Fill tripe pieces rather loosely to allow for expansion, and close the opening. Cook stuffed tripe, following the same instructions given for *Pacha*, above. While simmering, pierce the stuffed tripe with a fork to allow broth to penetrate the pieces. Serve it the way you do with *Pacha*.

SIMMERED LAMB (POT ROAST)

Habeet Makes 4 servings

A simple way of preparing lamb, with spices kept to the minimum. It is mostly cooked for gatherings, and special occasions like picnics. The meat is cut and washed at home, but the simmering is done in a big pot set on a campfire for hours until meat almost falls off the bones. In the old days when there was a *tannour* in every household, it was lowered into it and was left there to simmer overnight. That is why perhaps the dish was called *habeet* (the lowered). In all probability, this simple dish was initially prepared during the hunting sessions of our ancient and medieval ancestors, using the meat of the wild animals they caught. Al-Warraaq's 10th-century cookbook includes recipes for game meat *lahm al-wahsh*, which could be antelope, gazelle, wild cow, or wild ass (Chapter 48). This would also make the ancient Akkadian word '*habaatu*' (to kill, to slaughter) applicable to our *habeet*, which might well have started as cooking meat of the slaughtered animal as simple pot roast.

2 pounds (900 g) lamb chunks on the bone, trimmed

1 tablespoon oil

1 onion, quartered

1 teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)

2 to 3 whole noomi Basra, pricked at several places (see Glossary)

1 tablespoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

☞ In a medium heavy pot, brown meat pieces in oil, turning frequently, about 10 minutes. Add onion and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Fold in *baharat* and *noomi Basra*, and pour hot water enough to cover the lamb, about 5 cups (1.25 liter). Bring to a quick boil, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and let the pot simmer for about 1½ hour, or until meat is so tender it almost falls off the bones. Add salt and pepper towards the end of cooking. Serve with bread or rice of your choice with lots of salad.

STUFFED LAMB

Qouzi Mahshi

Qouzi is the dish for large gatherings, especially weddings. Depending on how big the occasion is, a lamb or a medium sheep is stuffed and slowly baked to succulence. It is customarily served on a huge mound of cooked rice, and decked with toasted nuts and raisins. The rice may be just white, or it might be multi-colored, partly white, partly yellow with saffron, partly red with tomato sauce, partly brown with cinnamon, and partly green with dill. It was definitely the dish for festivals during the medieval times, and was an emblem of good living, as seen in *The Arabian Nights* in which some lavish weddings are described. It was called *kharouf mahshi* back then.

The following recipe will give the interested reader an idea on how such dishes are usually prepared. A more practical and scaled down recipe will follow. However, the idea of stuffing a lamb is not as extravagant as it sounds at first, even by today's standards. A small lamb as required in the recipe below is a little larger than a big turkey stuffed for a Thanksgiving feast, for instance.

1 small lamb (about 25lb/11kg)

For stuffing:

3 cups (12oz/340g) slivered/flaked almonds

3 cups (18oz/510g) raisins

3 cups (15oz/425g) peas, cooked, frozen, or canned

3 pounds (1.35kg) lean meat, diced and browned in 3 tablespoons oil

4 tablespoons Baharat (see Glossary)

2 tablespoons cardamom

2 tablespoons cinnamon

2 tablespoons noomi Basra (see Glossary)

1 tablespoon allspice

2 tablespoons salt

12 to 16 cups (6-8 lb/ 2.75-3.75 kg) rice, depending on number of servings. Wash and soak for 30 minutes, and cook as directed in White Plain Rice 000

☞ To prepare the lamb: Wash thoroughly, and rub with salt and pepper inside and out. Wash in cold water and pat dry. Rub lamb inside and out with a paste of

AROMATIC LEG OF LAMB

Fukhudh Ghanam Mashwi bil-Firin

Scaled down Versions of Qouzi Makes 10 servings

½ cup oil, 2 grated onions, 3 teaspoons salt, 1 teaspoon pepper, 2 teaspoons cardamom, 1 teaspoon cinnamon, and 1 teaspoon allspice, and set aside.

☞ To prepare the stuffing: Brown almonds in a little oil. Fold in raisins, and stir for a few minutes. Add peas, browned cubes of meat along with the rest of the spices. Fold together until well blended. Mix with the cooked rice.

☞ To stuff and bake the lamb: Stuff the cavity of the prepared lamb with some of the rice mixture, and truss it with a strong white thread. Some people prefer to brown the stuffed lamb in clarified butter at first before roasting it; and some just place it on a big baking pan, brush it generously with oil, and bake it in a preheated oven, 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8, for the first 15 minutes. Then cover with aluminum foil and reduce heat to 350°F/ 180°C/ gas mark 4, and continue baking until very tender. Allow 30 minutes per pound (450g). If the oven is too small to contain the lamb, people would stuff the lamb at home, and take it to the neighborhood bakery to be roasted there.

In the old days, the stuffed lamb used to be baked in the household *tannour*. After stuffing the lamb, four date-palm leaves were stripped of their fronds. Two of the resulting sticks were pierced crosswise through the two sides of the lamb, and the other two are inserted vertically along the body of the lamb, through the neck opening. The hands and legs were tied to the sticks so that the lamb would not slide into the bottom of the *tannour*. The lamb was then put vertically inside the hot *tannour*, the top opening of which was closed with a big lid. After several hours, the lamb would be ready, so tender and succulent. The same method was followed in medieval times. According to al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes for stuffed kids, the stuffed animal was to be kept in a slow-burning *tannour* overnight (Chapter 87).

☞ To serve Qouzi, put the remainder of rice on a big platter, and place the cooked lamb on top. Garnish the dish with slices of salad vegetables, and serve it with stews of your choice.

For a group of ten diners, a leg of lamb can easily be substituted for the whole lamb, and yet keep its glamour. Incidentally, I discovered that the practice of making small slashes on meat and injecting them with garlic goes back at least to the ninth century (AD, to be precise). Al-Warraq gives a recipe of a *barida* cold dish of leg of gazelle, and the instructions were to make slits with a knife, and insert an almond, a pistachio, or a clove of garlic in each slit. The leg was then cooked in wine vinegar, seasoned with salt, parsley, rue, citron rind, cinnamon, coriander, and pepper (Chapter 42).

1 leg of lamb, about 5 pounds (2.25kg), trimmed

4 cloves garlic, sliced lengthwise

For marinade:

¼ cup (6oz/180g) yogurt

1 tablespoon grated orange peel

1 tablespoon grated lemon peel

1 tablespoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and cardamom, each

3 to 4 sprigs of thyme and mint, each

1 medium onion, sliced

1 tomato, sliced

2 carrots, sliced

2 tablespoons olive oil

¼ cup (60ml) orange juice

1 teaspoon salt

5 cups (2½lb/1.25kg) rice, washed, soaked and cooked according to directions in Plain White Rice 000

¼ cup (3oz/85g) slivered/flaked almonds

1 teaspoon oil

1 cup (6 oz/ 180 g) currants or raisins

½ teaspoon *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

Oven: 450°-350°-400°F / 230°-175°-200°C/ gas mark 8-4-6

☞ Trim and wash leg of lamb. Pat it dry, and with a sharp small knife, make shallow slashes at several places, each about 1in/2.5cm long. Fill incisions with garlic slices.

Recipes not for the Faint of Heart

Here is a recipe of a royal dish taken from the anonymous *Anwa' al-Saydala fi'Alwan al-At'ima*, a 13th-century cookbook on the cuisine of Muslim Spain, which was greatly influenced by the haute cuisine of Baghdad during the Abbasid period. The recipe below gives directions on how to prepare a stuffed calf. The dish used to be prepared for governor of Sabta, al-Sayyid Abil-'Ula (Abu al-'Alaa' bin 'Abd al-Mu'min, brother of al-Muwahhid Caliph Yusuf bin 'Abd al-Mu'min):

Take a fat young male sheep, skin and clean it, then make a small opening between the thighs, and carefully empty the cavity. Next, insert a grilled goose, and stuff the goose with grilled chicken. Inside the chicken, put a young pigeon, in the pigeon's belly put a grilled starling (zurzour), and inside the starling put a grilled or fried sparrow ('usfour). So all these you put them inside each other, all grilled and basted with the sauce [mix of murri 'fermented sauce,' olive oil, and thyme]. Now sew closed the stuffed sheep, and roast it in a preheated tannour oven until browned. Baste it with the above

mentioned sauce, and stuff it in the cavity of a cleaned and prepared calf. Sew closed the calf, and let it roast in a preheated tannour oven until browned. Take it out and serve it. Intaha (that's it). (Anwa' al-Saydala 11-12, my translation)

If you think that the medieval gourmets with their cooks went a little too wild, then listen to this: It seems that the trend of stuffing poultry with poultry is the latest gourmet fad in the United States of nowadays. The dish is called "Turducken." It is a Thanksgiving turkey stuffed with a duck, which in turn is stuffed with a stuffed chicken. The trend came from the south where there is a long tradition of stuffing a bird with a bird. What brought this to the attention of people was a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1996 just before Thanksgiving, featuring a company that prepares turduckens. Immediately after that, we are told, the company received 10,000 orders a day, and the company sold 25,000 turduckens for Thanksgiving. Devotees think its taste just blows your mind, skeptics think the idea is disgusting, and paranoids think it is a bacterial contamination nightmare. What do you think?

☞ Mix yogurt, orange and lemon peel, *baharat*, pepper, cumin, coriander, cinnamon, and cardamom. Rub the entire leg with this mixture, and let it marinade for an hour at room temperature. Alternatively, refrigerate overnight, covered, in a glass dish, but bring to room temperature before baking.

☞ In a baking pan large enough to hold leg of lamb, spread sprigs of thyme and mint, onion, tomato and carrot slices. Place leg of lamb on this bed of herbs and vegetables, fatty side up. Brush with oil and pour ½ cup (125ml) hot water around the meat.

☞ Bake in a preheated oven at 450°F (230°C/ gas mark 8) for the first 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 350° F (175°/ gas mark 4), and loosely cover with foil. Baste every

20 minutes with the liquid around the meat. Allow 30 minutes per pound (450g). Add a little more hot water if pan gets dry.

☞ When lamb is almost done, remove foil, pour orange juice all over the leg, and sprinkle it lightly with salt. Raise oven temperature to 400° F (200° C/gas mark 6) and continue baking until meat is tender and nicely browned. Take out of the oven, and let rest loosely covered for about 10 minutes. Discard the bed of herbs and vegetables.

☞ Transfer meat to a big platter, and surround it with the cooked rice. Brown almonds in a medium skillet using 1 teaspoon oil. Fold in raisins and noomi Basra until heated through. Garnish rice with the almond mix.

LEG OF LAMB IN SWEET-SOUR SAUCE

Fukhudh Ghanam b' Salsat Hamudh-Hilu Makes 10 servings

The following is a sensational variation on the traditional leg of lamb, executed in the spirit of the medieval cuisine, in which vinegar and dried fruits are combined to give a sweet-sour flavor. It is given a lighter touch - most of the fat drippings are removed.

One leg of lamb, about 5 pounds (2.25kg)

3 cloves garlic, sliced lengthwise

For marinade:

½ cup (125ml) wine vinegar

½ teaspoon caraway seeds

½ teaspoon aniseed

4 to 5 juniper berries, crushed, optional

1 tablespoon grated lemon peel

1 tablespoon grated orange peel

2 teaspoons baharat (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon black pepper

For the roasting bed (to be discarded afterwards):

sliced onion, tomatoes, carrots, with some sprigs of herbs such as thyme

and rosemary

2 tablespoons olive oil

¼ cup (60ml) orange juice

1 teaspoon salt

For the sauce:

1 medium onion, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon oil

3 tablespoons flour

1 teaspoon honey

8 ounces (225g) mushroom, sliced

1 medium pepper, hot or sweet, sliced

2 medium carrots, sliced diagonally

½ cup (3oz/85g) dry apricots, quartered

½ cup (3oz/85g) prunes, quartered

5 medium potatoes, boiled, peeled, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, and browned in 2 tablespoons olive oil, or sprayed with oil and broiled/grilled

Oven: 450°-350°-400°F / 230°-175°-200°C/

gas mark 8-4-6

➤ Trim and wash leg of lamb. Pat it dry, and with a sharp small knife make shallow slits, 1in/2.5cm long, each. Stuff incisions with garlic slices.

➤ Mix vinegar, caraway seeds, aniseeds, juniper, lemon and orange peels, *baharat*, and black pepper. Rub leg of lamb with the mixture. Cover it, and let it marinate for 1 hour at room temperature, or refrigerate overnight in a glass container, but bring to room temperature before baking.

➤ Preheat oven to 450°F (230°C/ gas mark 8). Place the roasting-bed vegetables and herbs in a baking pan big enough to hold the leg of lamb. Put the leg on top of this bed, fatty-side up, and rub it with 2 tablespoons olive oil. Pour ½ cup (125ml) hot water round the meat, and roast for 15 minutes.

➤ Reduce heat to 350° F (175°/ gas mark 4), and continue roasting, loosely covered with foil, allowing 30 minutes for each pound (450g). Baste meat several times while roasting. Add a little more hot water if pan gets dry.

➤ When meat is almost done, pour ¼ cup (60ml) orange juice all over the leg, and sprinkle with 1 teaspoon salt. Raise heat to 400° F (200° C/gas mark 6) and continue roasting, uncovered, until meat is tender and nicely browned. Take it out of the pan, and keep it loosely covered at a warm place.

➤ Strain leftover juices in the pan. Discard solids. Remove as much as you can of fat in the liquid.

➤ To make the sauce: In a medium skillet, sauté onion in 1 tablespoon oil until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add flour and stir until fragrant, one minute. Gradually add the defatted meat juices, prepared in the previous step, adding more hot water to make 2 cups/ 475ml (a wire whisk will be useful here). Add honey, mushrooms, pepper, carrots, apricots, and prunes. Stir well, and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to low, and simmer until sauce is of medium consistency, about 10 minutes. Stir occasionally.

➤ Return meat to baking pan, and surround it with the browned potatoes. Pour sauce on meat and potatoes, and let it heat through in the oven for about 10 minutes.

➤ Slice and serve with plain rice and salad.

AROMATIC LAMB SHANKS SIMMERED IN VEGETABLE SAUCE

Znoud bil-Khudhar Makes 4 servings

According to western standards, shanks have the reputation of being humble cuts that make the staple of the peasant kitchen. That is why perhaps they are relatively cheaper than, say, lamb chops. However, recent surveys in food magazines show that shanks are showing up and selling out at the most exclusive restaurants. In Iraq, they have always been looked upon as a delicacy. The succulent bone marrow (*mukh il-'adhum*) will seep into the broth and enrich it, and the rest will be extracted by gently tapping the bone on the plate, or scooped out with the handle of a small spoon. The shanks need to be cooked the right way. To get succulent and tender meat, prolonged simmering is required. Following is a spicy concoction inspired by the medieval masters.

2 lamb shanks (about 2½lb/1.25kg), trimmed and cut into halves, crosswise (ask the butcher to do this for you, or just cut the meat around the middle of the bone)

1 teaspoon ground aniseed

½ cup (2oz/60g) flour for dredging

3 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 cloves garlic, grated

1 teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

½ teaspoon ground cumin

½ teaspoon ground cardamom

¼ teaspoon chili, or to taste

1 cup (6oz/180g) cubed carrots

1 cup (6oz/180g) cubed zucchini/courgette

¼ cup (2oz/60g) chopped dried apricots

1 cup (250ml) orange juice

¼ cup (60ml) lemon/lime juice

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

For garnish: **¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley, ¼ cup (1oz/30g) chopped and toasted walnuts, optional**



➤ Sprinkle shanks with aniseed and toss in the flour.

➤ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil, and brown shanks on all sides, about 7 minutes. Transfer them to a plate, and set aside.

➤ Sauté onion in the same pot for 5 minutes. If pot looks dry, add 1 tablespoon oil. Fold in garlic and turmeric for a few moments. Stir in coriander, cumin, cardamom, and chili if used.

➤ Add carrots, zucchini, and dried apricot. Fold for a minute or two.

➤ Return shanks, and add lemon/lime and orange juice, and enough hot water just enough to cover meat and vegetables, about 3 cups (715ml). Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and let pot simmer, covered, for about 1½ hours, or until meat is very tender, and sauce thickens. Add salt and pepper about 15 minutes before meat is done.

➤ Take out shanks and keep them aside at a warm place. Set aside 1 cup (250ml) of vegetables, and purée the rest with a masher or a pot blender. Then return the chunky vegetables to the sauce.

➤ To serve, arrange shanks on a plate, and pour sauce all over. Sprinkle chopped parsley and walnuts if used, on meat and sauce. Serve with a side dish of rice or bulgur (see Chapters 8 and 9, respectively), or warm bread.

MEAT SIMMERED IN VINEGAR

Laham bi'l-Khal Makes 4 servings

Simmering meat in vinegar is an ancient way of cooking, and our evidence is the extant Babylonian recipes (see Introduction, Section VI). Vinegar was recognized as having a tenderizing effect upon not so tender cuts of meat. During the medieval times, meat dishes cooked in vinegar were called *sikbajaat*. The following is a recipe inspired by this tradition.

1½ pounds (675g) lean boneless lamb or beef, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
2 tablespoons oil
1 teaspoon turmeric
1 medium onion, sliced
¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
1 heaping tablespoon flour
1½ cup (375ml) hot water
¼ cup (60ml) vinegar, balsamic or cider
1½ teaspoons salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 tablespoon honey

- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil and sauté meat until browned, about 10 minutes. Add turmeric in the last minute. Take out meat of the pan and set aside.
- ☞ Add onion to the pot and sauté until it softens. Stir in flour and chili if used, until flour is fragrant.
- ☞ Mix water and vinegar and slowly pour into the pot, stirring constantly to prevent flour from lumping (a wire whisk will be useful here). Bring to a boil.
- ☞ Return meat to the pot and simmer slowly, covered, on low heat until meat is tender and sauce is thickened and reduced, about 40 minutes. Add a little more hot water if needed. Salt, pepper, and honey are added 10 minutes before dish is fully cooked. Delicious served with Plain White Rice 000 above.

LAMB OR BEEF CURRY

Kari bil-Laham Makes 4 servings

Spicy dishes are the specialty of the southern region, especially the port city of Basra. This is largely due to the Indian influence, which is as old as the silk-road trade itself. During the medieval times, the historian, al-Mas'udi named the city *ardh al-hind* (land of India). As you will notice, curry powder is not used in the recipe, but the components of the curry blend are present here. We learn from Lizzie Collingham in *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* that curry powder is not really Indian but was the invention of the British in colonized India. We also learn that the curry dishes - called so because they use curry powder - were created for the British in India. Possibly, the dish name *Kari* in Iraq must have entered the region during the times of the British colonization after the First World War.

2 tablespoons oil
1 pound (450g) boneless lamb or beef trimmed and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
3 medium potatoes (about 12oz/350g), peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, keep submerged in cold water.
Drain when needed
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), coarsely chopped
3 cloves garlic, grated
½ teaspoon turmeric
2 tablespoons flour
2 cups (475ml) hot water
1 tablespoon tamarind concentrate, or pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
1 teaspoon ground coriander
1 teaspoon cumin
½ teaspoon whole aniseed or fennel
½ teaspoon ginger
¼ teaspoon whole mustard seeds, optional
½ to 1 teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
1 bay leaf
2 to 3 pods cardamom
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper

Bone Marrow: A Medieval Delicacy

During the medieval times, bone marrow was a prized royal treat comparable to today's foie gras, and it was as rich. The anonymous writer of the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala* explains that it was the favorite food of kings and dignitaries, and that if it were their choice, they would have eaten more and more of it, but what you can get out of the bones would not be much anyway. Thus the writer justifies including some recipes to make *muhh muzawwar* (simulated/mock marrow) using a combination of pounded kidneys, spleen, and tallow, stuffed in intestines and boiled; or lambs' brains pounded with some meat and walnuts and almonds, to be stuffed in intestines, and served sprinkled with a little sugar. Mock marrow was also made by mixing pounded lambs' brains, clarified butter, eggs, milk, and a little sugar; or peeled pounded walnut kneaded with egg white and put in a glass and boiled in hot water (al-Warraq, Chapter 36; *Anwa' al-Saydala* 15). Because bone marrow was a coveted food at the medieval communal table, Diners felt the need

to set the proper protocol for sharing it. A basic rule to follow, the Andalusian writer explains, was that whoever extracts the marrow should not eat it himself until he first offers some to his superior, host, friend, lover, etc. By way of example, he tells this anecdote:

One of the king's followers was honored with a high-ranking job, so he went to the palace to pay the king a farewell visit before hitting the road to start his new job. It happened that while sharing a meal, one of the meat pieces had a bone marrow. The officer took it out while the king was watching and expecting the officer to offer him some of it. But no, the officer put the marrow on a piece of bread, gave it a sprinkle of salt, and stuffed it into his mouth. At the time, the king did not utter a single word, but when the officer prepared to leave, the king told him that he needed to talk with him later on about a matter that concerned them both. The officer went home, and never ventured to take the job. When the king was asked about this, his answer was, "Wouldn't the 5,000 dirhams he would have been paid for the job have been enough for him to get whatever he wants of bone marrow?" (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 14).

- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat oil and brown meat cubes, stirring frequently, about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Stir in the drained potatoes along with the onion, about 5 minutes. Then add garlic, turmeric, and flour. Fold the mix until flour emits a pleasant fragrant.
- ☞ Pour water, and stir to prevent flour from lumping. Add rest of ingredients, bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, until meat is tender, potatoes are cooked, and sauce develops medium consistency, about 30 minutes. Stir 2 to 3 times while simmering to prevent sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

- ☞ This spicy dish will pair quite well with plain white rice with vermicelli noodles or yellow rice (see Chapter 8).

CHILLI FRY

Makes 4 servings



This foreign sounding dish is probably a relic from the days of British colonization after the First World War. As the name suggests, it is a hot dish in which many hot fresh peppers are used, but you certainly have the option of using sweet peppers instead. Delicious comfort food.

2 tablespoons oil
1 pound (450g) lean meat, preferably lamb, cut into ¾in/2cm cubes
3 medium onions (about 2 cups/12 oz/350g), coarsely chopped
1 teaspoon curry powder
1 tablespoon tomato paste
3 medium tomatoes (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), diced
3 to 4 fresh chilies, chopped; or 1 medium bell pepper, chopped; or a combination of both
1½ teaspoons salt



- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté meat cubes in heated oil, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat to medium and continue cooking until all moisture evaporates, and meat is tender, 10 to 15 minutes.
- ☞ Add onion and stir until it softens. Stir in curry powder and tomato paste in the last minute.
- ☞ Add rest of ingredients, mix well on high heat to bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer, covered, until most of the juice released by vegetables is reduced considerably, and flavors are well blended, about 15 minutes.
- ☞ This dish is usually served with warm bread and salad. It also makes a tasty filling for a sandwich, with sliced onion and pickled mango (see Glossary, s.v. 'anba).

BREADED LAMB CHOPS

Cream Chap Makes 4 servings

It is funny how adopted foreign names sometimes metamorphose in the process. This dish might originally have been 'creamed chops,' but it finally settled to *Cream Chap*. This happened not only to borrowed dishes but also to proper names of persons. The name *Kokaz*, for instance, was popular among Iraqi peasants in the twenties and thirties, the time of British colonization. It is a corruption of the name of Sir Percy Cox, who was appointed as high commissioner in Baghdad in 1920. Some peasant girls born during that era were given the name *Ingireziyye*, a corruption of 'English woman,' and some were called *Amrikiyya*.

About 2 pounds (900g) lamb chops (8 rib chops, or 4 lamb or veal loin chops)
Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper and paprika, each
½ teaspoon marjoram
½ cup (2oz/60g) flour
4 to 5 eggs, beaten
About 2 cups (8oz/225g) breadcrumbs, seasoned with some salt and black pepper
Oil for frying

- ☞ Scrape clean the bones that protrude beyond the meat. Trim off excess fat, and pound the meat part with a mallet, making it as thin as possible without tearing it. Do not let the meat separate from the bone.
- ☞ Sprinkle the chops with lemon juice, salt, pepper, and marjoram, and set aside for 15 minutes. Then dip them in flour and shake off the extra. Next, dip them in beaten eggs, and then coat them with breadcrumbs, pressing with the fingers, to allow crumbs to stick to the chops until surface is well coated, and does not feel wet.

- ☞ Fry the breaded chops in 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil, until golden brown, on both sides, about 5 minutes for each side. Adjust heat if you notice chops are browning quickly. Drain on white paper napkins put on a rack to prevent pieces from getting soggy.
- ☞ Serve hot along with lots of salad, and warm bread.

Suggestions:

- ☞ You may substitute chops with a piece of rump roast, sliced thinly into steaks, and pounded as described above. Alternatively, if you want to treat your family to a quick gourmet dish, use cubed steaks, instead of chops, pound them well, and prepare and fry as described in the recipe. These boneless cuts make an excellent filling for sandwiches. After frying, simply slice each piece into ½in/1cm wide strips, and fill sandwich breads with them, along with sliced vegetables.
- ☞ Instead of frying, you can bake the chops or steaks by arranging them in one layer on a well-greased baking sheet. Generously spray or brush pieces with oil. Bake in a preheated oven at 450°F (230°C/ gas mark 8) until bottom is browned. Flip pieces to the other side, and continue baking until well browned.
- ☞ After removing the meat pieces from the pan, spread a layer of sliced boiled potatoes. Sprinkle them with a mix of 1 tablespoon *za'tar* (see Glossary), 2 tablespoons olive oil, and ¼ cup (60ml) hot water. Toss potato pieces in the mix, and bake, turning once, until they are nicely browned.
- ☞ Instead of red meat use chicken breasts, pound and cook as described above

GRILLED LAMB CHOPS

Kulbasti Makes 4 servings

Here is another borrowed name for a basic and simple meat dish, usually ordered at restaurants. It is a Turkish loan word, *kyul-bastissi*, used to designate pounded and flattened meat or sliced into steaks, as described in Turabi Efendi's 19th-century Turkish cookbook (10-12). If you like to marinate the chops the medieval way, use a little vinegar mixed with crushed raisins and pomegranate seeds, garlic, and coriander.

8 lamb rib chops, trimmed (about 2lb/900g)
 1 teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)
 Juice of one lemon
 1 medium onion, grated
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper

☞ Pound meat pieces with a mallet. If lean chops are desired, scrape clean the bones that protrude beyond the meat all the way down to the eye of the meat.

☞ Combine baharat, lemon juice, grated onion, and oil in a glass container, and marinate chops in the mix for 30 minutes.

☞ Take chops out of marinade, sprinkle them with salt and pepper, and grill on charcoal, medium high, or broil/grill in a preheated hot broiler/grill, turning twice, for about 15 minutes total, or until done but still moist. While chops are broiling/grilling, baste them with the marinade, and discard it after you are done with it.

☞ Serve immediately with warm bread, and salad.

LIVER SIMMERED IN TOMATO SAUCE

Mi'laag bi'l-Tamata Makes 4 servings

Liver tops the list of foods high in iron, but at the same time, it is high in cholesterol. However, if one enjoys normal health conditions, I guess it is no sin to enjoy these traditional liver dishes once in a while.

1 pound (450g) liver, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, washed and drained
 1 tablespoon vinegar
 1 teaspoon curry powder
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) flour
 2 tablespoons oil
 2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), coarsely chopped
 1 medium green pepper, sweet or hot, chopped
 3 medium tomatoes (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), diced; or one 15oz/425g can diced tomatoes, no need to drain
 1 teaspoon *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
 2 tablespoons tomato paste diluted in 1 cup (250ml) hot water, or 1 cup (250ml) tomato sauce

☞ Put liver pieces in a bowl. Combine vinegar with curry powder, salt, and black pepper; and toss liver pieces with this mix. Set aside for 30 minutes.

☞ Put flour in a big plate, and toss liver pieces in it.

☞ Heat the oil in a big skillet, and brown liver pieces after shaking off excess flour, about 5 minutes. Remove from pan, and set aside. Avoid overcooking liver; otherwise, it will develop a tough texture.

☞ In the same skillet, sauté onion until transparent, about 5 minutes. If skillet gets dry, add a little bit more oil. Add pepper and tomatoes, and stir for a few more minutes.

☞ Add *noomi Basra* and diluted tomato paste or sauce. Return liver pieces, and mix well. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, until sauce thickens, about 10 minutes.

☞ Serve with freshly baked bread, or a side dish of rice or bulgur, with lots of salad.

LIVER SIMMERED IN CUMIN SAUCE

Mi'laag bil-Kammoun Makes 4 servings

Another liver dish, delightfully aromatic and spicy.

1 pound (450g) liver, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, washed and drained
 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 1 teaspoon grated lemon zest
 1 teaspoon coriander
 3 whole pods cardamom
 2 teaspoons cumin, divided
 2 tablespoons oil
 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 1 heaping tablespoon flour
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon crushed chili pepper
 2 medium potatoes, peeled, cubed, sprayed with oil, and broiled/grilled until golden, optional

☞ Put liver cubes in a bowl, and sprinkle them with lemon juice, lemon peel, coriander, cardamom, and 1 teaspoon cumin. Toss to coat liver pieces with the spices. Set aside for 30 minutes.

☞ Heat oil in a big skillet. Add the liver pieces, stirring on high heat until all moisture evaporates and liver start to brown, about 5 minutes. Remove from pan and set aside. Avoid overcooking liver; otherwise, it will develop a tough texture.

☞ In the remaining oil, sauté chopped onion until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add flour and the remaining 1 teaspoon cumin, and stir, until fragrant, one minute.

Grumpy Old Man

Here is what a Sumerian husband would say when he felt neglected. (Proverb from Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 120):

*My wife is in the temple,
 My mother is down by the river,
 And here I am starving of hunger.*

☞ Gradually add 1½ cups (375ml) hot water, stirring to prevent flour from lumping (a wire whisk will be useful here). Add salt, black pepper, and chili pepper. Return liver pieces, and add the prepared potatoes if used. Mix well. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer until sauce thickens, 7 to 10 minutes.

☞ Serve with warm bread, or a side dish of rice or bulgur, with lots of salad.

11 DISHES WITH GROUND/ MINCED MEAT

The Arabian cuisine in general abounds with a variety of dishes that call for ground meat as the main ingredient. Ground meat is very versatile and is more economical than, say, steaks. A relatively small amount of meat goes a long way with so delicious and satisfying results, what with all the seasonings, herbs, spices, and vegetables added to it. During the medieval times, pounded meat was a convenient way for using the not so tender cuts of meat, and was creatively incorporated into their cooking. They also believed it was easier on the digestion than having meat in chunks. Al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, for instance, offered an interesting collection of such dishes. The *kubabs* (meatballs), made as a supplementary meat ingredient, came in different sizes and shapes. Some were shaped as big as oranges in a recipe called *narinjiyya* (from *narinj*, sweet and sour variety of orange). These huge meatballs were dipped in a flavorful sauce, and then thrice taken out of the pot, dipped in egg yolk and returned to the sauce, so that the meatballs would look like oranges (Arberry 190). They also made *bunduqiyyat*, which were as small as hazelnuts, and each meatball was stuffed with small amount of boiled and mashed chickpeas. They were then cooked in a flavorful sauce (Arberry 196-97). Interestingly, to this day, there still is a dish in Spain called *albondigas*. You can find more recipes using ground/minced meat in other chapters in the book, especially Chapters 5 and 11.

SCOTCH EGGS MEDIEVAL STYLE

Laham Mathroum Mahshi bil-Beidh il-Masloug

Ground/Minced Meat Stuffed with Boiled Eggs Makes 4 servings



The idea of boiling eggs and covering them with a layer of ground/minced meat - known as Scotch eggs in the West - can be traced back to medieval times. We have a recipe for such an egg preparation in al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadadi cookbook (see below). In the Aleppo 13th-century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*, individual large meatballs were made by stuffing meat paste with boiled eggs. The recipe recommends mixing the meat paste with some flour of chickpeas so that the meat stays on the eggs (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 607). In the following adaptation, lawash bread available at Middle-Eastern stores makes a perfect substitute for the medieval *ruqaq*. If you prefer to make *lawash* at home, see recipe 000.

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add
2 tablespoons oil
1 medium onion, grated
1 garlic clove, grated, optional
½ teaspoon cinnamon
¼ teaspoon allspice
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
¼ teaspoon nutmeg
½ teaspoon ginger
½ teaspoon cumin

¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs
1 egg, beaten
1 large lawash bread
6 large eggs, hard-boiled, shelled, and both ends cut off
Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ Mix all ingredients except for bread and boiled eggs. Knead to form a paste. Divide it into 2 equal parts.
- ☞ Spread flat the *lawash* bread on the work surface, and cut out 2 rectangles, 6-by-7-inch (15x18cm), each. Spread each rectangle with a portion of the meat paste, leaving about ½in/1cm around the edges free of it.
- ☞ Arrange 3 eggs lengthwise along the longer side of the spread meat. Wrap the bread sheet around the eggs as you do with jelly/Swiss roll. Tie the roll from both sides with cotton thread to prevent it from opening up, and place it on a greased baking sheet. Repeat with the other batch.
- ☞ Generously brush the rolls with oil, and bake in the preheated oven, loosely covered, about 15, or until cylinders are nicely browned. Let cool for 10 minutes, and then cut into slices with a sharp knife.
- ☞ Serve meat slices with lots of salad and mustard (as suggested in the 10th-century recipe above).

Variation:

- You may dispense with the *lawash* bread as follows:
- ☞ On a sheet of kitchen paper, spread a portion of the meat paste prepared in the first step, into 6-by-7-inch (15x18cm) rectangle. Arrange the eggs and roll the meat as described in the third step. The difference here is that you roll the meat with the help of the paper, but you do not wrap it with it. Seal the seams very well, and tuck in both sides.
 - ☞ You may bake the rolls after brushing them generously with oil (fourth step above). Alternatively, you may wrap the rolls in cheesecloth/butter muslin, tying both ends with kitchen strings to prevent cloth from opening up while simmering. Gently immerse cylinders in boiling salted broth or water. Invert a plate

Bazmaward: An Abbasid Sandwich Recipe

Here is a recipe for a rolled up sandwich bazmaward, taken from al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 23). An elaborate egg preparation, a precursor of the 'Scotch eggs':

- ☞ Prepare meat by pounding it the way you do with sausages (*laqaniq*). Add a small amount of kidney fat, onion, fresh herbs and rue. Add to these, coriander, black pepper, caraway, cumin, spikenard, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, and cassia, [all] pounded. Break 5 eggs on the meat mixture and add a little chopped garlic and onion. Pound the mixture until it blends very well.
- ☞ Spread caul fat *tharb* of sheep on a soft *ruqaqa* (thin sheet of bread). Let it cover as much as possible of the bread, and then spread the pounded meat mixture on the caul fat. Take 5 boiled eggs, peel them but leave them whole. Arrange them in a row along the spread meat paste. Tightly roll up *ruqaq* bread with what is spread on it, and truss the roll with clean intestines.
- ☞ Put the roll on 4 sticks of [willow] and tie it with a thread so that it stays intact. Lower it into the *tannour* and place it on a flat tile (*ajur*) put directly on the fire.
- ☞ When the roll is done, take it out of the oven and slice it crosswise into *bazmaward* [slices]. Arrange the pieces on a platter and serve them with *Nabatean murri* (liquid fermented sauce) or mustard, God willing.

on the cylinders to help keep them submerged. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and let cylinders cook gently for about 20 minutes, or until meat is cooked. There should always be liquid enough to keep cylinders submerged while cooking.

- ☞ Allow cylinders to cool, then remove the cheesecloth and slice with a sharp knife. Serve with bread and lots of salad.

KEBAB SUPREME

Kebab Mulouki Makes 4 servings

Mulouki (royal) designates excellence. The ingredients in this dish are ordinary but the construction is regal. The way it is traditionally made is to spread pieces of fried bread in the bottom of an oven casserole dish. Fried *kebabs* and onion slices are arranged all over. Chopped tomato and green pepper, preferably hot, make another layer. The whole thing is covered with more pieces of fried bread, and then tomato juice is poured all over. The casserole is baked until most of the liquid is soaked up, and the top is nicely browned. The idea of lining and covering a pot of a prepared dish with bread before cooking it is quite medieval. Such dishes were called *maghmoumat* (covered), and they were very popular back then. Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook gives five such recipes and a poem in praise of this dish (see *Maghmouma: A 9th-century Baghdadi Gastronomic Poem* 000 above). The following is a simpler and lighter rendition of such dishes.

For the kebab:

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add 2 tablespoons oil
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs
 1 small onion, grated
 1 garlic clove, grated
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon ginger, cumin, allspice, each
 For the tomato sauce:
 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

1 tablespoon oil
 ½ teaspoon turmeric
 2 tablespoons tomato paste diluted in 1½ cups (375ml) hot broth or water, or ½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce diluted in 1 cup (250ml) hot broth or water
 3 medium tomatoes (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), diced; or one (15oz/425g) can diced tomatoes, no need to drain
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 For the yogurt sauce:
 1 cup (250ml) yogurt
 ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley
 1 garlic clove, grated
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 2 to 3 flat breads, depending on their size. Lightly brush with oil, and slightly toast in hot oven
 For the garnish: thinly sliced onion, sprinkled with *sumac* (see Glossary)

☞ Mix all kebab ingredients. Knead briefly, divide into 8 portions, and shape into kebab by piercing a piece into the handle of a straight dinner knife, elongate by pressing with the fingers, and then carefully pull out of the knife handle. Arrange kebab pieces on a broiler/grill pan brushed with water or oil. Broil/grill for about 15 minutes, turning once to brown on both sides.
 ☞ To prepare the tomato sauce: In a medium skillet, sauté onion in oil, until it softens, about 5 minutes. Fold in turmeric in the last minute. Add diluted tomato paste or sauce, tomatoes, salt, and pepper; and stir. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, stirring frequently, until it nicely thickens, about 10 minutes.
 ☞ Mix Yogurt Sauce ingredients, and set aside until needed.
 ☞ To assemble the dish: Arrange toasted bread in the bottom of a rather deep serving platter. Pour tomato sauce all over the bread to moisten it. Add some more hot broth if bread still looks a little dry. Arrange broiled/grilled kebabs on this bed of bread, and spoon the prepared yogurt sauce all over. Garnish with onion slices, and serve with salad.

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE ROLLS

Betinjan bil-Kebab Makes 6 servings

Succulent slices of eggplant are rolled around spicy kebab patties, and simmered in flavorful tomato sauce. The neat presentation of the dish renders it suitable for formal occasions.

3 medium eggplants/aubergines, stalks cut off, do not peel. Slice lengthwise into ¼in/6mm thick slices, and soak in warm salted water for 30 minutes, drain (you will need 18 full-length slices)

For the kebab patties:

1½ pounds (675g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add 2 tablespoons oil
 3 tablespoons breadcrumbs
 1 small onion, grated
 1 garlic clove, grated
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ½ teaspoon cumin
 ½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper, ginger, allspice, each
 For the tomato sauce:
 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can), diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot water, or 1 cup (250ml) tomato sauce diluted in 2½ cups (590ml) hot water
 3 medium tomatoes (about 2 cups/12oz/350g), diced; or one 15oz/425g can diced tomatoes, no need to drain
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh basil, coarsely chopped, or 1 teaspoon dried basil
 1 teaspoon sugar or honey
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 For the garnish: ¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley
 Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Fry the drained eggplant slices, let them slightly brown on both sides, and drain on white paper napkins. Alternatively, broil/grill after spraying or brushing them with oil, about 10 minutes or until soft and browned in spots. They do not need to fully cook.



☞ Mix kebab ingredients, and knead briefly. Divide into 18 pieces, and form each into an elongated oval patty about 3½in/9cm long (the length of your index finger) and 2in/5cm wide. Broil/grill, turning once to lightly brown on both sides, 10 minutes. Again, they do not need to fully cook.
 ☞ Make the rolls by putting a kebab patty crosswise at one end of an eggplant slice, and roll up the eggplant slice around it. This roll is traditionally secured by tying it with a parsley stalk softened in hot water. Arrange finished rolls side-by-side, seam side down, in a glass baking pan, 11-by-7 inches (28x18cm) or approximate size.
 ☞ Put together the tomato sauce ingredients, and heat until the mix starts to bubble. Alternatively, you may microwave it for 3 minutes on high. Pour liquid all over the rolls. There should be enough to cover them. Add a little hot water if needed.
 ☞ Bake, loosely covered, in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes or until sauce is bubbly and nicely thickened.
 ☞ Garnish with chopped parsley, and serve with warm bread, bulgur, or white rice, along with salad.

NECKLACES OF EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE AND KEBAB

Maldhouma Makes 6 to 7 servings

A pretty dish in which *kebab* patties and eggplant discs are arranged interchangeably so that they look like a threaded necklace, and hence the name *maldhouma* (the threaded). Small eggplants, about 2 in./5 cm in diameter are needed here. The long Japanese eggplants would be ideal for this purpose.

22 small eggplant/aubergine discs, 1 in./2.5cm thick, soaked in salted warm water for 30 minutes, then drained

For the kebab patties:

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add

2 tablespoons oil

2 tablespoons breadcrumbs

1 small onion, grated

1 garlic clove, grated

¼ cup (½oz/1 g) parsley, chopped

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper, ginger, cumin, allspice, each

For the tomato sauce:

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste

(one 6oz/180g can), diluted in 3½ cups (860ml) hot

water, or 1 cup (250ml) tomato sauce diluted in

2½ cups (590ml) hot water

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh basil, coarsely chopped,

or 1 teaspoon dried basil

½ teaspoon sugar or honey

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6



☞ Brown drained eggplant discs in a small amount of oil, or broil/grill them after spraying or brushing them with oil, about 10 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, combine kebab ingredients in a medium bowl, and knead briefly with wet hands. Form into 20 discs about 1 in./2.5cm thick and a little bit larger in diameter than the eggplant discs.

☞ In an ovenproof glass baking dish, about 8-by-12 inches (20x30.5cm), make rows of "threaded necklaces" by alternating pieces of eggplant with discs of *kebab*, beginning and ending with an eggplant disc, pressing while arranging to keep the 'necklace' intact. Curve the rows a little downwards to give them the necklace look.

☞ Broil/grill dish for about 7 minutes or until surface is nicely browned.

☞ Mix sauce ingredients, and pour it all around the rows of 'necklaces,' but do not let the sauce cover them completely. Bake in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes or until sauce is nicely thickened.

☞ Garnish with chopped parsley if wished, and serve hot with rice or warm bread, along with salad.

'SPARROWS' HEADS' SIMMERED IN DILL SAUCE

Ras il-'Asfour b'Salsat il-Shibint Makes 4 to 6 servings

This is my family's favorite dish whenever we want a break from the familiar red stews. Delicious, pretty, and so medieval. The Abbasid cooks loved to give their dishes some panache by adding those dainty spicy meatballs of different sizes, sometimes using egg white as a binder. Eggs were also used to thicken sauces. For flavor, dill was added dried in a bunch and removed before serving, as in al-Baghdadi's recipe of *mudaqqaqa sadhaja* 'simple pounded meatballs' (Arberry 195). In another *mudaqqaqa* recipe, this time in al-Warraq's book, meatballs were thrown into boiling water, to which was added oil, crushed chickpeas, onion, leeks, cilantro, and were simmered until almost done. Then sauce was thickened by stirring in ground almonds and ten eggs. The pot was further simmered until done (Chapter 78). Also in al-Warraq's book, a dish called *shaljamiyya* (turnip stew) used turnips for vegetables, and thickened the sauce with a combination of crushed chickpeas, ground almonds, rice, and milk (Chapter 54).

1 whole onion, skinned and pierced with

6 whole cloves

1 tablespoon vinegar

1 bay leaf

1 teaspoon salt

For the kofta (meat patties):

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat. If lean, add

2 tablespoons oil

1 small grated onion

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper, marjoram, nutmeg, ginger, allspice, each

2 egg whites

½ cup (2oz/60g) breadcrumbs

For the Sauce:

3 tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour dissolved in

½ cup (125ml) cold milk

½ cup (4oz/115g) yellow split chickpeas, cooked and drained

2 egg yolks

¼ teaspoon black pepper

2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill, or

1 teaspoon dried dill

☞ In a medium heavy pot, pour 6 cups (1.50 liter) water. Add the whole onion pricked with cloves, vinegar, bay leaf, and salt. Bring to a quick boil, and let cook for 10 minutes. Discard bay leaf and onion.

☞ Meanwhile, mix *kofta* ingredients in a medium bowl. Knead briefly and form into small balls, as small as 'sparrows' heads' (*ras il-'asfour*), or to taste.

☞ Gently drop the meatballs into the boiling liquid. Let them cook for about 7 minutes on medium-high heat. With a slotted spoon, take out the balls and set them aside.

☞ Whisk the diluted cornstarch into the cooking liquid in the pot. Add the cooked split chickpeas, and continue cooking on medium-high, stirring frequently until it starts to thicken slightly, about 5 minutes. Beat egg yolks in a small bowl, whisk in some of the hot sauce, and pour it back slowly into the pot while whisking to prevent the egg yolks from curdling. Stir in pepper and dill.

☞ Reduce heat to medium, and return the meatballs to the sauce. Give the pot a good stir, and let it cook for 10 more minutes.

☞ Serve the dish with yellow rice topped with roasted almonds and raisins 000, or warm bread along with salad.

ZUCCHINI/COURGETTE SIMMERED IN WHITE SAUCE

Shijar bil-Salsa 'l-Bedha Makes 5 servings

An elegant dish in which halved zucchinis are stuffed with a meat mixture and simmered in white sauce. It is not as familiar as the traditional tomato stew, but it surely does make a refreshing change.

5 medium to large zucchinis/courgettes, choose fat ones if possible. Cut off both ends, and split into halves, lengthwise. Core out the inside and reserve pulp if it is not seedy

For the filling:

1 tablespoon oil

1 pound (450g) ground/minced meat

1 medium onion, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, grated

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh dill, or

1 tablespoon dried dill weed

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

½ teaspoon cinnamon

For the sauce:

1 tablespoon oil

2 heaping tablespoons flour

3 cups (715ml) liquid, half broth or water, and half milk

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs

¼ cup (2oz/60g) grated Pecorino Romano cheese, or shredded mozzarella (1oz/30g)

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Briefly brown zucchini halves in a small amount of oil. Alternatively, brush or spray them with oil, and broil/grill for about 15 minutes, until they start to brown slightly.

☞ In a medium skillet, heat oil and cook ground/minced meat stirring occasionally and breaking any lumps with the back of a spoon until all moisture evaporates and meat starts to brown, about 10 minutes. Stir in onion, and continue cooking until it softens,



about 5 minutes. In the last minute of cooking, add garlic, currants, parsley, dill, salt, pepper, allspice, and cinnamon. Mix well.

☞ Fill zucchini cavities with the meat mixture, and arrange in a rather deep baking pan, big enough to hold the 10 pieces of filled zucchinis in one layer. Scatter the reserved pulp around the zucchini halves.

☞ Prepare sauce: In a medium heavy pot, stir flour and oil until fragrant, about 5 minutes. Add liquids gradually and stir with a wire whisk. Cook on medium heat until it starts to bubble, about 10 minutes. Add salt and pepper.

☞ Pour sauce all over the filled zucchinis and around them. There should be enough liquid to barely reach the top of the zucchinis. Add a little liquid if needed. Sprinkle the entire surface with breadcrumbs and grated cheese.

☞ Cover loosely with aluminum foil, and bake in the preheated oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until zucchini is tender, and sauce is nicely thickened. Remove the foil in the last 10 minutes of baking to allow the surface to brown. Serve with yellow rice topped with toasted almonds and raisins, recipe 000.

A Quiz Show from *The Arabian Nights*

A smart slave-girl called Tawaddud is cross-examined in a battle of wits, in the presence of the Abbasid Caliph Harun Al-Rasheed (d.809). She is questioned by the court's most learned philosophers and intellectuals, and her answers get their unanimous approval. Here are some of her answers concerning food, some of which, even by today's standards, still ring true especially her answers advocating simplicity in preparing food, avoiding overeating, shunning processed meats, and the virtues of wine. (Burton's translation, 5: 221-24)

Q How cometh hurt to the head?

A By the ingestion of food upon food before the first be digested, and by fullness upon fullness; this is that wasteth peoples. He, who would live long, let him be early with the morning-meal and not late with the evening-meal.

Q What food is it that giveth not rise to ailment?

A That which is not eaten but after hunger, and when eaten, the ribs are not filled with it.

Q What kind of food is the most profitable?

A That which women make and which hath not cost overmuch trouble and which is readily digested. The most excellent of food is brewis [thareeda made of broken pieces of bread, sopped in broth; or bread sopped in milk and meat. Burton in his note comments that the tharida of the famous Arab tribe, Ghassan, cooked with eggs and bone marrow, was held a dainty dish].

Q What kind of meat is the most profitable?

A Mutton; but jerked meat is to be avoided, for there is no profit in it.

Q What of fruit?

A Eat them in their prime and quit them when their season is past.

Q What sayest thou of drinking water?

A Drink it not in large quantities nor swallow it by gulps, or it will give thee headache and cause diverse kinds of harm.

Q What of drinking fermented liquors?

A Doth not the prohibition suffice thee in the book of Almighty Allah, where He saith, "Verily, wine and lots and images, and the divining arrows are an abomination, of Satan's work; therefore avoid them, that ye may prosper"? And again, "They will ask thee concerning wine and lots: Answer, "In both there is a great sin and also some things of use unto men: but their sinfulness is greater than their use."

As for the advantages that be therein, it disperseth stone and gravel from the kidneys and strengtheneth the viscera and banisheth care, and moveth the body, expelleth disease from the joints, purifieth the frame of corrupt humors, engendereth cheerfulness, gladdeneth the heart of man and keepeth up natural heat; it contracteth the bladder, enforceth the liver and removeth obstructions, reddeneth the cheeks, cleareth away maggots from the brain and deferreth Grey hairs. In short, had not Allah (to whom be honor and glory!) forbidden it, there were not on the face of the earth aught fit to stand in its stead.

Q What wine is best?

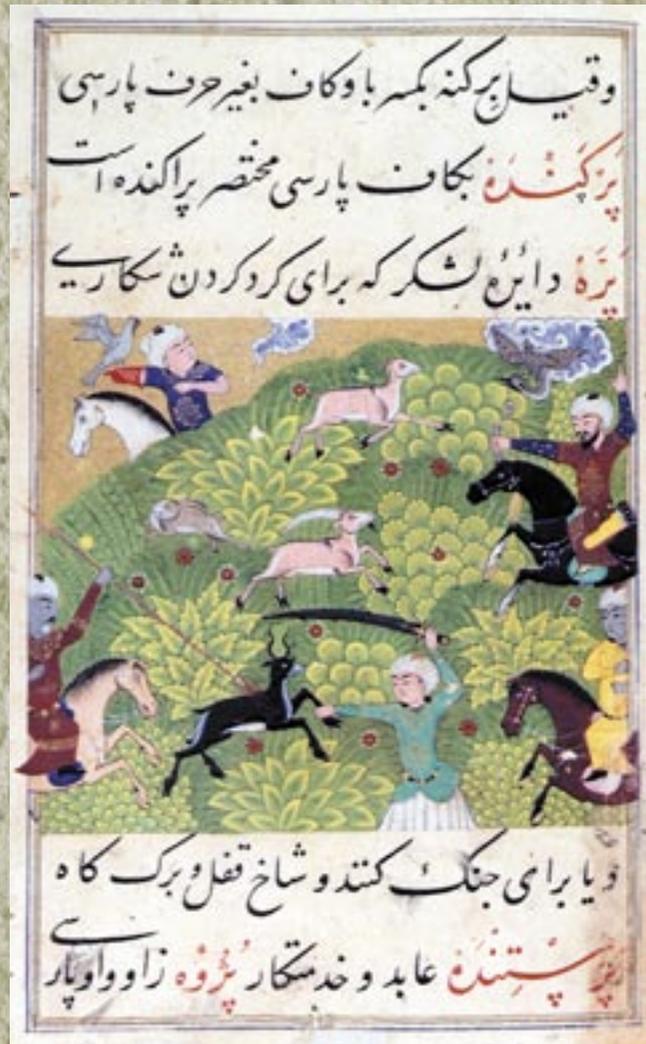
A That which is pressed from white grapes and kept eighty days or more after fermentation.

Q. What are the most excellent fruits?

A. Pomegranate and citron.

Q Which is the most excellent of vegetables?

A Endives.



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Stuffed Foods
Al-Mahahiyyat

المحیيات

I THE ART OF MAKING KUBBA

Kubba is dough made from bulgur, rice, or potatoes, usually stuffed with a spicy mixture of ground/minced meat and onion. It is traditionally shaped into balls (hence the name *kubba*) or discs. Though not difficult to make, *kubba* definitely requires a certain amount of skill, acquired by practice. It is no wonder that of all the dishes, *kubba* is the touchstone of a good cook. Skill is measured by how thin the shell of *kubba* is made. "Oh," it would be said, *flana* (so and so) "is such a fine cook, she makes her *kubba* as thin as onion skins." As for

kubba of the novice, alas, it would be gravely reported, if you threw it from the rooftop to the ground, it would not break.

The art of stuffing food with food is not new to the Mesopotamian cooks. Indeed, it can be traced back to the Babylonians' bird 'pies' prepared by enclosing birds cooked in white sauce between two layers of seasoned dough (see Introduction, Section VI.3). The word *kubba* itself, used to designate this kind of stuffed food, may be derived originally from the Akkadian "kubbu," (rounded like a ball or a dome, *qubba*). 'Kubbuzu,' for instance, was an Akkadian turban-like headdress, a word we still use in relation to headdresses (*kabbuz*). As we advance in history, the art of making *kubba* becomes more subtle. First, there were the medieval *kubab* (singular *kubba*), the spicy and aromatic meatballs that adorned their stews. Al-Warraq's tenth-century cookbook has a few of them, but there are many in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, a testimony to its increasing popularity. More elaborate dishes similar to *kubba* were also included. They were meant to be a kind of a pleasant surprise to the eaters. *Al-makhfiyya* (the hidden), for instance, is a stew dish containing whole cooked egg yolks, which have been enclosed in spicy paste of ground/minced meat, and shaped into

a ball. In a dish called *Rutabiyya* (with dates) a paste of ground/minced meat is formed into date-like balls, stuffed with peeled almonds, and simmered in broth. When served the dish is garnished with real dates filled with almonds, to further confuse the diners. In another dish called *Bunduqiyya* (like hazelnuts) a paste of seasoned ground/minced meat is shaped into small balls, as small as hazelnuts, filled with mashed cooked chickpeas, then simmered in broth. In our modern *kubba*-making practices we have reversed the procedure - meat is used as the main ingredient in the filling rather than being the main ingredient of the shell itself.

To my knowledge, the first mention of *kubba* as we know it today - a stuffed shell of pounded meat and grains - occurs in the 18th-century Arabic Lexicon *Taj al-'Arous*, s.v. كُبْبَا. It mentions that people of the Levant (*Ahl al-Sham*) make *kubba*, which is pounded meat mixed with rice flour, then made into small discs and the like. The other pre-modern citation for *kubba* of some sort occurs in 500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine, in which Yerasimos says, "in the 19th century [bulgur] became a basic in the cuisine of Istanbul with the arrival of *içliköfte*," which she describes as *kofte* coated in a bulgur and meat mixture (130). This is no other than *kubbat burghul*, and based on this statement, *kubba* was a late addition to the Ottoman cuisine. Given what we know of the medieval Arab cuisine regarding its successful experimentations with *kubeb* (meatballs), we can say with confidence that over the centuries, *kubeb* evolved into *kubba* as we know it today in the Arab countries, where the medieval tradition was still alive.

STUFFED POTATO DOUGH

Puteta Chap Makes 18 to 20 pieces



The meaning of *chap* in this otherwise very Iraqi modern dish eludes me. In most probability, it is a corruption of some sort of an English or Indian word, which, might have filtered into the dialect during the time of the British colonization. It is the best guise that potatoes can ever make. The stuffed fried discs are a delight to look at and eat.

For the shell:

2 pounds (900g) all-purpose potatoes, boiled whole and unpeeled,
½ cup (2oz/60g) cornstarch/cornflour (less with starchy potatoes)
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1 recipe *kubba* filling 000, include optional ingredients
About 1 cup (4oz/115g) breadcrumbs for coating
Oil for frying

A General Recipe for Kubba Filling

Hashu 'l-Kubba

Though shells for this type of stuffed food are made from a variety of ingredients, the stuffing for all is more or less the same. Here is how to prepare it:

1¾ (800g) pounds lean ground/minced meat
1 tablespoon oil
2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped
1½ teaspoon salt
½ to 1 teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon allspice
½ teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)
¼ to ½ teaspoon chili pepper, optional
¼ teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary), optional
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley, optional
½ cup (2oz/60g) slivered/flaked almond, dry toasted, optional
¼ cup (2oz/60g) currants, or chopped raisins, optional

➤ Heat oil in a big skillet and cook ground/minced meat, stirring occasionally, and breaking down any lumps with the back of a spoon. When moisture evaporates, add onion and stir until transparent, 10 to 15 minutes, total.

➤ Add the rest of the ingredients in the last five minutes of cooking, and fold gently. Set aside to cool off.

Note:

After making the *Kubba*, you might still be left with some of the filling. You can make delicious sandwiches with it.

BAKED PUTETA CHAP

Makes 18 to 20 squares

☞ Peel the boiled potatoes when cool enough to handle. Cut them into smaller pieces. Put them in a big bowl, and add cornstarch, salt, and pepper. Then mash them with a potato masher, or run them through a potato ricer. A blender or a food processor is not recommended because it will cause the potatoes to develop a gummy texture. With a moistened hand, knead mixture the way you knead pastry dough until well blended, about 5 minutes. If the mixture is too dry to form into dough (sometimes this happens when potatoes are too starchy), add a small amount of water.

☞ Divide dough into 18 to 20 pieces, size of a small lemon, each. With moistened hands, flatten a piece into a thin wok-like disk. Put about 2 tablespoons of the filling in the middle, gather edges, and close the piece into a ball. Flatten it into a disc by putting it between the palms of the hands and gently pressing the edges so that it is full in the middle and thinner around the edges. Always remember to handle dough with slightly moistened hands. Put finished discs in one layer on a tray or a flat dish.

☞ Put breadcrumbs in a dish, and coat discs before frying. Shake off excess crumbs.

☞ Put about ½ in/1cm deep oil in a skillet. When hot, fry discs turning once to brown on both sides, 3 to 4 minutes for each side. If they brown quickly, turn heat down a little. Put the fried discs in a large colander lined with white paper towels/kitchen paper, and let them cool off a little before serving. Alternatively, you may spread the paper towels on a rack and put the fried discs in one layer to cool off. This way you will prevent them from getting soggy.

☞ Serve warm with lots of salad, and bread. They also make an exciting filling for a sandwich (too much starch! But really delicious). Fill a sandwich bread (such as Italian ciabatta, or *sammoun*, recipe 000) with a piece or two of *puteta chap* along with lots of sliced salad vegetables.

Most of the traditional dishes are fried, because up until the late 1950s, ovens were not available in every kitchen as they are today. Nowadays there is no reason why some of the dishes should not be baked. Though frying is fast and easy, baking gives a lighter touch to the food. The following is a lighter version of the traditional stuffed potato dough.

☞ Use the same ingredients given in *Puteta Chap* above. However, you need to increase the amount of potatoes to 3 pounds (1.35kg). Make dough as directed in the first step, and prepare filling as directed in the general recipe for the filling, 000.

☞ Preheat oven to 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5. Grease 10-by-15-inch (25.5x38cm) baking pan. Coat generously both bottom and sides with breadcrumbs.

☞ Divide dough into 2 parts. Cover the bottom of the prepared pan with one part, and spread the filling all over it. Next, cover this filling with the other half of the dough by taking small portions, and flattening and putting them on the filling until the entire surface is covered. With wet fingers, lightly press the top layer closing any gaps on the surface. Brush with a beaten egg and sprinkle lightly with breadcrumbs. Decorate surface with a fork and drizzle with a little oil.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 40 to 45 minutes, or until surface is golden brown. Let cool for 10 minutes, and divide it into 18 to 20 squares.

STUFFED RICE DOUGH

Kubbat Halab Makes 22 to 24 pieces

These beautiful creations are golden and appetizingly crunchy from the outside, but succulently moist from the inside. Although their name links them to the Syrian city of Aleppo, they are, as far as I know, an Iraqi specialty. I once made this dish for friends from Aleppo, and they said they have never seen anything like it before.

Making dough for this *kubba* might prove to be rather tricky at the beginning. I remember when I first started experimenting with it, the finished *kubbas* were soft, and took some odd shapes. To make successful *kubbat Halab* you need to watch for two things:

The best rice choice would be a variety which tends to be a little on the sticky side such as jasmine rice. However, basmati or American rice will still work if you add the optional cornstarch/cornflour to the dough. Some people choose to add beaten egg to the dough as a binder, but this will soften the texture, and the *kubba* loses its characteristic crunchiness. Secondly, let rice boil gently in a big amount of salted water, and watch it and test the grains for doneness. Undercook the grains and they will not bind into dough, overcook them and they will be good for nothing. Although turmeric/saffron and cinnamon are given as optional ingredients, their addition to the rice dough will give the *kubba* shell an attractive golden hue and a delicious aroma.

For the kubba shell:

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained

10 cups (2½ liters) water

2 teaspoons salt

¼ teaspoon turmeric or saffron

½ teaspoon cinnamon, or a small cinnamon stick

¼ cup (1oz/30g) cornstarch/cornflour, optional

1 recipe *kubba* filling 000, use optional ingredients

Oil for frying



☞ Bring water to a boil in a medium pot. Add the drained rice along with salt, turmeric, and cinnamon. Give the pot a good stir, and bring it back to a boil. Reduce heat to medium, and let the rice boil gently in the partially covered pot, gently stirring twice or thrice. The rice grains should be cooked in about 15 minutes. Start testing after the first 10 minutes of cooking. Take a few grains and eat them, they should be cooked but still intact, not chewy, and not mushy. Do not let the rice overcook.

☞ Strain rice in a metal colander. Put the colander with the rice back into the pot and cover it with the lid, and set it aside until it is cool enough to handle.

☞ Transfer rice to a big bowl, and discard the cinnamon stick if used. Sprinkle cornstarch on rice and knead with slightly moistened hands until mixture is combined into dough.

RICE PATTIES

Hassle-free *Kubbat Halab* Makes about 24 small patties

☞ Have a bowl of cold water nearby. Handling with slightly moistened hands, take a small amount of dough, size of a small lemon, and shape it into a disc as described in *Puteta Chap*, 000 above, second step.

☞ Alternatively, shape it like an egg with two pointed ends (more like an American football or rugby ball), which is the more traditional thing to do. To make this shape, hold the ball of dough in one hand and hollow it with the thumb of the other hand until you get an elongated oval shell about ¼in/6mm thick and 3in/7.5cm long, it does not have to be perfect. Fill and close the opening, and roll it gently between the palms to make it look like an egg but with two pointed ends. Moisten your fingers whenever dough feels sticky. Put the finished ones on a big tray in one layer.

☞ Fry the filled *kubba* in 1in/2½cm of hot oil, turning once, until golden all around, about 7 minutes per batch. Put the fried pieces in a large colander lined with white paper towels/kitchen paper, and let them cool off a little before serving. Alternatively, you may spread the paper towels on a rack and put the fried *kubbas* in one layer to cool off. This way you will prevent them from getting soggy.

☞ Serve with lots of salad and bread, or make into sandwiches with slices of salad vegetables, and pickles. Pickled Mango Salad is especially good with this dish (recipe 00).

Kubbat Halab Made Light and Easy

☞ To avoid frying, simply divide dough into 2 parts, and line a generously greased 10-by-15-inch (25.5x38cm) baking pan with one half of the dough. Spread filling and cover it with the second half by taking small pieces and flattening them, and then spreading them on the filling until the entire surface is covered. Spray or brush surface generously with oil. Score all the way down into squares or diamonds. Bake in a preheated oven at 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5, for 40 to 45 minutes, or until surface is golden brown.

☞ Let stand for 10 minutes, then re-cut and serve with salad and bread.

The following is even an easier way of doing *kubbat halab*. It is a lazy day recipe when you have the craving to enjoy something nice with preparations kept to the minimum. Ultimately the taste is the same since the same ingredients are used here, but artistry is absent.

8 ounces (225g) lean ground/minced meat, browned with 1 chopped medium onion, using 1 tablespoon oil. Leftover *kubba* filling will be just fine

3 cups (12oz/350g) cooked rice; leftovers may be used here. Break grains by blending or processing using on/off turns, or simply press by hand

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

1 egg, beaten

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper, cinnamon, allspice, each

½ teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or chopped raisins

☞ Mix all ingredients and press and knead until they stick together.

☞ Handling with wet fingers, shape mixture into small patties about ½in/1cm thick, and brown them on both sides in ½in/1cm deep oil. Alternatively, simply press dough into a generously greased 12-by-9 inch (30.5x23cm) baking pan. Brush with oil, score into squares or diamonds, and bake in a preheated oven at 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5 for about 40 minutes, or until surface is golden brown and bottom layer is crispy brown. Let it set for 10 minutes then re-cut and serve with salad.

STUFFED RICE DOUGH SIMMERED IN TURNIP SOUP

Kubbat Timman/Hamudh Shalgham Makes about 16 pieces

This is the mother of all *kubba*. I am using the expression in the medieval sense, which is 'the best of.' I imagine, had al-Warraaq known this dish, he would have called it '*um al-kubab*.' Actually, one of the recipes in his book came that close to creating such a dish. In a *shaljamiyya* recipe (white stew with turnips), turnips were cooked in white sauce thickened with crushed chickpeas, ground almonds, milk, and rice. Lean meat was pounded into paste with spices, formed into *kubab* 'meatballs' and thrown into the simmering stew (Chapter 54).

This *kubba* is different from *kubbat halab* in that dough is made from ground uncooked rice, pounded with meat. There is only one way to serve it and that is as *kubbat hamudh shalgham*. After shaping the *kubba*, it is simmered in delicious turnip and Swiss chard soup. The soup in this case is served as a main dish (see *Cream of Turnip and Swiss Chard Soup* 000 above).

Kubbat hamudh shalgham is everybody's favorite. As children, we used to beg our mothers to make it, since it wasn't an easy thing to do - what with all the pounding and grinding needed to make this dish. It was definitely not the kind of food to be cooked as often as we would have desired. However, in the age of food processors and blenders, making it is no big deal. Nowadays, rice flour can be bought ready pounded, and dough can be pulsed in the food processor in a few minutes. This might explain why in the Arab countries, a food processor is called *sit il-bet* (lady of the house). In Iraq, this dish is a winter treat since turnips and Swiss chard are available in that season only. Still, some people do make it in the summer, using summer squash/courgette and mint. Incidentally, al-Warraaq, in the same turnip stew recipe I mentioned above, also gave gourd (*qar'*) as a substitute when turnip was not in season. The traditional Jewish Iraqi version of this dish is prepared with beets instead of turnips, which is also a very ancient vegetable used in stews as shown in one of the Babylonian recipes (see Introduction, Section VI.1, 2).

12 ounces (350g) lean beef, ground/minced

2 cups (12oz/350g) rice flour

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

About 4 tablespoons cold water, depending on how moist the meat is

1 recipe *kubba* filling 000

1 recipe Cream of Turnip and Swiss Chard Soup 000 (If wished, follow variation with zucchini/courgette and mint)

☞ To prepare the dough, put ground/minced meat in the food processor, along with rice flour, salt, and pepper. Process on high speed, adding cold water in tablespoons through the spout. A ball of dough will start forming and revolving within 2 to 3 minutes. The final dough is pinkish in hue, pliable, and of medium consistency.

☞ Fill three quarters of a somewhat large pot with water. Add 1 tablespoon salt and bring to a boil, so that it will be ready for *kubba*. Optional: remove outer skin of a whole small onion, stick to it about 6 whole cloves, and let it boil with the water. It will give the broth a wonderful aroma. Discard it before adding *kubba* pieces to boil.

☞ Shaping the *kubba* into the traditional balls and flattened discs: I personally prefer the balls, as they look more appealing in the soup dish. To make the ball, flatten a piece of dough, the size of a golf ball, into a wok-like disc, and put about one tablespoon of the filling in the middle. Gather the ends to close it, and roll it into a ball between the palms. Remember to handle the dough with moist hands.

STUFFED BULGUR DOUGH

Kubbat Burghul

☞ To make the discs, take a piece of dough, the size of a golf ball, and fill and shape as instructed in Stuffed Potato Dough 000, second step. Make the shell as thin as you can, without tearing it.

☞ It sometimes happens that while shaping, the dough tears at places, especially when you are trying to make it as thin as possible. The way to fix this is to take a small piece of dough, flatten it between your fingers, slightly wet the torn area, and patch it. Put the finished pieces on a tray, in one layer.

☞ When water comes to a full boil, carefully and with the help of a slotted spoon drop the *kubbas* into it one by one, up to 6 to 8 ones, depending on the size of your pot, but avoid crowding them. Carefully stir the *kubbas* to prevent them from sticking to the bottom of the pot or to each other. If you notice a crack on an already filled piece before you drop it into the water, seal it with moistened fingers, otherwise the filling will come out while boiling.

☞ Let the pieces boil gently uncovered, on medium high, for 15 minutes. The *kubbas* might start rising after 5 to 6 minutes of cooking, but this does not mean they are done. Meat and rice need to take their time to cook. With a slotted spoon take out the cooked pieces, and put them in a big flat dish in one layer. Repeat with the remaining batches.

☞ Make soup as directed in the recipe, preferably using the liquid you boiled the *kubba* in. In consistency, the soup should be somewhat thin. Add the cooked *kubba* to the soup about 10 minutes before it is done, and give the pot a gentle stir.

☞ Serve with bread and salad.

This is the specialty of the northern city of Mosul, where wheat grows in abundance. *Kubbat burghul* comes in different sizes and shapes. People of Mosul particularly pride themselves on making the round flat variety, which is thin and large (sometimes made as big as 16in./40.5cm in diameter). Needless to say, the bigger they are, the more skill and artistry they require. Special big pots and strainers are usually used to facilitate making and boiling the big flat *kubba* without breaking them. Here we will make do with whatever is more readily available in our kitchens. However, if you still find this too much of a hassle, you can start by making the smaller ones, which are easier to handle and require no special utensils until you get the hang of it. The big and the small are given in two separate recipes, because they are prepared differently.



For the Love of Kubba

When it's time for pounding kubba, "Wake up Qarandal!" When it's time to eat the kubba, "Let poor Qarandal sleep."

(A proverb in Zalzala, 3: 383, my translation)

The proverb is said when a person feels used. He would be called when his help is needed, but none would think of calling him back when the time comes to share with them the fruits of his deed. What dish to choose better than the elaborate *kubba*?

BIG FLAT KUBBA

Kubbat Mosul Makes 3 *kubbas*, 9in./23cm in diameter



The following is a practical method for making the flat variety using utensils readily available in every kitchen. If you find that the suggested size of the disc is too big to handle successfully, go ahead, by all means, and make them smaller, say, 6 in./15 cm across. You also have the option of shaping them into half circles by putting the filling on one half of the disc, folding the other half on top of the filling, and pressing the edge to prevent filling from coming out while cooking. Some cooks use the general cooked *kubba* filling (000), but I strongly recommend the uncooked variety of the filling, given below, for the big flat discs. The reason is, when the meat filling cooks inside the disc, it forms a binding layer that helps the disc stay intact while cooking and even while cutting it into wedges when ready to serve.

Another hurdle that even the experienced cooks might face when the appropriate utensils are not available is how to boil these thin large discs and yet stay intact in one piece. They are very fragile. After many experimentations, it suddenly occurred to me that the large splatter screen (11in./28cm), which has been sitting in my kitchen idle for years, can at last be put to some invaluable use when boiling *kubbat Mosul*. I turned up the handle, put the flattened *kubba* on it, and slowly lowered it into the boiling water. When *kubba* was done, I lifted the splatter screen with *kubba* in it and transferred it to a tray. It was that easy!

A note on Utensils:

The pot used for boiling *kubba* should be large enough to accommodate it comfortably. It should be shallow for easy handling. A large deepish skillet will be ideal. Choose a cheap variety of fine-mesh splatter screen, which has an easy to bend handle.

For the bulgur shell:

2 cups (12oz/350g) bulgur #1, picked over but not washed

1 cup (8oz/225g) *farina* (see Glossary)

1¼ teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

12 ounces (350g) ground/minced beef, at least 90 % lean

For the filling (with uncooked meat):

2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced beef, leave uncooked

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

¼ cup (1oz/30g) slivered/ flaked toasted almonds

¼ to ½ cup (1½-3oz/45-85g) currants or chopped raisins

☞ To make dough for the bulgur shell: Combine bulgur, farina, salt, and pepper in a big bowl. Pour 2 cups warm water. Mix with a fork, and cover. Let stand for 30 minutes, folding mixture 2 or 3 times while soaking. Test for doneness by taking a small amount of bulgur and pressing it between the fingers. If it forms into dough, it is ready. (If for some reason it still feels dry, sprinkle it with a little bit more warm water, cover, and set aside for 10 more minutes, and test again.)

☞ Put half the meat in a food processor, and pulse for 8 to 10 seconds or until it forms a ball. Add half the bulgur mixture, and turn processor on high speed, until a revolving ball of dough forms, about 2 minutes. Take ball of dough out of the processor, put it in a big bowl, and repeat with the other half of bulgur and meat. Knead the two balls with moistened hands for a minute or two to combine the two batches. The final dough should be pliable and of medium consistency, but a little bit more on the stiff side, so that when cooked, the kubba shell will have a pleasantly chewy texture. If you have a meat grinder, just pass the mix through, using the fine-grind disc.

☞ To make the filling: Heat oil in a medium skillet, and sauté onion until transparent, about 5 minutes. Cool off, and then combine with the rest of the ingredients.

Here is how to shape the big flat kubba:

☞ Divide the prepared dough into 6 equal parts. Spread a sheet of plastic, parchment, or wax paper, big enough to accommodate the 9in./23cm disc of *kubba*.

Top: Assembling flat disc

Middle: Assembling flat half moon with filling

Bottom: Assembling flat disc with filling



Wipe the surface of the sheet with moistened fingers. Put one portion of the dough on the sheet and press it first with the fingers into a ½in./1cm thick disc, then roll it out with a slightly moistened rolling pin. Moisten the rolling pin a little whenever you notice that it is sticking to the dough.

☞ Roll out the dough into a thin 9in./23cm disc, the thinner you get it without tearing it the better. To make a perfect disc, use an inverted round dinner plate as a guide, and cut out around it with a sharp knife. Reserve the cut out parts.

☞ Spread a little bit less than third of the filling on the disc. Press the filling with the back of a spoon, leaving about ½in./1cm around the edge uncovered. Set it aside on a flat surface.

☞ Make another circle as described in the first step. Moisten around the edge, lift it with the paper, and flip it on the filled disc. Do not remove the sheet of paper or plastic, yet. Press lightly on the disc to get rid of air pockets. Press around the edge very well with the fingers to seal it and prevent the filling from coming out while cooking. Now remove the top plastic or paper sheet, but keep the bottom layer, and set the disc aside on a flat surface to dry out a little while you make the other discs.

☞ Repeat the same procedure with the other 4 portions. With the leftover cut out pieces, make a small disc and fill it with the remaining filling.

Here is how to boil the big flat kubba:

☞ Fill with water three quarters of a skillet, 12in./30.5cm in diameter or bigger. Add ½ teaspoon salt, and bring to a boil. (The skillet should be larger in diameter than the dish you are using as a pattern for cutting out the dough)

☞ Due to their size, these flattened discs are to be cooked one after the other. So when ready to cook, and water is boiling in the skillet, lift one disc with the help of the bottom plastic or paper sheet and flip it onto the splatter screen, the paper side will be up (handle with wet hands).

☞ Next, carefully put the splatter screen in the boiling water, and immediately remove the plastic or paper sheet. Then, with a wide spatula, gently press the disc down so that it is totally submerged in boiling water. Let the *kubba* boil quietly on medium-high heat, partially covered, for 10 minutes. Help the disc stay down at least for the first 5 minutes, by weighing it down with a wide spatula especially at the places where air bubbles seem to be vigorously coming up which might cause the flat disc to break. The disc will float up to the surface when it is done, about 10 minutes.

☞ To take the cooked disc out, have a big tray ready near the skillet, and carefully lift the splatter screen from the handle and with it will come up the *kubba*, slide it gently into the tray, Put it aside, tilting the tray slightly to drain. Let it cool for at least 15 minutes (if you can wait) before serving, to allow it to set.

☞ Repeat with the other 2 discs. You might need to replenish some of the boiling water and do not forget to add a little bit more salt.

☞ Serve this *kubba* by dividing it into wedges, and presenting it along with pickles and salad. Olives are especially good with it.

Traditionally, after *kubba* is boiled, it is browned in a few tablespoons of oil, which gives it a lovely crispy texture, and incredible aroma. Alternatively, to cut down on fat, put the disc in a generously greased or sprayed baking sheet, brush or spray the *kubba* surface with oil, and bake in a hot oven until bottom is browned. Next, shift the tray to the upper level, and broil/grill top until golden brown. This method spares you the trouble of having to flip the disc to brown on both sides.

To refrigerate leftovers, put plastic sheets between the discs to prevent them from sticking to each other, or put them in separate sealed plastic bags. To freeze the discs, put each one in a plastic bag, seal, and freeze. To serve, let the disc thaw slowly in the refrigerator for a few hours then put it in a greased baking sheet and spray or brush the surface with oil. Then sprinkle the disc with water and warm it up in a hot oven.

SMALL DISCS OF BULGUR DOUGH

Makes 18 3in/7.5cm discs

Baked *Kubbat Mosul*: A Short Cut

According to a successful experiment by friend Khadhum Sha'ban, here is an easy way to cook *kubbat Mosul*:

☞ Skip the boiling and bake the flattened *kubba*. Generously brush a baking sheet with oil, and put on it a *kubba* disc or discs depending on size. Give the *kubba* top a generous brush with oil, and bake in a preheated oven (400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6) in the lower shelf until bottom is nicely browned. Next, flip the pieces with a large spatula to brown the other side, or shift the tray to the upper level, and broil/grill top until golden brown. Total time, about 15 minutes.

Bonding with Kubba

It seems I am not the only one who ate Kubba!

This is the story of a man who had an amazingly intelligent parrot. Once he invited friends to dinner, and his wife prepared a feast, the crown jewel of which were the flat beautifully huge *kubbas*. In order to cool them off a little, she spread them on large trays, and put them in the middle of the house yard. It happened that *kubba* was the parrot's favorite dish. When he saw them spread like this, he could not resist the temptation to try some of it. But since he did not want the wife to take notice that one piece was missing, he decided to take one bite from each *kubba*, thus unintentionally spoiling the whole lot. When his deed (or misdeed) was discovered, his master was so angry with him that he plucked every single feather on his head, to teach him a lesson he would never forget. The parrot was very much hurt and cried bitterly at the loss of his beautiful plumes. After a while, he flew to the dining room where the guests were eating. He was consoled to see a bald fellow-sufferer among them. So he alighted on the man's shoulder saying, "Poor man, have you also eaten *kubba*?" (Zalzala, 3: 287-88, my translation)

People can readily buy this kind of *kubba* from moveable stalls at marketplaces and busy street corners, where vendors advertising their aromatic steaming cauldrons of *kubba* can be heard shouting periodically at the top of their voices "*liyya w-loz!*" (it is filled with fat of sheep's tail and almond). There was a time when the best was bought from *Kubbat il-Saray*, served from a simple stall '*arabana*. I had it only once and the experience was memorable, it was juicy and bursting with the flavor of the stuffing mostly spiced with black pepper and allspice, with raisins, almonds, and of course lots of chopped fat of sheep's tail. Their enticing aroma filled the entire street. Some rumors started to spread about it though, perhaps initiated by vendor-rivals in profession, that most of the meat used for the filling was chopped intestines. I wonder if that was its secret ingredient!

Here is how to make it at home, but for now, we can pass the sheep's tail fat and definitely the 'secret ingredient' of *Kubbat il-Saray*.

For bulgur dough:

2 cups bulgur #1, picked over but not washed

1 cup (8oz/225g) farina (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

One recipe general *kubba* filling 000

☞ To make the dough combine bulgur, farina, salt, and pepper in a big bowl, and pour over them 2¼ cups (550ml) warm water. Mix with a fork and cover. Let stand for 30 minutes, folding mixture 2 to 3 times while soaking. Test for doneness by taking a small amount of bulgur and pressing it between the fingers. If it forms into dough, it is ready. (If for some reason it still feels dry, sprinkle it with a little bit more warm water, cover, set aside for 10 more minutes, and test again.)

☞ Put half the amount of bulgur in a food processor, and pulse until a revolving ball of dough forms, about 2 minutes. Take the ball of dough out of the processor, put it in a big bowl, and repeat with the other half of bulgur. Knead the two balls for a few minutes with moistened hands to combine the two batches. The final

EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE

CASSEROLE with Bulgur Dough Discs

Tabsi Betinjan bil-Kubba Makes 6 servings

Everybody's favorite. The combination of bulgur dough discs with eggplant gives the dish a festive touch suitable for parties and formal presentations (see also 000).

1 large eggplant/aubergine, or two medium ones

(about 1½lb/675g)

2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced

2 tablespoons oil

2 to 3 cloves garlic, thinly sliced lengthwise, or grated

½ teaspoon curry powder

1 medium bell pepper, diced (may be replaced with hot pepper, to taste)

3 medium tomatoes, diced (about 12oz/350g); or one

15oz/425g can diced tomatoes, no need to drain

12 small discs of bulgur dough (recipe above)

For the sauce:

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste

(one 6oz/180g can)

1 tablespoon oil

3 ½ cups hot water

1½ teaspoons salt

½ teaspoon black pepper, cumin, and crushed

coriander, each

½ teaspoon dried basil

1 teaspoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Cut off stems of eggplant, and peel lengthwise to give it a striped look. Cut it into ¼in/6mm slices crosswise. Soak slices in warm salted water for 30 minutes. Drain them well, and fry them in a small amount of oil, or arrange them in one layer in a generously greased baking sheet, spray or brush them with oil and broil/grill or bake them in a hot oven, turning once, to allow both sides to brown, about 15 minutes.

☞ In a big skillet, sauté onion in oil, stirring frequently until it softens, about 5 minutes. Add garlic, curry powder, diced pepper and tomatoes, Stir for a few minutes.

☞ In a large ovenproof glass baking pan 10-by-12-inch (25.5x30.5cm), arrange the prepared bulgur discs in

dough should be comfortably pliable and of medium consistency.

☞ Shaping the stuffed discs: Take a piece of dough the size of a golf ball, and flatten and fill exactly as in Stuffed Potato Dough 000, second step. Handle dough with moist hands.

☞ Fill up three quarters of a big pot with water, add 1 teaspoon salt and bring to a boil. When discs are ready, put each disc in a slotted spoon, immerse it in the boiling water, and let it slide gently into the water. Cook 6 to 8 ones at a time, depending on the size of the pot and the discs. Carefully stir the pieces once to prevent them from sticking to the bottom of the pot or to each other. The *kubbas* are done when they float to the surface and feel tender to the touch, 10 minutes.

☞ Take out the cooked ones with a slotted spoon, put them on a tray or a large plate, and allow them to cool slightly before serving. They go very well with warm bread, salad, pickles, and olives.

☞ If wished, these small *kubbas* can be browned on both sides in a small amount of oil, either in a nonstick skillet, or in a greased baking pan in a hot oven.

Variation:

You can form dough into small filled balls instead of flattened discs, and use them in soups. Flatten a piece of dough, the size of a golf ball, into a wok-like disc, fill it with about 2 tablespoons meat filling, gather the edges, and seal well. Roll the piece between your palms to give it a nice regular shape, and boil as directed above.



Eggplant/aubergine casserole

STUFFED BULGUR DOUGH

Simmered in Yogurt Sauce

Kubba Labaniyya Makes 7 servings

one overlapping layer. Cover with the eggplant pieces, followed by a layer of the onion mix.

☞ Prepare the sauce as follows: In the same skillet used for sautéing the vegetables, put the tomato paste and oil, and stir until they emit a pleasant aroma. Stir in the rest of the sauce ingredients, and let boil for about 5 minutes. Pour this sauce all over the arranged dish. There should be enough liquid to cover. Add some more hot water if needed.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven, loosely covered, for about 30 minutes, or until the sauce is nicely thickened. Garnish the dish with chopped parsley, and serve it with Rice with Vermicelli Noodles (recipe 000).



This dish calls for small balls of stuffed bulgur dough. Delicious and healthy.

½ recipe Bulgur dough for small discs 000

½ recipe *kubba* filling 000

For the sauce:

2 cups (475ml) whole-milk yogurt

2 tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour

¼ cup (2oz/60g) rice, washed, soaked 30 minutes, and crushed between the fingers, no need to drain

1 cup (8oz/225g) cooked whole chickpeas

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon pepper

2 cloves garlic, grated

¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh mint or

2 tablespoons dry mint

☞ Take a piece of dough the size of a walnut, flatten it into wok-like disc, and fill it with 1 teaspoon of the filling. Gather the sides and seal well, then roll it between your palms to make a ball. The amount of dough is enough to make 28 pieces. Cook the balls in a pot of salted boiling water. They will start floating within 5 minutes. Take them out with a slotted spoon, and keep aside.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, dilute yogurt and cornstarch in 3 cups (715ml) cold water. Mix well.

☞ Add rice and chickpeas, and mix well. Bring to a quick boil on high heat, stirring occasionally. Lower heat to medium, and continue cooking and stirring until sauce bubbles, about 10 minutes.

☞ Add the cooked stuffed bulgur balls, salt, pepper, and garlic. Simmer on medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, for about 15 minutes, or until sauce nicely thickens. Add mint 5 minutes before sauce is done.

Stuffed Bulgur Dough

Simmered in Yogurt Sauce

STUFFED BULGUR DOUGH

Baked in the Oven

Kubbat Burghul bil-Firin Makes 18 pieces

Preparing this *Kubba* is much easier than the traditional individually shaped ones. The filling is enclosed between two layers of dough, spread on a baking pan. It tastes as good as the individual discs and balls.

For the dough:

2 cups (12oz/350g) #1 or #2 bulgur, picked over but not washed

1 cup (8oz/225g) farina

1 small onion, grated

1¼ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon cumin

½ teaspoon cinnamon

¼ teaspoon chili pepper

2 cups (475ml) warm water

¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice

12 ounces (350g) lean ground/minced meat

1½ recipes *kubba* filling 000, using optional ingredients, or use uncooked filling, 000

Oven: 450°-375°F / 230°-190°C / gas mark 8-5

☞ In a big bowl, mix bulgur, farina, grated onion, salt, pepper, cumin, cinnamon, and chili. Then add warm water and lemon juice, and mix with a fork. Let stand for 30 minutes, covered, folding mixture 2 or 3 times while soaking. Test for doneness by taking a small amount of bulgur and pressing it between the fingers. It should combine and not feel crumbly. (If for some reason bulgur mix feels too dry, sprinkle it with a little bit more warm water, cover, set aside for 10 more minutes, and test again.)

☞ Put half the amount of bulgur in a food processor, and pulse until it combines into one mass, about 2 minutes. Take it out, and repeat with the other half. Knead the two batches for a few minutes with moistened hands. The final dough should be a little bit on the stiff side.

☞ Generously grease 15-by-10-by-2-inch (38x25.5x5cm) baking pan, and spread half the dough in the bottom, about ¼in/6mm thick. Sprinkle surface



with cold water, and spread the filling evenly all over it. Cover the filling with the remaining dough, by taking small pieces and flattening them between fingers and placing them on top until the entire filling is covered. It is easier to handle dough with moistened hands. An easier way for preparing the top layer is to arrange these flattened pieces of dough on a sheet of plastic or paper a little bit bigger than the baking pan. When an area the size of the baking pan is covered with dough, lift the plastic or paper sheet, and flip it on the filling. Peel off the plastic or paper sheet, and press the entire surface with wet fingers

☞ Brush top with 3 tablespoons oil, then sprinkle 3 tablespoons cold water. With a sharp knife, score all the way down, into 18 squares or diamonds (or more if it is to be presented as an appetizer). If wished, press an almond sliver in the center of each piece.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven at 450°F, loosely covered with aluminum foil for the first 10 minutes. Then lower heat to 375°F., and bake for 25 minutes. Remove cover, give surface a light brush of oil, and continue baking for 10 more minutes or until top is slightly browned. Let it stand for about 10 minutes before serving, then re-cut and serve with lots of salad.

SPICY BULGUR DISCS OF MOSUL

'Urooq Mousiliyya Makes about 8 servings

This is the Mesopotamian counterpart of pizza from the northern region of bulgur, city of Mosul. It is a variation on the filled bulgur dough, much easier to make. So enjoy the delicious taste and aroma of the traditional *kubba*, hassle free. Traditionally fat meat is used in preparing this dish to give it the desirable moist texture. In this updated version, a little olive oil is substituted.

2 cups bulgur (12oz/350g) #1 or #2, picked over, but not washed
 1 cup (8oz/225g) *farina* (see Glossary)
 2¼ cups (550ml) warm water
 1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
 2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ½ teaspoon pepper
 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 ½ teaspoon allspice
 ½ teaspoon cinnamon
 ¼ teaspoon or to taste, chili pepper
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 2 rounded tablespoons tomato paste
 1 egg, beaten
 1 tablespoon olive oil
 Blanched almonds for garnish, optional
 Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6



- ☞ Put bulgur and *farina* in a big bowl and pour 2¼ cups (550ml) warm water. Mix with a fork, cover, and set aside for half an hour, folding 2 to 3 times in the meantime. Test for doneness by taking a small amount of bulgur and pressing it between the fingers. It should combine and not feel crumbly. (If for some reason bulgur mix feels too dry, sprinkle it with a little bit more warm water, cover, set aside for 10 more minutes, and test again.)
- ☞ Add meat, onion, salt, pepper, cumin, allspice, cinnamon, chili pepper, and olive oil. Knead until dough of medium consistency forms.
- ☞ Form into 9in/23cm discs, ½in/1cm thick (will make 4 discs), and arrange on generously greased baking sheets, or spread the entire dough on a well-greased large baking sheet, about 18-by-11 inch (46x28cm) in about ½in/1cm-thick layer.
- ☞ Combine tomato paste, beaten egg, and oil. Brush surface of the spread dough with the mix.
- ☞ Score surface into wedges, diamonds, squares, or whatever you fancy, and press a sliver of almond in the center of each portion if wished.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 20 minutes, or until surface is golden brown. Re-cut and serve hot with lots of salad along with olives.

COOKED BULGUR DOUGH STUFFED WITH MEAT

Kubbat Burghul Matboukh Makes 25 to 28 pieces

This is different from the previous bulgur dough *kubba* in that bulgur used here is cooked first then made into dough. It is delightfully spicy, light in texture, and crunchy to the bite.

3 cups (18oz/510g) bulgur #1 or #2, picked over
 6½ cups (2.75 liters) hot water
 1 teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 ½ teaspoon cumin
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) cornstarch/cornflour
 1 recipe *kubba* filling 000
 Oil for frying

- ☞ Put bulgur in a medium heavy pot and cover it with hot water. Add salt, pepper, cumin, coriander, and chili. Bring it to a quick boil for about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until bulgur is well cooked and all moisture has evaporated, about 20 minutes. To test for doneness press a tablespoonful of the cooked bulgur between the fingers, if it is soft enough to stick together and form a dough, it is done. Fold 2 to 3 times while simmering to allow grains to puff. Set aside, covered, until cool enough to handle.
- ☞ Sprinkle cornstarch/cornflour on the cooked bulgur and knead with slightly moistened hands until dough forms.
- ☞ Take a piece of dough size of a small lemon, and fill and shape as described in *Stuffed Potato Dough* 000, second step.



- ☞ Fry filled pieces in 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil, turning once to allow both sides to brown and crisp, about 5 minutes for each side. Drain in a colander lined with white paper towels/kitchen paper to prevent pieces from getting soggy. Serve warm with lots of salad.

Note:

Instead of frying, bake dough and filling as described in *Kubbat Halab Made Light and Easy* 000. The final taste is the same but artistry is absent here.

Above: Kubbat bulgar served with rice

II MORE STUFFED FOODS

Mahshiyat

Vegetables are stuffed in a variety of ways and in the most alluring and intriguing manner. You see a beautifully simmered piece of vegetable, and you are clueless as to what there is inside. Is it just the pulp, or is it something else? The only way to know is to dig in, and you will be pleasantly surprised. That was exactly the intention of the medieval cook, whose last instruction in a recipe of *badhinjan mahshi* (stuffed eggplant) was to arrange the stuffed eggplants on a platter, and leave them whole as if they had never been stuffed (Anwa' al-Saydala 144). Following are the most popular types and methods for stuffing food, particularly vegetables.

Dolma

During medieval times, stuffed vegetable dishes were the epitome of good life. The countless *mahshi* recipes in the medieval cookbooks, and the recurrent references to them in *The Arabian Nights*, for instance, bear witness to this. The vegetable, which the medieval cooks commonly used, was eggplant, to which gourd *qar'* was always given as a substitute. Those vegetables were usually stuffed with a spicy mixture of ground/ minced meat, onion, and other ingredients, eked out with peeled and crushed chickpeas. Rice was added to the filling of the stuffed tripe dish, called *qibba mahshuwwa* (details 000 above).

At some point during the Ottoman rule, when it was the fashion to call things the *Istanbuli way*, *dolma* (simply means 'stuffed'), instead of *mahshi* (stuffed) was used to designate vegetables, including grape leaves, stuffed with a meat mixture eked out with rice. *Mahshi* proper, on the other hand, was reserved for stuffed vegetables, mainly eggplant (leaves excluded) which were simmered in lots of sauce (see 00-00 above for more details).

Nowadays *dolma* is well known in the Arab world and several Mediterranean countries, and each country, more or less, has established its own version. What characterizes the Iraqi *dolma* is combining an assortment of vegetables in making a single pot of *dolma*. The variety of flavors, aromas, and colors makes the dish a feast to the senses.

Dolma is the dish for big gatherings. Every household has a special pot for cooking it. It is usually big and wide to allow for layering the vegetables. There is no one particular uniform way of cooking it. Some people prefer it white, others like it with lots of tomato sauce. Some pride themselves on how cute and small their *dolmas* are, whereas others do not mind using bigger vegetables. I remember how a friend used to tease his wife on the size of her *dolma*, saying her onion *dolma* was good enough to play soccer/football with. Sometimes lamb rib chops are put in the bottom of the pot to simmer in the flavorful *dolma* juices. Fresh fava/ broad beans are sometimes scattered in the bottom of the pot, or between the layers of the stuffed vegetables. Lovers of bread would put pieces of flat bread on top of the pot towards the end of cooking time, and let it soak up some of the liquid, and when the pot is turned upside down, the bread will be in the bottom. I have never realized how steeped in tradition this practice was until I had access to al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook. Covering pots with bread in this fashion was called *maghmouma* 'the covered' (see *Maghmouma: A 9th-century Baghdadi Gastronomic Poem* 000 above). A

The Cook who Knows Everything

The neighborhood women decided that they have had it with Um Khadeeja, who would boast on all occasions that she knew all about cooking and would not accept advice from anyone. So one day they gathered around her pretending to discuss with her how to make *dolma*. They said, "We need to prepare the vegetables first," at which Um Khadeeja commented, "Oh yes, I know." Then the stuffing had to be so and so, and she said, "Yes, I know." In this manner, they went through all the stages, until they came to the last one, "Next, we take a handful of dried chicken droppings and scatter them all over the stuffed vegetables," and Um Khadeeja said, "Yes, I know."

favorite accompaniment with *dolma* is plain yogurt. Preparing a big pot of *dolma* might be somewhat time-consuming, but it is time well spent. Leftovers refrigerate very well (*dolma* with meat would stay 3 days and the vegetarian variety, 5 days). Heat leftovers in the microwave for 3 minutes, or sprinkle them with water and heat them on the stove. It will smell and taste as though you have just cooked it. The mere idea of going to the vegetable market hunting for the suitable vegetables, small and evenly shaped is exciting enough. To go home and handle this plethora of vegetables is an added pleasure. The entire kitchen will be replete with the vegetable aromas, so enticing and so wholesome. When households were big, *dolma* making was always a family affair, especially during the summertime. I

remember how in the late hours of the morning we would all go out and gather around a table under the grape arbor - a splendidly cool and shaded breezeway, an oasis in the midst of summer scorching sun. The children were given the task of picking the tender leaves growing on the grapevines, whereas the grown ups were to do the coring and the stuffing of the vegetables, under the supervision of mother who would be sipping her daily *finjaan* of Arabic coffee and smoking her morning cigarette. However, the most tedious time was the waiting, as lunchtime approached. It was not easy, what with all the alluring aromas escaping from the simmering pot and filling the air with a promise of a feast. When finally it was decided that the pot was done, the *dolma* would be inverted on a huge tray, to be followed by more torture, waiting until it got cool enough to handle and devour. Then the onslaught would begin, three stuffed grape-leaves, one zucchini, half an eggplant, one onion, etc, etc, and you wish you have two stomachs to eat to your heart's desire.

The traditional way of cooking *dolma* calls for not so lean ground/minced meat and requires that some of the vegetables be slightly fried before stuffing them. Keeping up with the modern trends of cooking, in the following recipes lean meat is used and the vegetables may be left raw, or brushed with oil and broiled/grilled. In order to retain the original texture and flavor, olive oil is added to the filling.

VEGETABLES USED FOR STUFFING DOLMA HOW TO PREPARE AND STUFF THEM

Cored Vegetables

This category includes eggplant/aubergine, zucchini/courgettes, cucumber, bell pepper (green, red, and yellow), banana peppers, or any big-size variety of hot peppers, tomatoes, and sometimes potatoes. Choose small vegetables, but if these are hard to come by, medium-sized ones may be used. In this case, eggplant, zucchini/courgette, and cucumber are cut into 2 or 3 parts depending on their size. Use a corer to core the eggplant, zucchini, and cucumber to $\frac{1}{4}$ in./6 mm-thick shells. Whatever you core out do not throw away, use it for making other dishes or simply dump it in the bottom of the dolma pot, and let it simmer with the vegetables. When coring, always try to keep a base for each piece. If this is not possible especially with the middle parts, use slices cut off from the vegetables, and press them into the bottom to make bases. As for potatoes, choose medium-sized ones, peel them, cut off one top, and core out the inside, leaving a shell about $\frac{1}{4}$ in./6 mm thick. Keep them in cold water until needed to prevent discoloration.

After coring, prick the vegetables at 2 or 3 places with a pointed knife to allow some of the *dolma*-liquid get into the filling while simmering. Then sprinkle pieces with salt and set aside for about 15 minutes. Lightly fry eggplant, zucchini, and cucumber, or brush them with oil and broil/grill them until they soften, or just leave them alone.

As for tomato, cut a $\frac{1}{4}$ in./6 mm slice off the stem side, but not all the way, leave top attached, to be used later on as a lid. Use a spoon or knife to remove pulp (add pulp to filling after chopping it). Sprinkle tomato shells with salt and invert, to allow them to drain. Do not prick the tomatoes.

Use a sharp pointed knife for the peppers. Cut off the upper stem and set it aside (will be used as a lid for stuffed pepper). Discard seeds and membranes, and prick at several places.

To fill all these vegetables, stuff them loosely to allow for expansion of rice while cooking, unless otherwise indicated. Close the openings with cut off tops. If they are divided, the first thing to try is to fit the smaller pieces into the slightly bigger ones. You can mix and match. Those that are of equal size, close their openings with discs cut off from the pulp or the bottom of the vegetable piece. This is to ensure that filling will not come out while simmering.

Onions

Choose medium-sized rounded or longish onions. Under running water, with a sharp pointed knife, core out the two ends of the onion especially the root part since this will make separation of layers easier. Slash the onion lengthwise only to the center. This way you will be able to fill an onion layer and overlap its cut edges to make it look like a filled rugby ball. Remove the brown outer skin and blanch the onions in boiling water for about 5 minutes. This will soften the onion and makes the separation of layers possible without tearing them. Drain onions, and when cool enough to handle, separate layers until you reach the heart. Do not throw them away, scatter them in the bottom of the pot. You may microwave the prepared onions, instead. Put them in a deepish plate with some water, and let them cook in the microwave until they slightly soften, a minute or two.

Stuff onion layers with the filling rather loosely, or as directed in the recipe. Slightly overlap the edges to keep the stuffing inside while cooking.

Grape Leaves

If you are one of those lucky ones who can get fresh grape leaves, wash them, cut off stems, and stack them in a big, rather deep pan. Pour hot water to submerge them and set aside for 30 minutes. The leaves will change color, and will be tender enough to use. In the old days, it was only possible to make grape-leaves dolma in the spring and summer, but with the advent of freezers, it is possible to enjoy them all year round. Treat them as described above, then drain and freeze them in plastic bags. To thaw, take them out of the freezer and soak them in warm water. Grape leaves kept in brine are available in the grocery stores, but you need to wash them in several changes of water to get rid of brine, and then drape them over the edge of a colander to drain. Cut off stem.

To fill a grape leaf, lay it flat on a plate or a working surface, vein side up. If the leaf is torn or small, overlap it with another one. Put about 1 tablespoon filling near stem side of the leaf, fold the two sides on the filling, they do not have to cover the entire filling. Roll leaf towards the direction of other end. Arrange finished ones snugly side by side in the pot, seam side down. Alternatively, you can roll it the buqcha way (like a bundle). Simply put stuffing in the middle of the leaf, and fold the 4 corners of the leaf to enclose the stuffing.

Swiss Chard

In Iraq, it is only possible to make this kind of *dolma* in wintertime, because freezing spoils Swiss chard. The huge leaves are divided into smaller pieces in the following manner: Cut off the stems (do not throw them away, arrange them in the bottom of the *dolma* pot or on top of the stuffed vegetables, and let them cook with *dolma*). The medium sized leaf can be divided into 3 parts - Cut across the top third of the leaf, i.e. at the place where the spine is still thin and pliable, then divide the rest into 2 parts, lengthwise, along the spine. If the leaf is not big enough, just divide it into 2 parts crosswise. Any torn portions can be put on top of the layered stuffed vegetables in the dolma pot.

To fill Swiss chard pieces: for the upper third, put

stuffing in the middle and fold it like a bundle, or roll it like you do with grape leaves. For the lower parts with the spine, spread filling along the spine, and roll it like a cigar. Arrange snugly in the pot, seam side down.

Cabbage Leaves

Discard outer layers. With a sharp pointed knife, core out the bottom of the cabbage. Go as deep as you can, to make it easier to separate the leaves. Put whatever leaves you manage to separate without tearing, along with the rest of the head, in a big pot of boiling water, and let boil gently for about 5 minutes, or just enough to soften leaves and make them more pliable, then take them out and drain them. When leaves are cool enough to handle, separate as many as you can, and return the rest to the boiling water, repeating the same process until you get to the core. Do not discard it, but put it in the bottom of the dolma pot, and let it simmer with the rest of the filled vegetables.

To fill small leaves, cut off the hard area attached to the core part, and trim the spine flat. Lay the piece flat on the working space, soft side down. Spread stuffing along the core end, and fold both sides to enclose the filling. Fold the core end towards the other end of the leaf. To fill the big leaves, divide each into two parts, at the place where the spine is thin and pliable enough to fold. Slice off the thick part of the spine on the upper half to make it flat. Lay it on a flat working space, soft side down, put filling along the wider end, fold the sides on the filling, and roll like a cigar. As for the lower part with the thicker spine, slice off the spine, and if it is big enough divide it into 2 pieces along the spine. Put filling along the spine side and roll like a cigar. Arrange snugly in the pot seam side down.

DOLMA

Makes about 6 servings

As Cool as a Cucumber?

A countryside bumpkin once visited a relative in Baghdad. They sat together and started talking about the countryside and of what grows in it of sweet fruits and appetizing vegetables. "Particularly cucumbers," the relative emphasized. "They are healthy, and have an amazing quality to cool off body heat, and extinguish the heat of summer." The villager was impressed by that, and took a mental note of it. The following day, the relative offered a huge platter of *dolma* (stuffed vegetables) for lunch, and they sat together to eat. Among the many stuffed vegetables, the villager saw a cucumber, and immediately remembered what his relative told him about it. So he picked it up, and greedily stuffed it into his mouth. To his dismay, it was so spicy, that he felt his mouth was on fire. He gulped a whole glass of ice-cold water, and said, looking at his relative with the corner of his eyes, "the inside of the cucumber is so hot, and yet some say it is cool!" (Zalzala 2: 69-70, my translation)

C'est la vie

Life is like a cucumber.

One end is sweet, and the other, bitter
(An Iraqi proverb)

Every family in Iraq owns a special pot for *dolma*. It is large and wide, not so heavy, and slightly tapers out. In fact, *dolma* will brown more easily at the bottom if the pot is not too heavy. For the following recipe, you will need a 5½ quarts/5.2 liters pot or larger. If you do not have such a pot, use 2 medium ones, and divide stuffed vegetables between the two.

The following recipe is the result of years of experimentations with this dish. For typical regional small touches, see Variations below. It is not traditional to fry the chopped onion of the filling as directed below. I started to do this many years ago after my eldest son, he was still a child then, protested that the chopped onion in the *dolma* tasted and looked like chopped skins of lizards. I do not know how he came up with this wild idea, but lizards (*abu breis*) are indeed an unpleasant fact in Iraqi homes. A span-long each, you see it crawling on the walls, or lurking behind a curtain and may fall on your head when you draw one.

For the filling:

2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped
 ½ cup (125ml) olive oil
 ½ teaspoon curry powder, optional
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can), do not substitute
2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, and drained
1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
 ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley
 ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped fresh dill, or
2 tablespoons dried dill weed
 ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh mint, or
1 teaspoon dried mint, optional
4 to 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped or grated
 ¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or chopped raisins, optional
 1½ tablespoons salt
 1 teaspoon black pepper
 1 tablespoon *baharat* (see Glossary)
 ⅓ cup (80ml) lemon juice



Vegetables to be filled:

Choice depends on personal preference and availability. Prepare and stuff as directed 000 above. Here is a typical collection:

4 medium onions
3 small eggplants/aubergines, or 1 medium, divided into 2 parts
5 small zucchinis/courgettes, or 3 big ones each divided into 3 pieces
2 medium tomatoes
2 medium peppers, sweet or hot
1 medium cucumber, divided into 3 parts, optional
About 20 grape leaves, or 1 small bunch Swiss chard, or 1 head of cabbage, or a combination of leaves
For the bottom of the pot: ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil
For the simmering liquid:
2 to 2¼ cups (475-550 ml) hot water
1 teaspoon salt

☞ To prepare the filling: In a large skillet, sauté the chopped onion in olive oil until it softens, about 5 minutes. In the last minute, stir in curry powder if used, and tomato paste. Set aside to cool off. Then fold in the rest of the filling ingredients.

☞ To fill the *dolma*: Pour ¼ cup oil into the empty dolma pot. Then start by stuffing the prepared onion shells and arranging them cozily side by side in the bottom of the pot. Next, stuff the cored vegetables, making sure to close the openings as directed, along with pepper and tomatoes. The last layer is normally reserved for stuffed leaves. The entire assortment of stuffed vegetables should not come up to more than three quarters of the depth of the pot. If Swiss chard is used, then arrange the stalks all over the vegetables. Invert a heatproof plate, a little smaller than the pot, on top. This helps keep vegetables in place when *dolma* starts to boil.

☞ Put the pot on high heat, and let it cook for 5 minutes before adding the liquid to allow the vegetables to wilt. Then pour the measured simmering liquid (hot water and salt). Now this is a critical moment in cooking *dolma* - deciding how much liquid is enough: First of all, start by pouring the smaller amount of liquid, and while pouring, firmly press the inverted dish several times to let air bubbles come up and the cavities between the vegetables be filled with the liquid. You know the amount is right if after pressing the inverted

plate twice or thrice, you see the liquid is at the same level with the vegetables. Add the remaining water if needed.

☞ Bring the covered pot to a quick boil (5 minutes), and keep it boiling for 10 minutes. Next, reduce heat to low, and let the pot simmer for 45 minutes. During this time, you should still be able to listen to the gentle bubbling of the pot. *Dolma* is done when all the liquid is absorbed and the pot starts emitting a wonderful aroma of the caramelized stuffed onions in the bottom of the pot.

☞ Set the pot aside for at least 30 minutes to allow it to cool off, and then unmold it as follows: Remove the inverted plate, and then invert a large tray or platter on the pot. With both hands holding both pot and tray or platter turn pot upside down. This is to transfer dolma onto the plate or tray. Serve warm with bread and yogurt.

Variations:

☞ To give *dolma* a true Baghdadi flavor, do not use tomato paste, and reduce the amount of lemon juice by half in the filling (but do not forget to replace it with plain water). To the simmering liquid, add 1 tablespoon concentrated tamarind or 1 teaspoon ground *noomi Basra* (see Glossary).

☞ To make *dolma* the *Mosuli* way (from northern city Mosul), use liquid extracted from sumac berries (see Glossary) as a souring agent. The way to get *sumac* liquid is to soak whole sumac berries in hot water for about 30 minutes (do not boil), then press well to extract all the juice. The remaining berries are usually discarded. Some of the *sumac* juice will replace the lemon juice in the stuffing, and some will be used for the simmering liquid. People of Mosul also prefer to use more tomato paste. To cook it like this, follow instructions for *dolma* above, but add 6oz/180g can of tomato paste to the simmering liquid. The rest is the same.

☞ The way to make *dolma* greatly depends on personal preference. Though generally the liquid is allowed to evaporate when the dish is prepared for a party, or is meant to impress, for casual family gatherings, it is sometimes served with some of its sauce still in it, which admittedly is somewhat messy but nonetheless delicious. I would add a little bit more than the required amount of liquid. About 15 minutes before it is done, I remove the inverted plate and replace it with a large piece of flat bread, and press on it with a spoon so that it soaks up liquid from the pot. When the cooked *dolma* is inverted on the tray or platter, the bread will be in the bottom and it will absorb most of the flavorful *dolma* liquid. Yummy!

☞ You may arrange pieces of meat in the bottom of the *dolma* pot before adding the stuffed vegetables. Good choices may be: 4 to 5 trimmed lamb chops or chicken drumsticks.

☞ A lovely touch to the dish may also be sprinkling 1 cup (6oz/180g) shelled fava/broad beans, fresh or frozen between the stuffed vegetables as you layer them.

VEGETARIAN DOLMA SIMMERED IN OLIVE OIL

Dolma bil-Zeit Makes 8 servings

For people who have a long tradition of believing that dishes without meat are not real food -in medieval times, such dishes were named *muzawwarat* (fake, simulated) - it is not surprising to learn that such a healthy and delicious dish as *dolma bil-zeit* is not given the due attention it deserves. It is usually presented warm or cold as a side dish, or *mezze* (small platters to be had with drinks). I myself can never have enough of it, it is deliciously succulent, and is packed with goodness. Under refrigeration, it stays good for about 5 days. For vegetarians, I guarantee this dish is heaven.

For the filling:

½ cup (125ml) olive oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

½ teaspoon curry powder, optional

**3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste
(one 6oz/180g can)**

**2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked for
30 minutes in cold water, and drained**

4 to 6 cloves garlic, finely chopped or grated

1½ tablespoons salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

1½ teaspoons *baharat* (see Glossary)

¾ cup (1½oz/45g) parsley, chopped

¾ cup (1½oz/45g) chopped fresh dill,

or 2 to 3 tablespoons dried dill weed

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped fresh mint,

or 2 teaspoons dried mint

¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice

½ cup (3oz/85g) currants or chopped raisins

Above right: Cabbage Dolma



Vegetables to be filled:
(prepare and stuff as directed 000 above.)

about 50 fresh grape leaves, or one 16oz/450g jar of grape leaves kept in brine, or 2 bunches of Swiss chard. You may also use cabbage leaves

4 medium onions

2 medium tomatoes

2 medium peppers, sweet or hot

For the bottom of the pot: ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil

For the simmering liquid:

¼ cup lemon juice

1 teaspoon tamarind concentrate, optional

1 teaspoon salt

1¼ to 1½ cups (310-375ml) hot water

☞ To prepare the filling: In a large skillet, sauté the chopped onion in olive oil until it softens, about 5 minutes. In the last minute, stir in curry powder if used, and tomato paste. Fold in the drained rice, and set aside to cool off. Then fold in the rest of the filling ingredients.

☞ Pour ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil in the bottom of a large pot (5½ quarts/5.2 liters, or larger). Start by stuffing the prepared onion shells and arranging them cozily side by side in the bottom of the pot. Next, stuff the peppers and tomatoes, followed by layers of the stuffed leaves. Fill the vegetables rather loosely because the filling is mostly rice, which needs more room to expand while cooking. The entire assortment of stuffed vegetables should not come up to more than three quarters of the depth of the pot. If Swiss chard is used, then arrange the stalks all over the vegetables. Invert a heatproof plate, a little smaller than the pot, on top. This helps keep vegetables in place when dolma starts to boil.

☞ Put the pot on high heat, and let it cook for 5 minutes before adding the liquid to allow the vegetables to wilt. Meanwhile, mix lemon juice, tamarind concentrate if used, and salt with the lesser amount of water. Pour on the stuffed vegetables, and while doing this, firmly press the inverted dish several times to let air bubbles come up and the cavities between the vegetables be filled with the liquid. You know the amount is right if after pressing the inverted plate twice or thrice, you see the liquid is at the same level with the vegetables. Add the remaining water if needed.

The Benefit of the Doubt

Our elders in Baghdad tell the following anecdote:

An Iranian villager was traveling in Iraq and happened to reach one of the cities at noon. He went to a restaurant and asked the owner to offer him the best he had on the menu. A beautiful dish laden with dolma was proudly put on the table for the villager to enjoy. He looked suspiciously at it and asked for another dish. The owner was surprised and assured him that it was very delicious. The villager looked at it again suspiciously, and said in Iranian, "Agar hilat nadari, chara laflaf mikuni?" Meaning "If no cheating or deceit was involved in making it, then why is it stuffed and wrapped like this?" (Zalzala, 1: 161-62, my translation)

☞ Bring the covered pot to a quick boil (5 minutes), and keep it boiling for 10 minutes. Next, reduce heat to low, and let the pot simmer for 45 minutes. During this time, you should still be able to listen to the gentle bubbling of the pot. *Dolma* is done when all the liquid is absorbed and the pot starts emitting a wonderful aroma of the caramelized stuffed onions in the bottom of the pot.

☞ Set the pot aside for at least 30 minutes to allow it to cool off, and unmold it as follows: Remove inverted plate, and then invert a large tray or platter on the pot. With both hands holding both pot and tray or platter turn pot upside down. This is to transfer *dolma* onto the plate or tray.

☞ Serve warm or cold with bread and yogurt.

AROMATIC FRESH SAUSAGES STUFFED WITH RICE AND MEAT

Mumbar Makes 6 to 8 servings

According to ancient texts, the practice of stuffing sausage casings (lamb and beef intestines) goes back to the Sumerian times. Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook includes six recipes for different kinds of stuffed intestines, fresh and dried, small and large. The small ones were variably called *maqaniq*, *laqaniq*, and *naqaniq*. The large and the very large, using large intestines - called *maba'ir* and *mahashi*, respectively - were stuffed with a spicy meat mix, and boiled in broth or roasted in the *tannour*.

The medieval cooks were quite inventive in filling the casings. In one of the recipes, for instance, they used a spicy mixture of mashed eggplant/aubergine with eggs as a binder (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 145). In another recipe, they used a mixture of pounded chicken breast, cheese, leeks, and walnut. Egg white was added as a binder (al-Warraq, Chapter 36).

In the Ottoman sources in Yerasimos' *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine*, I came across only one variety of sausages, and that is *mumbar*, which are fresh sausages made by filling a large intestine with a rice-meat mix, and then boiled. We still make *mumbar* in present-day Iraq the same way, assuming that the name and the dish are of Turkish origin. It was only a few months ago that it hit me: *mumbar* (the dish and its name) is no other than the medieval Baghdadi *mib'ar* (pl. *maba'ir*), a variety of large sausages.

Lamb casings are usually used for stuffing as they yield small sausages. If these are not available, beef casings may be substituted.

For the filling:

1 medium onion, finely chopped
 3 cloves garlic, grated
 2 tablespoons oil
 1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained
 ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper



2 teaspoons *baharat* (see Glossary)

Juice of 1 lemon (¼ cup/60ml)

2 heaping tablespoons tomato paste diluted in ¼ cup (60ml) water, or ½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce

About 3 ounces (85g) sausage casings, available at meat departments in supermarkets, wash before using to get rid of brine

For the simmering liquid:

Water enough to fill three quarters of a big pot

2 whole *noomi Basra*, pricked at several places (see Glossary)

1 whole small onion, outer skin removed and pricked with about 6 whole cloves

2 bay leaves

1 tablespoon salt

Vegetables, such as carrots and zucchini/courgette, for flavor

Oil for browning, optional

THE BEST OF STUFFED VEGETABLES

Sheikh Mahshi Makes 4 servings

☞ Sauté onion in oil until soft, add garlic and fold for a few moments. Set aside to cool, then in a big bowl, mix it with the rest of the filling ingredients.

☞ If you have a sausage stuffer, use it to fill the casings. If not, then fill them with a big funnel as follows: First transfer the casing to the spout of the funnel, tie the end with a kitchen thread, then start pushing the filling through the opening of the funnel spout into the casing, gradually releasing the casings as you do so. Run your fingers along the sausage to distribute filling evenly. Fill casings loosely to allow rice to expand while cooking. Overfilled sausages might burst while cooking. (You can make your own 'funnel' by cutting off the top third of a large plastic soda bottle).

☞ When stuffing is done, divide (do not cut) the long loosely filled casings into portions about 4in/10cm long, using a kitchen thread. Make sure to leave enough room in each portion to allow rice to expand while cooking. Leave the sausages linked.

☞ In a big pot, let simmering liquid ingredients come to a boil. Coil sausage links in the pot, and bring it back to the boil. When sausages puff out after about 10 minutes or so, pierce them with a pin or needle at one or two places to allow some of the moisture get into the inside of the sausages. Reduce heat to medium-low, and with the pot partially covered let it simmer gently for about 45 minutes, or until casings are tender. While cooking, make sure there is always enough liquid to cover the sausages. When done, turn off heat, and set the pot aside to cool off for about 15 minutes before serving.

☞ To serve, cut the sausage at the points where the threads are. Drizzle with a small amount of the liquid in which they simmered, and have them warm with bread and salad. Browning them in a small amount of oil before serving will make them look and taste even more appetizing.

Some call this dish *sheikh mahshi*, others call it *sheikh al-mahshi*, and the addition of al- makes all the difference. The former means 'stuffed chieftain,' whereas the latter means 'the best of the stuffed food.' The first is justified since the principal vegetable used in stuffing is eggplant/aubergine. The green stems and the bulging black body of the vegetable might have inspired a playful mind into giving it this name. On the other hand, the second nomenclature might well be attributed to the fact that, unlike *dolma*, the main ingredient in stuffing this dish is meat, which makes it superior to other stuffed dishes.

In al-Baghdad's 13th-century cookbook, the dish was known as *Madfuna* (the buried). In the recipe, eggplants/aubergines were cored and stuffed with finely ground/minced meat, cooked with peeled and coarsely ground chickpeas, and seasonings. The stuffed eggplants were then put in a pot, having first put a little chopped onion in the bottom. The broth was colored with saffron, sprinkled with coriander and cinnamon, and sprayed with a little rose water (Arberry 193).

Madfuna, as cooked in Iraq today, is eggplant, zucchini/courgette, or cucumber, stuffed with a spicy mixture of ground/minced meat and rice, and then submerged in tomato juice, and simmered. The cooked dish should still have enough sauce in it. In fact, it is midway between *dolma* and *sheikh mahshi*.

A Note on Vegetables:

Sheik Mahshi requires small eggplant/aubergine and zucchini/courgettes. If these are not available, use medium ones, and divide each into 2 portions crosswise. You need 3 to 4 pounds (1.35-1.80kg) of vegetables, allow at least 3 pieces per serving. Core vegetables as directed in the introductory part to *dolma* 000 above. Sprinkle them lightly with salt, and set them aside for 30 minutes. Lightly fry them, or spray or brush with oil and broil/grill them on both sides. The aim is to soften them.

For the filling:

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
1 tablespoon oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
½ teaspoon curry powder
2 cloves garlic, grated
¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
1½ teaspoons *baharat* (see Glossary)
¼ teaspoon allspice
¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or chopped raisins, optional
½ cup (4oz/115g) cooked split chickpeas
Vegetables (see note above)

For the liquid:

Juice of 1 lemon (about ¼ cup/60ml)
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon honey or sugar
3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water, or one 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3 cups (715ml) hot water, or 4 cups (950ml) tomato juice.

☞ To prepare the filling: Heat oil in a big skillet and sauté meat stirring frequently and breaking big lumps with a spoon. When all moisture evaporates, about 10 minutes, add onion and stir frequently until it softens, about 5 minutes. Stir in curry powder and garlic in the last minute. Remove from heat and add the rest of filling ingredients.

☞ Fill the prepared vegetables. No need to stuff loosely here, since filling is cooked and there is no rice to expand. Make sure to close the openings with lids made from slicing off tops of vegetables. This will prevent stuffing from coming out while cooking.

Above: Eggplant/Aubergine Fans (see recipe page 330 overleaf)



☞ Line a heavy wide pot (about 10in/25cm in diameter) with some of the cored out pulp if wished. Arrange stuffed vegetables in a single layer. If one pot is not enough, divide between two smaller ones. Secure vegetables with an inverted heatproof plate.

☞ Add lemon juice, salt, pepper, and sugar or honey to diluted tomato paste or alternatives. Pour this mixture all over the stuffed vegetables. There should be enough liquid to cover the vegetables.

☞ On direct heat, bring pot to a boil, 10 minutes. Reduce heat to low, and allow to cook gently until sauce nicely thickens, about 45 minutes. You can also arrange filled vegetables in a glass baking dish and bake, covered, in 400°F/200°C/ gas mark 6 oven, until sauce nicely thickens, about 30 minutes.

☞ Serve hot with white rice and salad.

Variation:

Iraqi *Madfoona* (مدفونة): Replace cooked split chickpeas in the filling of the above recipe with 1 cup (8oz/225g) rice, which has been washed, soaked for 30 minutes, and drained. Fill loosely to allow for expanding rice. Follow instructions above.

FANCY WAYS FOR STUFFING EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE

Using the *Sheikh Mahshi* filling



Eggplant/Aubergine Boats

This is only possible with small eggplants. For the filling given above, you need 6 to 8 small eggplants.

☞ Cut off the stem and peel the eggplant to give it a striped look. Slash one of the sides in the middle, do not go all the way down, and leave about 1in/2.5cm from the top and 1in/2.5cm from the bottom. Soak pieces in warm salted water for 30 minutes, and then drain them. You may fry them, or spray or brush them with oil, and broil/grill them. The aim is to soften them.

☞ Enlarge the eggplant slashes with fingers of both hands to give them the semblance of a boat. Fill them with the prepared stuffing and arrange them, slashed-side up, on a baking dish. Pour on them the prepared liquid given in *Sheikh Mahshi* above, and bake as directed in that recipe. Garnish with parsley, and serve with rice and salad.

Eggplant/Aubergine Fans

This can be done with small and medium eggplants.

☞ Cut off stems and peel eggplant in a striped fashion. Cut the eggplant lengthwise at 4 places, going from the bottom all the way up to about 1in/2.5cm short of the stem. Soak and fry or broil/grill as described in Eggplant Boats above.

☞ Lay each eggplant on the baking dish. Put the filling given in *Sheikh Mahshi* recipe above between the cut slices, all along the eggplant. Open up the layers a little to make it look like a hand fan. Cover with the prepared liquid given in *Sheikh Mahshi*, and bake as directed in that recipe. Garnish with parsley, and serve with rice and salad.

Eggplant/Aubergine Nests

Small and medium eggplants can be used to make nests.

☞ Cut off the stems and peel the eggplants in a striped fashion. Cut each into 2 parts lengthwise. Hollow out the middle of each part. Soak and fry or broil/grill as described in Eggplant Boats above.

☞ Fill cavities with the meat filling given in *Sheikh Mahshi* recipe above. Put a slice of tomato on each piece. Cover with the prepared liquid, and bake as directed in that recipe.

☞ To serve, put half of a boiled egg, domed side up, on each piece and sprinkle with chopped parsley. Serve with rice or bread, along with some salad.

Eggplant/Aubergine Rolls

This way of presenting eggplant is especially ideal for the more readily available big eggplants. The larger, the better.

☞ Cut off the stem of a big eggplant. Peel it in a striped fashion. Slice it lengthwise into 8 pieces ¼in/6mm thick, each. Soak and fry or broil/grill as described in Eggplant Boats above.

☞ Lay each slice flat on a working surface, and spread with some of the filling, given in *Sheikh Mahshi* recipe above, then roll them around the filling. Arrange these rolls in an ovenproof glass baking dish. Pour the prepared liquid, given in *Sheikh Mahshi* recipe all over the rolls. Then sprinkle them with 2 tablespoons Romano cheese and 2 tablespoons breadcrumbs and bake as directed in *Sheikh Mahshi* recipe above.

☞ Garnish with chopped parsley.

Above: Eggplant/Aubergine Nests

STUFFED ZUCCHINI/COURGETTES

Simmered in Yogurt Sauce *Shijar bil-Salsa 'l-Labaniyya* Makes 8 servings

Cooking with milk and yogurt is an ancient Mesopotamian way of enhancing flavors of the cooked dishes, as shown in the Babylonian recipes (see Introduction, Section VI.1). In the 13th-century Baghdadi cookbook, a whole chapter is given to dishes cooked with yogurt and milk. *Labaniyya*, for instance, is composed of cut meat cooked with chopped onion and leeks to which are added cut eggplant/aubergine, coriander, cumin, mastic, cinnamon, and some sprigs of mint. Then yogurt and ground garlic are added, with a sprinkle of dry mint (Arberry 42). In the following recipe, zucchinis/courgettes are stuffed with meat and a little rice, and then simmered in a delicate and delicious sauce made with yogurt, seasoned with mint and garlic, like in the old days. It makes a very pleasant dish for elegant presentations.

16 small zucchinis/courgettes, or 8 big ones (about 4lb/1.80kg)

For the filling:

1 medium onion, finely chopped, sautéed in 2 tablespoons olive oil

2 to 4 cloves garlic, grated

1½ pounds (675g) lean ground/minced meat

½ cup (4oz/115g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes and drained

¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh mint, chopped,

or 1 tablespoon dried mint

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped,

or 1 tablespoon dried dill weed

1 tablespoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

½ teaspoon nutmeg

½ cup (3oz/85g) currants or raisins, optional

For the sauce:

2½ cups (590ml) yogurt

2½ rounded tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour

4 cups (950ml) cold water

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 garlic clove, grated

For garnish: chopped fresh mint, or crushed dry mint

Preheat oven 400°F/200°C/gas mark 6

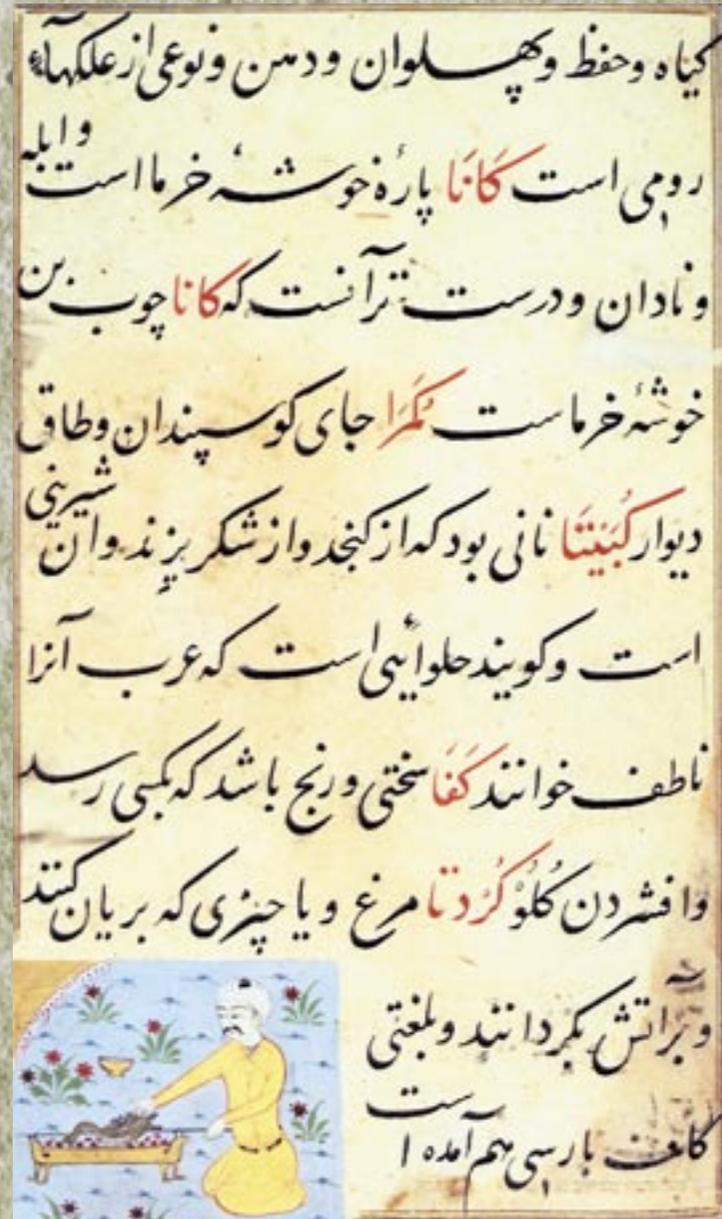
☞ Cut zucchinis into halves crosswise. Core out pulp, leaving about ¼in/6mm thick shells. Keep some of the pulp pieces to use as lids for the filled zucchinis. The rest of the pulp can be used in other dishes requiring shredded zucchini, such as Herbed Zucchini Pancakes, 000. Prick shells with a sharp pointed knife at 2 or 3 places to allow sauce to penetrate while simmering. Lightly sprinkle with salt, and set aside for 30 minutes. Then lightly fry or broil/grill zucchini pieces after spraying or brushing them with some oil.

☞ In a big bowl mix filling ingredients. Fill zucchini halves and seal them using some of the cored out pulp. Arrange the pieces in a single layer in a big glass ovenproof baking dish, big enough to accommodate them in one layer. Set aside.

☞ Prepare yogurt sauce by diluting yogurt and cornstarch in 4 cups (0.95 liter) cold water. Add salt, pepper, and garlic. Mix well until smooth, and then cook on moderate heat, stirring frequently until sauce starts to bubble, about 10 minutes.

☞ Pour sauce on the arranged stuffed vegetables and bake, loosely covered, in the preheated oven until sauce is nicely thickened, about 45 minutes.

☞ Serve hot sprinkled with mint, fresh or dry, along with rice. A good choice will be Golden Yellow Rice 000 above.



Flat Bread Sopped in Broth of Simmered Chicken 000
 Chicken supreme
 Cornish Hens Simmered in Cumin Sauce
 Chicken Simmered in Tomato Sauce
 Chicken Drumsticks Baked in Fig Sauce
 Chicken legs Simmered in Balsamic vinegar
 Chicken Curry
 Chicken Simmered in Pomegranate Syrup, *Fasanjoon*
 Rotisserie Chicken, Medieval style
 Grilled Cornish Hens
 Chicken *Shish Kebab*
 Chicken or Turkey stuffed with Rice
 The Pregnant Chicken
 Stuffed Chicken *Tabyeet*: A Baghdadi Jewish Dish
 Chicken with Red Rice
 Easy Fruity Baked Chicken
 Chicken with Macaroni
 Chicken and spinach Delights

Poultry
 Al-Tuyour
 الطيور

The ancient Mesopotamian ate a lot of birds and eggs. Game was plentiful. There were ducks, geese, and many kinds of pigeons, excluding perhaps the doves, which, though domesticated, were tabooed. They were thought of as belonging to the goddess Ishtar, and during religious festivals, worshippers fed them crumbled cakes made especially for such occasions. Some of the wild marsh birds were domesticated as pets such as the ibis, crane, and herons of which seven varieties were mentioned in the ancient records. The pelicans were trained for fishing, and the fields were the home of birds like thrushes, blackbirds, sparrows, and larks. The partridges and francolins were bred in the countryside. Chicken was the last to reach the scene, it was

Above: *Chicken Drumsticks Baked in Fig Sauce*

definitely known by the first millennium. The chicken reached Greece around 600 bc by way of Syria where it was called the 'Akkadian' bird.

The Akkadian language abounds with terms and occupations related to birds. There was the 'feeder of birds,' 'bird keeper,' 'fattener of poultry,' 'poultry farm,' and so on. The wild ducks and geese were netted by fowlers, and the domesticated varieties were kept for food outside the houses. They were fattened on barley, sometimes in the form of dough. An entry made for one day at the palace at Ur included a suckling pig delivered for roasting, two wood pigeons, one duck, and one pigeon, which were definitely destined for the rich royal stew pots and the fabulous pie dishes (see Introduction, Section VI.3).

By the medieval times, chicken was already the queen of all birds *par excellence*. In *The Arabian Nights*, for instance, a browned stuffed chicken was the epitome of affluence and luxury, a status, which the chicken enjoyed up until the present time. Commenting on the injustices of life, a modern proverb laments the fact that whereas some people eat chicken, others just get the dust:

فانسان ناكل ورجل وانسان ناكل الدجاج

Top-quality chicken, called *Kaskari*, was bred in the medieval village of Kaskar, a district between Tigris and Euphrates, north of Basra. A chicken of this sort might be as heavy as a sheep. Other domesticated and game birds were available to the medieval diners, such as geese, partridges, francolins, and sparrows.

In the 10th and 13th century Baghdadi cookbooks, a popular way for preparing chicken was *mutajjana* (braised chicken), a dish of disjointed cuts simmered in oil and a small amount of water and seasoned with spices and herbs. Tough chicken was boiled first and then braised. An ingenious way to tenderize chicken was to chase it until it drops with fatigue, as dictated in 13th-century *Al-Wusla ilal Habeeb* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 519). A delicate bird stew was called *zurbaja*, which medieval physicians praised for its balanced qualities. Chicken and pullets were grilled and roasted in several ways - in the *tannour* (*shiwaa'*), on a brazier (*mukabbab*), or in a spit rotating on camp-like fire (*kardana*). It was customary to serve chicken cooked this way with *sibagh*, which were sour sauces and dips made of vinegar, pomegranate juice, mustard, ground walnuts, raisins, mashed onion, garlic, a little sugar, and some spices. Such condiments were believed to help digest the meat. Chicken was also cooked as stew and served as *thareed* (bread sopped in broth).

Today's basic methods for cooking chicken have undergone little changes. Up until the early sixties, only locally grown free-range chicken was available in the markets, and they required prolonged cooking because their meat was tough. The following chicken recipes are adjusted to a more tender variety. However, if you happen to have free-range chicken, then my advice to you is to emulate the ways of the medieval cooks - chase your chicken until it drops with fatigue before you slaughter it.

Trial by Water

Story of the Zitti Bird and the Ass

A cuneiform bilingual Sumerian/Akkadian dictionary, written around 1900 bc, enumerates, amongst other things, some food and drink items, one of which was a bird called 'ezitu.' The decipherers of these tablets were unable to identify the bird with a modern counterpart. However, to people who have grown in modern Iraq the bird's name sounds familiar. To this day, a very common bird called *ziti* can be seen around the region. It is a small bird distinguished by the rapid wagging of its tail. It must have been around for a long time, for I remember my mother used to tell us a funny fable of a bird called *zitti* and his friend, who happened to be an ass (both physically and metaphorically). This story must have been told by so many generations of mothers before her. Oh, how we used to beg her to tell it again and again.

One night, the story goes, it was the turn of an ass and a zitti bird to guard a field of clover against the attacks of other animals. During their night shift, they felt hungry and ate the whole crop of clover. In the morning, they claimed that some animals came and ate it all. They were taken to the riverside, and were made to stand at the edge of a very steep cliff, and swear they didn't eat the clover themselves. The

ziti came first and said, "Zitu, zit, I haven't eaten it. If I had, let God make me blind. Zitu, zit, if I had done it, may all my bones break to pieces when I throw myself down into the water." The bird threw itself down, and flew away. When the ass saw this, he was encouraged by what he saw, and when his turn came he swore that he hadn't eaten the clover, if he had, let God blind him, and break his bones when he threw himself down the cliff. And down the cliff plunged the ass!

Interestingly, trial by the water ordeal was an Ancient Mesopotamian practice, which goes back to the Sumerian era (c. 2300 bc). They believed that running water was sacred and that the rivers themselves were deities. The water ordeal constituted the second item in Hammurabi's codes of law, "If any one brings an accusation against a man, and the accused goes to the river and leaps into the river, if he sinks in the river, his accuser shall take possession of his house. But if the river proves that the accused is not guilty, and he escapes unhurt, then he who brought the accusation shall be put to death, while he who leaped into the river shall take possession of the house that had belonged to his accuser." There is also item 132 of the Codes: "If a man's wife has been pointed out because of another man, even though she has not been caught with him, for her husband's sake, she must plunge into the divine river."

FLAT BREAD SOPPED IN BROTH OF SIMMERED CHICKEN

Thareed/Tashreeb Dijaaj Makes 4 servings

The following recipe is a traditional dish, which requires chicken to simmer to tenderness with spices and vegetables. It is served with bread soaked in its broth, along with garnishes. The dish is as old as the Mesopotamian civilization itself is. It always has been a kind of comfort dish, so much liked by high and low. In the extant medieval Arabic cookbooks, of both *al-Mashriq* (Abbasid Caliphate in the east) and *al-Maghrib* (*Ummayyad Caliphate* in Andalusia in the west), there is a considerable number of recipes for *thareed* dishes. Al-Warraq's *ma' himmas* (broth of chickpeas), for instance, was prepared for Caliph al-Ma'moun (d.833). Plump pullets were simmered in broth, with chickpeas, onion, seven pieces of aged sharp cheese, and pepper. For presentation, broken pieces of bread were sopped in the rich flavorful sauce, pieces of the cooked pullets were arranged around the plate along with the simmered cheese, onion pieces, and seven poached eggs (sunny-side up). The whole dish was then drizzled with sizzling hot oil, and taken to the table (Chapter 61).

1 whole chicken (about 4lb/1.80kg), cut into serving-size pieces, or 4 thighs, skinned and trimmed
2 medium onions (9oz/250g), quartered
4 to 5 cloves garlic, whole and unskinned
2 to 3 whole *noomi Basra* (see Glossary), pricked at several places
1 tablespoon salt
4 to 5 whole pods of cardamom

2 bay leaves
1 tablespoon curry powder
1 teaspoon ground coriander
2 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into big cubes
1 cup (8oz/225g) chickpeas, soaked overnight, and drained, or 2 cups (16oz/450g) cooked, or canned chickpeas
2 boiled eggs, shelled
1 to 2 flat breads, Iraqi variety or Arabic bread (see Chapter 1)
For garnish: Sumac, see Glossary, and/or Yogurt Sauce (see below)

☞ In a medium heavy pot, put chicken, onion, garlic, *noomi Basra*, salt, cardamom, bay leaves, curry powder, coriander, cubed potatoes, and chickpeas (if using cooked chickpeas add them later). Cover with cold water by 3in/7.5cm. Bring to a quick boil on high, skimming as needed, then reduce heat to low, and simmer gently, covered, until chicken is done, about 35 minutes. Add eggs (and cooked/canned chickpeas if used) in the last 10 minutes of cooking.

☞ In a deep big dish, break bread into bite-size pieces and drench with chicken broth. Arrange chicken pieces on top, along with potatoes, chickpeas, and eggs. Sprinkle with sumac, or drizzle with yogurt sauce. For a traditional touch, drizzle with sizzling hot oil if you do not mind the extra calories. Serve with slices of salad vegetables, and pickles.

Yogurt Sauce:

Combine 1 cup yogurt (250ml), ½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley, ¼ teaspoon salt, and 1 garlic clove, grated.

CHICKEN SUPREME

Dijaaj Muluki Makes 4 servings

Muluki (literally 'royal') stands for excellence in quality. This dish is a variation on the traditional *thareed/tashreeb*. Chicken is baked, and as a casserole, it can be served from oven to table, which renders it suitable for formal presentations.

4 chicken thighs, skinned and trimmed, or 12 drumsticks, skinned
1 medium onion, quartered
2 bay leaves
5 to 6 whole pods of cardamom
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 tablespoons oil
2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced
1 cup (4oz/115g) mushrooms, cut into halves
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
½ teaspoon coriander
¼ teaspoon crushed chili pepper, or to taste
1 flat Iraqi bread, or 2 Arabic breads (see Chapter 1)
1 tablespoon *sumac* (see Glossary)

☞ In a medium pot, put prepared chicken, quartered onion, bay leaves, cardamom, salt, and pepper. Add cold water just enough to cover, and then bring to a quick boil on high heat, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low and let gently simmer, covered, until chicken is just cooked, about 35 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, sauté sliced onion in oil, until golden brown, about 7 minutes. Add mushrooms and stir briefly. Mix in salt, pepper, coriander, and crushed chili. Set aside.

☞ In an ovenproof deep dish, big enough to hold chicken pieces in one layer, arrange broken pieces of bread to cover the bottom. Spread half of the onion mixture on bread and arrange cooked chicken pieces on top. Spread rest of onion mixture on the chicken. Sprinkle generously with sumac.



☞ Strain chicken broth and skim fat, if you like, by spreading a folded white paper towel/kitchen paper on the surface of the broth and lifting it quickly. Repeat until you get rid of fat. Pour broth on the prepared chicken casserole. There should be enough to come up to half the depth of the baking dish. Cover with aluminum foil.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven (400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6) for about 30 minutes, or until most of the liquid has been soaked up by bread. Remove foil 10 minutes before baking is done to allow surface to brown.

☞ Serve with salad, and pickles. If wished, drizzle with Yogurt Sauce (see recipe above).

CORNISH HENS SIMMERED IN CUMIN SAUCE

DijaajCammouni Makes 4 servings

An aromatic dish perfumed with a blend of spices, the most prominent of which is the ancient spice cumin. The distant ancestor of this dish is the medieval Baghdadi *zirbaja*, a delicate stew seasoned with cumin, made golden with saffron, lightly soured and sweetened with vinegar and honey, and enriched and thickened with crushed almond and sometimes *nasha* (wheat starch). A whole chicken may be used, but Cornish hens are more appealing for festive formal presentations. Chicken drumsticks can also be substituted, which in fact makes the dish suitable for casual dining and buffet dinners, very popular with children of all ages.

For marinade:

- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 to 4 cloves garlic, grated
- 1 medium onion, thinly sliced or coarsely chopped
- 1 small onion, grated
- 2 teaspoons cumin
- ½ teaspoon turmeric
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
- 3 to 4 pods cardamom
- ½ teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
- 1 teaspoon thin strips of lemon rind
- 1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup, or tamarind concentrate (see Glossary)
- ½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley or fresh cilantro, chopped
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
- 2 Cornish hens or 12 chicken drumsticks, leave skin on
- 3 medium potatoes (12oz/350g), cut into ½in/8mm thick slices
- ½ cup (2½oz/75g) frozen or canned peas
- 1 carrot diagonally sliced
- ½ cup (3oz/85g) pitted olives, whole or halved
- 2 to 3 whole small chili peppers, optional

Madhira: "A Very Miracle of Food"

Madhira was a popular medieval white stew cooked with meat and sour milk (*laban madhir*) of medium to low acidity, along with some vegetables such as eggplant, gourd, or asparagus, and onion. Mint and cumin were added, and sometimes coriander and cassia, but these were wrapped in a bundle of cloth to keep the stew white and pure of any speckles. The medieval cooks preferred to serve it in colored bowls, especially blue ones, to show off the whiteness of the stew. It was believed to be "good for you" food due to its moderate and cooling properties. Cooking meat with minted yogurt sauce is still a favorite dish in the Middle-Eastern cuisine in general. Here are verses on this dish by 9th-century Abbasid gourmet poet Kushajim, my translation:

*Madhira, among all other dishes,
the full moon resembles.
Shining on top of the tables,
like light illuminating the dark.
Like the crescent moon beaming
through the clouds.*

Following is Arberry's English rendition of verse lines from the same poem, enumerating the benefits of *madhira* (28):

*Madhira cannot rivaled be
To heal the sick man's malady:
No wonder this our meal we make,
Since, eating it, no law we break.
'Tis as delicious as 'tis good -
A very miracle of food.*

CHICKEN SIMMERED IN TOMATO SAUCE

Dijaaj bil-Salsa 'l-Hamra Makes 4 servings



In this dish, chicken is simmered in tomato sauce, and balanced with a little bit of sugar. The skin is left on the chicken pieces to protect meat from hardening while browning. Remove skin after browning if wished.

- 4 serving-size chicken pieces (about 2½lb/1.25 kg), trim but leave skin on
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, grated
- 2 tablespoons flour
- One 15oz/425g can tomato sauce
- 1 teaspoon sugar or honey
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- ½ teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)
- ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
- ¼ teaspoon allspice
- Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ In a big bowl, mix marinade ingredients.
- ☞ Put the washed hens or drumsticks in the marinade, and fold them in it so that they are coated on all sides. If Cornish hens are used, rub them inside and out with the marinade, and then tie their legs with kitchen thread. Set aside for 30 minutes.
- ☞ In a medium pot, put hens or drumsticks along with the marinade, and the potatoes. Pour 2½ cups (590ml) water, and bring to a quick boil skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and simmer gently, covered, for 30 minutes or until chicken is just done. Turn whole hens half way through cooking.
- ☞ Remove hens or drumsticks and potato slices from liquid and put them in a large ovenproof glass baking dish. Brush them lightly with oil or butter, and let them brown under a hot broiler/grill, turning hens several times to allow all sides to brown (turn drumsticks only once), about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Meanwhile, to the remaining liquid in the pot add peas, carrots, olives, and chili peppers if used. Bring to a quick boil then reduce heat to medium-low and let sauce boil gently until vegetables are cooked and sauce is richly thickened, about 20 minutes.
- ☞ As soon as hens or drumsticks and potatoes are browned, take them out of the oven, remove threads from hens, and pour sauce with the vegetables all over them
- ☞ Serve with rice with noodles topped with toasted nuts and currants (recipe 000), along with salad.

- ☞ In a big preferably non-stick frying pan, heat oil and sauté chicken pieces until browned on both sides, about 10 minutes. Transfer to a plate, and set aside.
- ☞ Sauté onion in the same oil until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and flour, and stir until fragrant, about 2 minutes.
- ☞ Mix tomato sauce, 1 cup (250ml) water, sugar, salt, black pepper, *baharat*, coriander and allspice. Gradually add to the onion-flour mix stirring until it starts to bubble (a wire whisk will be useful here), 2 to 3 minutes.
- ☞ Arrange chicken pieces in an ovenproof deep dish and pour tomato sauce mixture all over. Bake covered in the preheated oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until sauce nicely thickens and chicken is tender. Serve with white rice and salad.

CHICKEN DRUMSTICKS BAKED IN FIG SAUCE

Afkhadh il-Dijaa bil-Teen Makes 4 servings

Another delicious dish prepared à la Medieval Baghdadi cooking. Prunes can be substituted for figs. Skin is to be left on chicken for maximum flavor and for protection while cooking. Feel free to remove it before serving the dish.

12 chicken drumsticks, do not remove skin
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon black pepper
2 tablespoons oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
1 garlic clove, grated
16 dried figs
1 cup (250ml) tomato sauce or crushed tomatoes (one 8oz/225g can)
2 cups (475ml) broth or water
1 tablespoon crushed coriander seeds
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
For garnish: ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
 Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ Sprinkle drumsticks with salt and pepper and brown on both sides in heated oil in a big non-stick skillet, about 12 minutes. Remove drumsticks from skillet and arrange in a single layer in an ovenproof glass pan, about 7-by-12-inches (18x30.5cm).
- ☞ To the remaining oil in the skillet, sauté onion until transparent, about 5 minutes. Then add garlic and figs, and stir for a minute. Add tomato sauce, broth or water, coriander, salt, and pepper. Bring to a quick boil, stirring occasionally, about 5 minutes.
- ☞ Pour onion mixture all over the drumsticks, then bake, uncovered, in the preheated oven for about 35 minutes, or until chicken is tender, and sauce is nicely thickened.
- ☞ Garnish with chopped parsley and serve with rice or bulgur of your choice (see Chapters 8 and 9).

CHICKEN LEGS SIMMERED IN VINEGAR

Dijaa bil-Khal Makes 4 servings

Simmering meat in vinegar has been a favorite method for cooking meat ever since ancient times. The Babylonian recipes are our best testimony (see Introduction, Section VI). The tartness of the vinegar is usually balanced with a little bit of honey or sugar. During the Abbasid era, such a dish was called *masousiyya*. It was mainly a bird sour stew, but we do have recipes with shrimp and even red meat. The souring agent was vinegar, juice of unripe grapes, sumac juice, or juice of sour pomegranate. Poultry and fish were also preserved by sousing them in vinegar, salt, and herbs. Such dishes were called *mamqouriyyat*. When needed, pieces are taken out and served fried with sauce sibagh made with their vinegar (recipes in al-Warraq, Chapter 37). In this recipe, the chicken skin is kept while cooking for flavor and protection. It can be discarded before serving.

4 chicken legs, trimmed, or 12 chicken drumsticks, leave skin on
Salt and black pepper for seasoning the chicken
2 tablespoons oil
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
½ teaspoon turmeric
½ cup (3oz/85g) diced carrots, peas (frozen or canned), sliced mushrooms, each
2 medium potatoes, cubed
⅓ cup (80ml) vinegar, preferably wine vinegar, as in medieval recipes
1 teaspoon honey or sugar
1 cup (250ml) broth or water
1 teaspoon salt, coriander, thyme, each
½ teaspoon cardamom, allspice, each
¼ teaspoon black pepper
2 bay leaves
For garnish: ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley, or coarsely ground pistachio



- ☞ Season chicken pieces with salt and black pepper. Then brown them in oil using a non-stick skillet, big enough to hold chicken pieces in one layer. Brown on both sides, about 10 minutes. Transfer chicken to a plate.
- ☞ Sauté onion in the remaining oil until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add turmeric, carrots, peas, mushrooms, and potatoes. Fold for about 3 minutes. Pour vinegar and add honey or sugar. Boil for 2 minutes.
- ☞ Return chicken pieces to the skillet and add broth or water, salt, coriander, thyme, cardamom, allspice, black pepper, and bay leaves. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low and let chicken simmer, covered, until tender and sauce is nicely thickened, about 30 minutes. Half way through simmering, turn chicken pieces once.
- ☞ Garnish with chopped parsley, or give it a medieval touch by sprinkling ground pistachio on top. Serve with rice or bulgur (see Chapters 8 and 9 for recipes).

CHICKEN CURRY

Kari 'l-Dijaa Makes 4 servings

Besides the usual staples of rice and tomato-based stews, sometimes dishes are given a kick, whether gentle or vigorous depends upon the region and personal taste. Generally, people from the south, especially Basra, like their food on the spicy side. The best spices are found in the traditional soups of this southern port-city, which has been the pass-road for spice traders ever since ancient times. The following is a light version of the chicken curry using cubed chicken breasts.

According to Lizzie Collingham in *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors*, curry dishes - called so because they use curry powder, which was not really Indian but the invention of the British in colonized India - were created for the British in India. The dish's name Kari in Iraq must have been adopted during the time of the British colonization after the First World War.

1 pound (450g) skinless and boneless chicken breasts, or tender loins, cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes, and sprinkled lightly with salt and pepper
2 tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour
2 tablespoons oil, divided
1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
2 cloves garlic, grated
1 teaspoon curry powder
3 medium potatoes (about 12oz/350g), peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
2 tablespoons flour
2 cups (475ml) hot water
1 scant tablespoon tamarind concentrate or pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
½ teaspoon ginger
1 teaspoon salt

CHICKEN SIMMERED IN POMEGRANATE SAUCE

Dijaaj b-Sharaab il-Rumman Makes 4 servings

¼ teaspoon black pepper, whole mustard seeds, whole fennel or aniseeds, each
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander, ground cumin, each
 ½ to 1 teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste
 1 bay leaf
 2 to 3 pods cardamom
 ½ cup (3oz/85g) peas, any kind will do

☞ Sprinkle chicken cubes lightly with cornstarch. In a medium non-stick skillet, brown them in 1 tablespoon oil stirring frequently for about 7 minutes, or until chicken is cooked. Set aside in a plate.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in 1 tablespoon oil, and stir until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and curry powder one minute before onion is done. Add cubed potatoes and stir for a few more minutes. Sprinkle vegetables with the flour and stir until fragrant, one minute.

☞ Stir in hot water (a wire whisk will be useful here). Add the rest of ingredients, mix well, bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to low, and simmer until sauce is of medium consistency and vegetables are cooked, about 30 minutes. Stir 2 to 3 times while cooking to prevent sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Add the prepared chicken in the last 5 minutes, just to heat them through.

☞ Serve with rice and salad.

A tomato-free dish popular in the southern region of Iraq, especially in Najaf and Karbala. Cooking with sour pomegranate juice and thickening sauces with walnuts was not new to the region. The medieval Arabic cookbooks abounded with stew and sauce recipes in which countless sour agents were balanced with sweet substances. Similar dishes soured by adding *rumman* (pomegranate) were simply called *Rummaniyyat*, and sometimes *narbajat*, to give the dish an exotic Persian touch, fashionable at the time. The Persian name *fasanjoon*, must have filtered to the region at a later date. See similar recipes cooked with red meat 000, and fish 000.

In the late 1950s, Elizabeth Fernea spent around two years in al-Nuhra, one of the southern Iraqi villages. In her admirable *Guests of the Skeik*, she describes the way *fasanjoon* was cooked by the wife of the Sheik.

Fasanjan was a worthy delicacy to celebrate our release from the rain. The preparation took hours. First the walnuts were pounded and pounded in a mortar until nothing was left but the oil. The chicken was jointed and browned in the oil and then a little salt was added and water in which dried pomegranate seeds had been soaking. In this fragrant broth the chicken cooked slowly until the broth thickened to nut-brown sauce and the chicken fell from its bones. Walnuts and dried pomegranate seeds and salt proved to be an unexpectedly delicious combination of flavors. I told Selma that it was excellent and she smiled. (271)

This was how it was traditionally prepared. Nowadays it does not have to take that long. Here is how to prepare it the light and easy way:

4 serving-size pieces of chicken (about 2½lb/1.25kg), skinned and trimmed
 3 to 4 pods cardamom
 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 1 tablespoon oil
 1 cup (4oz/115g) walnut halves, toasted, then pulverized in a blender or food processor until oily
 ¼ cup (60ml) pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
 1½ teaspoons salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 ¼ teaspoon chili flakes, or to taste
 ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 3 cups (715ml) chicken broth
For garnish: ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley,
 4 tablespoons fresh pomegranate seeds if available

☞ In a medium pot, put chicken pieces and cardamom, and cover with cold water. Bring to a quick boil on high heat, skimming as needed. Reduce heat to low, and simmer gently, covered, until chicken is just cooked, about 30 minutes. Transfer chicken pieces to a plate. Strain broth and set aside.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until it starts to change color, about 7 minutes. Add pulverized walnuts, pomegranate syrup, salt, pepper, chili flakes, coriander, and 3 cups (715ml) chicken broth. Bring to a quick boil on high heat, then reduce heat to medium low and let the pot boil gently, covered, stirring 2 to 3 times until sauce is nicely thickened, about 25 minutes. Add the cooked chicken pieces in the last 5 minutes of simmering.

☞ Garnish chicken and sauce with chopped parsley, and pomegranate seeds if available. Serve with white or yellow rice along with salad.



Al-Fustuqiyya

An interesting 13th-century sweet chicken dish, named after fustuq (pistachio), the thickening and coloring agent in the recipe.

Take the breasts of chickens, and half-boil in water with a little salt. Drain off the water, and take the flesh off the bones, pulling it into threads: then put back into the saucepan, covering with water. Take peeled pistachios as required, and pound in the mortar: put into the saucepan, and stir, boiling. When almost cooked, throw in as much sugar as the pistachios. Keep stirring until set: then remove.

(Al-Baghdadi, Arberry's translation 197)

GRILLED CORNISH HENS

Farrouj Mashwi Makes 4 servings

It has always been the custom to choose pullets *farouj/fareej* for grilling because they are more tender than the indigenous fully-grown hens. In the medieval cookbooks, there are a considerable number of recipes for grilling farareej and plump chickens, served along with *sibagh* - later called *sulusaat* - sour-based sauces, thickened with nuts and seasoned with spices and herbs. They are the prototype of our modern *salsa* (see *Salsa: A Bit of History* 000 above). Even by today's standards, the *sibagh* idea still sounds good, and it is worth trying. Here is a sample:

Choose either wine vinegar or pomegranate syrup and combine it with crushed toasted nut, mustard, grated cucumber, onion and garlic, chopped parsley, mint or cilantro. Spice it with pepper, coriander, ginger, mustard, and salt.

2 Cornish hens

For marinade:

2 tablespoons oil

Juice of 1 lemon

1 small onion, grated

1 to 2 cloves garlic, grated

½ teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

½ teaspoon thyme, or *za'tar* (see Glossary)

For garnish: 1 tablespoon *sumac* (see Glossary),

an onion thinly sliced,

¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley

☞ Wash hens, and with a sharp knife cut them open flat from the back. Remove backbone and rib bones. Pound a little with a mallet to flatten pieces.

☞ Mix marinade ingredients and rub hens with it on both sides. Set aside for about 2 hours at room temperature or refrigerate overnight, but bring to room temperature before using.

☞ Put hens flat in a hinged fish grill and sprinkle with salt and black pepper. Grill on medium-high heat, turning several times while cooking until browned on both sides, about 30 minutes.

☞ The flattened hens can also be broiled/grilled. Put them flat on a broiling/grill pan, and broil/grill, turning twice to allow to brown on both sides. Brush with oil if you notice they are getting dry.

☞ To serve, mix *sumac* and onion and scatter all over the hens. Sprinkle the chopped parsley on top. Serve with warm bread and salad (see Chapter 3 for ideas).

Variation:

You can cook the flattened hens in a skillet, on top of the stove, the medieval way. They called chicken cooked this way *dajaaj mutajjan*, and was cooked in an earthenware skillet (al-Warraq, Chapter 32).

Cook them one after the other if you do not have a skillet big enough to hold both of them flat. Heat about 1 tablespoon oil in a big heavy skillet and put in hens flat. To help keep them this way while cooking, put a weight on them, such as a heavy flat plate. Cook on medium heat, basting with the oozing juices occasionally, and turning at least twice until they are tender and nicely browned. Put hens in a serving platter, and garnish and serve as suggested above.

CHICKEN SHISH KEBAB

Dijaaj Mashwi Makes 4 servings

Since fully-grown chicken nowadays is tender enough, there is no reason why we should restrict grilling to pullets. The following marinade will yield succulent and fully flavored grilled chicken.

4 boneless and skinless chicken breasts, trimmed and cut into 1½in/4cm cubes; or 12 drumsticks, leave skin on

For marinade:

1 cup (250ml) buttermilk, or milk mixed with

1 tablespoon lemon juice

1 small onion, grated

1 garlic clove, grated

2 tablespoons to ¼ cup (60ml) olive oil (depending on how lean chicken is)

½ teaspoon *za'tar* (see Glossary) or thyme

½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

1 tablespoon honey, optional

1 teaspoon grated lemon rind

Salt and pepper

For garnish: 1 tablespoon *sumac* (see Glossary), mixed with thinly sliced onion; and ¼ cup (½oz/15 g) chopped parsley

☞ Combine marinade ingredients in a bowl and add prepared chicken pieces. Let marinade coat pieces on all sides. Set aside for 2 hours at room temperature, or refrigerate overnight, but bring to room temperature before grilling.

☞ Thread chicken pieces into skewers (8 skewers if chicken breast is used, and 4 skewers if drumsticks). Reserve marinade for basting.

☞ When grill is ready, sprinkle chicken with salt and black pepper, and grill on medium-high heat. Turn skewers frequently to allow to brown on both sides, and baste several times with the reserved marinade to keep chicken moist, about 15 minutes for breasts, and 25 minutes for drumsticks, or until tender. When done, brush with a little oil if they look dry.



☞ You can also broil/grill them in the oven about 2in/5cm from source of heat. Arrange skewers on a broiling/grill pan. Turn skewers once to allow chicken to brown on both sides. Broil/grill until browned and tender, about 10 to 15 minutes on each side, and a little bit longer for the drumsticks. Baste several times while broiling/grilling and brush with a small amount of olive oil if chicken looks dry.

☞ Serve *kebab* on a bed of the prepared onion-*sumac* mixture, and sprinkle with chopped parsley. Delicious with warm bread and salads such as *tabboula* or *hummus* (recipes in Chapter 3), along with grilled tomatoes and onion slices.

Above: The ingredients for za'tar and sumac

CHICKEN OR TURKEY STUFFED WITH RICE

Dijaaj aw 'Ali Sheesh Makes 6 to 10 servings

Rotisserie Chicken, Medieval Style (*Kardanaaj*)

In addition to roasting meat in the *tannour* or grilling it on open fire *kebab* way, the medieval Baghdadi cooks grilled whole chickens in revolving spits, suspended on open fire, picnic style. Birds cooked thus were called *kardhabaaj* or *kardanaaj*. It was a popular way of serving chicken. In his 10th-century cookbook, al-Warraq dedicates a chapter for preparing such dishes. One of the recipes requires that after the rotating chicken is almost done, its skin is pierced and injected with *murri* (bread-based fermented sauce), and basted with olive oil and crushed salt. In another recipe, pullets are rotated on burning coals until they start to drip their juices, after which they are brushed with pancake-like batter while rotating using a bundle of feathers until they are thoroughly coated. When the dried up batter cracks, the pullets are brushed with *murri*, olive oil, and black pepper, and rotated until fully cooked. The recipe assures us that the pullets will come out "scrumptiously tender and juicy, God willing." Birds grilled this way were always served with specially prepared sauces, called *sibagh* (literally 'dipping sauces'). They were believed to aid digestion. A typical sauce would be made by mixing ground pistachio with sugar, vinegar, liquid extracted from cucumber pulp, salt, oil, and chopped mint. The sauce was then poured on the grilled chicken and set aside to let it absorb it. Before serving, chopped cucumber pulp, chopped mint, and oil were sprinkled all over the dish. Another *sibagh*, specially recommended for a hot summer day, was made by mixing sour juice of unripe grapes, thyme, basil (*badharuj*), parsley, and a bit of dried asafetida leaves (*anjudhan*). The grilled birds were put in this sauce, and then crushed ice was scattered all over the dish (Chapter 90).

The tenderizing effects of brine were recognized by cooks in the past. In the tenth-century Baghdadi cookbook, there is a meat recipe that requires the cut meat to be kept in brine from the time of Morning Prayer to around brunch time, which is around five hours. The meat was then washed very well and cooked (al-Warraq, 35). That was what our Christian neighbor used to do to her Christmas turkey before roasting it in the oven. However, this might not be necessary for roasting birds available in today's markets. Nevertheless, here are the suggested proportions for the brine:

For each quart (4 cups/950ml) of cold water, add 2 tablespoons coarse salt and 1 tablespoon sugar. The brined bird has to be refrigerated for about 6 hours. When ready to cook, do not forget to rinse the bird inside and out with cold water, otherwise it will taste too salty. Discard the brine.

1 large chicken (about 5lb/2.25kg) or a small turkey

Mixture for rubbing the bird:

½ cup (125ml) vinegar

1 tablespoon salt

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1 teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon cinnamon

½ teaspoon nutmeg

½ teaspoon *za'tar* (see Glossary) or thyme

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

For stuffing:

1 tablespoon oil

1 onion, coarsely chopped

2 cloves garlic, grated

½ teaspoon turmeric

½ cup (3oz/85g) frozen or canned peas, diced carrots, and chopped mushrooms, each

1 cup (4oz/115g) diced potatoes browned in

1 tablespoon oil

½ cup (3oz/85g) currants or raisins

½ cup (2oz/60g) slivered/ flaked almonds, toasted

1 tablespoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon cardamom

½ teaspoon cinnamon

1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon ginger

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, cooked as directed in

Plain White Rice 000

½ cup (125ml) yogurt, for coating the bird

Preheat oven 425°F/ 220°C/ gas mark 7

☞ To prepare the bird: Rub the washed bird with vinegar and salt inside and out and let it stand for 30 minutes. Drain and dry. Then rub it with lemon juice. Mix the spices and rub them onto the bird inside and out, and then set it aside in a colander fitted on a bowl, at room temperature, until ready for stuffing.

☞ In a large skillet, sauté onion in the oil until transparent, about 5 minutes. Add garlic and turmeric in the last minute. Add peas, carrots, and mushrooms. Pour in about ¾ cup (180ml) hot water and simmer on medium heat about 10 minutes, or until liquid evaporates. Mix in browned potatoes, currants, almonds, *baharat*, cardamom, cinnamon, *noomi Basra*, ginger, salt, pepper, and chili pepper. Gently fold this mixture into the cooked rice.

☞ To stuff the bird: Pat cavities dry with white paper towels/kitchen paper and fill very well with the rice mixture, because rice is already cooked. Close openings by sewing them with a kitchen thread. Tie the legs together, and put the stuffed bird on the roasting rack, breast side up. Tuck wings under the bird and tuck neck skin under the back. Discard any filling that came into contact with the uncooked bird while filling it.

☞ Coat the bird with yogurt. Bake in the preheated oven for the first 15 minutes. Reduce heat to 350°F (175°C/ gas mark 4), and continue baking (allow 30 minutes for each pound/ 450g). While bird is roasting, baste it occasionally with the dripping juices until it is nicely browned. Let it set for about 15 minutes before carving. Remove threads and serve on a platter surrounded with the remaining rice stuffing.

Note:

Some people prefer to bake the bird first until it is almost done, and then stuff it. According to this method, wash and rub the bird as directed in the first step. Roast it as directed in the fourth step. Prepare the filling as directed in the second step. When bird is almost baked, take it out of the oven and allow it to cool slightly. Then lift it up, to drain the cavity, and fill it very well with the stuffing, no need to close it, just cover it with a sheet of aluminum foil. Return to oven and resume baking until bird is thoroughly cooked and nicely browned, basting as needed.



THE PREGNANT CHICKEN

il-Dijaaja 'l-Haamil Makes 6 servings



An amusing method for stuffing chicken, which I learnt from my friends in Mosul, in northern Iraq. Once we were invited to dinner, and there it was in the middle of the table a huge stuffed bird. At first glance, I thought it was a huge duck, but I was corrected, it was an ordinary chicken, stuffed in the cavity, as well as between the skin and the meat. The chicken looked hilariously puffy, and we nicknamed it the pregnant chicken. The advantage of putting the filling between the skin and the meat is that the skin of the roasted chicken crisps to perfection.

Later on, I discovered, so much to my surprise, that stuffing chicken between the skin and the meat is not a new technique. In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala*, there is a chicken recipe

called *al-dajaj al-'Abbasi* (Abbasid chicken), which as the name indicates, is a loan dish from the Baghdadi cuisine. The initial instruction in the recipe was to stuff the chicken between the skin and the meat, as well as the cavity (23). More details on this method are given in the 13th-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla ilal-Habeeb* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 525-26). After the chicken was dipped in hot water, and feathers removed, and before opening it up, the skin was separated from the meat by blowing very hard through the neck. For still undetached areas, a meat skewer was pushed through the neck, and the skin was carefully separated.

To prepare this dish, you need a large chicken, about 5 pounds (2.25 kg). Get it ready for stuffing as directed in the recipe for stuffed chicken above, the first step. Prepare stuffing as in the second step. When you come to fill the chicken, follow these instructions:

☞ Hold the chicken with one hand and with the fingers of the other, starting with the neck part, separate skin from meat going down slowly all the way to the thighs, taking care not to pierce the skin with the nails. This will create a pocket to hold stuffing between meat and skin.

☞ Fill the regular cavity with the stuffing, and fill it well since the rice is cooked. Sew closed the cavity. Then fill the pocket you created with as much filling as it can hold, pushing the filling down to the thighs, the breast area, the wings, and the back. Sew closed the neck opening to prevent filling from coming out.

☞ Remove any of the filling that might have stuck to the chicken. Place the prepared chicken on a greased broiler/grill pan, and spray it lightly with oil or rub it with yogurt. Discard any filling that might have come into contact with the uncooked chicken.

☞ Bake as directed in Stuffed Chicken above, fourth step.

Above: Before and after

STUFFED CHICKEN, SIMMERED IN TOMATO JUICE AND BURIED IN RICE

A Baghdadi Jewish Dish

Tabyeet/Tannouri Makes 4 to 6 serving

A traditional dish prepared for the Sabbath by the Jewish families in Baghdad. The slow simmering was traditionally done in the *tannour* oven and hence the name *tannouri*. As for the other name *tabyeet*, it comes from the custom of keeping the pot simmering in the slow burning *tannour* overnight. Due to the prolonged time of cooking and generous amounts of fat, the rice develops a delicious crunchy crust. The following recipe is given a lighter touch.

1 chicken (about 4lb/1.80kg), washed
Juice of one lemon (¼ cup/60ml)
Salt and pepper, for rubbing the chicken
2 medium onions, chopped
(about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), divided
3 tablespoons oil, divided
1 medium tomato, chopped
1½ teaspoons salt, divided
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon baharat (see Glossary)
1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed and soaked in water for 30 minute, then drained, divided
1 cup tomato juice (250ml), or ½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce diluted in ½ cup (125ml) water, or 1 heaping tablespoon tomato paste diluted in water to make 1 cup (250ml)
4 eggs, boiled and shelled

☞ Rub chicken inside and out with lemon juice, salt and pepper. Set aside.

☞ Chop gizzards, and in a medium skillet, sauté them with one chopped onion in 1 tablespoon oil, until browned, about 10 minutes. Add chopped tomato, 1 teaspoon salt, black pepper, baharat, coriander, and 1 cup (8oz/225g) rice. Mix well stirring for a few minutes, and put away from heat. Set aside until cool enough to handle.

☞ Pat dry chicken inside and out very well with white paper towels/kitchen paper. Stuff the cavity with the prepared rice mixture. Do not pack it, allow some room for the expanding rice. Sew-closed the cavity, and tie legs with a kitchen thread.

☞ In a medium non-stick pot, sauté the other chopped onion and the stuffed chicken in 2 tablespoons oil, turning chicken to allow it to brown on both sides, taking care not to pierce the skin, about 15 minutes.

☞ Add tomato juice, or diluted tomato sauce or paste. Bring to a quick boil, and then allow chicken to boil gently on medium heat until liquid evaporates and chicken browns, about 15 minutes. Do not cover the pot at this stage.

☞ Pour about 4 cups (950ml) hot water. Add eggs and bring to a quick boil. Then reduce heat to low and simmer, covered, until chicken is cooked and 2 cups (475ml) of liquid is left, about 45 minutes. Turn chicken half way through simmering to allow it to cook on all sides.

☞ Remove chicken and eggs from sauce. Get rid of fat in sauce if wished.

☞ Add the remaining 1 cup (8oz/225g) rice and ½ teaspoon salt to the sauce. Bring to a quick boil, for 5 minutes, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer until the rice is almost cooked, about 15 minutes. Push some of the rice to the sides of the pot, and place the chicken in the middle of the pot and surround it with rice and eggs. Traditionally, at this stage, the pot would be placed in the *tannour* (clay oven) to simmer for a few hours. Continue simmering the pot on very slow heat for about 60 minutes, or until crust forms in the bottom of the pot. (You may simmer the pot, covered, in the oven, if it is ovenproof - no plastic or wooden handles or knobs to burn.)

☞ To serve, put the chicken in the middle of a platter, and surround it with rice and halved eggs. Break crust into chunks and arrange it around the platter. Serve with salad or Relish of Pickled Mango 000 above.

CHICKEN WITH RED RICE

Dijaj bil-Timman il-Ahmar Makes 6 servings

An easier version of *Tabyeet*, in which chicken pieces replace the whole stuffed bird.

6 chicken portions of your choice (about 3lb/1.35kg) skinned and trimmed
 2 tablespoons oil
 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
 3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (one 6oz/180g can) diluted in 6 cups (1.50 liter) hot water, or 6 cups tomato juice (46fl.oz/1.50 liter)
 1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 1 tablespoon salt
 ½ teaspoon black pepper
 4 to 5 cardamom pods
 1 bay leaf
 2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained well
For garnish: sliced boiled eggs, toasted slivered almonds, and currants or raisins

- ☞ In a non-stick skillet, brown chicken pieces in oil, turning once to allow to brown on both sides, about 6 minutes. Arrange browned pieces in bottom of a heavy medium pot.
- ☞ In the oil remaining in skillet, sauté onion until transparent, about 5 minutes. Scatter onion on chicken pieces in pot.



- ☞ Add to the pot tomato juice or diluted tomato paste, *noomi Basra*, coriander, salt, pepper, cardamom and bay leaf. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low, and simmer until chicken is tender, about 30 minutes.
- ☞ Take out chicken pieces, and set aside at a warm place until serving time. Measure the remaining liquid. You need 4 cups (950ml) for cooking the rice; the rest can be served in a bowl as extra sauce. Put drained rice in a heavy medium pot. Pour the measured 4 cups of liquid, and bring to a quick boil, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low, fold rice gently, then let it simmer, covered, for about 20 minutes, folding rice gently twice or thrice while simmering to allow it to fluff.
- ☞ To serve, put rice in a platter and surround it with chicken pieces. Garnish with egg halves, almonds and currants or raisins. Put any leftover sauce in a bowl and serve it with rice accompanied with a bowl of yogurt or Relish of Pickled Mango 000 above.

EASY FRUITY BAKED CHICKEN

Al-Bustaniyya Makes 4 to 6 servings

Bustaniyyat are medieval Abbasid dishes, which incorporate orchard *bustan* produce, most probably picked up and cooked in the orchards themselves. This recipe is inspired by *bustaniyya*, specialty of Abu Sameen (literally 'father of the fat one'), who was the palace chef of Abbasid Caliph al-Wathiq (d.847). According to Abu Sameen's version, chicken breasts were sliced into finger-like strips, and juice of sour green plums was added to them. When brought to a boil, spices, oil, a little sugar, wine vinegar, and 5 crushed walnuts were added. In its last stage, some eggs are broken on it, and are left to set with the steam of the pot (al-Warraaq, Chapter 62). Following is my easy fruity version of *bustaniyya*:

2 pounds (900g) skinless, boneless chicken breasts cut into finger-like strips
 ½ cup (3oz/85g) spring onion/scallion, chopped with the green part
 6 chopped dried apricots, dried prunes, dried figs, each
 10 green or black olives, stones removed
 ½ teaspoon grated orange peel
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted walnut, broken into pieces or crushed
 1 cup (250ml) orange juice
 1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup
 2 tablespoons olive oil
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
 ½ teaspoon ginger
 ¼ teaspoon cardamom
 ½ teaspoon whole aniseeds
 1 teaspoon salt
 ¼ teaspoon black pepper
 Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ Mix all the ingredients in a bowl, and let marinade at room temperature for 30 minutes.
- ☞ Spread mixture in a baking pan big enough to hold mixture in a thin layer.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven, loosely covered, until chicken is cooked, about 20 minutes. Fold mixture 2 to 3 times while baking.
- ☞ If remaining sauce is rather thin, remove chicken pieces and fruits from sauce, put them in a platter, and keep warm. Then put sauce in a skillet and reduce it on medium-high heat, until it nicely thickens. Then pour it on the chicken pieces.
- ☞ Serve hot, with bread and salad, or rice of your choice.



Dried cardamom pods... the seeds are ready for crushing

CASSEROLE OF CHICKEN WITH MACARONI

Qalab Dijaaj bil-Ma'karoni Makes 4 to 6 servings

We learn from the Babylonian recipes that the ancient Mesopotamians were the first people to make white sauce. They enriched and thickened their meat and bird broths by adding milk and breadcrumbs (see Introduction, Section VI). During the medieval times dishes cooked in white sauce, made of milk or yogurt and flour, such as *al-ragheeda* and *al-madheera* (see 000 above), were already part of an inherited long tradition. Following is a basic chicken and macaroni dish simmered in milk, and enriched with cheese. The list of pasta dishes is rather limited in the Iraqi cuisine, and when used, it would most likely be the *zittis*, those tubular luscious pastas (see *Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History* 000 above). You may use already cooked chicken or turkey, or prepare it especially for this dish. The white sauce in which chicken simmers is a basic form of béchamel sauce. To cut down on calories, you may use skim milk, and defatted broth, but please use regular cheese.

2 cups (about 18oz/510g) cooked chicken shredded into chunks (skin and bones removed) or 2 raw breasts and 2 raw thighs

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons oil

½ cup (2oz/60g) flour

2 cups (475ml) chicken broth

2 cups (475ml) milk

1 cup (4oz/115g) shredded cheddar cheese

¾ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

¼ teaspoon nutmeg

2 cups (11oz/300g) uncooked macaroni (such as *zittis* or elbow), cooked *al dente* according to package directions, and drained

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6



☞ If boiling your own chicken, put the pieces in a medium pot, and cover them with cold water along with 1 teaspoon salt, and a quartered onion. Bring to a boil, skimming as needed. Then reduce heat to low, and simmer, covered, until chicken is tender, about 30 minutes. Take out the chicken, and when cool enough, discard bones and skin, and shred the meat into chunks (you need 2 cups/ 510g). Strain the broth, and reserve 2 cups/475ml for the sauce. If using already cooked chicken, then skip this step.

☞ In a heavy medium pot (non-stick is not recommended here), sauté onion in oil until transparent, about 3 minutes. Add flour, and stir until fragrant and slightly browned, about 5 minutes.

☞ Carefully add broth (it will spatter) and stir with a wire whisk to prevent lumps from forming. Add milk and cheese, and stir, mixing well. Let sauce cook gently over medium heat until of medium consistency, stirring occasionally, about 10 minutes. Put away from heat.

☞ Add salt, black pepper, nutmeg, the shredded cooked chicken, and the cooked macaroni. Mix well.

☞ Grease 11½-by-7½-inch (29x19cm) baking dish (or approximate size) and spread the chicken mix. Bake in the preheated oven, uncovered, for about 30 minutes, or until sauce bubbles and thickens, and top is crispy and golden brown. Serve as a main dish with lots of salad.

CHICKEN AND SPINACH DELIGHTS

Dijaaj bil-Sbenagh Makes 6 servings

A light and tasty way for preparing chicken breasts. The combination of spinach, olives, and cheese is a delight to the palate as well as the eyes.

3 boneless and skinless chicken breasts (about 2½lb/1.24kg), cut in halves

For marinade:

2 tablespoons pomegranate syrup (see Glossary), honey may be substituted

¼ cup (60ml) orange juice

½ teaspoon nutmeg

½ teaspoon cumin

1 teaspoon coriander

¼ teaspoon ginger

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 medium onions (about 9oz/250g), thinly sliced

2 packages (10oz/285g) frozen spinach, thaw according to package directions, squeeze out extra moisture

½ cup (4oz/115g) grated pecorino Romano cheese

½ cup (3oz/85g) sliced olives, stones removed

½ cup (2oz/60g) shredded mozzarella cheese

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Pound chicken portions with a mallet to flatten. Combine marinade ingredients in a big bowl, then add the flattened chicken pieces and let them be coated with it. Set aside for about an hour at room temperature, or refrigerate overnight, but bring to room temperature before using.

☞ Take chicken pieces out of marinade and shake off excess. Discard any remaining marinade.

☞ Heat oil in a big non-stick skillet. Brown chicken pieces on both sides, and keep them flat by pressing them with a spatula (this will help them lay flat while baking in the oven). The chicken will brown quickly because of the sweet marinade. Turn over as soon as bottom side is browned (total time about 2 minutes) they do not need to fully cook.

☞ In the remaining oil and liquid, sauté onion slices until they brown and start to caramelize, about 10 minutes.

☞ Arrange browned chicken pieces flat and in one layer in a greased baking pan (or lined with aluminum foil), leaving a little space between pieces. Divide spinach among the 6 chicken pieces, covering the entire surface of each piece with it. Next, sprinkle the fried onion on the spinach, and then Romano cheese, sliced olives, and mozzarella cheese.

☞ Cover the pan with aluminum foil loosely, and bake in the preheated oven for about 10 to 15 minutes, or until chicken is tender and some liquid is released. Remove the foil and broil/grill the chicken for a few minutes, or until cheese is bubbly and browned in patches.

☞ Delicious with rice or warm bread and salad.

Like Sparrows for Cupid

Many recipes for drinks and dishes came down to us from the medieval period toting some amazing Viagra-like effects. To have the capacity to combat low libido, the consumed food must meet certain criteria based on the Galenic theory of humors, which argues that all objects in nature possess innate properties, ranging between cold and hot, and dry and moist. Some of the ingredients believed to be effective in this respect are ginger, linseed with honey, carrots, watercress *jirjeer*, nuts especially pistachios, mint, eggs, rice, pickled onion, sweet grapes, desserts, *saleb* (see Glossary), asparagus, artichoke, and chickpeas. Chickpeas in particular were said to possess the three essential elements required for coitus: Food must be hot in nature; it has to be nutritious and moist enough to increase semen; and it has to have the power to generate enough wind to fill and stiffen the veins of the 'equipment.' It will be at its most effective if eaten thoroughly cooked, and seasoned with black pepper, salt, asafetida, and thyme (al-Isra'ili *Kitab al-Aghdhiya* 2: 106). Nonetheless, nothing compares with sparrow dishes to boost sexual virility. Medieval physicians unanimously agree that sparrows (*asafer*) with their hot and moist properties can do marvels in whetting the sexual appetite, especially their eggs and brains. No wonder then when it comes to sparrow recipes, contemporary cookbook users were in good hands. Omelet of sparrows cooked in olive oil was especially recommended, and al-Warraq does not fail to include one in Chapter 79. In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan* by al-Tujeebi a *thareed* dish is said to be aphrodisiac. The recipe calls for some young fat chicks, preferably combined with sparrows, or sparrows alone. The birds are boiled with olive oil, salt, cinnamon, and coriander seeds. Then chickpeas, which have been soaked overnight, are put with the soaking water along with onion juice and clarified butter. When the dish is done, egg yolks are added to the pot. To serve, broken pieces of fine white bread are put in a bowl, and enough of the broth is poured to soak them up. The cooked birds are arranged on the

platter, and then the dish is given sprinkles of spikenard, cloves, ginger, black pepper, and cinnamon. The recipe highly recommends adding carrots to the mix (48). For a bonanza of sparrow recipes, though, we need to go to 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, where we have ten recipes no less, which seem to have been scooped from widely circulated specialized pamphlets. The recipes range from the simple to the elaborate. They are all lucidly written with a keen eye on details. We have grilled sparrows, which are marinated first and then skewered in wooden sticks alternately with onion wedges. Sparrows are pickled, prepared as omelets, and fried in several ways. The book also includes a long recipe prepared in al-Maghrib and al-Andalus as an aphrodisiac *mezze* dish (*naql*) for kings and the elite.

It calls for a special portable slow-burning stove, called *nafikh nafsihi* (the stove that blows its fire by itself), on which is put a delicate pot made of glass filled with slowly cooking sparrows with their heads attached, yellow and black chickpeas, chopped fresh fennel, and other ingredients. The pot is kept simmering throughout the long hours of the drinking session. During this time, the drinkers would help themselves to the sparrows, while amusing themselves by watching the cooking birds with their heads attached along with the vegetables and chickpeas bobbing in the pot with the gently boiling liquid (61-63).

Another *mezze* recipe is said to be popular in Baghdad and Mosul. The birds are first flattened and pounded (as done to pullets in the above recipe), then they are rubbed with turmeric and fried in oil. While cooking they are weighed down with heavy stones to keep them flattened. After frying, they are dipped in brine, and instantly removed and arranged on a platter, and served sprinkled with ground coriander and caraway seeds, black pepper, and mastic (60-61).

To this day, grilled sparrows (starlings) are still the specialty of the cafes and taverns in the Iraqi northern village of Tel il-Keif (literally 'hill of merriment'), a popular springtime picnicking area north of Mosul. The migrating sparrows pass by the area in huge numbers and are caught by nets, and grilled and served mostly with drinks. The eaters - whether aware of their special 'power' or not I am not sure - would nibble on them, munching and crunching them all, meat and bones.

A MEDIEVAL NABATEAN CHICKEN DISH

Nibatiyyat Dajaaj

The Nabateans (*Anbat*) were the indigenous inhabitants of Iraq, a mix of Chaldeans, Syriacs, and Arameans, collectively called *Nabat al-'Iraq* (not related to the ancient Nabateans from the area around Petra, collectively called *Nabat al-Sham*). It was through them that the fiber of the Mesopotamian culture continued. Their native language was the eastern Aramaic dialect from which Syriac evolved.

After the fall of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, the Mesopotamian region was ruled by Persian Achaemenides, Greeks, Parthians, and Sassanians, up until 636 AD when the Muslim Arabs defeated the Persians and seized control of the region. The majority of the Nabateans worked mostly as farmers in rural areas. The middle class played an important role in spreading the intellectual and scientific knowledge that spurred the Abbasid cultural boom. Harran, Kufa, and Wasit were centers for their intellectual activities. Medieval accounts of the Nabateans were shrouded with the notions of paganism and witchcraft even though most of them had converted to Christianity a long time ago.

The word *nabat* is believed to go back in origin to the Akkadian *nabatu* 'light up, shine, radiate' used in connection with the god Nabu, the divine scribe of the destinies. In medieval sources, the Nabateans were described as non-Arabs indigenous to Iraq. They were neither shepherds nor soldiers, but worked mostly as farmers. The word was sometimes used synonymously with 'commoners' and 'low-class people.' The region Iraq was praised for its healthy air, good soil, and sweet water, like the middle jewel in a necklace, and the Nabateans themselves were described as healthy and intelligent, and were the best in all handcrafts. Yet, they were notorious for being hostile to strangers, especially Persians, as 13th-century geographer Zakaria al-Qazwini explains in *Athar al-Bilad wa Akhbar al-'Ibad* 171. Following is a recipe for *Nibatiyya* made by Ishaq bin Ibrahim al-Mawsili (d.850 AD), the famous Abbasid singer during the time of Harun al-Rasheed. He featured in some of the *The Arabian Nights* stories. One of his

famous apprentices was Ziryab who fled to al-Andalus because Ishaq was jealous of him when he saw that Harun al-Rashid was enraptured by his singing (al-Maqqari 555). Judging from al-Warraq's cookbook, he was famous for his *Nibatiyyat* chicken dishes (Chapter 72, my translation):

Choose two plump chickens. Clean and disjoint them and put them in a pot. Add chopped onion, sweet and mellow olive oil, soaked and bruised chickpeas, and a stick of cassia. Let the pot cook for a short while. Then pour on it water, enough to cover the chicken, and bring it to a boil, twice.

Add a large piece of cheese and the needed amount of salt to the pot. Of the spices, add coriander seeds, black pepper, cassia, galangal, spikenard, cloves, nutmeg, dark fulful (long pepper), and ginger, all pounded. When the pot comes to one or two boils after putting the spices, add three handfuls of itriya [fine noodles, see Pasta and Noodles: A Bit of History 000 above] made from white dough. Pour 2 tablespoons rose water and let the pot simmer on slow fire until the noodles are cooked. Shell 5 [boiled] eggs and add them to the pot, and then wait until it stops bubbling and then rests.

Ladle the dish [into a bowl]. Take out the cheese and the eggs, cut them into pieces, and arrange them around the meat. You may add a handful of rice and smoked strips of meat [while pot is cooking]. That would be a good thing to do, delicious and scrumptious, God willing.

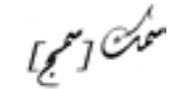
Comparable to illustrative pictures in modern cookbooks, Ishaq al-Mawsili composed a poem describing his dish: *Nibatiyya with chicken, as pure as ivory it looks.*

Eating it on a cold winter day is far more beneficial than eating beef stew. Swaying like the waves is the fat swimming on its face. Like a luminous full moon shining through its lofty mansion. The eggs are stars twinkling from a distance through the dark. The egg yolk, sitting in the midst of its white, is as beautiful as pure golden women's perfume put in glass, And the cheese showing through the dish is like beaded pearls set on a crown.



- Barbecued Fish, *Simach Masgouf* 000
- Baked Fish
- Baked Fish, Stuffed with Sumac Mix
- Broiled/Grilled Fish with Yellow Rice and Raisin Sauce
- Fried Fish a la Harun al-Rasheed
- Browned Fish with *Tahini*/Sesame Paste Sauce
- Layered Fish, *Mtabbag Simach*
- Fish Baked in Tamarind Sauce
- Fish Baked in Pomegranate Sauce
- Fish with Eggs
- Fish Stew
- Fish Stew Simmered in Pomegranate Sauce
- Fish Curry
- Sweet and Sour Fish Simmered in Almond-Prune Sauce
- Shrimp with Rice
- Shrimp Curry

Fish
Samak/Simach



In his comments on the Sumerian text "Home of the Fish" in *History Begins at Sumer*, Samuel Kramer provides us with valuable information about fish. Around a hundred different types were mentioned in Sumerian texts, about thirty of which are tentatively identified. This Sumerian text in particular contains "an itemized listing of some sixteen different fish, each described with a brief, pithy, riddle-like comment."

Above: Baked fish stuffed with sumac
Opposite: Fisherman with net

Around six of these can roughly be identified: "barbel, large and small, the carp, the sturgeon, the catfish, and the eel" (348, 350). Kramer says that the Sumerians had a soft spot for fish, as shown in this excerpt, where a devout lover of fish addresses his beloved fish in the following manner, which some interpret as an attempt of a fisherman to lure the fish to his bait or net.

*My fish I have built a house for you,
I have built a granary for you,
In the house there is food, food of top quality,
In the house there is drink, drink of well being,
In your house, no flies swarm about the liquor bar,
The house smells sweet like a forest of
sweet-smelling cedar,
By the house I have placed beer,
I have placed fine-quality beer,
I have placed there honey-beer and
sweet cookies. (348-49)*

In the third millennium BC, full use was made of this natural resource. It was salted and dried, a method that is still in use nowadays in the marshes of the south. The marsh dwellers call it *gbab* (from Arab verb *qabba* 'dry out'), and they normally de-salt it and cook it with rice, in a dish they call *masmouta*. Fish also was smoked, as well as consumed fresh. The roes were preserved separately and eaten as a delicacy. They were the caviars of the Sumerians. From fish they made fermented sauce for both kitchen and table use, similar to the oriental fish sauce. Some archaeologists even suggest that fish was a popular "carry out" food in the narrow winding streets of cities like Ur, where vendors with stalls offered fried fish with onions and cucumbers to hungry diners (Roux 182).

During the Sumerian times, fish was an important source of food, and fishing was considered a respectable profession. Fishermen were well attested as temple servants. In their records, there were freshwater fishermen and saltwater fishermen. Different methods for catching fish were mentioned,

such as using harpoons, nets, and wires. Existing artifacts show fishermen carrying big fishes. For instance, in a bas-relief, a temple attendant is portrayed as carrying a big vessel in one hand, and two fishes threaded through their gills, in the other. Amulets in the shape of two fishes strung together were found at Uruk (Buren 106). To the modern Mesopotamians, carrying large fishes in this manner is a very common sight along the banks of the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Allusions to fish were also made in the Sumerian hymns and incantations. A hymn in praise of the goddess Ishtar of Uruk associates the goddess with fish. It joyfully proclaims that because of Ishtar's favor, prosperity and plenitude gladdened the land, and the channels were filled with fish. They swarm with fish as if with dates. Another hymn describes a festival in honor of Ishtar: the table was laden with butter, milk, dates, cheese, and seven fishes. The number seven was not probably a specification of quantity as much as a magical number to suit the religious rite (Buren 112). However, during the second half of the reign of Hammurabi, mention of fish noticeably decreased in texts, and the word 'fishermen' in the Neo-Babylonian era was synonymous with 'lawless people.' One of the reasons could be that people escaping justice at the time used to find refuge in the southern marshes, the homeland of fishermen. This was by no means an indication that people stopped consuming fish. Herodotus, for instance, in the account of his visit to Babylon (I: 200) mentions that there were tribes in Babylonia who ate nothing but fish. Fish from the river Tigris was highly valued by the medieval Baghdadis because they believed that the best fish came from running cold-water sources, with stony riverbeds. Euphrates followed in excellence. Top quality fishes were *shabout* (*Barbus grypus*) of the carp family. Al-Biruni (d.1048) says its name in Syriac is *shabbuta* شَبُّوطَا and *shibuta* شَيْبُوطَا (*Kitab-al-Saydana* 396). Next in excellence comes *bunni* (*Barbus sharpeyi*), and *zajr* (*anthopeterus*), a large fish with small scales, now called *dhikar*. All these varieties are still

swimming in the Tigris and Euphrates, albeit in much smaller numbers.

The preferred medieval method for cooking the fish was frying. They believed it was easier on the digestion, and helped alleviate its harmful effects. Fried fish was prepared by sprinkling it with flour and salt and frying it in sesame oil. Sour based sauces and dips (*sibagh*) were always offered with fish dishes to further aid the digestion. Vinegar was the basic ingredient used in most of these sauces to which might be added garlic, onion, mint, parsley, mustard, caraway, thyme, raisins, walnuts, almonds coriander, pomegranate seeds, or sumac.

Fish was preserved for a few days by sousing it in vinegar, salt, and herbs. When needed, pieces are taken out and served fried with sauce made with its vinegar. Such fish dishes were called *mamqouriyat* (al-Warraq, Chapter 37). A specialty of the Abbasid Prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839) was to put a huge live fish in a basin filled with juice of red grapes and leave it there until it drinks as much as possible of the juice. The fish was then cleaned and roasted, and served with sauce (*sibagh*) made with wine vinegar, parsley, mint, and caraway. Fish tongues were a treat. Hundreds of them would be cooked as *qarees* (fish aspic). Another recipe prides itself on baking a fish, which results in a roasted head, poached middle, and fried tail. The recipe ends thus: For each part, prepare a sauce that goes with it, so that nobody would suspect that the whole fish was actually cooked as one piece, God willing (al-Warraq, Chapter 33).

The main source for shrimp (*roubyan* medieval and modern name) has always been the gulf in southern Iraq. The port city of Basra is its sole distributor. We have six interesting shrimp recipes in al-Warraq's cookbook. Shrimp was chopped with onion and used along with spices as a filling for sanbousa. It was cooked, then drizzled with oil and sprinkled with sumac, and was browned with onion and spices (Chapter 46).

Verses on Fish by Kushajim

Here are verses on fish composed by the famous Abbasid gourmet poet Kushajim (d.c.961), as depicted in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 11, my translation):

*What a glorious river, over-brimming,
bountiful, submerging, sweet, and flowing.
Teeming with the choicest fish, zajr, shabbut,
and bunni.
Like fresh dates of orchards or lusciously
contoured arms of beauties.*

Of the commercially important fishes still swimming in the two rivers, the medieval favorites still hold their ground, especially *shabbout* (carp). The British called it "the salmon of the Tigris" for, apparently, besides their delicious flavor, both swim against the current. *Bunni* and *gittan* (*Barbus xanthopterus*) are also important species. There is the huge 'monster of Tigris,' *biz* (*Barbus esotinus*). In English, it is sometimes called 'Tobias' fish.' There is also *mangout* (the spotted), which is the counterpart of the trout; *mizlaaj* (sole); and the less popular scavenger fish *jurri* (catfish). The southern marshes are famous for their *subour* fish (shad). It is a medium-sized fish, very flavorful, but unfortunately infested with sharp tiny bones. That was probably why in the first place it was called *subour* (patience). As an attempt to understand why such delicious fish has that many bones, folklore has it that when God created *subour*, they wanted to be distinguished from other kinds of fish. Therefore, they mediated to the Prophet's cousin Ali, and God granted them their request; He gave them a necklace of bones. The gulf itself provides the region with shrimp, and round flat fishes with cute little faces and significantly fewer bones, known as *zbeidi* (silver pomfret).

BARBECUED FISH

Simach Masgouf

Is it Done?

Cooking time given in the following recipes is approximate, depending on the size and thickness of the cuts. As a rule, fish cooks faster than other kinds of meat, so there is always the danger it might overcook, which results in dry, and sometimes stringy or rubbery texture. To test for doneness, the rule is that fish is cooked if it flakes when you probe it with a fork. Some cooks prefer this test: gently insert a pointed knife in the thickest area of the fish piece. If the knife slides all the way down without resistance, the fish is done, which might be a little less than 10 minutes, depending on the thickness of the cut. If you feel some resistance, let it cook for a little bit longer, and test again.

One of the most popular ways for preparing fish in Baghdad is by grilling it as *masgouf*, a method, which in all probability goes back to the times of ancient Mesopotamia. In some ancient Sumerian texts, fish was described as being 'touched by fire,' and 'placed upon the fire,' which possibly means placed on the glowing coals. *Masgouf*, as we shall see, is cooked in two stages. First, it is touched or licked by fire, and then it is placed on the fire. In modern times, *masgouf* is, more often than not, a picnic treat, which requires a certain skill. In the summertime, particularly on moonlit nights, picnickers make a huge campfire along the banks of the Tigris, or on the many small islands, known as *jazra*. Those small islands spring out into existence when the Tigris' level drops down. *Masgouf* can also be ordered at the open-air restaurants along the river Tigris. In the summertime, the sight and the taste of *masgouf* has never failed to fascinate foreign visitors to the area. In the amusing memoirs of two American twin sisters, who visited Iraq in the late thirties, *masgouf* was given exceptional significance. "No wonder," they said, "this part of the world had become the cradle of civilization when its inhabitants could think up a dish like this." The twins then go on to describe how they ate it:

We rolled up our sleeves, and with our fingers we slid the tender meat off the backbone of the fish and scooped it up. It was a dish worthy of an Escoffier. Everyone had a lot of fun except the [British] ambassador. He, too, sat on the ground, but he was wearing a hat and balancing a plate of fish on his knees drawn up in front of him. He ate with a fish knife and fork. Suddenly we looked around and saw that we were the only ones who were eating the masgouf in the proper fashion, or the improper fashion, depending on which way you looked at it. We wondered if a hot dog would also be honored with knife and fork under these circumstances. We were afraid we would never achieve that admirable ability of the British to translate into their own terms everything that came their way. (Heffman, 57-62)

Agatha Christie and Iraqi Food

Agatha Christie: The Unknown Assyrian and Baklava by Basil Pius is a charming little book, memoir with ten recipes, put together in "the spirit of celebration and remembrance of Agatha Christie's life" (87). Basil Pius parents were owners of Coronet Bookstore, a landmark on Rasheed Street. While still a college student in 1955, he was introduced to the then 65 years old Agatha Christie who was at the time paying a visit to the bookstore. He said at first they exchanged some niceties as they looked at each other and he toiling to find a topic that would make him "sound halfway intelligent" (21). Within the course of this encounter, Agatha told him about an event she was quite enthusiastic about:

One time while on an outing in northern Iraq, she, her husband, and some friends, visited a family of fellaheen (farmers). She described the afternoon as "very chilly and windy" but praised the villagers for their wonderful hospitality. She was particularly impressed with the free-spirited men because they were not embarrassed to let their wives and children join the gathering, an uncommon custom in the Moslem countries. (22)

Agatha was delighted that the bookstore carried several of her books, and started to talk fondly of Mesopotamian legacy, of Babylon, Ur, Nineveh, and Nimrud, and told him she had been reading about "the brave Assyrians,' their Aramaic language and contribution to our civilization." (22) Then they launched into the subject of food:

She assured me that eating Iraqi food had never been a problem during her many visits in Iraq. On the contrary, she was fond of several Middle Eastern recipes, and she referred to some by name... "No wonder," chided Agatha at one point, "you Iraqis have a reason to talk well of your fresh Iraqi bread and romanticize about your masgouf (outdoor barbecued fish)." Jovially she added, "I know how to smack my lips when sipping my chai (tea)." (22--23)

It should be added here that *masgouf* was definitely not one of Agatha Christie's favorite dishes. She told Basil Pius that it was "all right as a once-a-year adventure." Pius thinks this is because *masgouf* is eaten by hand (89).

Another American guest, visiting the region in the late sixties, describes *masgouf* as prepared at one of the casinos (outdoor cafes) at Abu-Nuwas Street, a promenade along the river Tigris:

The best food in Baghdad is masgouf, fish barbecued beside the Tigris and eaten outdoors along the riverside... With our host and hostess we looked into several fish stalls and chose a live shabout (a popular kind of fish)... It was split and cleaned, seasoned with rock salt and

paprika, and placed beside the fire with nine or ten others, all impaled on sticks arranged in a circle around the crackling twigs. The cook used a long stick to push the burning wood toward one fish or another as the breeze shifted the flames.

It takes an hour for the fish to cook... At last the shabout was brought on a large, oval plate, garnished with tomato slices and wedges of raw onion and accompanied by several loaves of Arab bread. "You must eat the fish with your hands," said our hostess, "so you can feel the





bones." But I remembered a better explanation of the custom: "Eating with knife and fork is like making love through an interpreter." We all tore off pieces of bread, searched out succulent morsels of shabout and ate, alternating mouthfuls of fish with bites of tomato or onion. (Nickles, 110)

Well, they left very little for me to say, except that I should admit that they are justified in all the fuss they made about eating the fish with the fingers. The region's fresh fish has a lot of tiny bones, as sharp as pins, and can only be felt with the fingers. It is to be regretted that nowadays fish is not readily available or even affordable as it used to be in the good old days. Unfortunately, too, much use and abuse have drained the two rivers of such a nutritious natural resource, and a dish like *masgouf* might well be beyond the means of many pockets.

How to Prepare Masgouf

The key to *masgouf* is freshness. Traditionally, the fish is slaughtered only when the fire is ready for barbecuing. In the outdoor cafes, they are either kept alive in large basins, or tied with a cord through their gills and kept in the river water until ready to cook. People choose their fish the way lobsters are chosen in restaurants and supermarkets. Here is how to prepare it:

☞ Fresh fish is cut lengthwise from the back all the way down without removing or breaking the backbone. The fish is then butterflied, cleaned, washed, and sprinkled with coarse salt and black pepper. Two 1in/1.5cm wide slashes are made on the outer skin of the side that has the backbone, because it is heavier than the other. The fish is going to be hanged on two stakes; therefore, those two slashes should be so spaced that the fish stays open and balanced while cooking without falling.

☞ Big fire is made from brushwood and date palm leaves, which will give fish that distinguished delicious smoky taste. Around the fire, sticks are then stuck in the sand about one foot away from the flames, two sticks for each fish, or one forked stick, and the distance between them should be the same distance between the two slashes made on each fish.

☞ The fish is then hung on these two sticks by inserting their pointed tips into the prepared slashes on the back of the fish between the skin and the flesh. The inside of the fish is to face the flames with the whole fish a little curved so that they receive as much heat as possible.

Because the fish needs to be 'licked' by the fire, so to speak, the inside of the fish is to face the blowing wind.

☞ It takes about an hour for the fish to cook. During the last 10 minutes of cooking, the fish is laid flat on its back right on top of the ashes and embers, which are raked together.

☞ The fish is then put on a big tray, garnished with slices of tomatoes and onion. Sometimes it is topped with a prepared sauce consisting mostly of chopped parsley, tomatoes, onions, and garlic, with tamarind sauce and curry powder. *Masgouf* is usually eaten with bread, especially the Iraqi flat breads, and accompanied with pickled mango.

BAKED FISH

Samak Mashwi

At home, fish was traditionally baked in the clay oven *tannour*. It was butterflied, and laid flat on brick tiles arranged in the oven's floor. Another way was to lay it flat in a long-handled hinged fish grill, and place it vertically in the *tannour* to cook slowly in the smoldering coals. However, for the less romantic, here is a more practical method for enjoying baked fish:

1 whole medium-size fish, butterflied, or a fillet (with skin on)

For marinade:

1 onion, grated

2 cloves garlic, grated

1 teaspoon cumin

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

Juice of one lemon (¼cup/60 ml)

Salt and black pepper for sprinkling

☞ Mix marinade ingredients and rub with it the prepared fish on both sides. Set aside for 30 minutes at room temperature.

☞ Put the fish flat on an oiled hinged fish grill. Sprinkle salt and pepper on both sides Grill on medium-high heat, skin down. When skin starts to brown, baste surface with any leftover marinade, or oil, and turn the fish to allow it to brown on the other side. Time greatly depends upon the size and thickness of fish, but avoid overcooking it. If meat flakes easily when probed with a fork, it is done.

☞ Remove the fish from hinged grill, and sprinkle it with sumac (see Glossary) or a squeeze of lemon juice. Also delicious topped with Pomegranate Raisin Sauce (recipe below). Serve the fish with bread or rice, along with salad and *'anba* (pickled mango, see Glossary).



Pomegranate Raisin Sauce

This sauce goes well with fried or baked fish, which does not have sauce of its own. It is fast, easy, and flavorful:

2 tablespoons oil

2 medium onions, chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

1 garlic clove, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)

2 medium tomatoes, chopped

1 medium fresh pepper (sweet or hot), chopped

1 medium potato, diced, sprinkled with oil, and broil/grill to brown it, optional

½ cup raisins

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ cup (60ml)

☞ In a medium skillet, sauté onion in oil until transparent, 5 minutes. Stir in curry powder, coriander, and garlic until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Fold in the rest of the ingredients and cook gently on medium heat, covered, until sauce is nicely thickened, 5 to 7 minutes.

BAKED FISH, STUFFED WITH SUMAC MIX

Samak Mahshi bil-Summag, Mashwi Makes 4 servings

Stuffed fish was baked in the clay oven tannour as follows: it was tied up with strong threads, inserted into a large iron skewer, and then placed in the slow-burning flameless oven. This we learn from al-Baghdadi's 13th-century recipe (Arberry 203). The following is an adaptation. The recipe uses a whole fish, which would be a nice thing to have. However, for convenience I sometimes use the whole tail part of a medium to big salmon, slash the skin, fill the cavity, and then tie it up with a kitchen thread.

2½ to 3 pounds (1.25-1.35kg) whole fish such as a small salmon or 2 big trouts, butterflied. Make 2 to 3 diagonal slashes on the outer skin on both sides

2 tablespoons oil

½ teaspoon turmeric

For the stuffing:

½ cup (2oz/60g) sumac (see Glossary)

¼ cup (1oz/30g) za'tar (see Glossary) or thyme

½ teaspoon coriander, cumin, each

4 cloves garlic, grated

½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted walnut, chopped

2 tablespoons oil

½ teaspoon salt

About 3 tablespoons water

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

*Above: Fish with Yellow rice and raisin sauce
Below: Baked fish stuffed with sumac sauce*



- Rub fish with oil and turmeric inside and out.
- Mix stuffing ingredients, it should have a paste-like consistency. Add some more water if needed. Fill the inside of the fish with it, and close the opening with wooden picks, or wrap around the fish with a kitchen thread.
- Put the stuffed fish in a greased baking sheet and bake it in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes, or until flesh is flaky when poked with a fork, and skin is nicely browned.

BROILED/GRILLED FISH WITH YELLOW RICE AND RAISIN SAUCE

Samak bil-Timman il-Asfar w'il-Kishmish Makes 4 to 6 servings

A beautiful dish. The fish with its crispy topping is surrounded with golden yellow rice, and decked with browned noodles, raisins, and toasted slivered almonds. The whole combination is extremely aromatic, and on top of all this, it can be done in only 30 minutes. Traditionally, fish is always served with yellow rice partly for aesthetic reasons and partly for a very practical purpose. Because the domestic fish comes with lots of bones, some of which are as tiny and prickly as thorns, it will be easier to see the bones if the rice is yellow rather than white. Some people like to serve fish with rice cooked with lentils, which also serves the same purpose. In the recipe below, the less expensive turmeric is used to color the rice, but if saffron is available, by all means, use it. In this case, use ¼ teaspoon saffron instead of turmeric, steep it in 3 tablespoons hot water for about 5 minutes, then add it in the first step when you add water to the rice.

For yellow rice:

1 tablespoon oil

½ cup (1oz/30g) broken vermicelli noodles (2 balls)

½ teaspoon turmeric

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained

3½ cups (860g) hot water

1½ teaspoons salt

4 to 5 whole pods of cardamom

A stick of cinnamon

For raisin sauce:

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

½ teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon curry powder

2 cloves garlic, grated or thinly sliced

2 medium tomatoes, chopped

¾ cup (4oz/115g) raisins

½ to 1 teaspoon tamarind concentrate or noomi Basra

(see Glossary). If not available substitute with 1

tablespoon Worcestershire sauce

1 teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

½ cup (125ml) tomato sauce or water

For broiled fish:

2 pounds (900g) salmon skinless fillet (or any fish of your choice), divided into 4 portions

1 tablespoon olive oil

1 tablespoon each, mustard and honey, combined

Coarse salt for sprinkling

For garnish: ¼ cup toasted slivered/flaked almond

➤ Put oil and noodles in a medium heavy pot and stir on high heat until noodles are browned, a few minutes. Stir in turmeric in the last few seconds. Add the drained rice, hot water, salt, cardamom, and cinnamon. Let it boil on high heat for 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low and simmer rice, covered, for 20 minutes, folding it gently 2 to 3 times to allow it to fluff. While rice is cooking, prepare the fish topping.

➤ To prepare the topping: In a medium skillet, sauté onion in oil until translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in turmeric and curry powder in the last 30 seconds. Add the rest of the topping ingredients, and stir and cook for about five minutes. Keep warm. Ten minutes before serving the meal, cook the fish.

➤ To broil the fish: Turn on the broiler/grill. Line a shallow baking pan with aluminum foil, and drizzle it with half the oil. Arrange the fish pieces on the pan leaving a space between pieces. Brush them with the mustard-honey mix, drizzle with the remaining oil, and sprinkle with salt. Broil for 5 minutes, then turn over the pieces, give them a brush of the mustard-honey mix and a sprinkle of salt. Broil until surface is crisp and golden, 3 to 5 minutes, or until flesh is flaky when poked with a fork. Immediately, transfer the fish pieces to a big oval platter, surround them with the cooked yellow rice, and spread the raisin sauce all over the dish.

➤ Garnish with the slivered almonds.

FRIED FISH À LA HARUN AL-RASHEED

Samak Maqli Makes 4 servings

In an *Arabian Nights* story, the Abbasid Caliph of Baghdad Harun al-Rasheed, once disguised as a fisherman for his amusement. He caught fish, and volunteered to fry it himself for two young lovers in an orchard. For seasoning, he used salt, saffron, wild marjoram, and cumin. When fish was fried, he put it on a banana leaf, and gathered from the garden wind-fallen fruits, limes and lemons (From the story of "Nur al-Din Ali and the Damsel Anees al-Jalees," (2: 33). This was how the medieval eaters preferred to have their fish, for they thought frying was lighter on the digestion. Fish was first lightly coated with flour and salt before frying it, which was probably done to prevent the oil from spattering while frying. We still fry our fish almost the same old way.

It would be a good idea to put the fish pieces, after you wash them, in a colander to allow them to drain, and give them a light sprinkle of salt. I also remember my mother used to put a special flat disc of glazed earthenware fish-weight on the fish pieces while frying to keep them flat. This gadget is unfortunately a thing of the past now. Here is how to fry the fish:

Fish Bones

*My husband heaps up (grain) for me,
my son metes it out for me -
Would that my darling husband would
pick the bones from the fish (for me).
(A Sumerian proverb, Gordon, 465-66)*

The speaker is a Sumerian woman who had it all, but still pines for the times when her husband used to do those personal, caring, little things for her, perhaps during their honeymoon. Nowadays, such a woman might win our sympathy, but the Sumerians meant this to be a sarcastic comment on unreasonable selfishness.

☞ Coat 4 serving-size skinned fish pieces (about 2 pounds/900g) with a mixture of:

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon cumin

¼ cup (1oz/30g) flour

¼ teaspoon paprika, for color and flavor, optional
(This mixture will help give fish pieces a protective and aromatic coating)

☞ Fry the coated fish pieces in hot ½in/1cm deep oil, turning once until golden on both sides. While frying help keep pieces flat by putting a weight or pressing with a hamburger flipper. Total cooking time 5 to 10 minutes, depending on how thick fish is.

☞ To avoid frying, coat fish pieces with the suggested mixture above, generously brush or spray the pieces with oil, and bake in a hot oven until meat is flaky, and coating is golden brown, around 10 minutes, depending on how thick fish pieces are (avoid overcooking fish), or broil/grill them.

☞ I sometimes add about 2 tablespoons of sesame seeds to the flour mixture, coat the fish with this mixture as directed above, and press it with the hand to help the seeds adhere to the fish. The seeds will toast while baking, and give the fish a very appetizing aroma.

☞ To serve, give the fish a sprinkle of *sumac* (see Glossary) or a squeeze of lemon juice.



BROWNEED FISH WITH TAHINI/SESAME PASTE SAUCE

Samak Maqli bi-Khal wa Rashi Makes 4 servings

I found this delicious recipe in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook. It is called *Samak Maqlu bi-Khal wa-Rahshi* (fish fried with vinegar and tahini/sesame paste). We still use the same medieval indigenous name *rahshi* (*tahini*), except we pronounce it *rashi*. The quantities suggested below are my improvisation.

4 serving-size skinned fish pieces
(about 2 pounds/900g), salmon or any white fish will do, prepared as in the previous recipe

⅓ cup (80ml) tahini/sesame paste

¼ cup (60ml) vinegar

1 tablespoon mustard

A dash of salt

1 garlic clove, grated

¼ to ½ cup (60-125ml) water

1 tablespoon whole coriander seeds, fried in a small amount of oil

¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted walnuts, broken into small pieces

¼ cup (½oz/15 g) chopped parsley

A dash of cinnamon and cumin, optional

☞ Stir together tahini, vinegar, mustard, salt, garlic, and water (start with the lesser amount and add as needed). The sauce should be of spreading consistency.

☞ Spread tahini sauce on the serving plate, and arrange fish pieces on it. Sprinkle coriander seeds on the fish and garnish with walnut, parsley, and cinnamon and cumin if used.

☞ Very nice with white rice cooked with vermicelli noodles, recipe 000 above.



Iraqi Folk Song

*Hey fisherman, catch a bounni fish for me,
will you? How come you are a city dweller and
me a Bedouin?*

LAYERED FISH

Mtabbag Simach Makes 4 servings

A traditional dish, which calls for fried pieces of fish attractively layered with rice and raisins. To give it a light touch you can oven-fry the fish.

For the fish:

2 pounds (900g) white fish fillet or salmon, skin removed, and cut crosswise into 8 strips

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon cumin

1 tablespoon flour

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

For the rice:

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained

1 tablespoon oil

3½ cups (860ml) hot water

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon cinnamon

For the raisin mix:

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

½ teaspoon turmeric

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 tablespoon oil

¼ cup (4oz/115g) golden raisins/sultanas (other kinds may be substituted)

¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted slivered/flaked almonds or broken walnut pieces

1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

¼ cup (60ml) water

½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, chopped

☞ To prepare the fish: Coat the pieces with a mixture of curry powder, cumin, flour, salt, and pepper. Then fry them until crisp. Alternatively, brush or spray them with oil, and bake them in a hot oven or broil/grill them until crisp and flaky, about 10 minutes. Avoid overcooking the fish.

☞ To make the rice: In a medium heavy pot (preferably non-stick), put all the rice ingredients, and let them boil for 5 minutes on high heat. Reduce heat to low and let it simmer for 20 minutes. Fold rice gently 2 to 3 times while simmering to allow it to fluff.

☞ To prepare the raisin mix: In a medium skillet, heat oil and sauté onion until translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in turmeric and curry powder until fragrant, a few seconds. Add raisins, almonds or walnuts, *noomi Basra*, and water. Stir for a few minutes until most of the moisture evaporates. Fold in parsley and stir for a minute.

☞ To assemble the dish: Empty the cooked rice into a bowl. Using the same rice pot, put about a third of cooked rice as a bottom layer. Arrange half the fish pieces on rice, and spread half the raisin mix on the fish. Repeat layering of rice, fish, and raisins. Top with the remaining third of rice. Return pot to stove and let it simmer on low heat for about 15 minutes to allow a crunchy crust to form in the bottom of the pot (you might need to raise heat in the last 5 minutes to ensure a good crust, let your nose be the judge). A non-stick pot will make the task of unmolding the rice much easier.

☞ To serve, unmold the layered rice by putting a big platter on the pot, and holding both with both hands, turn pot upside down. For more casual occasions, just carefully spoon out the layered rice with fish and raisins into the serving dish. Have it with lots of salad. Radish with its leaves is a perfect match for this dish.

Note:

Instead of boneless and skinless fish fillets, fish with bones and skin can be substituted. Just sprinkle it with salt and pepper and then poach it or enclose it in a pocket of aluminum foil and bake it in a hot oven, about 10 minutes or until flaky when probed with a fork. When cool enough to handle discard skin and bones, and break fish into big chunks and layer with the rice and raisin mix as directed in the fourth step.

FISH BAKED IN TAMARIND SAUCE

Tabasi 'l-Samak bil-Tamur Hindi Makes 4 servings

The dish is called *tabasi* because ingredients are arranged in a pan like a casserole, and the resulting sauce is more condensed in consistency than stew. *Tabasi* is derived from *tabs* Turkish for 'tray', which must have been adopted during the Ottoman era. This is an easy and fast dish, but you'll be amazed at how tasty the tamarind will make the fish. Obviously, we do not believe that fish and tamarind do not get along well in the stomach. Unlike the Egyptians who believe that combining *samak*, *laban*, *tamrihindi* (fish, milk, tamarind) is the epitome of incongruity.

2 pounds (900g) fish fillet, skinned and sliced crosswise into 4 serving-size pieces.

Salt and pepper for sprinkling

2 tablespoons olive oil, divided

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 cloves garlic, grated

½ teaspoon curry powder

2 medium tomatoes (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), diced

¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped

1 scant tablespoon tamarind concentrate

½ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste

¼ teaspoon black pepper

2 tomatoes, or ½ red bell pepper thinly sliced

Preheat oven 450°F/ 230°C/ gas mark 8

☞ Sprinkle fish pieces with salt and pepper and set a side in a colander fitted on a deep dish, to drain.

☞ In a medium skillet, heat 1 tablespoon oil and sauté onion, until translucent, about 5 minutes. Stir in garlic and curry powder in the last minute. Add diced tomatoes, parsley, tamarind concentrate, salt, chili, and black pepper. Mix well.

☞ Spread half of the mixture in the bottom of an ovenproof glass-baking dish. Arrange fish pieces in one layer on top. Spread the remaining onion mix on the fish. Arrange tomato or pepper slices on top.

☞ Drizzle with 1 tablespoon oil, and bake uncovered in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes, or until fish is flaky when probed with a fork. Broil/grill the top for a few more minutes to let the surface crisp. Serve with rice or warm bread, with lots of salad.

FISH WITH EGGS

Samak bil-Beidh Makes 4 servings

As suggested in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook, one of the many ways to prepare *tirrikh* fish (dried and salted) was to fry it, debone it, cut it into bite-size pieces, then cook it with eggs and lots of spices (Arberry 204-05). The following dish is inspired by such recipes. In our modern kitchens, we can certainly substitute with canned salmon or tuna.

2 cups (about 18oz/510g) cooked fish, cut into bite-size pieces; or three 6oz/180g cans chunk tuna, drained

½ cup (2oz/60g) breadcrumbs

1 medium onion, diced and sautéed in 1 tablespoon oil

4 eggs, slightly beaten

1 tablespoon vinegar or lemon juice

2 tablespoons tahini/sesame paste

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

¼ cup (2oz/60g) olives, pitted and sliced

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon coriander

½ teaspoon cumin

2 fresh chili peppers, diced, or

½ teaspoon ground chili

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a big bowl, mix all ingredients, taking care not to crush fish. Put a small amount of of breadcrumbs aside for lining the pan.

☞ Grease 8-by-8-inch (20x20cm) baking dish. Sprinkle lightly with the reserved breadcrumbs. Spread fish mixture, and bake in the preheated oven for about 35 minutes, or until dish is set and surface is golden brown. Let set in pan for 10 minutes before cutting into squares, and then serve with warm bread and salad.

FISH BAKED IN POMEGRANATE SAUCE

Tabsi 'I-Samak b'Sharab il-Rumman Makes 4 servings

Pomegranate and walnut combine in this recipe to give sauce a rich, medieval texture. About the term *tabsi*, see above recipe.

2 pounds (900g) fish fillet, skinned and divided into 4 serving-size pieces

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cumin

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon black pepper

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons olive oil, divided

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon crushed chili pepper, or to taste

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup, diluted in

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup (160ml) water

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (2oz/60g) shelled walnut, toasted and ground

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

For garnish: $\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz/15g) parsley, chopped

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Rub fish pieces with cumin, black pepper, and salt. Fry them briefly on both sides in 1 tablespoon oil, about 5 minutes (they don't need to be fully cooked). Take them out of the skillet, and keep warm.

☞ Add 1 tablespoon oil to the skillet, and sauté onion until translucent, about 5 minutes. Fold in chili pepper and coriander.

☞ Spread half the onion mixture in the bottom of an ovenproof glass baking dish. Arrange fish pieces on top, and then spread the remaining onion mix on the fish.

☞ In a small pot, put diluted pomegranate syrup, walnuts, and salt, and bring pot to a quick boil, a few minutes. Pour it all over the fish and bake in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes, or until fish is flaky when probed with a fork, and sauce is nicely thickened. Garnish the dish with chopped parsley, and serve with rice and salad.

FISH STEW

Margat Simach Makes 4 servings

Cooked in simple tomato sauce, fish stays deliciously moist and succulent, and potatoes pair very nicely with it. Unfortunately, in its original region Iraq, it is not a very popular type of stew. River fish is full of bones, which makes it a rather hazardous dish to cook this way. That's why I have never really had enough of it. Here is how to prepare it:

2 pounds (900g) boneless and skinless fish fillet, cut into 4 serving-size pieces

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon black pepper

2 tablespoons lemon juice

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 tablespoons oil

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon turmeric

3 medium potatoes (about 12oz/350g), peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes

3 heaping tablespoons tomato paste (6oz/180g can), diluted in 4 cups (950ml) hot water; or 15oz/425g can tomato sauce diluted in 3 cups (715ml) water

1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary) or

2 tablespoons lime or lemon juice

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons salt

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon black pepper

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz/ 15 g) parsley, coarsely chopped

☞ Sprinkle fish pieces with salt, pepper, and lemon juice. Set aside in a colander fitted on a deep dish, to drain.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until translucent, 5 minutes. Add turmeric and potatoes and fold for one more minute.

☞ Add diluted tomato paste or sauce, *noomi Basra*, salt and pepper. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer for about 20 minutes, or until potatoes are cooked.

☞ Arrange fish pieces in the bottom of the pot. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes, or until fish is done (depending on thickness of the fish pieces). Cooked fish will flake when probed with a fork. Sprinkle with chopped parsley, and serve with white rice.

FISH STEW SIMMERED IN POMEGRANATE SAUCE

Margat Samak b'Sharab il-Rumman (Fasanjoon bil-Samak) Makes 4 servings

Back in medieval times, such a dish would have been called rummaniyya (from rumman pomegranate) or narbaja (pomegranate stew), a trendier Persian name. Pomegranate syrup will give fish a lovely taste and color. See 000 for a similar stew cooked with red meat, and 000 with chicken.

2 pounds (900g) fish fillet, such as salmon, skinned and divided into 4 serving-size pieces

2 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, chopped

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon turmeric

1 cup (4oz/115g) toasted walnuts, pulverized in a food processor or blender until oily

3 cups (715ml) water

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cardamom

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon black pepper

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon cumin

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon chili powder, optional

For garnish: 4 tablespoons fresh pomegranate seeds, and/or chopped parsley



☞ Sprinkle fish pieces with salt, pepper, and lemon juice. Set aside in a colander fitted on a deep dish, to drain.

☞ In a medium heavy pot, sauté onion in oil until translucent, 5 minutes. Add turmeric and fold for a few seconds until fragrant. Fold in the rest of the ingredients -- except for garnish. Bring pot to a quick boil. Then Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer, covered, stirring 2 to 3 times until sauce is nicely thickened, about 20 minutes.

☞ Arrange fish pieces in the bottom of the pot. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 5 to 10 minutes, or until fish is done (depending on thickness of the fish pieces). Cooked fish will flake when probed with a fork. Overcooking the fish will toughen it. Sprinkle with pomegranate seeds and /or chopped parsley, and serve with white rice and salad.



Zubaydi fish

FISH CURRY

Kari'l-Simach Makes 4 servings

We cook curry whenever we crave something spicier than the regular stew. Being on the crossroads of the spice trade ever since ancient times, the Mesopotamian cuisine has always abounded in aromatic dishes that sometimes tend to be on the hot side, and this is one of them. For curry with red meat, see 000, and chicken 000.

- 2 pounds (900g) boneless and skinless fish, cut into 4 serving-size pieces
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 2 tablespoons oil, divided
- 1 medium onion, coarsely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, grated
- 1 teaspoon curry powder
- 3 medium potatoes (about 12oz/350g), peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 2 cups (475ml) hot water
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- ¼ teaspoon whole mustard seeds, optional
- ¼ teaspoon whole aniseed or fennel
- ½ teaspoon cumin
- ½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
- 1 teaspoon tamarind concentrate (see Glossary)
- ½ to 1 teaspoon chili powder, or to taste
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 bay leaf



- ☞ Sprinkle fish pieces with salt and pepper. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a medium non-stick skillet and brown fish pieces briefly on both sides to seal them, about 3 to 4 minutes. Transfer to a plate, and set aside.
- ☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat 1 tablespoon oil and sauté onion until translucent, 5 minutes. Add garlic, curry powder, and cubed potatoes. Stir for additional 2 to 3 minutes, and then sprinkle flour and stir to coat the vegetables until fragrant, about 1 minute.
- ☞ Add the rest of the ingredients and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, then simmer, covered, for about 20 minutes, or until potatoes are cooked and liquid nicely thickens. Stir two to three times while cooking to prevent the sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
- ☞ Return fish pieces to the simmering curry, and let them be submerged in the sauce. Simmer for additional 5 to 10 minutes (depending on thickness of the fish pieces). Cooked fish will flake when probed with a fork.
- ☞ Serve with white rice cooked with vermicelli noodles 000, along with salad.

SWEET AND SOUR FISH SIMMERED IN ALMOND-PRUNE SAUCE

Samak b'Salsat il-Loz wi 'l-'Injas il-Mujaffaf Makes 4 servings

The following dish is inspired by the medieval Baghdadi cuisine, which had a penchant for combining the sweet and the sour. They also believed, as we still do, that vinegar and other sour agents aid digestion, especially when conjoined with fish. The medieval *sibagh* were sour sauces served with fish, and were made by combining a number of ingredients such as sour pomegranate juice, vinegar, raisins, ground almond or walnut, a little sugar or honey, garlic, mustard, and spices (al-Warraaq, Chapter 34). This fish dish is intoxicatingly delicious, and yet unbelievably simple and fast. The fish is briefly broiled/grilled, and then transferred to the stovetop. The sauce is thickened and flavored with an appetizing combination, of prunes, almonds, honey, mustard, pomegranate syrup, and vinegar. Have a feast in just 30 minutes - prepare White Rice with Noodles while fish is cooking.

- 2 pounds (900g) boneless and skinless salmon, cut into 4 serving-size pieces
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon mustard, such as Dijon
- ¼ (60ml) cup honey
- ¼ cup (60ml) cider or wine vinegar
- 1 cup (250ml) water
- 2 to 3 sprigs fresh thyme, or ½ teaspoon dried thyme or *za'tar* (see Glossary)
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ cup (1oz/30g/ about 28 by count) almonds, toasted and ground
- 10 prunes, whole or halved
- ¼ teaspoon crushed chili pepper, or to taste
- 1 tablespoon pomegranate syrup (see Glossary)
- For garnish:* ¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped parsley
- Preheat broiler/grill

- ☞ Sprinkle salt and black pepper on fish pieces, and arrange them in one layer in a heavy skillet with ovenproof handles.
- ☞ In a small pot, mix honey and mustard, and brush surface of fish pieces with almost half of it.
- ☞ Broil/grill fish in the skillet for about 7 minutes or until surface is golden brown and bubbly. Remove from broiler/grill. Do not turn over fish pieces.
- ☞ While fish is broiling/grilling prepare sauce: To remaining honey and mustard in the small pot, add vinegar, water, thyme, ginger, salt, ground almonds, prunes, chili pepper, and pomegranate syrup. Mix well, and bring to a quick boil, about 3 minutes.
- ☞ As soon as fish comes out of the broiler/grill, spread sauce on and around it, and continue cooking on top of the stove, this time, on medium heat. Let fish simmer in the sauce, covered, about 7 minutes, or until sauce nicely thickens and fish is flaky when probed with a fork. Garnish with chopped parsley, and serve with white rice cooked with vermicelli noodles 000, along with salad.

Opposite: Sweet and Sour Fish Simmered in Almond-Prune Sauce

SHRIMP WITH RICE

Timman bil-Roubyan Makes 4 servings

The southern port of Basra has been the main source for shrimps. When the season is plenty, it is usually transported to other inland cities such as Baghdad, where these moustached creatures end up being cooked with rice, or made into a delicious curry. When cooking shrimp, you might find that the frozen variety tends to release some moisture, which will sometimes spoil the texture of the dish. If left to cook until all moisture evaporates, the shrimp themselves will overcook, get stringy in texture, and shrink considerably. In the following rice recipe, I have managed to avoid this by cooking shrimp separately until just done.

2 cups (16oz/450g) rice, washed, soaked in cold water for 30 minutes, then drained

3½ cups (860ml) cold water

1 tablespoon oil

1½ teaspoons salt

For the shrimp mix:

2 tablespoons oil, divided

1 pound (450g) medium-size shrimp, cleaned and deveined. You may use precooked shrimp

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

1 teaspoon curry powder

1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 teaspoon *baharat* (see Glossary)

½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley, chopped

☞ In a medium heavy pot, preferably non-stick, put drained rice, water, oil, and salt. Bring to a quick boil, and on high heat let cook for 5 minutes. Reduce heat to low and let rice simmer, covered, for 20 minutes. While simmering, gently fold rice two or three times to allow it to expand and fluff.



☞ While rice is simmering, cook the shrimp mix. In a big skillet heat 1 tablespoon oil and quickly sauté shrimp until just cooked, 4 to 5 minutes (avoid overcooking). Take them out with a slotted spoon and keep warm. Return the skillet to the fire, and let any moisture released by shrimp evaporate. If precooked shrimp is used, then skip this step.

☞ Add the second tablespoon of oil to skillet and sauté onion until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add curry powder and stir for a few seconds. Then stir in *noomi Basra*, salt, pepper, *baharat*, and parsley, a minute or two. Away from heat, fold in shrimp.

☞ When rice is done, transfer it to a bowl. Then layer it in the same rice pot with the shrimp mix as follows: Put fourth of the rice in the bottom of the pot, then cover it with third of the shrimp mixture, and continue layering. The last layer will be rice. Return pot to the stove, and let it simmer on low heat, tightly covered, to heat it through, about 5 minutes.

☞ Serve the rice with yogurt and lots of salad.

SHRIMP CURRY

Kari 'l- Roubyan Makes 4 servings

The following is the Basrawi (from Basra) version of cooking shrimp, the curried way. Basra, being the only port city in the entire Mesopotamian region, has always been famous for its spicy hot delicious dishes, especially when it comes to fish and shrimp. Shrimp curry is supposed to be smoky-hot and highly aromatic, but feel free to adjust the quantities of spices to suit your palate.

2 tablespoons oil

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

2 cloves garlic, grated or thinly sliced

1 teaspoon curry powder

3 medium potatoes (about 12oz/350g), peeled and cut into 1in/2.5cm cubes

2 tablespoons flour

2 cups (475 ml) hot water

1 teaspoon tamarind concentrate, or 1 teaspoon prepared *noomi Basra* (see Glossary)

½ teaspoon ginger

¼ teaspoon whole mustard seeds, optional

¼ teaspoon whole aniseed, or fennel

½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds

½ teaspoon cumin

½ to 1 teaspoon chili powder, or to taste

1 teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 bay leaf

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) coarsely chopped fresh pepper, sweet or hot

1 pound (450g) medium-size shrimp, cleaned and deveined. You may use precooked shrimp

☞ In a medium heavy pot, heat 1 tablespoon oil and sauté onion until translucent, 5 minutes. Add garlic, curry powder, and cubed potatoes. Stir for additional 2 to 3 minutes, and then sprinkle flour and stir to coat the vegetables until fragrant, about 1 minute.

☞ Add the rest of the ingredients, except for shrimp, and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, then simmer, covered, for about 20 minutes, or until potatoes are cooked and liquid nicely thickens. Stir two to three times while cooking to prevent the sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

☞ Stir in shrimp and cook just until they are done, about 5 minutes (if precooked, just until heated through). Avoid overcooking, otherwise shrimp will be rubbery in texture and shrink a lot. Serve with rice of your choice, along with salad.



SAVORY PASTRIES



Sanbousa 000

Filled Rolls, *Boureg*

Um al-Faraj: An Eastern Dish

Boureg Dough

Easy to make *boureg* Dough

Boureg with Fillo Dough

Puffed *Boureg*

Boureg Diamonds Filled with Cheese and Parsley

Boureg Diamonds Filled with Zucchini/Courgette

Cheese Crescents

Cheese Bundles

Spinach Roll

Spicy-Hot Meat Flat Pie

Olive and Cheese Bread

Poppy Seeds Pinwheels

Cheesy Cookies/Biscuits

Dill Weed Balls

Spicy Sesame Sticks

Savory Pastries

Al-Mawalih

الموالح

A nice platter laden with fried or baked savory pastries offered for afternoon tea (served sweet) would traditionally be *boureg* or *sanbousa* filled with cheese and parsley. The ones filled with meat are reserved for a more serious meal, like supper, or offered as a side dish while having dinner with guests. Of the two, you will see more of *boureg* on these platters, simply because the dough sheets can be bought ready made. For *sanbousa*, one starts from scratch, and that was, indeed, how all pastries had to be made in pre-modern times.

SANBOUSA

Makes about 40 pieces

Judging from extant medieval recipes, the Arab cuisine had an exciting variety of savory pastries to offer besides *sanbousa*. They made *mukhabbaza* (meat pie), *mujabbanat* (cheese pie), and *tannouri* (baked in *tannour*). A variety of puff pastry was made rich and layered using clarified butter or pounded solid fat, and gave names like *muwarraqa* (multi-layered) or *musamma* (layered with clarified butter). Savory cookies/biscuits like *aqras mumallaha* 'salted,' were offered with the sweet ones.

Boureg pastries are closely associated with the Ottoman cuisine. It was to them what *sanbousaj* was to the Abbasids. However, we do not tend to think of them as very close relatives, even siblings, which indeed they are. Keep on reading.

Sanbousa was the queen of snacks during the medieval times. The earliest recipes for this pastry are in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 36). In the same chapter we also find a verse-recipe composed by Ishaq bin Ibrahim al-Mawsili (d.850), the famous Abbasid singer of Harun al-Rasheed. He calls it the most delicious of fast food *al-ma'kal al-mu'ajjal*. After giving detailed on preparing the filling, the poem goes on to describe how to shape, fry, and serve them (my translation):

فقد إنا شئت في رفاق
نم الحمر اللطراف بالاصاق
أوشيت خبز جزوا من العجين
معدن النقرين معطين
فأهبطه بالمويين مستديراً
نم النقر اللطرافه ظفيرا
وصب في الطابون زينا قنيا
وقد بالزيت قلباً حببياً
وضع في جاح له لطيف
ورمته من خردل حريف
وكده اللطيفاً بحردل
فهر الكزالمائل المعجل

Make rolls with meat, if wished, with thin sheets of bread
Whose ends you need to seal.

Or, a piece of dough, you may use, well kneaded but still
soft. Into thin discs spread it out with a rolling pin,
And with the fingernail you press the sides to seal.
Into a frying pan pour some good oil and fry them as
best as you can, And in a delicate platter put them.
Where a bowl of pungent mustard in the center sits.
Then eat them with mustard, am sure with joy.
For indeed they are the most delicious of all fast
food dishes.

From another poem, we also learn that meat in the filling might be young chicken. In al-Warraq's recipe, an option is given to add dried fruits and nuts. He further suggests eggs can be used for garnish as when they are prepared for weddings and feasts. There was also the option of using a sweet nut filling, and dipping the pastries in syrup after frying them, as in al-Baghdad's 13th-century version (Arberry 201), where he also suggests filling them with pieces of *halwa sabouniyya* (solid starch-based pudding, similar to Turkish delight). The medieval name *sanbousaj* is a loan Persian word, meaning 'triangular.' Apparently, when the pastry was first made it was shaped into triangles, and the term *shabour* (triangle) was often used in conjunction with it. From al-Baghdadi's description, we know that triangles were made by dividing the thinly rolled out dough into strips first, and then each strip was rolled into a triangle, similar to today's 'flag fold' (Arberry 201). *Sanbousaj* thus prepared must have looked so much like our *boureg* triangles.

Al-Warraq's recipe provides more details: Besides the traditional muthallath triangles, he suggests shaping it into *murabba'* squares, and *mustateel* rectangles. The rectangular ones must have resembles *boureg* rolls of today.

Sometimes *sanbousaj* prepared as above were not fried but gently boiled in broth. These were mostly shaped like half moons and sealed by twisting the edges with the fingernails. They were the precursors of what later came to be known as *shishbarak*, popular today in the Levant and other Middle Eastern countries. The earliest recipe for such a preparation is in al-Warraq's cookbook (Chapter 58), where it is attributed to Abbasid prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839).

For the above pastries, the dough medieval cooks used was mostly unleavened. It was the same dough used for making their paper-thin *ruqaq* breads. After the pieces were shaped, they were sealed with a small amount of wheat starch dissolved in water. Sometimes, leavened dough was used to make round *sanbousaj*, shaped by filling two thin discs of the dough and sealing the edges by twisting them with the fingernails.

The following *sanbousa* recipe is a modernized version, which uses mashed potato in the dough mix. If you feel too lazy to make the dough yourself, use spring-roll wrappers available at oriental stores and some general grocery stores. My version will yield soft-textured pastries shaped into half moons. The crisp triangles need spring-roll wrappers, 20 sheets of these will be needed.

For the dough:

2 medium potatoes, boiled and mashed
2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour
½ teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon ginger
½ cup (125ml) yogurt

For the filling:

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat
1 tablespoon oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
½ teaspoon curry powder
1 heaping tablespoon tomato paste
½ cup (1oz/30g) parsley chopped
1 teaspoon salt
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 teaspoon cumin
1 teaspoon coriander
½ teaspoon allspice
¼ teaspoon chili pepper or
fresh hot peppers chopped fine
Oil for frying

☞ To make dough combine mashed potatoes, flour, salt, and ginger. Rub between the fingers until mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add yogurt and knead for a few minutes until you get dough of medium consistency. Set aside, covered.

☞ To prepare the filling heat oil in a medium skillet and cook meat, stirring occasionally, and breaking any lumps with the back of a spoon until all moisture evaporates, about 10 minutes. Add onion continue cooking, stirring most of the time, until transparent, about 5 minutes. Fold in the rest of the filling ingredients, and cook for further 5 minutes, stirring most of the time. Set aside to cool off.

☞ The most traditional shapes of sanbousa are triangles and half moons. My suggestion is if you have made the dough yourself; shape the pastries into half moons. If you have chosen to use spring-roll wraps, it is easier to make them into triangles. Here is how to shape both kinds:

☞ To make half moons break away a walnut-size piece of dough and on a well-floured surface roll it out into a circle, as thin as possible (sprinkle with as much as needed of flour to prevent dough from sticking to working surface). Cut out into a 3in/7.5cm wide circle using a cutter. Put about 1½ tablespoons of the filling on one half, keeping clear of the edges. Then fold it to make half a circle, and press and twist all along the edge to keep filling from coming out while frying. Set aside in a well-floured tray, and repeat with the other portions arranging them in one layer.

☞ To shape into triangles cut a stack of 20 square spring-roll wrappers into 2 sets of rectangles. Put about 2 teaspoons of filling on one of the corners of each rectangle, then fold the sheet three times (like folding a flag) to form a triangle. Secure the seam side following package directions. Arrange pieces in a single layer on a slightly floured tray.

☞ Heat about ½in/1cm of oil in a medium skillet, gently shake off excess flour, and fry pieces turning only once to allow both sides to brown, about 5 minutes. Put browned pieces in a colander or a rack put on a tray to allow excess fat to drip down.

☞ Following the medieval custom, serve these pastries piping hot with *Mustard Dip* prepared as follows: Mix together ¼ cup (60ml) vinegar, 1 tablespoon mustard, 1 tablespoon ground walnuts, and a dash of sugar.

Variations:

Vegetarian Sanbousa

Replace meat with diced cooked vegetables such as potatoes, peas, cabbage, and cauliflower. Start by cooking the onion as described in the second step, then fold in the prepared vegetables with the rest of ingredients.

Chicken Sanbousa

This is very useful when you already have leftover cooked chicken. Just replace meat with 2 cups (about 18oz/510g) shredded cooked chicken. Start by cooking onion as described in the second step. Add chicken with the rest of filling ingredients.

FILLED PASTRY ROLLS

Boureg

In Iraq, like in the rest of Middle-Eastern Mediterranean countries, boureg 'stuffed pastry' is prepared in two major ways: the ones made with not so thin pastry, these are shaped into rolls or triangles, and then fried. The layered baked variety uses very thin sheets of dough, such as fillo. It is the savory version of the sweet *bakalwa*.

Today, we tend to associate these pastries with Turkey, and some even say they were the creations of the Ottoman palace cooks. Now, to my knowledge, the first mention of *boureg* in Arabic sources which links it to the Turks occurs in *Sirr al-'Aalamayn* (8) by the famous Abbasid theologian and philosopher Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111) where he describes it as pastry filled with spicy mix of meat. So this pastry was already known in the medieval Abbasid era but the cooks back then had their own version of it, called *sanbusaj*, both sweet and savory (see previous recipe). Interestingly, in the culinary records belonging to the Ottoman era, there was no mention of *sanbusaj*. Instead, we have *boureg*. Yerasimos in her 500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine tells us that at the beginning of the Ottoman rule, 15th and 16th centuries, boureg "did not appear so often," and that the first record for a boureg recipe was in 1502. It was described as "a parcel-like or wrapped-up" (134, 136). Indeed, it might have been this early shape of the pastry, which gave it the name *boureg*. In Persian, *boura* was 'sack' or 'bag,' and adding the suffix *-eq* (*boureq*) or *-ek* (*bourek*) was one of the ways Persian words were Arabized during medieval times (my variant *boureg* is the colloquial Iraqi).

As for the layered variety of *boureg* spread in a tray, it was first mentioned in an Ottoman book by D'Ohsson in 1788, where it is described as a "dough-based dish... of a magnificent size with vegetables, meat, fruit, or



jam," and adds, "Most Arab chefs are masters of such dishes" (Yerasimos 136). Yerasimos concludes her observations by saying:

For centuries of Ottoman cuisine the word 'börek' encompassed dishes both sweet and savory, made with water dough, fatty doughs and also thinly-rolled-out doughs, and that the tray böreks with their paper-thin layers of dough cooked in the oven, became common only in the 20th century. (136)

Above: Boureg filled with cheese

Previous page: Boureg filled with meat

UM AL-FARAJ: AN EASTERN DISH

Precursor of *Boureg*, *Baklawa*, and *Bastiyya*

First, some preliminary notes:

The dish *Um al-Faraj* occurs in the 13th-century Anonymous Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala fi Alwan al-At'ima*. The Arabic edition I am using here is published in 2003. The master manuscript the editor used has a title, and it is in a much better condition than the one used for the Spanish edition by Huici Miranda 1965.

The name *Um al-Faraj* literally means 'mother of relief.' It was most likely an appreciative nickname given to the dish - a kind of comfort food. Giving nicknames to dishes was quite common at the time. For instance, wheat porridge *hareesa* was called *Um al-Khayr* (mother of plenty), fine white bread was *Abu Badr* (father of the full moon), and so on (al-Abi, d. 1030 *Nathr al-Durar* 172).

In this Andalusian cookbook, the dish is presented as a kind of *judhaba*, which is a sweet-savory dish, for which we have many recipes in the medieval Baghdadi cookbooks of al-Warraq (10th-century) and al-Baghdadi (13th-century).

The anonymous writer suggests that *Um al-Faraj* originated in *al-Mashriq* (Islamic Eastern world, the center of which was Abbasid Baghdad).

Now, the significance of the dish discussed here lies in the fact that it describes the making of a savory and sweet pastry, now considered the signature dish of the Moroccan cuisine, namely *bastilla*/*bastiyya*. It also testifies to the fact that paper-thin sheets of bread, for which we have recipes going back to the 9th century, have already been successfully used in layered pastries both sweet and savory in the Islamic Eastern world well before the 13th century, the time when the Andalusian book was written. It is my contention that these pastries were the precursors of the layered variety of *boureg* and *baklawa* pastries, known today all over the Middle East.

From the extant Eastern recipes, we know that *judhaba* was composed of two parts: the first was prepared in a casserole-like pan - wide and not so deep - in which a sweet preparation similar to bread pudding was spread. The second was the meat, which could be a chicken, a duck, a large chunk of lamb or cheese. The casserole was put on the floor of a preheated *tannour* with the prepared meat suspended above it so that it received its drippings. Having the sweet pudding with the meat was believed to facilitate its digestion. In some of *judhaba* varieties, thin sheets of bread, called *ruqaq*, were used in a layered fashion, as in *judhaba* of banana prepared by the Abbasid gourmet prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839). The thin sheets of bread were repeatedly layered with banana pieces sprinkled with sugar until the casserole was full, then rose water was poured on them. The casserole was put in a heated *tannour* with a chicken suspended above it, so that the casserole received its drippings (al-Warraq, Chapter 92). From this Andalusian recipe of *judhaba* we learn that the Eastern cooks had already taken it a step further by combining the meat and the bread part in one casserole. Here is how it was made (175-76):

☞ Paper-thin *ruqaq* sheets were made by first preparing batter similar in consistency to *kunafa* or *qata'if* (pancake batter). A round iron plate was stuffed with coals and preheated. Some of the batter was poured on a special piece of cloth called *muballila* 'the wetter;' which was then used to wipe the heated plate. As a result, some of the batter would stick to the plate in the form of a very thin sheet of bread. The writer calls it *ruqaq*. It is also called *waraq al-kunafa* in the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan* by *al-Tujibi*. In this book, the pastry thin sheets are made by pouring a small amount of the batter and spreading it on the hot iron plate (69-75). The procedure was repeated until the needed amount was accumulated. In the Eastern region, the earliest recipe for making similar thin pastries was given in al-Warraq 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, where they were used in

making filled *lawzeenaj*, the prototype of dainty baklawa rolls (see 000 below).

☞ The filling was made by cooking plump chickens with salt, oil, pepper, cinnamon, and spikenard until all liquid had evaporated.

☞ A soapstone pan was coated with pounded tallow *shahm*, and lined with a couple of sheets of dough, big enough to hang over the sides. The surface is dusted with a ladleful of a mix of sugar, ground almonds, spikenard, cloves, and cinnamon; generously drizzled with oil; and sprinkled with rose water in which musk and camphor were dissolved. Then two other pastry sheets were added, but this time they were big enough to cover the pan base, and then drizzled and sprinkled the same way. This was repeated until half the pan was full.

☞ The cooked chicken was spread on the lined layers, and covered with layered pastry sheets as was done in the previous step. The layering would continue until the pan was full, with the chicken buried in the middle.

☞ The surface was dusted with lots of sugar, and sprinkled with oil and rose water. The overhanging first two layers were folded over the whole surface, to cover the top completely. The pan was then covered tightly with a lid, sealed with dough, and baked in a moderate oven 'furn' until done. A wonderful aroma will emit from the pan when it is open, we are told. The dish was then inverted on a large wide bowl and served. The author says it is an aromatic dish, exotic, nutritious, and fit for kings.

Now, we clearly see here the beginnings of the modern day *bastiyya* casserole in the making. In fact, contrary to common belief today that the dish and the name were derived from the Spanish pie 'paste', I am convinced that it might well have been the other way round, as the above recipe shows. As for the name, I believe *bastiyya* was originally derived from the Arabic verb *basata* (بسط), 'spread on a wide area,' which is what casseroles are all about. Originally, the layered bread part of *judhaba* was baked in *judhabadan*, a large

and wide round pan with low sides, that is, a casserole pan. It is my contention that as gradually meat was no longer suspended above the sweet casserole, but buried in the midst of its many layers, the name *judhaba* - descriptive of the suspended meat - gradually fell out of use, and *bastiyya* (بسطية) 'the spread out dish' became more common.

In the Eastern regions of the Islamic world, the above recipe points to the genesis of the layered savory *boureg* dishes, usually associated with the Ottoman cuisine. For the other shapes of *boureg* we go to *sanbusaj* pastries (see recipe above). As for the sweet layered *baklawa*, I think we also have our clues in *judhaba*, but this time the meat part is dispensed with, and the sweet part is enjoyed on its own. Immediately after *Um al-Faraj*, the Andalusian cookbook provides *judhaba sadhaja* (plain and simple), which is constructed like the casserole described above, but no chicken is used. Instead, every time the sugar mix is sprinkled on the layered thin pastries, some beaten egg is spread on it. Before baking, a generous amount of oil is poured on the casserole, and then it is baked as described above. When the dish is out, it is inverted on a wide large bowl, and drenched in syrup perfumed with rose water. Except for the beaten-egg part, the dish clearly points to the layered variety *baklawa* as we know it today (also see 000).

To make these delicious boureg pastries, you can prepare the dough yourself, or use fillo dough or spring roll wrappers, available at oriental stores and some general grocery supermarkets. Generally, homemade dough and spring roll wrappers are shaped into rolls and fried. Store bought fillo dough may be shaped into cylinders, triangles, or layered, and baked.

BOUREG DOUGH

'Ajeen il-Boureg Makes 22 pieces

This dough may be substituted with spring roll wrappers, and in this case, follow package directions for rolling and sealing.

2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

¼ teaspoon salt

2 eggs, beaten

⅓ cup (160ml) water

2 tablespoons hot oil

**Flour or cornstarch/cornflour
for spreading on work surface**

Oil for frying

☞ In a medium bowl, combine flour and salt. Stir in eggs and water to make medium to soft dough. Knead lightly.

☞ Drizzle hot oil all over the dough and knead lightly. Leave aside for 10 minutes.

☞ Divide dough into 22 walnut-size pieces, or depending on how big you want your rolls to be.

☞ On a surface generously sprinkled with flour or cornstarch, roll out pieces into thin rounds using a rolling pin.

☞ Put about 2 tablespoons of filling of your choice (filling recipes will follow) along one corner of the disc. Fold about 1in/2.5cm of the sides on the filling to contain it, then roll all the way down. Arrange filled pieces, seam side down, in one layer on a flat surface sprinkled with flour or cornstarch.

☞ Remove any clinging flour or cornstarch from the pieces and fry them, seam side down, in 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil. Turn once to allow both sides to brown, about 5 minutes, total. Let them drain in a colander lined with white paper towels/kitchen paper to prevent them from getting soggy, or put them on a rack placed on a tray to allow excess oil to drip.

☞ Serve hot with salad.

Light Touch:

Before frying, brush pieces with a mixture of ¼ cup (60ml) milk and 1 beaten egg. This will help reduce the amount of oil absorbed by the pieces while frying.

EASY-TO-MAKE BOUREG DOUGH

Makes about 30 rolls

The following is an easy method for making the dough. It needs neither kneading nor rolling out, all you need is a non-stick skillet about 6 in./15 cm wide. This method is in fact a relic of one of the medieval techniques used to produce thin sheets of bread. Simple batter, made of flour or flour and cornstarch, was poured in small amounts on a hot iron plate called taabaq. Medieval cooks used this method to make *ruqaq* (thin) breads, *qata'if* (crepe), and the super thin breads for the *lawzeenaj* (similar to *baklawa*).

1½ cups (6oz/180g) cornstarch/cornflour

1½ cups (6oz/180g) all-purpose/plain flour

½ teaspoon salt

1½ cup (320ml) milk

2½ cups (635ml) water

2 eggs, beaten

☞ Sift cornstarch, flour, and salt into a big bowl.

☞ Mix milk, water, and eggs, and stir into dry ingredients using a mixer at medium speed. The final mixture will be a little thinner than pancake batter.

☞ Put a small non-stick skillet, about 6in/15cm wide, on medium heat.

☞ Pour a small amount of the batter, 3 to 4 tablespoons, into the pan and tilt to all directions so that it covers the entire surface. If you notice some holes, try to patch them with a small amount of the batter. When the piece starts to come away from the sides of the pan - within 30 seconds - remove it and spread it on a tray. Repeat procedure until batter is used up.

☞ Put some filling of your choice (filling recipes will follow) on one side of the circle. Turn once to cover the filling. Then fold both sides, and roll all the way down. Press seam to seal it. Put finished ones on a tray in a single layer.

☞ Fry in 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil until golden brown, 3 to 4 minutes, and drain in a colander lined with a white paper towel/kitchen paper, to prevent pieces from getting soggy, or put on a rack set on a tray to allow excess oil to drip down.

Light Touch:

Before frying the pieces, brush them with a mixture of ¼ cup (60ml) milk and 1 beaten egg. This will help reduce the amount of oil absorbed by the pieces while frying.

Suggested Fillings for Boureg

Meat Filling

1 pound (450g) lean ground/minced meat

1 tablespoon oil

**2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g),
finely chopped**

1 tablespoon tomato paste, optional

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

¼ teaspoon chili pepper, or to taste, optional

1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped parsley

☞ In a big skillet, heat oil and add the meat. Stir occasionally and break meat lumps with the back of a spoon. Cook until all moisture evaporates and meat starts to brown, about 10 minutes.

☞ Add onion and stir until onion is soft, about 5 minutes.

☞ Mix in tomato paste if used, salt, pepper, allspice, cinnamon, and chili if used, and stir for a few minutes. Put away from heat and let cool slightly. Fold in parsley, and use as directed.

Cheese Filling

Traditionally, grated jibin *Akrad* (Kurdish cheese) is used to fill the boureg. It is a white variety of hard cheese, which is aged and rather salty. When cooked, it becomes deliciously elastic. A combination of mozzarella, feta, and pecorino Romano cheese will give almost the same desirable texture as well as taste.

2 cups (8oz/225g) shredded cheese

1 egg white, beaten

¼ teaspoon black pepper

1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped parsley

2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill, or

1 teaspoon dried dill weed, optional

☞ Mix all ingredients and use as directed.

Spinach Filling

1 medium onion, finely chopped

1 tablespoon oil

1 10oz/285g package frozen chopped spinach, thawed.

Squeeze out excess moisture

½ cup (4oz/115g) crumbled feta or

Pecorino Romano cheese

1 egg, beaten

½ cup (1oz/30g) chopped parsley

2 tablespoons chopped fresh dill, or

1 teaspoon dried dill weed

¼ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

¼ cup (1oz/30g) chopped toasted nuts, optional

☞ In a medium skillet heat oil, and sauté onion until transparent, about 5 minutes.

☞ Add spinach and stir until all moisture evaporates, a few minutes. Set aside to cool off, then mix with the rest of the ingredients and use as directed.

BOUREG WITH FILLO DOUGH

Homemade *boureg* dough and spring roll wrappers are at their best when fried. If you prefer to bake *boureg*, the option is to use fillo dough, available at most grocery supermarkets. The following two shapes are the most popular:

Boureg Rolls

You need one 1-lb/450-g package fillo dough. This amount is enough to make around 20.

- ☞ Work on one sheet at a time. Spread it on a dry flat surface and lightly brush half of it with oil, fold it, and brush half of it and fold it again. Now you have a piece with 4 layers.
- ☞ Put about 2 tablespoons of filling along the narrower side. Brush with oil the rest of the piece. Turn the top onto the filling, roll once, then fold in 1in/2.5cm of both sides onto the rolled part, and continue rolling all the way down. This way of rolling the dough prevents filling from seeping out of the sides while baking as it gives more thickness to the sides.
- ☞ Arrange rolled pieces on a greased baking sheet, seam side down. Brush them lightly with oil, and bake in a preheated oven at 375 degrees F. for 20 minutes or until golden brown.
- ☞ Best when served piping hot from the oven.

**Boureg Triangles**

- ☞ Use one sheet for each triangle. Brush lightly with oil two lengthwise thirds of one sheet. Fold the unbrushed third on the center third, and then fold on it the other third.
- ☞ Put about 2 tablespoons of filling in one of the corners. Brush the rest of the piece lightly with oil. Fold the corner on the filling, to form a triangle. Then fold repeatedly maintaining the same triangular shape, until you get to the other end (like folding a flag).
- ☞ Arrange the triangles on a greased baking sheet, and brush them with a little oil. Bake as directed above in *Boureg Rolls*.

PUFFED BOUREG

Boureg Muwarraq Makes 20 pieces

Making puff pastry was a technique already known to the medieval Arab cooks, and the Andalusian cookbooks, in particular, were the most explicit in explaining this art. A recipe in al-Tujibi's 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan*, describes how to make big *khubz muwarraq* (thin-layered bread) by rolling out dough thinly using a long dowel. Then the thin sheet is spread with clarified butter and folded several times. The recipe gives the option of stacking three small discs of dough, spreading each with clarified butter while layering. The stack is then rolled out as thin as possible (45). This is still our option today when we want to make boureg, light and puffy in texture.

3 cups (12oz/350g) all-purpose/plain flour

½ teaspoon salt

1 egg, beaten

¾ cup (180ml) water

2 tablespoons oil

One recipe filling of your choice, see 000

Oil for frying

- ☞ Mix flour and salt in a medium bowl. Make a well in the middle.
- ☞ Combine liquid ingredients and pour mixture into the well. Stir with a fork at first, and then knead to make dough, which is somewhat soft and slightly sticky, about 5 minutes.
- ☞ Divide dough into 10 pieces and let them rest for 10 minutes.

☞ On a surface well dusted with flour or cornstarch, roll out one piece into a ¼in/6mm thick circle, 5in/12.5cm in diameter, and brush its top with some oil. Repeat with 4 more pieces, stacking them, but do not oil the top of the fifth one. Make a second stack with the remaining 5 pieces.

☞ On a surface sprinkled with cornstarch or flour, roll out the two stacks separately to get 2 thin sheets, as thin as you can get them.

☞ With a sharp knife, divide each sheet of dough into 10 squares. Put about 2 tablespoons of the filling in the center of the square. Fold three corners of the square on the filling, and then roll down firmly into a roll. Fry rolls in about 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Rolls will nicely puff while cooking. Let the pieces drain in a colander lined with a white paper towel/kitchen paper or on a rack. This will prevent pieces from getting soggy.

☞ Serve hot with lots of salad.

Opposite: Puffed Boureg

BOUREG DIAMONDS

Filled with Cheese and Parsley

Baqlawaat il-Boureg bil-Jibin wil-Krafus

Makes 18 servings

The diamond shape of the sweet *baklawa* became so familiar that it gave its name to the shape itself, regardless of taste. In the Turkish 19th-century cookbook, Turabi Efendi calls a rice sweet confection *Pirinj Baklawassi* because it is cut into diamonds (48). The following is a kind of savory *baklawa* in which fillo dough is layered and filled with a cheese mixture. The blend of cheeses used gives the filling a delightful taste, and a good texture. The medieval cooks have long recommended mixing cheeses for the perfect texture. They said if you use only sheep cheese, which is flaky in consistency like feta, it would disintegrate and become runny in texture. If you use cow's cheese only (similar to mozzarella), it would melt and bind in one mass letting all its moisture run out (13th century *Andalusian Anwa' al-Saydala* 178).

Eggs might be Varicolored but they all Taste the Same

There once was a clerk, who was married to a beautiful and intelligent woman. The judge for whom the clerk worked had his eye on the wife, so he sent her husband on an errand and went to the woman's house pretending that he had some business with her husband. The wife immediately understood his intention but she welcomed him, guided him to the guests' room, and offered to serve him dinner until her husband came back. After a while, the maids entered with an array of dishes, thirty in all, not even one has a resemblance to the other. He started tasting the dishes one after the other. To his amazement, they all tasted alike. He got up, apologized to the woman, and ashamedly left the house. (Zalzala 1: 381, my translation)

For the filling:

1½ cups (6oz/180g) shredded mozzarella cheese

1½ cups (6oz/180g) crumbled feta cheese

1 cup (2oz/60g) parsley, chopped

¼ cup (½oz/15g) fresh dill, chopped, or

1 tablespoon dill weed

3 eggs, beaten

½ teaspoon nutmeg

¼ teaspoon black pepper

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough

About ½ cup (125ml) oil for brushing

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ In a medium bowl, mix filling ingredients.
- ☞ Grease 10-by-15 inch (25.5x38cm) baking pan. The pan should be slightly smaller than fillo dough sheets. Spread a fillo sheet in the pan allowing the extra to line up the sides. Brush it lightly with oil, top it with another layer, and brush it with oil. Repeat until you stack about 10 sheets or half the package.
- ☞ Spread the filling on the layered sheets.
- ☞ Layer the remaining sheets following the same procedure in the second step. This time try to tuck in the sides very well to contain the filling.
- ☞ Score the surface into diamonds with a sharp knife (they do not have to go all the way down), and spray with water to prevent pastry from curling up.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 45 to 55 minutes, or until pastry is crisp and golden. Let it set in the pan for 10 minutes, then re-cut all the way down along the scores.

BOUREG DIAMONDS

Filled with Zucchini/Courgette

Baqlawaat il-Boureg bil-Shijar Makes 18 servings)

The following is a delicious way for preparing zucchini. A slightly modified version of this recipe has won me the second prize of the *Gourmet* cooking contest, "Milk on the Menu" in February 1997. (See comment on *baklawa* shape in above recipes)

1½ pounds (675g) zucchini/courgettes, shredded (about 3 medium ones)

1 teaspoon salt

2 medium carrots, shredded

½ cup (2oz/60g) dried tomatoes, soaked in hot water, then drained and chopped, optional

¼ cup (60 ml) plain yogurt

5 eggs, divided

½ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon nutmeg

1 tablespoon chopped fresh dill, or

1 teaspoon dill weed

1 cup (4oz/115g) breadcrumbs, divided

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough

About ½ cup (125ml) oil, for brushing

1 cup (250ml) milk

A dash of pepper

¼ cup (2oz/60g) grated Pecorino Romano cheese

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ Put zucchini in a colander and sprinkle it with 1 teaspoon salt and let it drain for 30 minutes. Press down excess moisture.
- ☞ Put zucchini in a big bowl and mix it with carrots, dried tomatoes if used, yogurt, 3 eggs, salt, pepper, nutmeg, dill, and ¼ cup (1oz/30g) breadcrumbs. Set aside.
- ☞ Grease 10-by-15 inch (25.5x38 cm) baking pan (it should be a little smaller than the fillo sheets).
- ☞ Spread one sheet, allowing it to line up the sides a little to contain the filling. Brush very lightly with oil, and sprinkle very lightly with breadcrumbs. Repeat brushing and sprinkling with 9 more sheets, or half the package.



- ☞ Spread filling prepared in the first and second steps. Cover with remaining sheets repeating the same procedure of spreading, oiling, and sprinkling with breadcrumbs (in the previous step). Tuck in the sides to contain the filling.
- ☞ Mix the remaining 2 eggs, milk, pepper, and grated cheese. Pour the mixture all over the surface, and then sprinkle with the remaining breadcrumbs.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 45 to 55 minutes or until golden brown. Let it set for 10 minutes, then cut it into about 18 pieces with a thin sharp knife. Serve warm as a snack by itself, or as a side dish.

CHEESE AND PARSLEY CRESCENTS

Krosnaat bil-Jibin wil-Krafus Makes 32 pieces

From simple yeast dough, you can make wonderful savory cookies/biscuits that are a pleasure to look at and eat. Like most yeast pastries, they are much lighter than the regular cookie/biscuit dough. For the dough:

1 teaspoon dry yeast

A pinch of sugar

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup (160ml) warm milk

$2\frac{1}{2}$ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour

1 teaspoon salt

1 egg, at room temperature, beaten

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) oil

For the filling:

About 2 cups (8oz/225g) shredded cheese of your choice (half mozzarella and half cheddar will be good)

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/45g) finely chopped parsley

1 egg, beaten, for glazing

Sesame seeds

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in milk and set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.

☞ Mix flour and salt in a medium bowl. Make a well in the middle and pour yeast mixture, beaten egg, and oil. Stir in a circular movement with a fork, at first, to incorporate flour into liquids. Then knead for about 5 minutes to make dough of medium consistency. Set aside, covered, at a warm draft-free place, for 45 minutes.



☞ Punch down dough and divide it into 8 pieces, the size of a big egg each. On a slightly floured surface roll out each portion into a circle 6in/15cm in diameter and $\frac{1}{8}$ in/3mm thick. Divide each into 4 parts.

☞ Mix cheese and parsley, and put about 1 heaping teaspoon of the mixture on the wider end of each triangle. Roll this end once to cover and tuck in the cheese mix well. Then continue rolling firmly all the way down to the tip. Curve the two pointed sides inwards to shape like a crescent.

☞ Arrange the crescents on a greased large baking sheet, leaving a space between pieces. Let rest for 10 minutes. When ready to bake, brush them with beaten egg and sprinkle lightly with sesame seeds. Place the baking sheet on the middle shelf of the preheated oven, for 12 to 15 minutes or until golden brown.

CHEESE BUNDLES

Buqach il-Jibin Makes 36 pieces

Tiny delicately spiced bundles, delicious with soft drinks or sweetened hot tea.

For the dough:

1 tablespoon dry yeast

1 teaspoon sugar

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60g) warm water

$3\frac{1}{4}$ cups (13oz/370g) all-purpose/plain flour

1 teaspoon salt

2 eggs, at room temperature, set aside a little of the white for glazing

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) oil

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) warm milk

For the filling:

2 cups (8oz/225g) crumbled feta cheese

1 tablespoon milk

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt, nutmeg, black pepper, chili pepper, each

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ oz/15g) finely chopped parsley

6 pitted olives, finely chopped

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in water and set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.

☞ Put flour and salt in a medium bowl, mix, and make a well in the middle. Pour yeast mixture, eggs, oil and milk, and stir in a circular movement with a fork to incorporate flour into liquids. Then knead the mix for about 5 minutes, and let it rise, covered, at a warm draft-free place for 45 minutes.

☞ Mix the filling ingredients in bowl.

☞ Punch down the dough, and on a slightly floured surface, roll it out to a 15-by-15-inch (38x38cm) square, about $\frac{1}{4}$ in/6mm thick. If dough resists, let it rest for 10 minutes and try again.

☞ Divide the dough into 36 squares, 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -by-2 $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch



(6.5x6.5cm), each. Trim edges if needed. Put a scant tablespoon of the filling in the middle of each square. Join the four corners of the square and pinch them firmly together to form a bundle.

☞ Arrange the bundles in a greased large baking sheet, leaving a space between pieces. Whisk the set-aside egg white, and brush the pastries with it. Let them rest for 10 minutes, and then bake them in the preheated oven for 12 to 15 minutes or until golden brown.

SPINACH ROLL

Laffat il-Sbenagh/ Al-Bazmaward Makes 2 rolls, 10 slices each



This flavorful and beautiful pastry comes out of the oven an already filled sandwich that just needs to be sliced and served. The Baghdadi medieval cooks used to make sandwich rolls comparable to this. It was called *bazmaward* (for details, see Abbasid Sandwiches 000). The amount the recipe yields is enough to satisfy a crowd. You can freeze one piece for future use, or just cut the amounts of ingredients given by half.

For the dough:

2 tablespoons dry yeast

1 teaspoon sugar

1½ cups (400ml) warm milk

6 cups (24oz/675g) bread/strong flour

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon nigella seeds, optional

2 eggs, at room temperature, beaten

⅓ cup (80ml) olive oil

For the filling:

2 medium onions (about 1½ cups/9oz/250g), finely chopped

2 tablespoons oil

Two 10oz/285g packages frozen chopped spinach, squeeze out excess moisture

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon pepper

¼ cup (½oz/15g) chopped fresh dill, or

1 tablespoon dill weed

3 eggs, boiled and coarsely chopped

¼ cup (3oz/85g) shredded cheese, such as mozzarella or feta

¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted and chopped walnuts

¼ cup (2oz/60g) pitted olives, chopped or sliced

Milk and sesame seeds for glazing and sprinkling the rolls

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ To make dough, dissolve sugar and yeast in warm milk, and set aside in a warm place for 5 minutes.

☞ In a big bowl, put flour, salt, and nigella seeds if used. Make a well in the middle and pour yeast mixture, eggs, and oil. Stir in a circular movement with a wooden spoon to incorporate flour into the liquid. Then knead for about 5 minutes. Oil both sides and let it rise, covered, at a warm draft-free place for 45 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, prepare the filling: Sauté onion in oil until soft, about 5 minutes. Add spinach, and fold frequently until all moisture evaporates, a few minutes. Put away from heat and fold in the rest of the filling ingredients. Set aside.

☞ Punch down the dough and divide it into 2 parts. Roll out each into a 12-by-9-inch (30.5x23cm) rectangle, ⅛ in/8mm thick (if dough feels resistant and elastic let it rest for 10 minutes). Spread half of the filling on the surface leaving about ¾ in/2cm of the edges clear of it. Roll the rectangle starting with the long side, jelly/Swiss-roll fashion. Seal seam and tuck in sides. Transfer the roll, seam side down, to a greased baking sheet. Repeat with the other batch and put on the baking sheet leaving a space between the two pieces to allow for expansion. With a sharp knife, make 3 or 4 shallow diagonal slits. Let them rise, covered with a clean kitchen towel, at a warm place for 30 minutes.

☞ Brush the rolls with milk, sprinkle them with sesame seeds, and bake in the preheated oven for about 35 minutes or until golden brown. It should be allowed to bake well; otherwise, the center will remain doughy. Let the rolls cool slightly, then divide them into 1 in/2.5cm wide slices.

SPICY-HOT MEAT FLAT PIE

Mukhabbaza/ Paay bil-Filfil il-Harr Makes 16 wedges

Flat pies are usually filled with jam and served as cookies/biscuits (see 000). However, my family sometimes craves a savory version. Something filled with more serious stuff, like meat. Since it is mess-free, it has always been a winner for picnics. Use less chili for mild hot. The resulting crust is flavorful and flaky despite the fact that its fat content is lower than traditionally made pies.

The oldest pies in the world were baked on the land of Mesopotamia, as displayed in the Babylonian bird-pie recipes (see Introduction, Section VI.3). During the medieval times, pies filled with a mixture of red meat, chicken or even fish were called *mukhabbazat* (from *khubz* 'bread') and the ones filled with cheese were *mujabbanat* (from *jubn*). Puff pastry was sometimes used, and was called *muwarraqa* (thinly layered) or *musamma* (layered with clarified butter).

For the pie dough:

3 cups (12 oz/ 350 g) all-purpose/plain flour

1 teaspoon baking powder

¼ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon ginger

⅔ cup (160ml) oil, or ½ cup (4oz/115g) butter and

¼ cup (60ml) oil

¾ cup (180ml) milk

For the filling:

1 tablespoon oil

1 medium onion, finely chopped

½ teaspoon turmeric

2 tablespoons tomato paste

2 to 3 small fresh chilies, chopped, or to taste

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon black pepper

½ teaspoon allspice

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) raisins or currants, optional

¼ cup (½oz/15g) parsley, chopped

8 ounces (225g) ground/minced lean meat

1 tablespoon milk for glazing, and 1 tablespoon sesame seeds for sprinkling

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Make dough: In a big bowl, mix flour, baking powder, salt and ginger. Add oil (or butter and oil) and rub lightly between the fingers until mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Pour in milk and stir first to incorporate flour into milk. Knead briefly to make dough of medium consistency. Set aside, covered.

☞ Make filling: in a medium skillet heat oil and stir in onion until translucent, about 5 minutes. Fold in turmeric, tomato paste, fresh chilies, salt, pepper, allspice, and currants. Stir for a minute or two. Set aside to cool off to room temperature. Then fold in parsley and meat.

☞ Grease a flat ovenproof big dinner plate. Divide dough into 2 parts, and with a rolling pin flatten a portion until it is as large as the greased dinner plate, and about ⅛ in/3mm thick. Line the plate with this dough disc, and trim the edge with a sharp knife. Spread the filling on the disc leaving about ½ in/75mm) of the edge free of the filling. Flatten the second portion of the dough as you did with the first one, and cover the filling with it. Trim off the edge with a sharp knife and press it with the handle of a knife at ⅛ in/8mm) intervals to give it a decorative look and to keep the two layers sealed while baking.

☞ Prick the surface with a fork at several places, then brush it with milk, and sprinkle it with sesame seeds. Bake the disc in the preheated oven for about 40 minutes, or until it is nicely browned. Let it cool off for 10 minutes or so, then cut it into 16 wedges, and serve it with salad.

OLIVE AND CHEESE BREAD

Pita Makes 22 bars

Pida is a Turkish name for a sort of flat bread with savory filling put in it or on it. Baghdadis call it *pita*. The way they make it is to mix the dough with the cheese and vegetables and bake it. Traditionally it uses a lot of butter and eggs. This quick version makes a delicious and healthy snack that looks so colorful and appetizing. I like to have it for breakfast with sweetened hot tea.

- ½ cup (125ml) olive oil
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup (250ml) yogurt
- 3½ cups (14oz/400g) all-purpose/plain flour
- ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup (125ml) milk
- ¾ cup (4oz/115g) olives black and green, pitted and chopped
- ½ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely chopped fresh mint
- ½ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely chopped fresh parsley
- 1 cup (4oz/115g) shredded cheddar cheese
- Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ In a medium bowl beat together oil, eggs, and yogurt, about 2 minutes.
- ☞ Sift together flour, baking soda, baking powder, and salt. Add to the oil mixture alternately with milk, and stir briefly until mixture is well blended, about 2 minutes. Mixture will somewhat thicken.
- ☞ Fold in olives, mint, parsley, and cheese.
- ☞ Grease and dust lightly with flour a 10-by-15-inch (25.5x38cm) baking pan. Spread the batter in it, even up the surface with slightly oiled fingers.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 20 minutes, or until golden brown. Let cool for 10 minutes then cut into 22 bars.

POPPY SEED PINWHEEL

Biskit Malih bil-Khishkhash Makes 40 pieces



The bright red corn poppies have been growing in Mesopotamia ever since time immemorial. In *The Assyrian Herbal*, a pharmaceutical monograph on the Assyrian vegetable drugs, the narcotic quality of the plant was recognized. Poppy was recommended, for instance, as a soothing drug for toothache (57). A distinction; however, has to be made between the opium poppy plant and the bright red corn poppy. Opium extracted from the seed capsule latex of opium poppies contains the powerful morphine, still used for pain relief but is considered unsafe for internal use because of its highly addictive nature. The bright red corn poppies also have some sleep inducing qualities but they are not addictive (McIntire 177). The corn poppy still grows in abundance on the hillsides of the northern region. The seeds were used in cooking, and the red petals and the seeds were useful as an aid to relaxation and sleep. In Arabic, it is called *khishkhash* after the rattling sounds the seeds make when they dry in the pod. The 13th-century Baghdadi recipe for *Khishkhashiyya*, a sweet and spicy stew, called for poppy flour, and ground fresh or dried poppy seeds. It was sprinkled on bread before baking it, or used toasted in small amounts the same way nuts are used in pastries, as in the sweet judhab dishes (al-Baghdadi, 195-96, 208). The following recipe is an attempt to revive this medieval practice by incorporating poppy seeds into the cookies/biscuits.

CHEESY COOKIES/BISCUITS

Biskit bil-Jibin Makes 48 pieces

The beauty of these cookies is that they can be conveniently cut out into any shape you like. The cookies are not rich and they make a nice change from the familiar sweet cookies.

- 5 cups (20oz/565g) all-purpose/plain flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 cup (250ml) oil
- 1 cup (4oz/115g) shredded mozzarella or cheddar cheese
- ½ cup (80ml) milk
- 3 eggs
- Sesame seeds and/or chili powder for sprinkling on cookies
- Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ½ cup (1½oz/45g) toasted poppy seeds
- ⅓ cup (80ml) milk
- 4 cups (16oz/450g) all-purpose/plain flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- ½ teaspoon ginger
- ¾ cup (180ml) oil
- 1 egg, separated
- 1 cup (4oz/115g) shredded mozzarella or cheddar cheese
- ½ cup (125ml) milk
- Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ In a small pot mix poppy seeds and milk, bring to a boil, then lower heat and simmer until milk evaporates, about 10 minutes. Set aside to cool.
- ☞ In a medium bowl, combine flour, salt, baking soda, baking powder, and ginger. Add oil, and mix by rubbing between the fingers until mix resembles breadcrumbs.
- ☞ Add whisked egg white, cheese, and milk to the flour mix, and knead briefly to make dough of medium consistency.
- ☞ Divide dough into two parts. Roll out one part into a rectangle about ¼in/6mm thick. Spread surface with half of the poppy seeds prepared in the first step. Roll firmly from the longer side, jelly/Swiss roll fashion. With a sharp knife, slice the log into about 20 ½in/8mm wide pieces. Press each piece flat on the cut side and transfer it with the help of spatula to a large greased baking sheet. Repeat with the other portion of dough. Add 1 tablespoon cold water to the remaining egg yolk, beat a little, and brush cookies/biscuits with it.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 15 minutes, or until golden brown.

- ☞ In a medium bowl, combine flour, salt, baking soda, and baking powder. Add oil and mix by rubbing between the fingers until mixture resembled breadcrumbs.
- ☞ Make a well in the middle and add cheese, milk, and beaten 2 eggs and white of the third one. Reserve yolk for the glaze. Knead mixture for a few minutes to make dough of medium consistency. Let it rest for about 10 minutes.
- ☞ On a slightly floured surface flatten dough with a rolling pin to ½in/8mm thickness. Cut into shapes with cookie/biscuit cutters, and arrange them on a greased baking sheet. To the reserved egg yolk add 1 tablespoon cold water, beat a little. Glaze the cookies with it, and sprinkle them with sesame seeds and/or chili pepper.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 12 to 15 minutes, or until golden brown.

DILL WEED BALLS

Biskit Malih bil-Shibint Makes 60 balls



Dill gives these flaky cookies an extraordinary aroma. I usually shape them into balls. For impressive presentations, I use a small wooden mold *qalab il-kleicha* used for shaping cookies/biscuits.

½ cup (125ml) oil
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) butter, melted
 1 cup (250 ml) yogurt
 ¾ cup (1½oz/45g) fresh dill, chopped or
 3 tablespoons dried dill weed
 3 eggs, divided
 4½ cups (18oz/510g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 1½ teaspoons baking powder
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a medium bowl, beat together oil, butter, yogurt, dill weed, and 2 eggs and yolk of the third one, reserve egg white for glazing.

☞ Mix flour, salt, and baking powder, and add to the mixture above. Stir with a fork first to moisten flour. Knead briefly to form medium dough. Let it rest for 10 minutes.

☞ Break away pieces, size of walnuts, and roll them between fingers to shape into balls. Alternatively, you may use a small *qalab kleicha* (wooden mold for shaping cookies/biscuits): press the dough pieces into the mold and then tap them out. Arrange them in a greased baking sheet, brush them with the reserved beaten egg white, and bake them in the preheated oven for 15 to 20 minutes, or until golden brown.

SPICY SESAME STICKS

Biskit Malih bil-Simsim Makes 16 sticks

These sticks are very nice with dips or sweetened hot tea.

2½ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon baking powder
 ½ teaspoon whole toasted caraway seeds or aniseeds
 ¼ teaspoon ginger
 ¼ teaspoon cumin
 ½ cup (125ml) oil
 2 tablespoons yogurt
 2 eggs, divided
 ¾ cup (2½oz/75g) toasted sesame seeds
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

1. In a medium bowl, mix flour, salt, baking powder, caraway or aniseeds, ginger and cumin.

2. Make a well in the middle, and add oil, yogurt, and beaten 1 whole egg and one egg white, reserve yolk for glazing. Stir mixture with a fork first to moisten flour, and then knead briefly for a few minutes to make dough of medium consistency.

☞ Divide into 16 balls the size of a walnut each. Let rest, covered, for 15 minutes.

☞ Roll pieces into pencil-like sticks.

☞ Add 1 tablespoon cold water to the reserved egg yolk and beat together. Put sesame seeds in a flat dish.

☞ Brush each stick with the egg wash and roll it in sesame allowing it to catch as much as possible of the sesame.

☞ Arrange the sticks in a greased baking sheet and bake in the preheated oven for about 15 minutes, or until golden brown.



DESSERTS

LIGHT AND THICKENED, CANDIED AND FROZEN



Introduction 000

I Simple and Light Puddings

Milk Pudding, *Mahallabi*

Rice Pudding

Saffron-gold and Milky-white Pudding, *Zarda w'Haleeb*

II Fruity Desserts

Stuffed Dates

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III Thickened Puddings, *Halawaat*

Sweet 'n Golden Vermicelli Noodles

Thickened Pudding of Toasted Flour

Thickened Pudding Pudding of Mastic

Thickened Pudding of Toasted Rice Flour

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Date Sweetmeat, *Halaawat Tamur*

VI Confections

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Sesame Candy

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Almond Candy

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Apricot Ice Cream with Pistachio

Green Ice Cream with Pistachio and Mastic

Cinnamon Ice Cream with Dried Fruits



Desserts

Light and Thickened, Candied and Frozen

Halawiyyat

حَلَوِيَّات

(Only) when he has eaten the food,

let him give (his) verdict (on it)!

(A Sumerian proverb, ca 3500 BC, Gordon, 456)

Introduction

Arabian desserts in general might strike the Western palate as being too rich and sweet. This could be true, but they are usually reserved for special religious and social occasions and gatherings. For every-day dessert, fresh fruits are usually the choice after the main meal or between meals. Probably the sweet tea customarily served after every meal satisfies the sweet tooth in many of us.

Opposite: Making halawa

Above: Cinnamon ice cream

Fruits in the region are seasonal. Melon and watermelon are consumed in huge amounts in the summer, for they help replenish the liquids our bodies lose in the hot dry season. At best, watermelon is sweet and red, but when buying it, *caveat emptor*. It is safer to buy it *'ala shart il-sikeen* (on the condition of the knife). The vendor would choose the melon himself and prove its excellence by cutting out a wedge to show how red and good it is. Watermelons are usually cut open an hour or so before the meal to allow them to cool naturally. In the old-fashioned houses, the cut melons used to be kept next to the *badgeer* (wind catcher, a chimney-like cooling passage). Towards the end of summer melons similar to honeydew, greenish and rather crunchy, but as sweet as honey, start to appear in the market. They are called *bateekh Samarra* (melons of Samarra), after the place where they grow abundantly. They are the harbingers of the fall.

Grapes come in different shapes and colors, such as the long and slender variety called *des al-anza* (goat's dug). Unfortunately, our grapes have many seeds in them, which gave rise to a word of wisdom you'd better heed: "do not rush things, but deal with them the way you eat grapes, *habba, habba* (one grape at a time)." That is why our *zibeeb* (black raisins and sultanas) have lots of seeds, only *kishmish* (small raisins) are seedless. Nectarines and apricots have a very short season. Different kinds of plums and cherries, such as *goaja*, and locally grown white small apples (more like crab apples) are more commonly eaten while green and tart, with a sprinkle of salt, as appetizing snacks. They are mostly consumed on the household level, and no hostess worth her name would think of presenting her honored guests with such humble, but nevertheless scrumptious stuff. Cucumbers, small, smooth, and crunchy, are also snacked on, they are even classified by some as fruit. Dates start appearing in mid-summer, some golden yellow, some radiant red, and some half golden and crunchy, and half brown, soft, and honey-sweet. It is estimated that about 450 kinds of dates are grown in the region but only several kinds are commercially

significant, such as *khistawi*, *zehdi*, *barhi*, and red *barban*. Dates need a lot of heat and humidity to ripen, which explains why the best dates are grown in middle and southern Iraq, especially in Basra. Indeed date palm groves growing in Basra inspired the most beautiful poetic imagery ever composed by a contemporary Arab poet. Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, a native of the city of the date palms himself, compares, in his poem *Inshudat'l-Matar* (an ode to rain), the gracefully long black eyelashes of his beloved's beautiful eyes to two date palm 'forests' growing along the banks of the river, at the time of dusk.

From "An Ode to Rain"
by Iraqi Poet Badir Shakir al-Sayyab, 1926-1964

*Your eyes are like two date-palm groves
at the time of dusk,
Or two balconies from which
the full moon is receding.*

During the month of August, dates fully ripen. All it takes is a few bouts of humidity to do the job. A joke is told of the legendary despot, Quaraqush, *wali* (governor) of Iraq during the Ottoman occupation. He once complained of the hot humid weather in Iraq in August. When he was told, it was so in order to ripen the dates, he decreed that all date palms be cut off. Traditional accompaniments with ripe dates are yogurt drink and cucumber, a perfect balance of colors, tastes, and nutrients. A considerable amount of the ripened dates is dried and kept, so that it may be enjoyed all year round. Basra is especially famous for its *tamur mu'assal*, (chewy dates preserved in their 'honey' and mixed with some toasted sesame). My father, a Basrawi himself, used to entertain us with the joke about the British soldier who commended the Basrawi 'chocolate,' but complained it always came filled with stones.

Singing Praises of Dates

"Our dates are smooth and snub-nosed; your teeth sink into them; their stones are like birds' tongues; you put a date into your mouth and you find the sweetness in your ankles." That was how a Bedouin once described dates (Ibn al-Jawzi Tales of Dupes and Gullibles, cited in Gelder 41).

Towards the end of summer, figs, both black and white (pale green), and pomegranates, make their appearance. Fig trees grow successfully in household orchards but mostly in the north where the surplus is preserved by threading them into strings and drying them, or making them into jam for winter. Pomegranates come in different varieties. Sour ones are mostly used for cooking purposes, semi-sweet and sweet pomegranates are consumed as fruit, and the best and sweetest variety grows in Shahraban, in the western region of Iraq.

Like figs, apricots are highly perishable. The fruit is enjoyed fresh for a limited period. Otherwise, it is mostly preserved dried whole as *turshana*, which is consumed as a snack or added to some traditional dishes. Apricot is also mashed, then spread in thin layers in huge trays and dried under the scorching sun of summer. The sheets would then be brushed lightly with oil and folded to be sold as *qamar'l deen* (literally, 'moon of religion'), a chewy fruit leather. Levantine variety is the best. It is consumed as a sweet snack or made into *sherbet* (a cold drink) popular during Ramadhan, the religious month of fasting. If you have a passion for vegetables and fruits, shopping in the local market places may prove to be the most fun time you can think of spending. There you lose yourself in the hustle and bustle of the shoppers, the fresh earthy smells of the products that have just arrived directly from the farms and orchards. The vendors chant the excellence of their produce at the top of their voices,

using some catchy phrases. I particularly remember a smart vendor advertising his sweet pomegranates by saying at the top of his voice, "*eba hilu!*" (Their only blemish is their intense sweetness!) Citrus fruits are for winter, although some farmers prolong the period of their availability by keeping them in holes under the ground to sell them at a higher price when they become impossible to get in the summer. This method of preserving fresh fruit is called *'jafur* (keeping in pits), and it must have been quite an old one. Citrus trees thrive in the entire region, but the oranges of Diyala, a city west of Baghdad, are especially sweet and have very thin peel. Household gardens are usually bordered with citrus trees in addition to date palms and other fruit trees. The aroma of the blossoms of citrus trees wafting through the fences, while walking on the streets in springtime, is an unforgettable memory. Two kinds of citrus trees are unique to the region. The first is orange of Seville (*rarinj*) which is a thick-skinned, sweet-sour variety, mostly used for cooking purposes instead of lemon juice. It also yields excellent jam and *sherbet* (drink). The other variety is as big as an orange but as yellow as a lemon. It is just sweet, and hence the name *noomi hilo* (sweet lemon). People believe in its soothing and cooling effect on skin rashes. In the old days, it was the custom for women to take their children and have a social gathering once a month at the neighborhood public bath. There they would share a meal brought from home, which would typically consist of *kebab*, *kubba*, *khubz 'uroug*, and fruits, especially *noomi hilu* to cool their bodies off before they leave.

Iraqi Folk Song

*When Pomegranates hovered around me,
Lemons came to my rescue,
O that sweet one, I do not want him any more!
Take me back home!*

The Ancient Scene:

To go back in history, it is plausible to argue that the ancient scene regarding fruits and desserts in general does not differ substantially from the modern one. Excavators at Ur, a site in the southern part of modern Iraq, inhabited from the Ubaid period (c. 4500 BC) until about 400 BC, found small crab apples sliced crosswise and threaded in strings. Date stones were also found, evidence that date palms were quite common in the area as far back as 50,000 BC, and that they played a predominant role in Sumerian economic life. The network of irrigation canals in southern Mesopotamia provided ideal conditions for palm cultivation. The palms clung to the canal banks, leaving the open land free for other crops. Literally, every single part of the palm was used in one way or another. From early second millennium BC Sumerian lexicographical lists, we learn of about one hundred and fifty words for the various types of palms and their different parts. The date palms were shown in a Neo-Assyrian relief of Ashurbanipal and his queen feasting in a garden at Nineveh. Interestingly, the early archaeologists in the 19th century mistook the germinating date palm, a symbol of fertility in Assyrian sculptures, for pineapple. Although nowadays date palms cannot be successfully grown in the modern northern region, date palms grew in Nineveh as late as the medieval era.

In ancient times date palms were so productive that they were cheaper than grain, which made dates a staple food for the poor. The fruits were eaten fresh, but they were also pressed to let juice ooze. This juice was allowed to evaporate into thick syrup called 'daspu' (honey-sweet) in Akkadian (cf. Arabic *dibs*). This syrup was sometimes referred to as 'lal' (honey). Real honey was known and used by those who could afford it. The cheaper and more readily available thick date syrup was used for puddings and sweetmeats. Cane sugar was not yet known in the region.

The dates were dried and compressed for winter use, and sometimes chopped up and mixed with flour for pastries. In the early 4th century BC, Xenophon, who had been to the region, commented on the size and

succulence of the dates. Their color was like amber, he noted, and the Babylonian villagers dried them and kept them as sweets.

The new foliage sprouting from the crown of an old date palm was eaten as vegetable. The ancient Sumerians thought it had a "peculiar pleasant taste" though it had the tendency to cause headaches. This part of the date palm, *jummar*, has always been deemed a delicacy. However, since the tree dies after this part is taken, this was normally done with trees past their prime. Artificial fertilization of the female date palms was known and practiced in Sumerian times. To do this, the farmers had to climb up those tall trees - not as tough at it might sound because the surface of the trunk is rough. The normal method of climbing to the top was for the climber to tie a rope around both the trunk and his body. Then he would lean back and literally walk to the top, the rope being raised at each step to hitch itself on the projections immediately above. This can be seen on a fresco from the palace of Mari dating from the beginning of the second millennium BC. And this method has not changed. Nowadays you can still see the date-palm climbers 'walking' up the date palms for fertilizing as well as gathering the crops. Listen to what an American twin said when they saw the date-palm climber for the first time in Baghdad, in their 1940 memoirs *Our Arabian Nights*. They saw an Arab walk right up their tallest date tree.

At least it looked as if he did... when he started climbing, he passed a short length of wire round the trunk of the tree and attached it to a red scarf, in which he sat hammock fashion. Then with every step he took, he hooked the wire one notch higher on the tree. There was a fraction of a second between jabs of the wire, when the man's contact with the tree was the soles of his feet. It was fascinating to watch. (140)



On Top of the Date Palm: An Iraqi Folk Song *Fog il-Nakhal Fog*

The height of the date palm has always been an emblem of glory, success, and the coveted unattainable, as in the song below. On the other hand, it also stands for deceptive appearances. An impressively attractive person with no real substance to complement it, is compared to a tall date palm with the brain of a goat. In the following song, the beloved supposedly a woman is addressed as a male - a traditional ritual in the codes of Middle-Eastern courtly love. It was mostly followed to protect the beloved's reputation; but also - especially in cases of unrequited love - to protect the accosting lover from a hefty *qubqab* ('wood slide,' Middle-Eastern clogs) being hurtled at him.

*Look at him! Crowning the summit of the date palm.
Is this luster I see, radiating from his cheeks,
Or is it light shining from heavens above?*

The Tree of Life

When Herodotus visited the region in the 5th century BC, he commented that the "palm-trees grow in great numbers over the whole of the flat country, mostly of the kind which bears fruit, and this fruit supplies them with bread, wine, and honey. It is not surprising then that the date palm in Mesopotamia was one of the most ancient symbolic forms of the concept 'Tree of Life,' the sacred tree, which connects heaven, earth, and the underworld; the giver of gifts, wisdom, immortality, and fertility. In Judaism, the palm represents peace and plenty, and is one of the Four Species of Sukkot. Among the early Jews, it was a symbolic representation of the Tree of Life in the Kabbalah. Early Christians used the palm branch to symbolize victory of the faithful over enemies of the soul, as in the Palm Sunday festival celebrating the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. The date palm is repeatedly mentioned in the *Qur'an*, such as in the well-known verses, which describe Mariam (Mary) when she was in labor: "And shake the trunk of the palm tree towards thee: it will drop fresh ripe dates upon thee. Eat then, and drink, and let thine eye be gladdened!" (Chapter 19 *Maryam*: verses 25-26). To this day, it is still the custom among villagers in Iraq and other Muslim countries to adorn the gates of their houses with palm leaves on religious festivals.

Above: A date palm walker

Excavated cuneiform texts indicate that the Sumerian orchards included other fruit trees, such as pomegranate, apple, peach, fig, apricot, plum, grapevines, and citrus trees. All these were inter-planted with the higher date palms, and together they formed a canopy for vegetables and herbs, which required more attention and care. This way of organizing trees for maximum shade and protection is described in a Sumerian poem, which tells the story of a gardener called Shukallituda, whose diligent efforts at gardening at first had met with nothing but failure. After doing a lot of scrutinizing, and being guided by divine omens, he came up with the technique of planting shade trees in a garden or grove to protect the smaller plants from wind and sun (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 70-72). This method is still followed by modern farmers, and it explains why dates are usually mentioned in conjunction with other fruits. References to fruit trees in the *Qur'an*, for instance, always include dates with other fruits such as grapes and pomegranate. Even the names of some of these ancient fruits underwent little changes throughout all these millennia. Compare, for instance, Akkadian '*kamissaru*' (pears) with Arabic *kummathra*, '*supulgar*' (quince) with *safarjal*, or '*andahsu*' (plum) with *ijjas/injas*.

The ripe and half-open pomegranate displaying its many seeds was the symbol of fecundity and eternal life in ancient times. In ancient Babylon and Assyria, they were served at marriage banquets. The Assyrians, in particular, thought highly of them. They figured on many of their monuments and jewelry. They were also used for medicinal purposes. In *The Assyrian Herbal*, pomegranate rind was prescribed as a "stomach binder." Three kinds were mentioned: the sour, the sweet, and the very sweet (called '*daspu*' i.e. sweet as honey, Thompson 177). The pomegranates also yielded a highly prized drink. The Assyrians knew many varieties of figs, which were a staple dietary item. Fig-syrup was used as a sweetener. The fruit itself was preserved by drying. For medicinal purposes, fig juice was used as a stomach wash, and a cake or lump of figs was applied to boils. The fig tree was revered by all religions. To the Hebrews it was a symbol of

peace and abundance, to the Christians it was a sacred tree because Jesus desired to eat figs on the way to Bethany. To the Muslims it was called the Tree of Heaven. Figs were deemed sacred for God swore by them and the olives in the opening verse of *Surat al-Teen* (Chapter Figs) in the *Qur'an*.

Since the ancient Mesopotamians were concerned with the laying-out of fine parks and orchards, a tremendous variety of other fruits were also grown. Several Assyrian kings showed keen interest in botany and introduced exotic trees and plants into their parks. The earliest evidence for cultivating quince for instance is in Mesopotamia. Other fruits like plums and especially cherries were mentioned by the Assyrian king Sargon II (722-705 BC). The Akkadian word for cherries was '*karshu*' (cf. medieval Arabic *qarasiya*, and modern *karaz*), and Sargon associated it with the word '*sumlalu*,' (sweet smelling). He mentioned that they grew in the Kurdish mountains in the north of the region. Scholars believe that the Akkadian name has survived into European languages such as the Greek '*kerasos*,' and the German '*kirsche*.' Apricots were first cultivated in the region, and in Akkadian it was known as '*armanu*.' It is now believed that the Latin word '*armeniaca*' and its derivatives do not indicate that the fruit originally came from Armenia but that it is a loan word from Akkadian (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 179).

Peaches originated in the orient and reached the Fertile Crescent as early as the third millennium BC. It must have been from this region that the Greeks and Romans came to know of them. Citron and lemon trees also grew on the land of Mesopotamia ever since antiquity. Lemon pips were found in excavations at ancient Nippur (4000 BC). Apparently, they were brought to the land from the Far East. The Sanskrit word for orange '*naranj*' is still used even nowadays to describe a special variety of orange, sweet and sour with a more than usual bitter rind. These are known as the oranges of Seville, because the Arabs took them to Spain during the eighth century AD.

Trees of mulberry (*tukki*) and medlar (*nabug/nabq*) were also found on the ancient land of Mesopotamia. They

have always been of no significant commercial value. Now they are usually grown in orchards as shade trees. Children, in particular, enjoy climbing and picking up their fruits, small and exotic, and delicious for nibbling. If fruits are too high to reach, they throw stones at them, an utterly irksome way for gathering crops, particularly when done to other people's trees. Mulberry in its white and red varieties is eaten fresh, and made into attractive jam and drink. As for the medlar tree (*sidr*), archaeology has proven that it was as common in ancient Mesopotamian household gardens as it is nowadays. We are told that syrup was made out of the fruit, which is somewhat similar to *jujube* '*unnab*.' When dried, the fruit yielded a tasty sweetmeat. The medlar tree itself has always been shrouded with superstitions. It is believed to be the dwelling house of all kinds of demons such as *ginni* and *si'lua* (male and female demons), and superstitious people believe that cutting off a medlar tree brings bad luck. Some people even claim they heard loud shrieks when they cut them down. Such superstitions must have been circulated from ancient times. Tenth-century Nabatean Ibn Wahshiyya in his book on farming confirms this by telling similar anecdotes, which he believes to be of ancient Babylonian origin (*Al-Filaha al-Nabatiyya* 2: 1195). Medlar tree leaves were believed to have a peculiarly pure quality. There were many varieties of the fruit. Herodotus commented on the similarity in flavor of medlar to dates, and right he was. To this day, there is a particular variety called *nabug khistawi* after the name of an excellent kind of dates. Unlike the more commonly rounded varieties, *nabug khistawi* is oblong like a date but a little smaller. When ripe, it is as brown and as sweet as a ripe date.

Nuts, such as almonds, walnuts, and pistachios, were widely used. The poisonous quality of bitter almonds was recognized although small quantities of its oil were prescribed for their medicinal value as emollient, demulcent and laxative, as well as in enema. For confections, they used 'almond flavor,' or what was then called 'spirit of almond' (cf. Arabic *rouh al-lawz*). Almond in Akkadian was '*luzu*,' from which the Arabic

lawz was derived (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 132, 182). Pistachio was cultivated in the gardens of King Merodach-baladan of Babylon. It was used for its oil, or eaten fresh and used in confections, as it is used today. Shelled pistachios, nuts, and salted seeds were mentioned in the menu of the huge banquet the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II prepared for his 69,574 guests in ninth century BC (see *The Legendary Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II* 000 below).

Manufactured Desserts:

Making pastries and confections was a flourishing business in ancient Mesopotamia. They were made at the palace and temple kitchens, as well as in bazaars by professional confectioners, called '*episanu*.' Confectioners attached to temples were specialized in making the sacred cakes consumed in large numbers at times of religious festivals. Menus prepared for the gods invariably included a course of dessert at the end of the meal. They also made the pastries that the worshippers of the goddess Ishtar crumbled and left for her doves. The principal ingredients used for making such pastries were mostly different kinds of flour, date syrup, honey, butter, sesame seeds, sesame oil, and the so much valued rose water, called '*hilu*' in Akkadian. Evidently, roses were abundant in the region, and rose water was made in the ancient temples (see Glossary). They also valued cardamom for its flavor and medicinal properties. Confections in Ancient Mesopotamia were mostly sweetened with honey and syrups derived from dates and figs. In making desserts, a product such as sesame proved very handy, indeed. Sesame seeds grew abundantly in the entire region. In Akkadian it was '*samasamu*' (cf. Arabic *simsim*). Although some desserts were made using the seeds themselves, the principal consumptive value of the plant was in its fine oil, which was a staple in the people's diet until recently. Their pastries and desserts included the '*qullupu*,' which was dough made of sesame oil and wheat, filled with raisins or dates and baked. People in the region have always been baking cookies/biscuits similar to these,

such as the medieval Baghdadi *khushkananaj* and the traditional *kleicha* of modern times. They also made a kind of semi solid pudding from flour, sesame oil and honey, called '*muttaqu*,' and it was often mentioned in their literature mainly as offerings to the temples. It sounds so much like many of the medieval and modern Iraqi *halawa*. As for '*mirsu*' (cf. Arabic verb *maras* '*mash*'), a mixture of dates mashed with clarified butter and honey, its counterparts would be the medieval date dessert *ha'is*, and today's *halawat tamur*. They shaped their pastries in many interesting ways, such as pillars as in '*makatu*,' or turbans as in '*kubbusu*.'

Sugarcane was early introduced into the subcontinent of India, and was of considerable importance there by the fifth century BC. However, it spread very slowly westwards. It was introduced to Mesopotamia around the fourth century AD, and it was not until the eighth century AD, when the Islamic rule spread it along the Mediterranean, that cultivation of sugarcane began on the shores of North Africa, Sicily and Spain. The rest of Europe had to wait eight more centuries before sugar became common.

The word 'candy' is borrowed from the Arabic *quand*, which is a hard crystalline mass formed by evaporating or boiling sugarcane. Cane juice was clarified by boiling it with egg white, which would be skimmed off after it coagulated with the trapped impurities. The remaining liquid was boiled down until most of the water had evaporated. The resulting thick, sticky mass was poured into cone-shaped clay molds, where it crystallized into raw sugar. The cones were inverted for a few days so that the molasses could run off through a hole in the tip. Finally, wet clay was packed over the wide end of the cone and its moisture was allowed to seep through the crystals for eight to ten days. This washing action removed most of the remaining impurities. The final product was a cone-shaped white sugar mass, usually wrapped in blue paper to make it appear whiter. It was sold whole to be grated as needed by the cook.

The availability of sugarcane, date syrup, and honey by the middle ages brought about an array of confections

and cookies/biscuits as evident from the extant cookbooks and literature of the time. Fried pastries dipped in syrup like zalabiya fritters were quite popular back then. Almond pastries, *qata'if*, sweetmeats, nougat, candies, oven-baked cookies/biscuits, and caked drenched in syrup are a few examples of what the Abbasid bakers and confection-makers offered. Rice puddings and custards flavored with saffron and rose water, or fine noodles cooked in honey and nuts were more likely made at home.

Today's traditional desserts are not different from the medieval varieties, but they are not consumed on daily basis. Some of them are more customarily enjoyed with guests, served with tea or coffee during the evening visitations and dinner parties. Some pastries are associated with the religious month of Ramadhan, such as *baklawa* and *zlabya*. *Kleicha* cookies/biscuits are made for the two religious feasts, the small one at the end of Ramadhan, and the big one after the pilgrimage to Mecca is performed. Besides, a box of *baklawa* and *zlabya*, or *mann il-sima* (manna), or *halqoom* (Turkish delight), bought from one of the specialized confectioneries, would make a welcome gift between friends on certain social occasions like graduations, circumcisions, and birthdays.

Other kinds of pastries such as *chureck* (sweet yeast dough pastry), *ka'ak* and *bakhsam* (dry cookies/biscuits like biscotti) are very popular, but are deemed too humble offer on formal occasions. Nobody has to bake such pastries at home. They are bought from special bakeries that carefully guard their recipes. The most famous is *Ka'ak al-Sayyid*. My recipes of these traditional pastries are my improvisation, but they are close enough.

You will notice that the traditional types of dessert are usually fried and soaked in syrup, or simmered on stovetops. Cookies/biscuits up until the late fifties were baked in the *tannour* (clay oven) or at the neighborhood bakery. Europeanized types of cakes were mostly bought at bakeries. However, as gas stoves with ovens increasingly became more common in the average kitchens, cakes of all types started to be made at home,

and cake making became the favorite pastime of the leisurely modern Mesopotamian young ladies. In the following recipes, I tried to develop reasonably low fat desserts, without sacrificing the taste. Most recipes replace the traditional *ghee*, butter, margarine, or shortening with liquid vegetable oil such as canola oil. Extra light olive oil may be used because it is bland. Such oils have less saturated and trans fats, infamous for being artery-cloggers. I am also including some of the traditional fried desserts. Frying is inescapable sometimes. These can be made less frequently and just for the fun of it when there is a big crowd to entertain. Or they may be served in smaller portions after a light meal. It is comforting to learn that recent studies have proved that a little fat is good for you. It helps prevent strokes, for instance. But it is safer to go by the golden rule: moderation, and not deprivation.

Catchy Phrases and Songs by the Street Vendors of Baghdad

To attract the attention of children of all ages, street vendors in the old quarters of Baghdad used to repeat some catchy phrases while roaming the streets. They more often than not carried on their heads large baskets laden with all sorts of hard and chewy candies, and nuts. *Beidh il-laglag* (stork's eggs) was somewhat fluffy swirls of dry meringue, usually carried in a deep basket and protected with a cone-like cloth cover. This vendor's phrase would be, "*Beidh il-laglag ya walad*," (Hey boys, here come the stork's eggs). The seller of the elegant *lawzeena* (almond confection) would usually say, "*The Aleppans make it, so that the 'white collar' workers eat it*". The most fun were the vendors offering *zlabya* (fritters), *baklawa*, and *sha'ar banat* (lit. girls' hair= candy floss/cotton candy). They would chant: *Zlabya, baklawa, sha'ar banaat!*
Where shall I go, where shall I sleep for the night?
If I sleep in the alley, the cat will scare me.
If I sleep at the train station, the duck will alarm me.

Medieval Cannoli

Halaqem / Asabi' Zaynab

In his 10th-century cookbook, al-Warraq gives a recipe for small stuffed tubular pastries, called *halaqem* (like gulleets, tubes). Unleavened dough, made of flour and oil, is wound around a cleaned long reed, which is then sliced into about one-inch /2.5-cm pieces, and colored red, yellow, green, and blue. They are baked in the *tannour*. When done, the reeds are removed and the resulting tubes are stuffed with a mixture of walnut and sugar. The tips are sealed by dipping them in melted sugar, and then sprinkled with colored sugar. Al-Warraq says they will look like *bustan* (colorful orchard, Chapter 103).

In the 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydala*, a similar recipe is given. The cookies/biscuits are called *qananeet mahshuwwa* (stuffed tubes). Dough yellowed with saffron is made into thin flat breads that are wound around reeds and cut small or big, as desired. They are then fried. After removing the reeds, the tubes are stuffed with a mixture of nuts and sugar bound with honey (217). A similar recipe is given in 13th-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 642). It is called *asabi' Zaynab* (Zaynab's fingers).

In the above recipes, we clearly see the prototype of what later was called cannoli, the famous Italian pastry. Etymologically, *cannoli* is plural of *cannolo* 'tube,' diminutive of *canna* 'reed,' ultimately derived from Akkadian *qanu* 'cane' (*American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* 4th Edition)

I SIMPLE AND LIGHT PUDDINGS

Light and tasty desserts are made from basic ingredients such as cornstarch, rice, and milk. The 'perfumes of Arabia' will give them a tremendous lift - all it takes is a pinch of saffron, some cardamom or cinnamon and a tablespoon of rose water or orange blossom water.



Above: Milk Pudding
Mahallabi

MILK PUDDING

Mahallabi Makes 6 generous servings

A warm bowl of *mahallabi* in winter or a chilled one in summer is always welcome for dessert. The way we make it today is much lighter than the traditional medieval *muhallabiyya*. One of al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes, for instance, is a custard-like pudding, which calls for 30 eggs. We grew up believing that the pudding got its name from *haleeb* 'milk.' Apparently, there is another explanation for the name, and for this, we go to medieval sources such as the Abbasid Theologian and philosopher al-Ghazali. He explains that oftentimes kings and leaders choose a favorite dish as their own and call it after their names. For an example he mentions al-Muhallabiyya, which is named after al-Muhallab bin Abi Sufra (d.702), Umayyad governor of Iraq (*Sirr al-'Alamayn* 6). A story in 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Anwa' al-Saydal* confirms this (163-64).

7 cups (1.7 liters) milk
1½ cups (11oz/300g) granulated sugar
1 to 2 cardamom pods
¼ cup cornstarch/cornflour (3oz/85g) or rice flour(4¼oz/130g), or a combination of both
1 cup (250ml) cold milk
2 tablespoons rose water, or to taste
For garnish: 2 tablespoons shelled and ground pistachio

- ☞ In a heavy medium pot, bring milk, sugar, and cardamom pods to a boil, about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Dissolve cornstarch or rice flour in cold milk and pour it slowly into the boiling milk, stirring all the time lest it should get lumpy (a wire whisk will be useful here). Lower heat to medium and stir until mixture bubbles and starts to thicken, about 5 minutes. The pudding should be thick enough to cover the back of a metal spoon. Put away from heat and stir in rose water. Discard cardamom pods if wished
- ☞ Pour into individual bowls, and immediately garnish with pistachio before a skin forms on the surface. Serve warm or chilled. Very nice with fruit compote.

RICE PUDDING

Mahallabi 'l-Timman Makes 4 small servings

Unlike the regular rice puddings cooked in other parts of the world, our version is very simple and basic. It is a comfort food, nourishing, delightfully scented, and not so sweet. Slow cooking is best for this pudding. The medieval version was called *aruzza/aruzziyya*, sometimes enriched with meat, and colored with saffron. Here is how to prepare it:

½ cup (4oz/115g) rice, washed and soaked in water for 30 minutes, no need to drain
3 cups (715ml) water
¼ teaspoon salt
2 cups (475ml) milk
¼ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar, or to taste
1 tablespoon rose water, or
1 teaspoon cardamom, or both
For garnish: ground cinnamon

- ☞ Rub rice grains between your finger to break them, and put them with the soaking water in a medium heavy pot, along with water, and salt. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium and simmer 15 to 20 minutes, or until liquid is absorbed. Stir 2 to 3 times while simmering.
- ☞ Add milk and sugar and simmer gently, stirring occasionally, until pudding is of medium consistency, 15 to 20 minutes.
- ☞ Stir in rose water and/or cardamom, and ladle the pudding into individual bowls. Decorate with cinnamon, and serve warm or chilled. Very nice with fruit compote



Aruzziyya: Rice Pudding

In his chapter on *aruzziyyat* (rice puddings), al-Warraq illustrates his recipes with this descriptive poem, the way nowadays we illustrate our cookbooks with beautiful pictures of dishes (Chapter 51, my translation)

*What a wonderful aruzziyya, cooked to perfection,
 Like the full moon in the middle of the sky.
 Purer than the doubly condensed snow, which the
 winds and dew tinted.
 As white as a pure pearl in a bowl,
 Dazzling the eyes with its sheen.
 Behold moonlight even before the evening is seen.
 The sugar on its sides is like lustrous light
 projected from the skies.*

SAFFRON-GOLD AND MILKY-WHITE PUDDING

Zarda w'Haleeb Makes 4 to 6 servings



A spectacular pudding fit for formal presentations. A shallow platter is filled half with fragrant saffron-yellow rice pudding and half with white rice pudding, and the surface is decorated with ground cinnamon. The yellow part of the dessert, *zarda* 'yellow', is well known in the neighboring countries. Besides, judging from the many references to *zarda* in *The Arabian Nights* it seemed to have been a favorite dish among people in the middle ages. The combination of the white and yellow puddings gives this dessert a touch of regional originality. Since only the yellow part is sweetened, the traditional way to enjoy it is to combine the two portions in each mouthful.

1 recipe Rice Pudding above, using only
 1 tablespoon sugar
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) rice, washed and soaked in water for 30 minutes, no need to drain
 6 cups (1.50 liters) water
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon saffron, steeped in ¼ cup (60ml) hot water
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) cornstarch/cornflour dissolved in ½ cup (125ml) cold water
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 1 to 2 tablespoons rose water
For garnish: ground cinnamon

- To prepare white rice pudding: Follow instructions given in the previous recipe.
- To prepare saffron pudding: Rub rice grains between your finger to break them, and put them with the soaking water in a medium heavy pot, along with water, and salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to medium, and boil gently until rice is thoroughly cooked, 20 to 25 minutes.
- Mash saffron in hot water with a spoon to get as much color from it as possible, and add it to the cooked rice.
- Add dissolved cornstarch and sugar (a wire whisk will be useful here), stir well and resume cooking gently on medium heat. Stir occasionally until pudding nicely thickens, about 15 minutes. Add rosewater.
- To assemble a dish: Fill half of a somewhat flat plate with the white rice pudding and the other half with the yellow saffron pudding. Decorate surface with ground cinnamon.

II FRUITY DESSERTS

STUFFED DATES

Tamur Mahshi Makes 20 pieces



Dates by themselves make an excellent dessert, natural and wholesome. However, for special occasions, they can also be made into attractive and elegant dessert.

20 pitted dates
 20 toasted almonds, or toasted walnut halves
 ½ cup (125ml) water
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar
 1 teaspoon rose water
 1 cup (4oz/115g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
 ¼ teaspoon ground cardamom
For garnish: ground pistachio or shredded unsweetened coconut

- Stuff pitted dates with toasted nuts.
- Make medium syrup by boiling water and sugar until syrup starts to cover back of a metal spoon, about 10 minutes. Add rose water and cool off.
- Meanwhile, in a small skillet melt butter, and add flour. Stir all the time until flour is fragrant and evenly browned, about 5 minutes. Add cardamom.
- Dip each filled date in syrup and roll it in the toasted flour. Let the dates pick as much as possible of the flour. Spread the remaining flour on a dish and arrange dates on this bed. Sprinkle with ground pistachio or shredded coconut, and serve with coffee.

Besides eating fruits fresh, there are some nice ways of serving them as desserts. This works especially well with dried varieties.

EASY SPICY DATE SWEETMEAT

Madgouga Makes 8 servings

This dessert is originally pounded in a mortar and pestle, and hence the name madgouga (the pounded). A dry variety of dates called ashrafi is usually used. You may substitute with any kind of dryish dates.

½ cup (2oz/60g) flour
2 cups (12oz/350g) pitted dates
¼ cup (60ml) tahini/sesame paste
½ to 1 teaspoon cardamom
½ teaspoon coarsely ground toasted aniseeds
½ teaspoon crushed coriander seeds
½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted nuts
1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds

☞ To dry toast flour, put it in a heavy skillet and stir it constantly until it starts to change color and emits a pleasant fragrance, about 7 minutes on medium heat.

☞ Put dates, tahini, the toasted flour, cardamom, aniseeds, and coriander in a food processor or blender. Blend or process until mixture forms a ball, about 2 minutes. If it looks somewhat dry, add a little bit more *tahini*.

☞ Press half the date mixture onto a flat plate forming a 7in/18cm disc. Arrange the toasted nuts all over the surface, and cover with the remaining date mixture. Press sesame seeds into the surface, crimp all around the edge, and cut into thin wedges. Alternatively, you can form date mixture into small balls. Stuff each with a piece of nut, and roll it in the toasted sesame.

APRICOT DELIGHT

Mishmish bil-Kreama Makes 4 servings

Sweet and sour dried apricots make an appealing dessert garnished with cream and sprinkled with bright green pistachio.

1 cup (6oz/180g) dried apricots
1½ cups (375ml) water
⅓ cup (3oz/85g) granulated sugar
1 teaspoon grated lemon peel
1 tablespoon rose water
1 cup (250ml) heavy /double cream, whipped
Shelled pistachio, some broken into small pieces and some left whole

☞ Put apricots, water, sugar, and peel in a small heavy pot. Bring to a boil, and then turn heat to low, and simmer gently until mixture becomes syrupy, about 35 minutes.

☞ In a blender or food processor, purée the apricot mix. Chill for a few hours. Then gently fold in rose water and the whipped cream. Spread on a serving dish and decorate with some cream and pistachio, to your fancy.



APRICOT BALLS

Kubab il-Mishmish Makes 15 balls



Dried apricots are packed with goodness. You can make some nice and simple desserts with them as in the following.

1 cup (6oz/180g) dried apricots
¾ cup (2½oz/75g) shredded/desiccated sweetened coconut, divided
1 teaspoon rose water

☞ In a blender or food processor puree apricots, ½ cup (1½oz/45g) coconut, and rose water for about 3 minutes or until the mixture starts to gather into a ball. If apricots are not soft enough, adding a small amount of orange juice will help. Form into 15 balls about 1in/2.5cm in diameter, each. Roll them in the remaining ¼ cup (¾oz/23g) coconut, and set them aside overnight at room temperature to allow them to dry out.

APRICOT TRUFFLES

Kubab il-Mishmish Makes 20 balls

Another apricot snack packed with goodness. They are tasty, not so sweet, and delightfully chewy. If you want them a little bit sweeter, add the optional sugar. I first made them by accident. I was planning to make the apricot balls above, but the dried apricots I had were not soft enough, so I soaked them in orange juice for a few hours. When I puréed them with the coconut, I got a wet mushy mixture. So I kept on adding dried milk until mixture formed into a ball. It tasted so good that ever since it became a favorite.

1 cup (6oz/180g) dried apricots. Soak in orange juice for a few hours, then drain

(reserve liquid in case needed)

½ cup (1½oz/45g) shredded/desiccated sweetened coconut

1 tablespoon grated orange peel

3 cups (12oz/350g) dried milk (such as Nido). If milk is grainy, press it through a sieve

¼ cup (1oz/30g) confectioners' / icing sugar, optional

1 tablespoon rose water

For coating: ground nuts, or shredded coconut

For garnish: 20 shelled whole pistachios and about 2 ounces (60g) melted chocolate

☞ In a blender or a food processor put drained apricots, coconut, grated orange peel, powdered milk, confectioners' sugar if used, and rose water. Process or blend on high speed for about 2 minutes, or until mixture starts to form a ball and look like thick paste. If mixture looks a little dry, add some of the drained orange juice, or rose water.

☞ Form into 20 small balls, about 1in/2.5cm across. Roll balls in nuts or coconut. Press a shelled pistachio in the center of each, and drizzle with melted chocolate. Set aside to set.

STUFFED PRUNES

'Injas Mahshi Makes 5 servings

Prunes prepared this way are transformed into a refreshing dessert served chilled and garnished with a dollop of whipped cream. Brewed tea adds enticing depth to the stuffed prunes.

20 prunes, soaked overnight in hot brewed tea
20 walnut pieces, toasted
½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon rose water, may be laced with a bit of brandy

For garnish: whipped cream

- ☞ Drain prunes, and reserve the liquid. Then stuff them with walnut pieces.
- ☞ In a small pot combine sugar, lemon juice, and 1 cup (250ml) of the reserved liquid, if not enough is left, add water to make one cup. Bring to a quick boil, then reduce heat to medium and cook gently for about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Add the stuffed prunes carefully to the syrup, and let them simmer gently for about 20 minutes. Dessert is done when syrup is of medium consistency. To test put a drop of syrup in a cold plate. It should keep its domed shape even if you shake the dish a little.
- ☞ Cool off to room temperature, and then mix in rose water. Chill for a few hours, and serve in small bowls garnished with whipped cream.

III THICKENED PUDDINGS
(HALAWAAT)

Halaawa (pl. *halawaat*) is a traditional rich dessert steeped in sugar and oil, and lots of history. It has been cooking in the region for centuries by professional confectioners and house makers alike. The ancient Mesopotamian date desserts, for instance, still have their counterparts on our tables. The most popular medieval Baghdadi *halawaat* cooked in pots were *faludhaj* and *khabees*. In al-Warraaq's 10th-century cookbook, we have the motherload of recipes for preparing such desserts (Chapters 93, 94, 95, 96, 97). *Faloudhaj* is a golden translucent and thickened starch pudding similar to the traditional varieties of starch *halaawa* we cook today. A thicker and chewier variety is more like today's *halqoum* (Turkish delight). *Khabees*, is another variety of thickened pudding made in many different ways. They are not as translucent as *faludhaj*, and are slightly thinner in consistency. They are made with starch and nuts, or fruits and vegetables such as dates, apples, and carrots. We still cook most of these puddings at home, but some varieties can be bought from traditional confectionaries, such as *halaawat jizar* (made with carrots), *halaawa sabouniyya* (similar to Turkish delight), *halawa mastakiyya* (starch pudding flavored with mastic), and *halaawa ramiyya* (starch pudding with a grainy texture). Unfortunately, delicious as they are, they come loaded with fat and sugar. The following recipes have been slimmed down a little.

SWEET 'N GOLDEN
VERMICELLI NOODLES*Halaawat Sha'riyya* Makes 6 portions

A popular dessert steeped in the history of fine dining in medieval Baghdad. *Sha'riyya* is mostly sold in form of balls (also called 'nests'), available at Middle Eastern stores. I once tried it with a more nutritious variety made with whole wheat, but my children were diplomatically discouraging. "It was good," they assured me, "but don't make it any more." Never underestimate the lure of a fine noodle.

2 tablespoons butter plus 1 tablespoon oil
(such as Canola)
6 ounces (180g) vermicelli noodles (about 7 balls)
2 ¼ cups (548ml) hot water
A pinch of salt
1 to 1 ¼ cups (8-10oz/225-285g) granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 tablespoon rose water
½ cup broken walnut pieces
For garnish: 2 tablespoons ground pistachio

- ☞ Melt butter with oil in a medium heavy pot. Slightly crush noodle balls between your fingers and add them, folding constantly until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Carefully pour in hot water, and add salt. Stir, and bring to a quick boil, then lower heat and simmer, covered, until noodles start to soften, 4 to 5 minutes.
- ☞ Add sugar, cardamom, rose water, and walnut. Stir until sugar crystals dissolve. Let the pot simmer, covered, on medium-low, folding 2 to 3 times, until moisture is absorbed, noodles look glossy, and sugar starts to stick to the bottom of the pot (12-15 minutes).
- ☞ Immediately, spread it on a flat platter, evening up the surface with the back of a spoon. Give it a generous sprinkle of ground pistachio, divide it into 6 portions, and serve it warm. Leftovers may be refrigerated and heated for 1 minute in the microwave when needed. Very nice served with coffee.

Opposite left: Stuffed Prunes

Opposite right: Sweet 'n Golden Vermicelli Noodles

THICKENED PUDDING OF
TOASTED FLOUR*Halawat Taheen* Makes 6 servings

Here is another dessert, which has been cooking in the region ever since ancient times. The Akkadian texts tell of a sweet dish called '*muttaqu*,' made of flour, sesame oil, honey, and water (Levey 49). In the medieval times, it was called *khabees* (the mixed) using almost the same ingredients as we still do today. Many variations were made on *khabees*, some were white, and others yellow with saffron, some were solid and others *ratb* (moist). Elaborate decorations were also suggested for impressive presentations.

Toasting of flour called for in this recipe prevents it from getting glutinous and doughy while simmering, and it gives the dish an alluring aroma. However, it needs constant attention because flour burns quickly. Toast it less than required and the dessert will be weak in aroma and pale in color. Toast it longer than required and you end up having a good-for-nothing blackened mixture. Probably, it was this kind of tricky dessert that the contemporary Iraqi folkloric poet Mudhaffar al-Nawwab had in mind when he composed his poem *Lil Rel w'Hamad* (To Hamad and the Train). In this poem, the "burnt up" soul of the frustrated lover is compared to *halaawa* cooked at night, assumably in a dimly lit cottage.

1 ½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
3 cups (715ml) water
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
1 ½ cups (6oz/180 g) all-purpose/plain flour or whole wheat/wholemeal flour
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 tablespoon rose water, or to taste
For garnish: toasted slivered/flaked almonds or walnuts

- ☞ In a medium pot, dissolve sugar in water and let it boil for 5 minutes.
- ☞ In a heavy medium pot, melt butter and add the flour. Stir well on medium heat until flour changes color into medium brown, and becomes fragrant, 10 to 12 minutes. Then put the pot away from heat, (as it will spatter) and gradually pour syrup, stirring constantly with a wire whisk to prevent lumping.

THICKENED PUDDING OF MASTIC

Halawa Mastakyika Makes 8 servings

☞ Return pot to stove and, on medium-low heat, continue cooking and stirring until it thickens, about 5 minutes. If it thickens too fast, add a small amount of hot water and continue cooking. Stir in cardamom and rose water in the last minute.

☞ Immediately, spread the pudding on a flat plate, even up the surface with the back of a spoon, and garnish surface with toasted nuts.



Sometimes called *halaawat nisha* (cornstarch pudding) after the thickening ingredient used. Many of al-Waerraq's recipes for *khabees* (thickened pudding) were made with wheat starch *nasha*, similar to what we cook nowadays, except that we use cornstarch instead. One of these recipes was called *khabees abyadh* (white *halwa*). It was cooked with cornstarch dissolved in some water, along with sugar and sesame oil (*shayraj*) or clarified butter (*samn*). When spread on a platter, it was beautifully decorated with a dome made of pulled honey taffy. Triangles of colored sugar and almonds colored red, yellow, and green were arranged on the dome (Chapter 94).

1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 2 cups (475ml) water
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) cornstarch/cornflour
 2 pieces mastic, pulverized, or
 1 tablespoon mastic cream (see Glossary)
 ¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted slivered/flaked almonds
 or walnuts

- ☞ In a heavy pot dissolve sugar in water and let it boil for about 5 minutes. Then put it away from heat.
- ☞ Dissolve cornstarch in a small amount of cold water. Then put the pot away from heat, add it to the syrup, stirring with a wire whisk.
- ☞ Return the pot to medium heat and continue cooking, stirring all the time, until it thickens, about 10 minutes. Add the pulverized mastic and nuts, and stir for a minute or so. (A trick I learnt from a friend: mastic will pulverize much easier if you freeze it first)
- ☞ Spread the pudding on a lightly greased platter, or on individual plates. Sprinkle the top with confectioners' icing sugar and/or ground nuts.

Dental Care in Ancient Mesopotamia

The ancient Mesopotamians were well aware of the connection between excessive sweetness in food and tooth decay. The "Incantation against Toothache" tells how after heaven and earth and the rivers were created, the worm goes weeping before the sun god Shamash, and its tears flowing before Ea, god of water, saying,
*"What wilt thou give me for my food?
 What wilt thou give me for my sucking?"*

Shamash promises to give it the ripe fig and the apricot. But the worm does not like this and answers back,
*"Of what use they to me, the ripe fig
 [and] the apricot?
 Lift me up and among the teeth
 And the gums cause me dwell!
 The blood of tooth I will suck,
 And of the gums cause to dwell!
 The blood of tooth I will suck,
 And of the gum I will gnaw its roots!"*

Obviously, the ancients saw that the sweet dried fruits were excellent pastures for the small white worms, which the simple imagination associated with the tooth nerve. And the legend continues to this day. One of the expressions used describing a decayed tooth is *sin mdawwid* (i.e. a tooth having worms in it). Apparently, the worm was punished for its rebelliousness, for there are instructions for the

dentist to extract the decayed tooth where the worm dwells (Pritchard 1: 75-76).

The incantation was written for people with toothache, and the purpose of telling it was because the ancient magician wanted to show that he could diagnose the enemy, and get rid of it. After that, it would then proceed with this instruction: "So must thou say this: O worm! /May Ea smite thee with the might of his fist!" After chanting this incantation three times, he must rub a mixture of beer, a certain plant probably of a pungent nature, and oil on the tooth of his patient." (Thompson *Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylon* lxiv-v).

There is also reason to believe that the ancient Assyrian physicians recognized the effect of an inflamed tooth upon the whole body. In an Assyrian letter written on a cuneiform tablet around the end of the 8th-century bc, the palace physician gives his verdict: "I will tell the final (decision) to the King, my lord. The inflammation wherewith his head, his hands (arms), feet (legs) are inflamed, is due to his teeth. His teeth must be drawn" (Townend "An Assyrian Dental Diagnosis" 82).

For less drastic cases of tooth decay, they used gum to fill cavities, and applied poppy seeds to soothe toothache. Cardamom seeds were also used for the same purpose, as well as a breath freshener (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 118, 178-80). Recent research confirms that cardamom can help prevent cavities. It is still a very popular breath-freshening spice in Iraq, people would pop two or three whole pods in their mouths and chew them for a while.

THICKENED PUDDING OF TOASTED RICE FLOUR

Halawat Timman Makes 8 servings

Similar puddings thickened with rice flour were made in medieval Baghdad. In al-Warraq's cookbook, similar desserts were called *faloudhaj al-aruz* 'rice thickened pudding' (Chapter 93). It was made with rice flour, honey, and sesame oil (*shayraj*); and perfumed with rose water and a small amount of camphor *kafour*. Nowadays, we toast the rice to perfection, as this will give the dessert a delicate golden hue and a wonderful aroma, replace honey with sugar, and pass the camphor.

1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
5 cups (1.25 liters) water
3 tablespoons butter
1 cup (6oz/180g) rice flour
A pinch of salt
1 teaspoon cardamom
1 tablespoon rose water
For garnish: toasted slivered/flaked almonds or walnuts

- ☞ In a medium pot, dissolve sugar in water and boil for 5 minutes. Set aside
- ☞ In a heavy medium pot melt butter and fold in rice flour. Stir constantly until rice starts to change color and emits a pleasant aroma, about 10 minutes.
- ☞ Put the pot away from heat (for it will spatter), and gradually pour in syrup, stirring all the time with a wire whisk to prevent lumping. Then return the pot to medium heat and continue cooking, stirring frequently, until mixture thickens, about 15 minutes. Add cardamom and rose water in the last 5 minutes.
- ☞ Ladle the pudding in small bowls, and garnish the top with toasted nuts.

THICKENED PUDDING OF GOLDEN SHREDDED CARROT

Halawat Jizar Makes 8 servings



A scrumptious way to use this humble vegetable. It is a very popular dessert sold at confectioneries and made at home. Al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook gives a recipe called *khabees al-jazar* (thickened pudding of carrots). Honey was used as a sweetening agent, and it was highly spiced with spikenard, cloves, cassia, ginger, and nutmeg (Chapter 95). It is usually made red or yellow depending upon the color of carrots used (see 00 for information on red carrots). During the medieval times other fruits and vegetables, such as *qar'* (gourd), apples, dates, and white poppy seeds, were also cooked as *khabees*.

2 pounds (900g) carrots, shredded
(9 to 10 medium ones)
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
2 tablespoons lemon juice
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
½ cup (2oz/60g) cornstarch/cornflour
1 to 2 teaspoons cardamom
1 tablespoon rose water
For garnish: toasted walnuts, pistachio or
shredded/desiccated coconut

DATE SWEETMEAT

Halaawat Tamur Makes 8 servings

- ☞ Put carrots in a medium pot and add water just enough to cover them, about 3½ cups (860 ml). Bring to a boil then reduce to medium and simmer until carrots soften, about 30 minutes. Drain in a colander fitted on a bowl, and press down extra moisture. Reserve the liquid.
- ☞ Make syrup by dissolving sugar in 2 cups (475 ml) of the reserved liquid. If not enough, add more water. Let it boil until medium syrup forms, about 10 minutes. To test, put a drop on a dry cold plate. If it forms a ball that keeps its shape while tilting the plate to different directions, it is done. Add lemon juice.
- ☞ Meanwhile, in a heavy medium pot, melt butter and stir in cornstarch until it starts to change color, about 10 minutes. Fold in drained carrots and mix well.
- ☞ Pour syrup into carrot mixture while constantly stirring to prevent it from lumping, and continue cooking on medium heat, stirring occasionally until mixture thickens and carrots are translucent, about 30 minutes. Add rose water and cardamom in the last 5 minutes.
- ☞ Spread the pudding on a big flat plate, or 8-by-8-inch (20x20cm) pan. Decorate with toasted nuts and coconut, and cut into wedges or diamonds.

This is the most ancient dessert ever prepared in Mesopotamian kitchens. Dates were plenty and cheap. They were stored in vats in dry places and used year round. In the ancient cuneiform texts dates were referred to as 'fresh' or 'pitted,' they were crushed and made into jam, but also into '*daspu*,' (date syrup, cf. Arabic, *dibs*), which was quite useful in making desserts. In Sumerian cuneiform tablets, a certain type of pastry called '*girilam*' was mentioned frequently. It was a preparation of mashed dates and sesame oil, sweetened with honey and bound together with a small amount of flour (Limet 134). Another sweet preparation was referred to as "mirsu of honey, *ghee*, and dates" (Levey 49). The Arabic language retained the Akkadian word '*marsu*' (mash). In the medieval cookbooks, we find similar date *halwas* called *marees*. In the Baghdadi medieval cookbooks, this type of *halwa* was called *ha'is* (al-Baghdadi, 214) or *hays* (al-Warraq, Chapter 97). It was prepared by mixing fine breadcrumbs or cookie/biscuit crumbs with pitted dates, ground almonds, and pistachios. The mixture was kneaded with heated sesame oil or butter, and then formed into *kubabs* (balls) or discs. They were either dusted with sugar or sprinkled with rose water in which a small amount of camphor (*kafour*) had been dissolved. *Ha'is* was highly recommended as travel food for pilgrims to Mecca. In modern times, no sweeteners are added to this sweetmeat. Toasted flour instead of cookie crumbs is used here, to give it a lovely aroma and balance the sweetness of the dates. Traditionally the flour is browned in lots of clarified butter.

½ cup (2oz/60g) flour
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
2 cups (12oz/350g) pitted dates
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
½ teaspoon coarsely ground toasted aniseeds or fennel
½ teaspoon whole coriander seeds
¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted nuts of your choice

IV CONFECTIONS

TURKISH DELIGHT

Halqoom/Luqum Makes around 30 pieces

☞ In a heavy skillet, dry toast flour until it starts to change color and emits a pleasant aroma, stirring all the time, about 7 minutes on medium heat. Transfer toasted flour to a container.

☞ On medium heat, and in the same skillet, cook dates and butter butter. Fold and mash them with the back of a wooden spoon most of the time. While doing this, gradually sprinkle on them the toasted flour, cardamom, aniseeds and coriander, about 10 minutes. If dates look dry and hard to mash, add a small amount of hot water until dates soften.

☞ Spread the date mixture on a flat platter, and level the surface with the back of a spoon. Press nuts in a decorative way on the surface and crimp all around the edge like a pie. To serve, cut into thin wedges. Alternatively, you may spread the cooked dates in a pan, and cut into diamonds or triangles.



This delicious chewy candy caught the fancy of the Western world and as anything coming to them from the east during the Ottoman rule it was called Turkish. This candy in particular is known in the West as Turkish Delight. Actually, the Turks themselves call it *rahat lokum*, and the first mention of this confection in Ottoman records available to us was in the 19th century, where it was called *rahat'ul hulkum* (Yerasimos 235). The name is clearly derived from Arabic, meaning 'something swallowed with ease.' Indeed, this was the meaning the pre-Islamic Arab cooks chose to convey in the name they chose for it - *sirirat* (سرطرات), which indicates the pleasure and ease of eating and swallowing it (*Taj-al-'Arus*, s.v. سرطرات). Yes, this confection is that old if not older.

According to Arabic medieval sources, the first to make this dessert was 'Abdullah bin Jud'an, one of the affluent and most generous masters of the famous tribe of Quraysh (Ibn Hamdoun 1105). It was their favorite dessert described as starch mixed with honey (يبلك بالشهد لباب البر), which is, indeed, what this confection was essentially made of. Its Persian name during the time of the Sassanians was *palutak*, and it was described as a delicate dessert. During the Abbasid era, the Persian name was Arabized to *faludhaj*. Its ingredients remained the same - wheat starch, honey, and/or sugar, but it was prepared in many different ways. Some varieties were made not so thick so that they may be eaten as semi-solid puddings, whereas others were made thick and chewy like our modern *halqoom*. The latter was called *faludhaj mu'allak* (chewy). In some of the recipes, sesame oil or clarified butter was added, but this fat was discarded as soon as it separated from the thickening sweet mass (al-Warraq, Chapter 93). In the Aleppo 13th-century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*, this candy was called *malban* (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 626). I find it significant that in Turabi Efendi's 19th century Turkish cookbook the recipe for *palude* (the not so thick variety of *faludhaj*) was directly followed by the recipe for *rahat-i-holkum* (the chewy variety *faludhaj mu'allak*). What differentiates the former from the latter

is consistency. *Palude* is stirred "until it forms a smooth substance, but not too thick." *Rahati-l-holkum*, on the other hand, was stirred until thickened. To test for doneness, the recipe instructs, "Take a little out, and let it drop a few drops on powdered sugar. If it moistens or absorbs the sugar it is not done, and if it does not it is done" (64-65). A useful tip indeed.

In the modern scene, such delights are usually bought from specialized candy stores. But it is fun to prepare at home. It may be made quite attractive by using different colors and flavors besides the traditional mastic flavor.

The following is an easy and fast recipe that yields delicious *halqoom*, studded with toasted nuts.

1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
2 cups (475ml) water
A pinch of cream of tartar or citric acid or
1 teaspoon lemon juice
½ cup (2oz/60g) cornstarch/cornflour dissolved in
a little cold water
2 small pieces mastic, pulverized; or 1 tablespoon
mastic cream (see Glossary)
½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted almonds or walnuts

☞ Put sugar and water in a medium heavy pot, and on high heat bring to a boil, stirring until sugar completely dissolves, about 5 minutes. Stir in cream of tartar or lemon juice.

☞ Put pot away from heat, and add the dissolved cornstarch, stirring vigorously to prevent it from lumping (a wire whisk will be useful here).

☞ Return pot to medium heat and continue cooking stirring all the time until mixture becomes very thick, about 10 minutes. Stir in mastic and toasted nuts (A trick I learnt from a friend: mastic will pulverize much easier if you freeze it first). To test for doneness, take a small amount and rub it between your fingers. If it does not stick, it is done.

☞ Spread the mixture in a greased 6-by-4-inch (15x10cm) pan. Set aside at room temperature for

about 12 hours. Turn it onto a flat surface sprinkled with cornstarch, and cut it into squares using a knife dipped in cornstarch or the edge of a thin metal pancake turner. Roll pieces in some cornstarch to coat on all sides, and let them dry in one layer for 12 hours.

Variation:

Sujuq (*halqoom* shaped like sausages):

In the city of Mosul in northern Iraq, an interesting variation on *halqoom* is available in the markets. It is shaped like sausage links and filled with walnuts. Instead of water, grape juice is used, which gives it an attractive hue and a delicious flavor.

Walnut halves threaded in long strings are dipped in warm *halqoom* mixture, then removed and set aside to cool and set. The process is repeated at least three times until walnuts are well covered. They are then hung to dry for a few days, and are finally rolled in cornstarch.

An easy way for preparing this kind of *halqoom* at home is to use grape jelly (clear translucent jam made from pectin-gelled fruit juice). Any other kind of fruit jelly may be substituted to give it a different flavor. Here is how to make it:

1 cup (250ml) grape jelly (clear translucent jam of
grape juice)
¼ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (1oz/30g) cornstarch/cornflour,
diluted in a little cold water.
½ cup (2oz/60g) walnuts

☞ In a medium heavy pot, bring jelly and sugar to a boil, about 5 minutes. Add the diluted cornstarch and stir vigorously with a wire whisk to prevent lumping. Continue cooking until mixture is very thick, about 5 minutes. Stir in nuts.

☞ Spread mixture in a greased 8-by-8-inch (20x20cm) pan. Set aside at room temperature for 12 hours. Cut into bars or squares, and roll in cornstarch to prevent them from sticking to each other. Arrange in one layer on a tray dusted with cornstarch, and set aside for 12 hours.

SESAME CANDY

Simsimiyya Makes 32 bars

Sesame grew in abundance in ancient Mesopotamia. It is quite possible that cooks back then prepared this simple candy, but we know for sure that it was enjoyed in medieval Baghdad. According to al-Warraq's recipe *natif lu'lu'i* (candy which looks like pearls), two pounds (900g) of honey are boiled until thickened. Then hulled sesame, as much as honey could take, is stirred into it. It is then poured on a greased marble slab, and broken into pieces when it gets cold (Chapter 104). Toasting the seeds is the key to fragrant and delicious *simsimiyya*. Following the way of the ancients, the sweetening agent used here is honey.

1 cup (250ml) honey

2 cups (8oz/225g) well-toasted sesame seeds

☞ In a small heavy pot bring honey to a boil, and then let it cook gently on medium heat until it starts to thicken, about 5 minutes. Fold in the toasted sesame and immediately pour the mix into a greased 8-by-8-inch (20x20cm) pan and spread evenly with the back of a spoon. When cool and hardened, cut it into bars, or whatever shape you fancy using a sharp and thin knife.

Variations:

Instead of sesame seeds, other nuts may be substituted like shelled pistachio, toasted hazelnuts, or shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut.



ALMOND BRITTLE

Sahoon



Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook includes a candy recipe similar to what we nowadays call *sahoon*. He names it *natif Wathiqi*, after Abbasid Caliph al-Wathiq (847) who was known for his big appetite and love for food. In the recipe 1 pound (450g) honey, 1 pound (450g) red sugar (unrefined crystallized brown cane sugar), and a little bit of rose water are boiled until sugar thickens. Next, 6 grams of saffron, and 1 pound (450g) skinned nuts are added. The mixture is then poured on a greased marble slab, and broken into pieces when cold (Chapter 104). Nowadays, this translucent candy studded with toasted almonds is the specialty of the southern city of Basra. It is usually bought from confectioneries, alluringly displayed in huge trays. Although traditionally toasted skinned almonds are the nuts to use, other nuts of your choice may be substituted.

1¼ cups (10oz/285g) granulated sugar

¼ cup (60ml) water

1 cup (4oz/115g) toasted whole almonds

☞ Put sugar and water in a small heavy pot, and bring to a boil stirring to allow sugar to dissolve. Then lower heat to medium, and wipe the inside walls of the pot with a wet brush or napkin to get rid of crystallized grains of sugar. Let the sugar cook undisturbed until it turns golden brown. Add almonds and immediately pour the mix on a greased flat pan and spread it into a thin layer. When cool, break it into smaller pieces.

ALMOND CANDY

Lawzeena Makes 15 pieces

Baghdad is reputed to be the homeland of almond candies. Almond, which originated in central Asia, was transported to the Mesopotamian region thousands of years ago. In Akkadian *luzu* was its name (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 182). With the arrival of cane sugar around the 4th-century AD, almond pastries and candies, called *lawzeenaj*, became favorite desserts at the time. Of this almond confection, two kinds were made: *lawzeenaj mughrraq* (drenched in syrup and oil) and *lawzeenaj yabis* (dry). *Lawzeenaj mughrraq* will be discussed in the following chapter.

Now, *lawzeenaj yabis* is more of a candy, for which we have two types: uncooked varieties, whose texture is described as *maftout* (not chewy but crumbly to the bite) like marzipan. For recipes, we go to al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook. Stiff almond paste was made by mixing ground almonds and ground sugar, and binding them with rose water. It was molded into a variety of shapes, such as fishes. We also have a similar recipe replacing almonds with pistachio and the paste was shaped into discs, dates, *sanbusaj* (pastries shaped like half moons), cucumber, and melon. Carved wooden molds were also used to make more elaborate shapes (Chapters 96, 97).

The other variety of *lawzeenaj yabis* was cooked and it was chewy in texture. It was made by making syrup with sugar and water, and then the needed amount of ground almond was added to make it thick enough to shape into chicken, lamb, fish, melon and so on. Alternatively, the candy was spread in a pan, and cut out into pieces, mostly *shawabeer* (triangles), and I should add, rhomboids to mimic the oval shape of almonds, which became the characteristic shape of this confection. We still use the adjective *lawzi* to designate a rhomboid. Similar recipes were also included in the medieval Andalusian cookbooks. It was perhaps from Muslim Spain that this confection spread to the southern European regions, where it was called 'lozenge,' an adaptation of *lawzeenaj*. We know that *lawzeenaj* recipes were translated into Latin and Italian late 13th and 14th centuries (Rodinson, "Venice and the Spice Trade"

210). Ultimately, the name of the confection became synonymous with cough lozenges even though they did not contain almonds, neither were they necessarily shaped into rhomboids.

To explain this, we have to keep in mind that *lawzeenaj* of the Arabs discussed here was enjoyed as dessert but also as a soothing medicine. According to the physician Ibn Zuhr (d.1162), *lawzeenaj* helped induce sleep, nourish the brain, and 'ripen' cold humors in the chest and lungs to facilitate purging phlegm (95), in other words, it was a cough medicine of some sort. The European lozenges might well have initially been shaped as rhomboids like the original *lawzeenaj* of the Arabs. The rhomboid shape must have become characteristic of the candy itself, and eventually gave its name to the geometric shape itself. Gradually the European lozenge broke away from the shape and from the ingredient, but kept the name lozenge to designate cough medicine.

In modern Iraq, you can still see vendors in the old bazaars selling diamond-shaped white or colored candy called *lawzeena*, which might or might not contain almonds.

Today's *lawzeena* with almonds is what in medieval Baghdad was called *lawzeena yabisa*. Traditionally, it was the confection to make for weddings. For such occasions, it would be "decorated with gold-leaf paper" and "sent to relatives and friends by the bride's family." In *The Best of Baghdad Cooking with Treats from Teheran* we learn that wedding *lawzeena* "is prepared on huge round tin-lined copper trays and is made thick as a brick. It is usually cut into huge diamond shapes. Sometimes the tray is so enormous that it has to be tilted in order to pass through the doorways" (Iny 159). The recipe Iny gives is strikingly similar to how it was made in medieval Baghdad. Besides the original *lawzeena* with real almonds, other varieties replace almonds with coconut, quince, or orange rind. They were all spread in trays and cut out into rhomboids.

Following is my *lawzeena* recipe of the crumbly variety. The medieval Baghdadi cooks would have called it

lawzeenaj yabis maftout (dry and crumbly to the bite) like marzipan, but it combines almonds and pistachio. To save you time and trouble, use canned almond paste, available in the baking aisles in most of the supermarkets. If you prefer to make it from scratch, follow the below recipe. The pistachio filling is inspired by one of al-Warraq's recipes (Chapter 97).

¾ cup (4oz/115g) finely ground pistachio

¾ cup (4oz/115g) confectioners' / icing sugar

2 tablespoons rose water

One 8-ounce can pure almond paste (or follow instructions below)

2 tablespoons honey for glazing

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ Mix pistachio with sugar, and moisten with rose water to form into dough-like mass.
- ☞ On a flat surface sprinkled with confectioners' sugar, roll out the almond paste into a 4-by-15-inch (10x38cm) rectangle. Shape pistachio dough into a thick pencil-like roll, 15in/38cm long (handle with hands sprinkled with confectioners' sugar). Place pistachio roll in the middle of the almond rectangle. Wrap almond dough firmly around pistachio dough, overlapping edges a little, and then press all along the seam to prevent it from opening up. Put this roll on a greased baking sheet, seam side down. Gently, press flat the sides and the top so that the roll looks like a long cube. Decorate the top with the blunt edge of a knife.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven about 20 minutes or until nicely browned. It will be soft at this point but it will firm up when it cools off. While still warm, lightly brush the log with warmed up honey. Set the log aside for 24 hours, and then cut it crosswise into 15 portions, 1 in./2.5 cm long, each. Store in an airtight container for 3 days before using.

The Rhombus Allure

The rhomboid, like the triangle, was a very familiar symbol in ancient Mesopotamia. We learn from *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia* that it was "closely associated in art with the goddess Ishtar (Inana)," goddess of love and fertility among other attributes. In plain English, the rhombus was an emblem of her vulva. Several clay figurines shaped like triangles and rhomboids were excavated in her temple at Ashur. They seem to have had "a magically protective function." They were believed to have some sort of "amuletic property." Babylonian incantations composed to help cure impotency, ask that such figurines be made and "placed at the head of the bed during intercourse" (Black 152-53). So perhaps the popularity of cutting out our pastries and candies into rhomboidal shapes has its distant and deep roots in such indigenous ancient practices and beliefs. We eat the food and pray for its protective powers through the ancient science of seductive geometry.

Note:

If you want to make almond paste yourself, then follow this recipe:

2 cups (8 oz/ 225 g) whole almonds

1½ cups (8 oz/ 225 g) confectioners' / icing sugar

2 to 4 tablespoons rose water

- ☞ Skin almonds by blanching them in hot water. Rub off skins and let the almonds dry completely. Then grind them using a blender or food processor. It is better to put a little granulated sugar when grinding as this will prevent almonds from getting oily.
- ☞ Mix almonds and confectioners' sugar. Start by adding 2 tablespoons rose water, and then add just enough to make a comfortably pliable dough. Do not be tempted to add more than is needed. Use as directed in the second step above.

CANDY FROM HEAVEN

Mann il-Sima Makes about 25 pieces

Mann al-sama (heavenly-sent manna) today is an exclusively Iraqi candy made with *manna*, an ingredient mentioned in the *Bible* and the *Qur'an* as God-sent food to the people of Israel during their wanderings in Sinai Desert. We know from *The Assyrian Herbal*, a monograph on the Assyrian vegetable drugs, that oak-like trees growing in northern Mesopotamia, near Mosul and Sulaymaniyya of modern day, provided *manna*, which they made into a paste, ate for food, and used for medicinal purposes. The allusions to *manna* in the Assyrian cuneiform medicinal texts match the Biblical references in Exodus, chapter 16. In the Akkadian language it was called '*supalu*,' and the Assyrians called the medicine made from it, 'a drug of flour,' 'a drug of the ground,' 'a drug of dough paste,' and 'gum of dough.' They described it as something round, something which exudes, and 'Earth of the Moon-Crescent' (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 268-9). Our present-day knowledge of the way it formulates and how it is gathered and used corresponds perfectly with both versions. We know that tamarisk and oak-like trees in northern Iraq exude *manna* through their barks in the form of sap as the result of punctures made by tiny insects during June and July. The sap falls on the leaves and down the ground into the bushes beneath the tree or on the ground. According to the *Bible*, it is like white frost, the size of coriander seeds. The *manna* is then gathered early in the morning before the ants get to it, and the sun melts it, and hence the Assyrian expression "Earth of the Moon-Crescent," and Biblical "bread of heaven." When *manna* is gathered and still in its rough form, it is a sticky hard darkish mass with impurities such as leaves, twigs, and pebbles. After boiling and purifying it, it is then kept in pots, shaped into small cakes, or milled. In this form, it will keep indefinitely. It tastes delicately sweet, like 'wafer made with honey.' Getting rid of all the impurities in the gathered *manna*, is a time-consuming task, and that's why most people now prefer to buy it ready-made. In the good old days, housewives used to hire experts to come to the house and prepare it for them. According to Iny in her *Best of Baghdad Cooking*, making *manna* confection "was the

A Medieval Description of Manna

Manna, according to medieval Arabic sources, is initiated by the rising vapors of the fruits of trees, water, and earth. All these gather up in the sky and 'cook' with the heat of the sun, and then condense and thicken and sweeten in taste. With the cold of night they condense even further, and as a result they become thick and heavy and fall on the ground, rocks, and trees, like dew. This explains why manna and similar sweeteners were called 'honey of dew' in medieval times. Also according to medieval descriptions, the quality of *manna* depends on the kind of trees they fall on. Good varieties are taken from terebinth, almond, and similar trees. The kind that falls on tamarisk they called *turunjabeen*. (al-Biruni, d. 1048, p. 353; Ibn al-Baytar, d. 1248, p. 139).

province of Jewish confectioner" in Baghdad (136). After purifying *manna*, it is usually flavored with cardamom, kneaded with pistachios, almonds, or walnuts and shaped into balls the size of a golf ball each. Flour is used to keep the pieces from sticking to each other. For the special religious occasion of *Khidhr Elias* (Ilyas), Iraqi Christians make a delicious variety on the regular *mann al sama*, shaped into balls in which the walnuts are not mixed with *manna* but stuffed inside it like *kubba*. In texture, it is hard and brittle, but as soon as it warms up in the mouth, it becomes as chewy as the regular variety.

To give you an idea how this confection is prepared by the experts, here is a curiosity recipe I found in Rowland's chapter on Iraq in *Good Food from the Near East*, 1950. The technique of using eggs to purify syrup is quite a medieval one. It was used in making candy called *natif* 'nougat', derived from root *n-t-f* 'purify' (recipes in al-Warraq, Chapter 104).

12 pounds (5.40kg) manna

100 eggs

3 pounds (1.35kg) almonds,

Toasted flour

- ☞ Soak *manna* in hot water overnight to help it dissolve. Strain it through fine cheesecloth/butter muslin, and then put it on low heat, in a very big pot.
- ☞ Add 25 eggs, and stir. The mixture will be clear in about 30 to 45 minutes. Strain it again. All the soil and dirt will be removed with the help of the coagulated eggs.
- ☞ Return *manna* to heat, bring it to a boil, and then add the whites of the remaining 75 eggs. Stir constantly over low heat until *manna* becomes a light-colored paste, five to six hours. It is ready when the spoon is lifted from the pan and the *manna* adhering to it breaks off. Immediately, fold in the toasted almonds.
- ☞ When *manna* is cool enough to handle, form it into flat cakes or balls about 2 in./5 cm in diameter. Roll each piece in flour. When completely cooled off, layer the pieces in tins or small wooden boxes with plenty of flour between the pieces.

Genuine *mann al-sama* is hard to come by. It is chewy in texture and looks rather tan in hue. Most of the stuff sold at confectioners' is adulterated, much like what you will be getting in the following recipe, which I have adapted from a nougat preparation. The taste is quite similar to the cardamom-flavored original *mann al-sama*, it only lacks its characteristic chewiness.

Nougat was a favored candy in medieval Baghdad. The 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook dedicates a chapter to making *natif* made with honey and egg whites, and mixed with nuts and dried fruits (al-Warraq 278-80).

2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar

1½ cups (375ml) light corn syrup/golden syrup

¼ teaspoon salt

¼ cup (50ml) water

2 egg whites

1 teaspoon ground cardamom

¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter, softened

1½ cups (6oz/180g) toasted nuts, whole or broken

Flour for coating nougat

- ☞ Put sugar, corn syrup, salt, and water in a medium heavy pot and bring to a boil stirring to allow sugar to dissolve. Keep cooking undisturbed until medium syrup forms, 4 to 6 minutes. You can tell by placing a drop on a cold dry plate. It should keep its shape when the plate is tilted.
- ☞ While syrup is cooking, start whipping egg white on high speed until stiff and glossy peaks form. While whipping, pour a quarter of the syrup in a thin continuous thread over the egg white. Then return syrup to heat and continue cooking until heavy syrup forms, about 4 minutes. Resume pouring syrup in a thin thread on the egg white while still whipping until mixture is thick. If mixture is too thick for the beaters, continue beating with a wooden spoon.
- ☞ Fold in cardamom, butter, and nuts, and mix well until butter is well incorporated into the mixture.
- ☞ Spread the mix in a greased 8-by-8-inch (20x20 cm) pan sprinkled with flour. Leave it in the pan for about 12 hours, after which you can divide the mix into about 25 balls, the size of a golf ball each. Sprinkle the pieces liberally with flour to prevent them from sticking to each other. Set aside for a day or two to allow the nougat to harden.

V ICE CREAM (DONDIRMA)

The ancient Mesopotamians used ice in their drinks; although it is unlikely that they manufactured it. Judging from the frequent references to it in literature and cookbooks, the medieval Baghdadis used it in their drinks and in some of their dishes. One of al-Warraq's recipes, for instance, recommends that the best way to eat fresh and dried dates is to put them in a glass bowl and break some ice on them. Serving a bowl of *shahd* (honey in the comb) with ice pieces around it was recommended. Caliph al-Ma'moun used to do this with dates and desserts. As for al-Wathiq, *qata'if* pastry was always presented to him chilled with ice (Chapters 96, 102). We have no evidence they knew ice cream (information on ice, see Chilling Drinks in Medieval Baghdad 000, and Chilling Drinks in Ancient Mesopotamia 000). The earliest mention of ice cream in the Middle East occurs in the culinary Ottoman records of 18th and 19th centuries in Istanbul. The kinds enlisted were milk-ice cream, ice cream with snow water, ice cream with cream, and ice cream with sour cherries or strawberries (Yerasimos 234, 237).

In the modern scene, many specialized places make top quality ice cream. The most popular ones are those made with pistachio and *qamar'l deen* (sheets of dried apricot). It is delightfully chewy in texture and not so rich. *Sahlab* (see Glossary) is customarily used as a primary thickening agent besides milk, or/and heavy cream. No eggs are used.

Although supermarkets nowadays abound with ice creams and *sherbets* of various flavors, nothing beats homemade ice cream. You can control your ingredients, making it perhaps less sweet. Alternatively, you might incorporate your favorite flavors and fruits. Where else would you find ice cream flavored with mastic, cardamom, cinnamon, or rose water?

An ice cream maker comes in handy here - especially the new models, which work on dry ice principle - because automatic churning yields ice cream creamier in texture than the freezing-in-a-pan method.

General Methods for Making Ice Cream:

- ☞ If using an ice cream maker: follow manufacturer's instructions. It is important to chill the prepared mix completely before churning it. After ice cream is frozen, transfer the mix to a chilled container and keep it frozen. For easier scooping, take it out of the freezer about 10 minutes before serving.
- ☞ If using the regular freezer: Put the prepared mix in a rather shallow pan, and keep it in the freezer, covered, until partially frozen. About 1 in./2.5 cm around the edges will be solid, and the center will be soft and mushy. Blend or process the mix, in batches, until soft but still frozen. Then return it to the pan, and cover and freeze until firm, stirring occasionally.
- ☞ To serve: take it out of the freezer, one hour before serving time. Then beat it at medium speed in a bowl until smooth, return it to the pan, and back to the freezer. Ten minutes before actual serving time take it out of the freezer for easier scooping. Amounts given in the following recipes are enough to make approximately 1 quart/1 liter of ice cream.

APRICOT ICE CREAM WITH PISTACHIO

Dondirmat Qamar il-Deen bil-Fistiq



A traditional ice cream, which uses the golden sheets of dried apricots (qamar il-deen, see Glossary). It is attractively speckled with coarsely ground pistachio

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
 2 rounded tablespoons arrowroot
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups (375ml) milk
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon ground mastic (easier to grind when frozen) or 1 teaspoon mastic cream (see Glossary)
 A large piece of dried apricot sheet, size of a hand, tear into small pieces and soak in $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (180ml) boiling water. Let steep for about one hour, then mash with fingers or fork
 1 cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ pint/ 250ml) heavy/double cream
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (3oz/85g) coarsely ground pistachio, chilled

☞ Put sugar and arrowroot in a medium heavy pot. Gradually add milk, whisking all the time to allow solids to dissolve. Cook on medium heat, stirring all the time until mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. It should be thicker than pudding in consistency. Add ground mastic and mashed apricot. Chill overnight, covered.

☞ When ready to make ice cream, blend chilled heavy cream with the milk mix. Churn in an ice cream maker or the freezer compartment, as instructed in the general methods above. Add pistachio half way through making the ice cream.

Variations:

If dried apricot sheets are not available, substitute with $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (4 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/130g) dried apricots. Put them in a small heavy pot and cover them with 1 cup (250ml) water. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer for about 10 minutes or until apricots are mushy. Puree in a blender or food processor, then chill and use as directed above.

Ice cream with Prunes and pistachio:

Instead of apricot, use $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (4 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/130g) prunes, cover with 1 cup (250ml) water, and boil, mash, and chill as directed above.

GREEN ICE CREAM WITH PISTACHIO AND MASTIC

Dondirma bil-Fistiq wil-Mastaki

Mastic (see Glossary) will give this ice cream a unique flavor. If it is hard to come by, substitute with cardamom or rose water.

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
 2 rounded tablespoons arrowroot
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups (375ml) milk
 A few pulverized lumps of mastic gum, or 1 teaspoon mastic cream (see Glossary). May be replaced with 1 tablespoon rose water, or 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
 A few drops of green food coloring
 1 cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ pint/ 250ml) heavy/double cream
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (3oz/85g) coarsely ground pistachio

☞ Put sugar and arrowroot in a medium heavy pot. Gradually add milk, whisking all the time to allow solids to dissolve. Cook on medium heat, stirring all the time until mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. It should be thicker than pudding in consistency. Add ground mastic or alternative flavors, and food coloring. Cover and chill overnight.

☞ When ready to make ice cream, blend chilled heavy cream with the milk mix. Churn in an ice cream maker or the freezer compartment, as instructed in the general methods above. Add pistachio half way through making the ice cream.

CINNAMON ICE CREAM WITH DRIED FRUITS

Dondirma bil-Darseen wil-Fawakih il-Mujaffafa

Tea and cinnamon combine to give this ice cream a uniquely attractive color. The frozen dried fruits will be delightfully chewy.

2 heaping tablespoons arrowroot
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) brewed cold tea
 1 cup (250ml) milk
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon cinnamon
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon cardamom
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 1 cup ($\frac{1}{2}$ pint/ 250ml) heavy/double cream, chilled and whipped
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups (8oz/225g) finely diced dried fruits, shredded/desiccated coconut, and toasted nuts, moistened with a little brewed tea, keep chilled
For garnish: $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/45g) raisins coated with chocolate

☞ Put arrowroot and sugar in a medium heavy pot, and gradually add cold tea and milk whisking all the time to allow solids to dissolve. Cook the mix on medium heat, stirring constantly until mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. It should be rather thick in consistency. Stir in cinnamon, cardamom, and vanilla. Cover and chill overnight.

☞ When ready to make ice cream, blend chilled heavy cream with the milk mix. Then churn it in an ice cream maker or freezer compartment, following instructions given in the general methods above. Add dried fruits half way through freezing. Serve garnished with chocolate-coated raisins.

DESSERTS

WITH SYRUP



- Baklava, 000
- In the Beginning, there was no Baklava
- Medium Syrup for Baklava
- Fillings for Baklava

- Shaping Baklava:
- Traditional Layered Baklava, Cut into Diamonds
- Small Rolls
- Swirls or Coils
- Corrugated Rolls
- Winged Squares
- Bird's Nest
- Cream-filled Baklava Triangles

- Shredded Fillo Dough (Kataifi), *Knafa*
- Knafa* Rolls
- Layered *Knafa* with Nuts
- Layered *Knafa* with Cream
- Layered *Knafa* with Cheese

- Golden Translucent Fritters, *Zlabya*
- Arabian Pancakes, *Qata'if*
- Stuffed Arabian Pancakes
- Cream-filled Rolls, *Znoud il-Sit*
- The Judge's Morsel, *Luqmat il-Quadhi*
- Dimpled Fritters, *Surrat il-Khatoun*
- Um-Hayder's Colander Datli
- Yeast Cake Drenched in Syrup



Desserts with Syrup

سملو يابس بالتمريرة

Sugarcane was introduced to the Mesopotamian region around the fourth century AD. Before that, the most important sources for sweetening agents were date syrup and the more expensive honey. A large number of fried pastries dipped in syrup were developed by the medieval cooks. If most of the dessert recipes in al-Warraq's cookbook used honey, that was because the cuisine it represented was that of caliphs, princes, and dignitaries. Syrup made with cane sugar and flavored with rose water was the choice of the less privileged. It is amazing how many of the medieval Baghdadi desserts are still popular in the entire Middle East, such as *luqmat al-qadhi*, *baklava*, *zalabiya*, *kunafa*, *qata'f*, and many more. People usually buy these traditional pastries from specialized confectioneries. However, with the availability of ingredients like fillo dough and *kunafa*, they can be made at home quite successfully.

Above: Baklava filled with cream

In the Beginning, there was no Baklava

في بداية فكر البقلاوة وصنعها

Writing about *baklava*-making during the Ottoman era, Yerasimos in her *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine* surprises us by saying that “*Baklava* was not... such a popular sweet in Ottoman cuisine until the 18th century.” Then she adds, “*Baklava* was an unexceptional sweet distributed to the Janissaries on the 15th day of Ramazan.” She thinks that layered *baklava* as we know it today “probably made its appearance on the culinary stage along with tray *börek*, the creation of the skilled Arab cooks of the 18th century” (269).

The first mention of the word *baklava* in the sweets lists Yerasimos provides, which cover five centuries, was made in the 17th century. Prior to that, it was just a sweet variation on *boureg*. For instance, in the 15th-century Turkish translation of al-Baghdadi’s 13th century cookbook by the Turkish Physician Muhammed Shirvani (see Introduction, Section XIV), a sweet pastry was called *sheker burek* (sweet *boureg* pastry). “For centuries of Ottoman cuisine,” Yerasimos observes, “the word ‘*börek*’ encompassed dishes both sweet and savory, made with water dough, fatty doughs and also thinly-rolled-out doughs” (136).

The beginnings of making *baklava* may be traced back to the times of the Abbasid era. The rolled variety, such as today’s *asabi’ il-’arous* (the bride’s fingers), might well find an ancestor in the pastry called *lawzeenaj mugharraq*, which was paper-thin sheets of pastry stuffed with a mix of nuts and sugar, rolled, cut into smaller pieces, arranged in a container, and drenched in oil and rose water syrup.

As described by the eloquent protagonist of 10th-century Al-Risala al-Baghdadiyya, the best *lauzeenaj* was made from *raqeeq al-ruqaq* (the thinnest of the thin bread). It was perfumed with mastic and rose water, well stuffed with almonds and sugar, and fried in almond oil. When you eat it, it should melt in your mouth even before chewing it. The Baghdadis were so much fond of it that they called it *ahjar al-janna* (stones of paradise). The pastry wrappers themselves were so delicate that the Abbasid poet of Baghdad Ibn al-Rumi compared them to *naseem al-saba* ‘gentle eastern breeze’ and *ajnihat al-jundub* ‘locust wings’ (Abu Hayyan al-Tawheedi 162--63, n. 6). Al-Warraq provides a recipe for making the wrappers (see A Recipe for Paper-Thin *Lawzeenaj* Wrappers). As given in the two Baghdadi medieval cookbooks, the filling was made by binding ground sugar and nuts such as almonds, walnuts, and pistachio, with rose water. Thin sheets of dough were wrapped around the stuffing like a roll, and were cut into smaller pieces, as desired, and immersed in fresh almond or walnut oil, and syrup. For garnish, they were sometimes sprinkled with ground pistachio (al-Warraq 265-66; al-Baghdadi 211).

As for the layered variety, the best candidate is the Abbasid dish *judhaba*, prepared by enclosing a filling between layers of very thin bread, and then baking it. The filling may be nuts and sugar as in al-Baghdadi’s 13th-century recipe where thin sheets of *qatayif* bread (similar to thin crepes) are used in the layering (208). The filling may be dates and crushed nut, it may be fruits such as bananas, black mulberry, or mashed muskmelon *biteekh* cooked into thick paste. I found a *baklava* recipe in Turabi Efendi’s 19th-century Turkish cookbook, which uses melon in the same manner. It is called *kawoun baklawassi* (*baklava* with muskmelon, 48). This variety of *baklava* was not drenched in syrup, but served sprinkled with powdered sugar. Not many people are familiar with this *bakalwa*. In Turkey today, you can still find *baklava* filled not with nuts or cream but orange rind paste (similar to ground orange rind jam). I tried it using orange jam (see recipe 000 below).

The verdict: A delicious remnant of medieval Baghdad (more details on *judhaba* in *Um al-Faraj: An Eastern Dish* 000).

The technique of scoring pastry before baking it, characteristic of the layered *baklava*, was also practiced in the medieval period. In the 10th-century cookbook, a pastry recipe for *shahmiyya* (cake with tallow) requires the cook to score the dough spread in pan lengthwise and crosswise with a knife. When the pastry comes out of the oven, it is re-scored (al-Warraq, Chapter 98).

Baklava

بقلاوة

Of the impressive array of Middle-Eastern desserts, *baklava* is, by far, the most widely known confection outside the region. *Baklava* takes several shapes, such as rolls, triangles, bundles, layered rhomboids (diamonds). Of these, the latter became the most traditional and most widely known. Indeed, so much so, that the diamond shape itself acquired the name *baklava*. In Turabi Efendi’s 19th-century Turkish cookbook, we come across desserts named *baklava*, which have no connection with *baklava* except for the diamond shape of the cut out pieces, as in *pirinj baklawassi*, a variety of rice pudding (48). Traditional commercial *baklava* is usually made sweet and rich, and if you want to have your *baklava* and eat it, you’d better make it at home where you are more in control of your ingredients. No, I am not going to go ahead and give you a recipe on how to make your own dough. Life is just too short to learn how to flatten dough until it is as thin as onion skins, as our grandmothers used to boast, or as thin as *naseem al-saba* (eastern breeze) or locusts wings. Fillo dough works just fine. Since *baklava* is shaped and filled in many different ways, it is more practical to divide the process of making it into three stages:

- 1 preparing the syrup
- 2 preparing the filling
- 3 filling, shaping, and baking

Baklava: Possible Etymology

Why *baklava*, pronounced *baqlava* in Arabic, was called so in the first place, nobody knows for sure. Here are my latest findings, which might lead us somewhere:

The thin rolling pin used in rolling out *bakalwa* dough is called *oklava* in Turkish, which indeed is a combination of *ok* = stick + *lava* = *lavash*/*lawash* (thin sheets of bread). That is a stick for rolling out thin sheets of pastry.

In medieval Arabic terminology, thin and malleable sheets of bread were called *ruqaq labiq*. Now, *labiq* was used synonymously with *lawish*, which explains where our modern name for thin sheets of bread *lawash* comes from (Arabic sound *w* is pronounced *v* in Turkish).

Oklava is used to roll out *baklava*. Therefore, *baklava* is a combination of *bak/baq* + *lava*. The *lava* part is explained above. Now we come to the first part *bak/baq*. Our clue is in Steingass’ dictionary of Persian words: of the meanings of *bugh/bogh*: any outward covering or wrapper, pouch, or bundle (the Arabic sound *q*, is pronounced *gh* in Persian, and *k* in Turkish). Therefore, *baklava* may plausibly designate ‘thin sheets of dough used as wrappers for stuffed pastries.’

MEDIUM SYRUP FOR BAKLAWA



Medium syrup is required for making *baklava*. It should be thin enough to be absorbed by the baked pastry but thick enough to prevent *baklava* from getting soggy. Prepare the syrup while *baklava* is baking in the oven to allow it to cool off before using it.

2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
1¾ cups (430ml) water
¼ cup (60ml) honey
1 tablespoon lemon juice, or ¼ teaspoon cream of tartar or citric acid (see Glossary)
2 whole cardamom pods, or 1 teaspoon rose water, or orange blossom water

☞ In a medium pot combine all ingredients except for rose or orange blossom water if using any. Bring to a boil on high heat, and stir frequently with a wooden spoon to allow sugar to dissolve. Skim as needed.

☞ Continue boiling the syrup on medium heat, undisturbed, until it reaches the right consistency, about 20 minutes. You can easily tell when syrup is done, by putting a drop on a flat dry saucer. If it keeps its domed shape while tilting the saucer to different directions, then syrup is done. However, if the drop goes flat, then you need to cook it more, and test again. Another way for testing syrup is to drop some syrup slowly off the tip of a spoon. If syrup is thick enough, the last drop will cling to the tip.

☞ When syrup is done, put it away from heat immediately, and add rose water or orange blossom water if using any. Allow it to cool off before using, or follow recipe directions.

A Recipe for Paper-Thin *Lawzeenaj* Wrappers From al-Warraq's 10th-century Cookbook

Lawzeenaj was a medieval delicacy made by stuffing very thin wrappers with nuts and sugar. It was usually formed into rolls, and might or might not be fried in almond oil, and then drenched in syrup. It is the prototype of what later came to be called *baklava* (the variety shaped into rolls). Following is al-Warraq's recipe for thin *lawzeenaj* wrappers:

☞ Dissolve starch (*nasha*) to thick paste and strain it. For each 1 ounce (30 g) of starch, add 1 egg white and whisk mixture thoroughly and continuously.

☞ Heat the *taabaq* and wipe it with a cloth wrapped with pieces of wax and shelled walnut. Ladle out some of the mixture and pour it on the *taabaq*.

☞ When the [thin] bread is done scrape it out. Wipe the *taabaq* once more with the cloth and make another piece. (Chapter 13)

FILLINGS FOR BAKLAWA

Nut filling

Walnuts, pistachios, and almonds are the traditional nuts to us.

4 cups (16oz/450g) coarsely ground nuts
¼ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar
2 teaspoons ground cardamom
½ teaspoon cinnamon

☞ Mix ingredients in a bowl and use as directed.

Note:

Baklava filled with nuts does not need refrigeration if consumed within 3 to 4 days. Nut-filled *baklava* freezes very well. To serve frozen *baklava*, take it out of the freezer and allow it to thaw for about 1 hour. If you like to have it warm, heat it in a moderate oven for about 10 minutes. Microwave oven not recommended.

Cream Filling *Geymer*

Traditionally, layered triangles of dough are filled with slabs of *geymer*, which is a kind of thick cream (see Chapter 2). In his 19th-century *kaymak baklawassi*, Turabi Efendi provides instructions on how to use clotted cream as a filling: the solid cream is divided into pieces, and then each piece is rubbed with egg white. The purpose for doing this he explains, "Is to prevent it from melting while the paste is baking" (48). Alternatively, the following filling gives *baklava* a much lighter touch. Turabi Efendi calls this version '*musanna kaymak*' (from Arabic *musanna* 'made, prepared'):

3 heaping tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour
3 heaping tablespoons rice flour
¼ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar
3 cups whole milk
1½ tablespoons rose water

☞ In a small heavy pot, mix cornstarch, rice flour, and sugar. Slowly stir in milk until all solids are dissolved (a wire whisk will be useful here).

Jullab: Sweet Migration

Julep is widely known as a sweet alcoholic beverage in the southern states of the United States of America. It is traditionally flavored with mint, and served with crushed ice, and is closely associated with the Kentucky Derby. Although there are many recipes for making the drink, they all boil down to Bourbon, mint, crushed ice, and syrup. And it was this syrup which gave its name to this thirst-quenching southern drink.

In medieval times, syrup flavored with rose water was called *jullab* (Persian for rose water). A recipe for making it is given in the book of medicine by Ibn Sina (d.1037), according to which 2 pounds/ 900 g of sugar are simmered in ½ cup/ 125 ml water. Just before the pot is taken away from the fire, ¼ cup/ 60 ml rose water is added (1229). In this concentrated form *jullab* was used the same way we use simple syrups to drench pastries. It was also added to medicines to make their taste more acceptable. Diluted in water or fresh fruit juices, with ice, it made refreshing drinks, exactly as we do today. Medicinally, it was valued for its cooling effects, which benefit the stomach, chest, and lungs. It was also recommended for hangovers, and that was perhaps how it became to be associated with the Kentucky Derby julep. This syrup was known all over Europe. In Portuguese, it was called '*julepe*,' in Latin, '*julapium*,' and "*julep*" is the French adaptation. The syrup could have migrated to America with all the fluxes of the European immigrants, or it could have been brought over by the African slaves.

SHAPING BAKLAWA

☞ On medium heat, bring the pot to a boil stirring most of the time to prevent mixture from sticking to the bottom of the pot, until it thickens (7 to 10 minutes total time of cooking). In consistency, the mixture should be thicker than regular pudding. To test, when dropped from the spoon it should keep its shape.

☞ Put away from heat and stir in rose water. Set aside, covered, to cool off completely. Use as directed in the recipe.

Note:

Cream-filled *baklawa* can be enjoyed warm or chilled. Any leftovers should be kept in the refrigerator. Freezing is not recommended.

Egg-White Nut Filling

This filling is used in open-faced *baklawa* to prevent the filling from scattering while handling and baking. Toasting almonds and walnuts used is recommended to bring out their flavor.

2 egg whites, stiffly beaten

½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar

4 cups (16oz/450g) ground toasted nuts

1 tablespoon rose water, or to taste

1 teaspoon cardamom, or to taste

☞ Fold ingredients together, and use as directed.

Note:

No need to refrigerate *baklawa* with this filling if it is consumed within 3 to 4 days. Freeze and defrost as directed in Nut Filling given above.

Traditional Layered *Baklawa*, Cut into Diamonds

Makes about 25 pieces

The most commonly known shape of *baklawa*. Indeed some people think that this is the only form that baklawa comes in. In Iraq, the rhombus is called *baklawa* after the way this *baklawa* is cut (more details in *The Rhombus Allure* 000).

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough, thawed according to package directions

½ to ¾ cup (6oz/180g) melted butter (or half butter and half oil)

Half recipe of *Nut Filling*, given above

Half recipe of *Medium Syrup*, given above, flavored with orange blossom water, and cooled off

For garnish: ground pistachio, optional

Oven: 350-300°F/ 175-150°C/ gas mark 4-2

☞ Brush with melted butter a pan half the size of the fillo dough sheets or the nearest in size. I use 12-by-9-inch (30.520x23cm) pan. Because this *baklawa* goes fast, you might not need to cover the fillo sheets, provided you work in a draft-free place.

☞ Start by lining the pan with a half of the sheet, brush it lightly with the melted butter, then fold the other half on it, and brush it lightly with butter. If the pan is not exactly half the size of a fillo sheet, then you might need to alternate the places of folds, as you stack up, to get an even height of the layers. Repeat the layering and brushing until you get a stack of 12 layers.

☞ Spread one third of the filling all over the surface. Then layer and brush 8 more times, and spread the second third of the filling. Next, layer and brush 8 more times, and spread the last third of the filling. Then cover the filling with 12 brushed layers or with whatever is left of the sheets. This might sound like too many layers but in fact the height of the pieces you will end up having will not be more than 1¾in/4.5cm.

To summarize the layering and filling, the following is the way it goes:

12 layers - one third filling - 8 layers one third filling - 8 layers one third filling - 12 layers

☞ Press down the layers with your fingers, and tuck in the dough all around the edges. Next, brush the entire surface with the remaining butter. With a sharp knife, carefully score the surface all the way down, into small diamonds. To get diamond-shaped pieces, cut lengthwise into strips at first, and then cut diagonal intersecting lines. Remember to spray the surface lightly with water to prevent the dough sheets from curling up while baking.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven (350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4) for the first 30 minutes. Then reduce heat to 300°F (150°C/ gas mark 2) and bake for another 30 minutes or until golden brown. Slow baking is essential in this kind of *baklawa* because of the too many layers, so don't try to rush it.

☞ Take the pan out of the oven, and while still hot, pour the cooled syrup all over the surface. Let it rest for at least 2 hours to give it time to absorb the syrup.

☞ Re-cut the pieces, and arrange them on a serving platter. If you like, sprinkle them lightly with ground pistachio.

Tips for Brushing Fillo dough

Fillo dough used in making desserts is always brushed with melted butter for maximum flavor. For 16oz/450g of fillo dough, try to use between ½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) melted butter. To reduce amount of fat used, you can substitute some of the butter with whipped 2 egg whites. To give the layers a lighter texture and more height and thickness, after brushing each sheet with butter, sprinkle it lightly with breadcrumbs or crumbs of stale cake.

Small Rolls (The Bride's Fingers) *Asabi' il-'Aroos*

Makes about 80 small pieces

This way of rolling the dough yields gracefully thin rolls reminiscent of the original medieval *lauzeenaj* pastries, made of almond filling wrapped in paper-thin breads and drenched in almond oil and rose water syrup.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough, thawed according to package directions

½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

One recipe *Nut Filling* 000

One recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

For garnish: ground pistachio, optional

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

☞ On a working surface lay a fillo sheet flat, brushing half of it crosswise with melted butter. Fold in half, crosswise, and brush the top. Keep the rest of dough covered with a dry kitchen cloth, away from draft.

☞ Spread about 2 tablespoons of the nut filling on the surface, leaving about ½ in./1 cm all around the edges uncovered.

☞ Fold the top longer edge slightly on the filling. Roll tightly jelly/Swiss roll fashion, starting from the longer folded topside down to the bottom edge.

☞ With the help of a spatula, carefully transfer the roll to a greased baking sheet wide enough to accommodate the roll without bending. Put seam side down.

☞ Repeat the same procedure with the rest of the sheets, arranging rolls side by side on baking sheet. You'll have 20 slender rolls. Brush rolls with the remaining butter.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 35 to 40 minutes, or until golden brown. The slower the oven is the crispier and more evenly baked the baklawa will be. However, comparatively speaking, these should bake a little faster than the layered kind, so watch it.

☞ Take the pan out of the oven, and while still hot pour the syrup on the rolls. Let them rest for at least 2 hours to allow them to absorb enough of the syrup.

☞ To serve, trim off ends of rolls, and cut each roll crosswise (diagonally if you wish) into 4 to 5 pieces. Sprinkle them with ground pistachio, as desired.

Swirls or Coils *Suwwerat***Makes 20 pieces**

This way of rolling fillo dough yields comparatively bigger pieces.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough, thawed according to package directions

½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) melted butter (or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

1 recipe *Nut Filling* 000

For garnish: coarsely chopped pistachio

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

➤ Divide fillo sheets into halves, crosswise, and stack them.

➤ On a flat surface, layer 2 fillo sheets, brushing each lightly with some butter. Keep the rest of the sheets covered with a kitchen cloth while working on one piece.

➤ Spread about 2 tablespoons of the filling on the layered sheets, leaving about ½in/1cm around the edges clear of the filling. Slightly fold the uncovered longer edge on the filling. Put a thin long stick or a skewer along the folded edge, and roll, with the skewer still inside, jelly/Swiss roll fashion all the way to the bottom. To create a wrinkled look, with the roll lying on the working surface and with the help of the skewer, press the roll from both ends towards the center. The roll will shorten a little. Wrinkling the roll in this way prevents it from breaking while twisting it. Carefully take the skewer out, and coil the roll.

➤ Arrange coils on a greased baking sheet, leaving a space between pieces to allow them to brown on all sides. Brush pieces with the remaining melted butter.

➤ Bake in the preheated oven for 40 to 45 minutes or until golden brown.

➤ Take out of the oven, and while still hot, pour the prepared syrup on the pieces. Set aside for at least 2 hours to allow pieces to absorb enough of the syrup. To serve, press coarsely chopped pistachio into the center of each coil.

**Corrugated Rolls *Burma*****Makes about 20 pieces**

This way of rolling *baklava* yields somewhat large pieces. For smaller portions, divide ready to serve rolls into three pieces, each. Interestingly, in 19th-century Ottoman culinary records, a variety of *baklava* was called 'caterpillar *baklava*' (Yerasimos 234). I suspect it is the same as our modern *burma*.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough,

thawed according to package directions

½ to ¾ cup (4-6 oz/115-180g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

1 recipe *Nut Filling* 000

For garnish: ground pistachio, optional

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

➤ On a flat surface spread a whole fillo sheet, lightly brush half of it with butter, and fold it. Then brush half of the folded sheet and fold it again.

➤ Spread about 2 tablespoons of the nut filling, leaving ½in/1cm of the edges uncovered. Put a round stick (about ¼in/5mm thick) along one of the short sides (I broke off the handle of an old wooden spoon and always use it as a stick for this purpose). Roll firmly around the stick down to the bottom. Wrinkle the roll by

holding it in both hands, and gently but firmly pushing the roll towards the center to create the wrinkled look. While holding the roll firmly in one hand, take out the stick, and then put the roll on a greased baking sheet, seam side down. Repeat with the rest of the sheets, arranging them next to each other.

➤ Bake in the preheated oven for about 45 minutes or until golden brown.

➤ Take out of the oven, and while still hot, pour syrup and set aside for at least 2 hours to allow it to absorb the syrup. Serve it warm or at room temperature, with the optional sprinkle of ground pistachio.

Winged Squares**Makes about 36 pieces**

This way of shaping the dough results in fluffy and crispy *baklava*. Traditionally whole shelled and skinned pistachios are used for the filling, but Egg White-Nut filling may be substituted.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough

½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe Egg-White Nut Filling 000; or 2 cups

(8oz/225g) whole shelled and skinned pistachio

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

For garnish: ground pistachio, optional

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

➤ Stack 10 sheets of fillo, brushing each lightly with melted butter. Do not brush the top layer to help the pieces stay in shape after forming them.

➤ Divide the stack into squares. The size depends on how small or big you want the pieces to be. You can divide the layered sheets into 18 squares. Put about 1 teaspoon of the filling in the center of each square. If using pistachio put about 5 to 7 pieces. Firmly lift up the four tips of each square and press them together. While baking, the folded tips will open up a little, showing some of the filling.

➤ Arrange the pieces on a greased baking sheet leaving a space between pieces to allow all sides to brown. Repeat same procedure with the rest of fillo sheets.

➤ Bake in the preheated oven for about 40 minutes, or until golden brown. Take the pan out of the oven, and while still hot, pour the syrup all over the pieces. Set aside for at least 2 hours to allow the pieces to absorb syrup. Sprinkle with some ground pistachio, if wished.

Note:

To skin pistachios, after shelling them, soak them in hot water; leave them for about 5 minutes, then rub off the skin. Dry them before using.

Bird's Nest *'Ish il-'asfour***Makes about 20 large nests**

Impressively shaped *baklava*. Traditionally the 'nests' are filled with whole, shelled and skinned pistachios. The egg white-nut filling is good, too.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough

½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

½ cup (2oz/60g) ground nuts mixed with

½ teaspoon ground cardamom

To fill the nests: 1 recipe *Egg-White Nut Filling* 000; or

2 cups (8 oz/ 225 g) whole, shelled and

skinned pistachios

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

➤ Lay flat one whole sheet of fillo. Lightly brush with butter half of it. Fold sheet in half crosswise, and lightly brush entire surface. Keep rest of sheets covered with a dry kitchen towel, away from draft.

➤ Fold one of the long edges by 1in/2.5cm. Brush top of fold with butter, and spread about 1 teaspoon of ground nuts along the fold. Put a long thin stick or skewer along the fold and roll with skewer jelly/Swiss roll fashion leaving 2in/5cm of the other edge unrolled. With the roll

still on the working surface, gently but firmly push it from both ends towards the center to create a wrinkled look. Slip out the skewer. Overlap both ends to make a ring about 3 in./7.5 cm in diameter. Tuck in the unfolded edge to create a base for the nest. Put on a greased baking sheet. Repeat with the rest of sheets leaving a space between pieces to allow to brown on all sides. Brush pieces with remaining butter.

☞ To fill the nests: If you are using egg-white nut filling, put about one tablespoon or enough to fill the cavity in the nest and bake in the preheated oven for about 40 minutes or until golden brown. Take out of the oven, and while still hot, pour syrup all over nests and set aside for at least 2 hours to allow pastry to absorb syrup.

☞ If using whole pistachios for filling the nests' cavities, bake the nests unfilled. Take them out of the oven, and fill them with the prepared pistachios. Pour cooled syrup all over the pieces and set aside for at least 2 hours to allow them to absorb syrup.

Note:

To skin pistachios, after shelling them, soak them in hot water, leave them for about 5 minutes, then drain them and rub off the skin. Dry them before using.

Cream-filled Baklava Triangles *Baklava bil-Geymer* Makes about 20 pieces

Filling for this variety is scented with rose water or orange blossom water rather than cardamom, since filling is supposed to look immaculately white.

One 16oz/450g package fillo dough

½ to ¾ cup (4-6oz/115-180g) butter, melted

(or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe *Cream Filling 000*

1 recipe *Medium Syrup 000*, cooled

For garnish: ground pistachio

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4



☞ Lay a single fillo sheet flat, and lightly brush with butter two thirds of the sheet, lengthwise. Fold the ungreased third on the middle third, and then fold the other third on these two layers. Lightly brush surface. Keep rest of sheets covered with a dry kitchen cloth away from draft.

☞ Put a heaping tablespoon of the cream filling on one end of the strip. Fold the tip of the strip across the filling to form a triangle, and then fold again and again until you get to the other end of the strip (the flag fold). Put the filled triangle on a greased baking sheet. Repeat the same procedure with the rest of pieces, arrange them on a baking sheet, and brush them with the remaining butter.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 40 to 45 minutes or until golden brown. While still hot, pour syrup on them. Set aside for about 1 hour to allow pieces to absorb the syrup. Sprinkle with ground pistachio, if wished, and serve warm or at room temperature. Very refreshing served chilled in the summer. Keep any leftovers refrigerated.

SHREDDED FILLO DOUGH (KATAIFI)

Knafa/Kunafa

Kunafa in Iraq is a somewhat confusing name. If *kunafa* is made *baklava* style, that is filled with nuts and drenched in heavy syrup, it is called *baqlawat sha'riyya* or *qatayif*. If the fine noodles are not allowed to brown, it is called *baklava balluriyya* (lit. looks like crystal), white and translucent, of Levantine origin. When it is prepared, as in the rest of the neighboring countries, spread in huge trays, filled with cheese, and kept warm for the day's consumption, it is called *knafa* (Iraqi dialect).

The main ingredient, *kunafa* looks like very fine noodles, and is usually translated as 'shredded dough' because it resembles cereal known by this name. It is available at Middle-Eastern grocery shops, and the package usually identifies it as '*kataifi*' (Greek name). This is a little confusing because there is another traditional syrupy dessert made of small crepe-like pastries, also called *qata'if* (recipe below).

The reason behind this confusion in the nomenclature may be traced back to the practices of medieval Arab cooks, who made *qata'if*, delicate thin crepes. They used pancake-like batter in making these crepes. To bake them, they poured a small amount on a marble slab or *taabaq* (heated metal plate) and let it spread and bake. To serve, the crepes were drenched in syrup and rolled, or stuffed and fried, as we do today.

They also made *kunafa*. In its earliest stages, it was not made the same way with which we are familiar today. For clues, we go to the Aleppo 13th-century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* by Ibn al-'Adeem. First, he sets the line between *qatayif* and *kunafa*. *Qatayif* batter is fermented with yeast and /or bakers' borax *boureq* or natron/sodium carbonate *natroun*. *Kunafa* batter, on the other hand, is unleavened *fateer* (2: 648). Both of them are baked on the *taabaq* or marble slab into thin breads. At this stage, *qatayif* will be ready to use as described above. However, *kunafa* is taken a step further - it is rubbed with sesame oil, and cut into thin threads, like noodles, using scissors. It was served in many ways, but mostly fried and drenched in rose water syrup or cooked in it and sprinkled with fine sugar and crushed nuts (2: 627). We have a detailed recipe for making similar



kunafa breads in 13th-century Andalusian cookbook *Fidhalat al-Khiwan* (Al-Tujeebi 69-70). We also have more similar recipes in 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* (49, 124-27).

Kunafa as described above is said to have been created for the Umayyad Caliph Sulayman bin 'Abd al-Malik, who was known for his gluttonous indulgences (d.717). It was also described in *Riyadh al-Nufous* by Abu Bakr al-Maliki in the 9th century (Wright 658). Neither al-Warraq (10th century) nor al-Baghdadi (13th century) mentioned *kunafa*, from which we may conclude that it was not a Baghdadi specialty. During the Ottoman period, the Arabic *qata'if* became *kadayif*. Now, Turkish *kadayif* was used to designate both the regular crepe *qata'if* and the shredded noodles *kunafa*. To differentiate between the two, the former started to be called *yafkali kadayif*, and the latter, *tel kadayif*.

As to when cooks stopped preparing *kunafa* by cutting it into thin noodle-like strips with scissors and started to use a more "advanced technology," this must have happened some time between the 14th and 18th century. In Turabi Efendi's cookbook, which covers Turkish cooking

in 18th and 19th centuries, we have a description of the 'gadget' used to make *kunafa* the easy way:

Procure a tin pint pot, the shape of a tumbler, insert in the bottom eight or ten fine tubes; then put some flour in a basin, which mix [sic] with water to form a smooth batter; put a portion of the batter in the pot, let it run through the tubes, by passing the pot up and down on a very hot crumpet-stove, which is done in a few minutes in long threads like vermicelli; take them up, and spread them on a tray, and continue in this way till you have made about three pounds. (51-52)

Nowadays, *kunafa*-makers use a deep tin with a perforated bottom, and they dribble the batter in a rapid swirling fashion onto the hot metal plate. The batter, in the process, would turn into fine noodles.

A note on the best way to refresh frozen kunafa dough: In Arab countries, it is customary to buy freshly made *kunafa*, which is soft and moist. The frozen variety tends to dry out. To compensate for lost moisture, sprinkle or spritz the shredded dough with some warm water, while fluffing and separating the strand of *kunafa*, before adding butter to it. Thus, less butter will be needed

Knafa Rolls *Baqlawā bil Sha'riyya*

Makes about 35 to 40 pieces

Knafa rolls are commonly called *baqlawa bil sha'riyya* (*baklawa* of vermicelli noodles), and some bakers prefer to fill the rolls with whole pistachios rather than the ground nut mixture.

For the filling: 2 cups (8oz/225g) walnuts, skinned almonds or pistachio, coarsely ground

1 teaspoon ground cardamom

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 tablespoon rose water

1 egg white, whisked

One 16oz/450g package *kunafa* (shredded fillo dough), thawed according to package directions

¾ to 1 cup (6-8oz/180-225g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

Preheat oven 325°F/ 160°C/ gas mark 3

- ☞ Make the filling by mixing all filling ingredients in a medium bowl. The egg white and rose water will help bind the ingredients.
- ☞ Put shredded dough in a big bowl, and refresh it with a sprinkling of water. Fold it several times, and then pour the melted butter all over. Working with the fingers, coat the strands well with the melted butter by turning and folding them.
- ☞ Take a strand of the dough, about eighth of the total amount. Fluff it with the fingers to loosen it and spread it out on a flat working surface to make a 6-by-8-inch (15x20 cm) rectangle. Press down surface with fingers. Put about 3 tablespoons of filling along the narrow edge of the strand. Put a long skewer along the filling, and firmly roll the strand around it. Press the roll then slide out the skewer. Neaten up the roll by pressing and tucking it. It will look like a 5in/12.5cm long cocoon.
- ☞ Put roll on a greased baking sheet. Repeat with remaining strands. You'll end up having 8 rolls. Leave space between rolls to allow them to brown on all sides. Repeat with the rest of the shredded dough.
- ☞ Bake rolls in the preheated oven for about 70 minutes or until they are golden brown (slow baking will ensure that rolls will be cooked inside and out).
- ☞ Take out of the oven and immediately pour half of the cooled syrup on the rolls. After 10 minutes, pour the rest of the syrup. Set aside for two hours to allow pastries to absorb syrup.
- ☞ When completely cool, carefully cut each rolls (diagonally if wished) into slices about 1in/2.5cm wide or a little wider. Sprinkle them with ground pistachio, if desired.

Only Kunafa with Honey Becomes Fatima

In the medieval book of *The Arabian Nights*, frequent mention was made to *Kunafa*, the deliciously delicate vermicelli-like pastry. In the story of "Ma'ruf the Cobbler and his Wife Fatima," the kind of syrup used in making this pastry becomes a social status symbol. One day, the story goes, the shrewish and pretentious wife Fatima demanded of her husband to bring her *kunafa*, and demanded it should be dressed with no less than bees' honey. So much to Ma'ruf's chagrin, the *kunafa*-seller had the cheaper variety sugarcane honey, which is molasses. Ma'ruf was reluctant to reject the dessert because the "pastry-cook was to have patience with him for the price." So he asked him to go ahead and prepare some for him. The cook "fried a vermicelli-cake for him with butter and drenched it with [sugarcane honey] till it was fit to present to kings." Ma'ruf took it home, but the wife was furious with him and threw the *kunafa* in his face (Butron 10: 2-3). Nowadays *kunafa* is more commonly drenched in just simple syrup and the chances of having it thrown in our faces because of this are nil

Layered Knafa with Nuts *Siniyyat Knafa bil-Joz*

Makes about 24 pieces

An easy and delicious way with *kunafa* dough. Different fillings may be used, and each will yield a delightfully distinguished taste and texture. The following recipe calls for nut filling.

For the filling: 2½ cups (10oz/285g) walnuts, skinned almonds, or pistachio, coarsely ground

1 teaspoon ground cardamom

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon



1 to 2 tablespoons rose water

One 16oz/450g package *kunafa* (shredded fillo dough), thawed according to package directions

¾ cup (6oz/180g) melted butter

(or half butter and half oil)

½ cup (125ml) heavy/double cream, optional

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ Mix all the filling ingredients in a medium bowl.
- ☞ In a big bowl, separate and fluff the shredded dough by pulling it with the fingers in two opposite directions. It's okay to break some in the process. Refresh it with a sprinkling of water, and then pour on it the melted butter. Work with the fingers to moisten dough strands with butter by turning and folding the shredded dough.
- ☞ Spread one third of dough on a greased 12-by-9-inch (30.5x23cm) baking pan. Spread one half of the filling on the dough and sprinkle with half of the heavy cream if used. Repeat the layering two more times to make 3 layers of the shredded dough and 2 layers of the nut filling. With oiled fingers, press the entire surface well.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 45 minutes or until golden brown. Take it out of the oven and immediately pour half of the cooled syrup over the entire surface. Let it stand for 10 minutes then pour the remaining syrup. Cover loosely with a clean kitchen towel, and set aside for at least 1 hour to allow pastry to absorb syrup.

☞ Cut it into squares while still in the pan, and garnish it with some ground or chopped nuts, if liked. Refrigerate leftovers.



Layered Knafa with Cream *Siniyyat Knafa bil-Geymar*
Makes 24 pieces

The combination of golden knafa and cream filling make a sensational dessert fit for special occasions.

Above: Layered Knafa with Cream

Opposite: Layered Knafa with Cheese

One 16oz/450g package kunafa (shredded fillo dough), thawed according to package directions

¼ cup (6oz/180g) melted butter (or half butter and half oil)

1 recipe *Cream Filling* 000

1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000, cooled

Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

☞ In a big bowl, separate and fluff the shredded dough by pulling it with the fingers in two opposite directions. It's okay to break some in the process. Refresh it with a sprinkling of water, and then pour on it the melted butter. Work with the fingers to moisten dough strands with butter by turning and folding the shredded dough.

☞ Layer half of the shredded dough in a greased 12-by-9-inch (30.5x23 cm) baking pan and press it with the fingers. Spread the prepared filling on the entire surface, and cover it with the remaining dough. Press well with oiled fingers.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 45 minutes or until golden brown. Take the pan out of the oven, and immediately prick the surface down to the bottom with a fork or skewer to allow syrup to penetrate to the bottom layer. Pour half of cooled syrup the over entire surface, and let it stand for 10 minutes, then pour the remaining syrup. Cover loosely with a clean kitchen towel, and set aside for at least 1 hour to allow pastry to absorb syrup.

☞ Cut it into squares while still in pan, and garnish it with some ground or chopped nuts, if liked. Refrigerate leftovers.

Layered Knafa with Cheese *Siniyyat Knafa bil-Jibin*
Makes 24 pieces

A bland variety of white unsalted cheese is usually used in the Arab countries for making this type of knafa. It is called jibna hilwa (sweet cheese), available in Middle-Eastern stores. When baked, it becomes pleasantly chewy and elastic in texture, somewhat similar to mozzarella cheese, which can conveniently replace it when the authentic jibna hilwa is hard to come by.

GOLDEN TRANSLUCENT FRITTERS

Zlabya Makes about 28 pieces



For *jibna hilwa* (sweet cheese) or mozzarella filling use:

1 pound (450g/4 cups) sweet cheese or shredded mozzarella cheese

½ cup (125ml) milk

6 level tablespoons semolina (see Glossary)

1 to 2 tablespoons rose water, or orange blossom water (see Glossary)

☞ If using *jibna hilwa* (sweet cheese), crumble it with your fingers into smaller pieces, and mix it with milk, semolina, and rose or orange blossom water.

☞ If using mozzarella cheese, then you need to get rid of its salt as follows: Soak it in cold water for about 45 minutes, changing water several times. Next, drain it very well, and mix it with milk, semolina, and rose or orange blossom water.

☞ Following directions in *Layered Knafa with Cream*, given above, use this cheese filling to make Cheese-filled *Knafa*. Refrigerate leftovers.

Zlabya is always mentioned in conjunction with *baklawa*. It is shaped like a tubular rosette, translucent and crispy from the outside and yet succulent from the inside. Baghdad is believed to be the originator of this popular dessert. Indeed, according to some stories, even the name itself is said to have been derived from that of the famous musician and singer, Ziryab (c. 800 AD), of Iraqi origin (see Ziryab 000). This dessert itself was called *ziryabiyya* after his name and later settled to *zalabiya*. However, some medieval sources suggest that the name *zalabiya* is of Arabic origin because the word occurs in ancient Arabic verses (*Taj al-'Arus*, s.v. زلاب).

Zalabiya as we know it today, was called *zalabiya mushabbaka* (latticed) in medieval times. We have two detailed recipes on how to make it (al-Warraq, Chapter 100; *Anwa' al-Saydala* 199), and they clearly show that the method has remained the same, except that instead of our funnel, medieval cooks used half a coconut shell with a hole pierced in the bottom to drip batter and swirls it into the frying pan. From contemporary poems, we learn that the batter was colored yellow, green, or red before frying it.

Following are tips for making the perfect *zalabiya*, as suggested by the medieval experts:

☞ A test to see whether dough has risen: tap on the side of the pot with your finger, you should hear a hollow sound (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 199).

☞ Oil for frying should be neither too little nor too cold, otherwise it will stick to the pan. Put just enough to cover them when frying (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 199).

☞ You know you got the right batter consistency when fried pieces immediately turn into translucent hollow shapes (al-Warraq, Chapter 100).

☞ After dipping fried pieces in warmed honey, put them on crossed woods until they are drained of all honey except what they hold inside (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 199).

☞ Good *zalabiya* should be brittle to the bite. Bad *zalabiya* is soft and leathery in texture. This happens when batter was not given enough time to ferment, or yeast was not good, or honey was not thick enough, or



humid and cold weather. The remedy is to let batter ferment well, and put honey back to the fire until it loses its moisture. In humid weather do the cooking indoors, and in a warm room. To compensate for the bad yeast, put some more *buraq al-'ajeen* 'borax' (al-Warraq, Chapter 100).

Although the amount of syrup called for in the following recipe might sound outrageous, a good deal of it will be drained.

1½ teaspoons dry yeast
1 teaspoon sugar
3 cups (715ml) warm water
A few threads of saffron, optional
2½ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
½ cup (2oz/60g) cornstarch/cornflour
A pinch of salt
1 teaspoon rose water
Oil for frying
4 cups (950ml) light corn/golden syrup warmed and flavored with 1 tablespoon rose water (or make your own syrup, recipe below)

How to Prepare Heavy Syrup for *Zlabya*

In a medium heavy pot, combine 4 cups (2lb/900g) granulated sugar, 2 cups (475ml) water, 1 tablespoon honey, 2 tablespoons lemon juice, and ¼ cup (60ml) rose water. Bring to a boil, stirring with a wooden spoon to dissolve sugar, and then leave it to boil gently undisturbed, until heavy syrup forms, about 15 minutes. To test, put a drop on a cold dish. If done, it should keep its shape.

- ☞ Make batter as follows: In a big bowl, dissolve dry yeast and sugar in warm water. Add saffron if used. Set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.
- ☞ With a mixer, beat in flour, cornstarch, salt, and rose water into the yeast mixture, for about 5 minutes. The final mix should have the consistency of pancake batter. Let it ferment in a warm place, covered, for 1 hour. Stir batter several times while fermenting.
- ☞ When ready to fry, have the warmed syrup ready in a pot or a big bowl, put it near the stove.
- ☞ In a 10in/25.5cm flat-bottomed skillet, heat about 1in/2.5cm deep oil until it is shimmering hot, and fry the pieces as follows: Have ready a small funnel or a pastry bag fitted with ¼in/6mm nozzle. Blocking the opening of the funnel or pastry bag with a finger while holding it, ladle a small amount of the batter into it. Transfer the funnel or bag to the place where the skillet is. Quickly remove the blocking finger to allow batter to flow down. While pouring, move your hand to form a closed circle about 3in/7.5cm in diameter, then form a kind of cross in the middle making sure it touches the outer circle at several points to prevent it from opening up while frying. The frying fritter will puff and rise almost immediately. Turn the piece only once to allow it to cook on both sides, 2 to 3 minutes or until it turns pale golden. There should not be much of a change in color.
- ☞ Using tongs, take the fried fritter out of oil, shake off excess oil, and immediately dip it in the warm syrup,

Ziryab

Born around 789 AD, Ziryab was an Iraqi Kurdish musician, who was given this nickname after the blackbird *ziryab*. His teacher was the celebrated Ishaq al-Mosuli who was the court musician of Caliph Harun al-Rasheed of Baghdad. So much impressed was the Caliph by Ziryab's talent and originality in singing and playing a lute (*'oud*) of his own design that al-Mosuli's jealousy was aroused and Ziryab had to quit Baghdad and try his luck somewhere else. In 822 AD, 'Abd al-Rahman II, Caliph of al-Andalus (Spain) in Cordoba welcomed him and bestowed upon him an abundance of gifts. Ziryab, therefore, decided to spend the rest of his life there.

Coming from the highly cultured and accomplished Baghdadi court, he was in a position to have a remarkable influence upon the court and city of Cordoba such as teaching them the art of grand and refined living. He set trends for their social patterns and domestic habits. He showed the courtiers how to dress in silk, and wear white clothes in summer, how to set their hair, and dye their beards. Besides introducing some sophisticated dishes, he taught them the etiquette of eating, how to set the table, how to behave at the table, and how to serve dishes in a succession of courses, rather than presenting them all at once

(*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, s.v. Ziryab).

turning once to coat both sides. Allow the pieces to absorb syrup, about 4 minutes. Lift them out of the syrup and place them on a cooling rack (I use my oven rack), placed on a big tray to allow excess syrup to drain down and help keep the fritters crispy. Let the pieces drain on the rack until they are no longer sticky to the touch. Note: It is better to use separate utensils for frying and

Zalabiya in the Eyes of a Medieval Poet

The famous Abbasid poet Ibn al-Rumi (d.896) composed the following verses describing *zalabiya* being fried:

*I saw him at the crack of dawn frying zalabiya,
 Looking like tubes of reed, delicate and thin.
 The oil I saw boiling in his pan was like the hitherto
 elusive alchemy. The batter he threw into the pan
 looking like silver, Would instantly transform into
 lattices of gold.*



dipping in syrup. I use tongs for turning the pieces in skillet and two forks for turning them in syrup. Always keep a napkin ready for wiping your fingers because if you are doing it by yourself you can only handle one piece at a time, but this should not be a problem because the whole process goes very fast. Reuse the drained syrup. ☞ Arrange the drained pieces on a platter in a pile. Sprinkle *zlabya* with ground nuts, preferably pistachio. If syrup is thick enough, *zlabya* will stay crispy.

ARABIAN PANCAKES

Qatayif Makes about 20 pieces

In the Middle Ages, *qata'if* /*qatayif* was a delicacy worthy of the caliph's table. Numerous recipes were written, and poems were composed in their praises. The fillings ranged from the regular walnuts and almonds to the more exotic skinned green walnuts, and chopped date-palm hearts (*jummar*). In many Arab countries, including Iraq, it is still prepared and cooked in the same manner. However, to give these traditional desserts a lighter touch, the following recipe will call for baking the filled *qata'if*.

1 teaspoon dry yeast
1 teaspoon sugar
1¼ cups (310ml) warm water
1½ cups (6oz/180g) all-purpose/plain flour
¼ teaspoon salt
About ½ cup (125ml) honey or syrup of your choice
Ground pistachio and whipped cream, for garnish

- ☞ Dissolve yeast and sugar in warm water, and set aside at a warm place for 5 minutes.
- ☞ Using a mixer, add flour and salt and beat until smooth, 3 to 4 minutes. The mix should be smooth and have the consistency of pancake batter. Set aside, covered, for about an hour.
- ☞ Heat a pancake grill, or a non-stick pan, until very hot, then reduce heat to medium. Stir the fermented batter and pour about 2 tablespoons on the pan. Tilt it to different directions to spread batter into a 4in/10cm disc. Wait until surface rises, develops bubbles, and looks dry, a few minutes (it should come away easily from the pan). If you intend to serve it unfilled, then you need to flip it to the other side. If you want to have it filled, do not flip it, but transfer it to a plate, and stack.
- ☞ Unstuffed *qata'if* may be dipped quickly, and while still warm, in honey or cold syrup, then sprinkled with chopped nuts, and served by themselves or with whipped cream. Or, they may be sprinkled with confectioners' icing sugar and ground nuts and rolled like cigars, then drizzled with honey or pancake syrup, and sprinkled with more chopped nuts.

STUFFED ARABIAN PANCAKES

Qatayif Mahshiyya Makes 20 pieces

Qatayif discs as prepared in the previous recipe can also be stuffed for presentations that are more formal. Traditionally these filled pastries are fried, but a lighter option is given here.

One recipe of *qatayif* dough, cooked on one side only
For the filling: 2 cups (8oz/225g) chopped toasted nuts
3 tablespoons granulated sugar
1 teaspoon cinnamon, or cardamom
2 tablespoons rose water
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter, melted for brushing the pieces
Light syrup, such as pancake syrup
Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ Cook *qatayif* discs as directed in the previous recipe. Do not flip the pieces, as this will help the edges to stick together when filled.
- ☞ Combine filling ingredients. As soon as you finish cooking *qatayif* discs, fill them by putting about 2 tablespoons of filling in the middle of the uncooked side. Then fold it to form half a circle. Press the edges very well to prevent filling from coming out while baking.
- ☞ Place the filled pieces on a greased baking sheet. Brush them with melted butter and bake them in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes or until golden brown. Alternatively, after filling the pieces, fry them in ½in/1cm deep hot oil, for 2 to 3 minutes, or until golden brown. Drain the pieces on white paper towels/kitchen paper.
- ☞ Dip the pieces - whether baked or fried - in the syrup and while they still hot. Serve them immediately with cream, if wished.

CREAM-FILLED ROLLS/LADY'S UPPER ARM

Znoud il-Sit Makes about 24 rolls

A popular delicious dessert, lavished with an equally scrumptious name. In a way, it is a variation on the cream-filled *baklawas*, except that these rolls are fried because slightly thicker sheets of dough are used here. A time saving tip is to use the ready-made spring rolls (not egg rolls) wrappers available at oriental grocery stores.

One recipe boureg dough 000 , or
one package spring roll wrappers
1 recipe filling of Iraqi Éclaires 000
1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000
Oil for frying
For garnish: ¼ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely ground pistachio, optional

- ☞ Prepare dough as directed in the recipe, and then divide it into 24 pieces. Roll out the pieces as thin as possible, and trim off edges to make them into approximate 4-by-5 inch (10x12.5cm) rectangles.
- ☞ Put about 2 tablespoons of filling on the shorter side of the rectangle, leaving about 1in/2.5cm on both sides uncovered. Roll the filled side twice (this will help prevent filling from oozing out while frying), then fold both sides about ½in/1cm inwards, and continue rolling all the way down. In their final shape, rolls should look plump and rather short. If using spring roll wrappers, follow package directions.
- ☞ Fry the rolls in 1in/2.5cm deep hot oil, seam side down. Turn once to brown on both sides, about 5 minutes. To drain, put them in a colander set on a plate or tray. When you are done frying, and while they are still warm, dip them in warm syrup, in batches. Keep them there for a minute or so, then take them out and arrange them in a big platter. Serve hot or cold, garnished with some ground pistachio, if wished. Refrigerate leftovers.

A Poem on *Qata'if*

The following poem, composed by the Abbasid poet Kushajim (d.c.961), describes the Arabian dessert *qata'if*. It was one of the many food poems recited to the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustakfi (d.945) at his request, for he was depressed at the time and needed to be diverted. (My translation)

*When hunger strikes my friends, I have qatayif
like piles of books stacked.
They resemble honeycombs - all white and
with holes - when keenly seen.
Swimming in almond oil, disgorged after
they had their fill of it.
With glistening bubbles, back and forth
rose water sways.
Rolled and aligned like the purest of arrows,
their sight the smitten-hearted rejoice.
More delicious than they are, is seeing them
plundered, for man's joy lies in what is
most hankered.*

THE JUDGE'S MORSEL

Luqmat il-Qadhi Makes about 50 pieces



This dessert is so good, it is worthy of a judge, so seems to be the idea behind the naming of this popular medieval dessert. In the Ottoman culinary records of over five centuries, *luqma* was consistently mentioned (see Yerasimos *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine*). Even today, it is still known by this name in the entire Arab world. The 13th-century Baghdadi cookbook includes a simple recipe: "Make a firm dough. When fermented, take in the size of hazelnuts, and fry in sesame-oil. Dip in syrup, and sprinkle with fine-ground sugar" (Arberry 213). The *quadhi* (judge) was an important man in the Islamic State. After the caliph, vizier (minister) and *wali* (governor), he was the fourth man in the medieval political hierarchy. He was a man to be feared and revered and anything related to him or coming from him should be good, even his body parts, public and private alike.

2 teaspoons dry yeast
¼ cup (60ml) warm water
1¼ cups (5 oz/ 140 g) all-purpose/plain flour
¼ cup (1oz/30g) cornstarch/cornflour
¼ teaspoon salt
2 cups (475ml) warm water
Oil for frying
One recipe *Medium Syrup* 000

- Dissolve yeast in ¼ cup (60ml) water and set aside for 5 minutes.
- Mix flour, cornstarch, and salt in a big bowl, and make a well in the middle. Pour in yeast mixture, and 2 cups (475ml) warm water. Stir with a mixer to incorporate liquids into flour. Beat vigorously until smooth and soft dough is formed. It should be just thick enough to hold its shape when lifted by a spoon. Let it rise at a warm draft-free place for 45 minutes. Beat dough about 3 times or more while fermenting. This should result in an elastic texture.
- Deep fry the dough in batches, as follow: Heat about 3in/7.5cm of oil in a small heavy pot until it is medium hot. Fry 5 or 6 at a time by dipping two teaspoons in cold water or oil (this will help dough slide from the spoon easily). Scoop up a level teaspoon of batter and with the other spoon push dough into the hot oil. The pieces will rise to the surface immediately and brown in about 8 minutes. If they brown faster than that, this indicates the oil is too hot. Slow browning ensures that the fritters will stay crisp. Turn pieces several times to allow to brown on all sides. Take them out of oil with a slotted spoon and let them drain in a colander lined with a paper towel/kitchen paper. Fry another batch, and while this is cooking, dip the drained pieces for a few minutes and, while still hot, in the prepared warm syrup. Lift them out of the syrup and arrange them on a serving dish in a pile. Repeat with other batches. Sprinkle them with a little ground nuts and cinnamon, if wished.

DIMPLED FRITTERS/ LADY'S NAVEL

Surrat il-Khatoun Makes about 28 pieces

This delicious dessert is called "the lady's navel" due to the dimple in the center of the pastry. A deep navel was an emblem of beauty and good living in the old days. In one of *The Arabian Nights* stories, a woman was described as being so beautiful that her navel would hold 1oz/30g of benzoin ointment (*duhn al-ban* oil of moringa tree used in medicine and perfumes). Khatoun, the woman of the old affluent household, was always thought of as leading a life of luxury and plenty and hence was always pictured as being plump and 'cushiony.' To the deprived commoners who might never have had the chance to see a woman's body except in the privacy of their own homes if at all, what else to compare the diverse delicious desserts but to the luscious body parts of khatoun?

2½ cups (592ml) water
3 tablespoons butter or oil
¼ teaspoon salt
2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour
3 eggs
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
Oil for frying
1 recipe *Medium Syrup* 000
For garnish: whipped cream and ground pistachio (optional)

- In a heavy pan, bring water to a boil. Stir in butter and salt, and then add flour all at once. With a wooden spoon, mix until well blended and dough comes away from sides of pan. Cool slightly (cool enough not to cook the eggs) and beat in eggs one at a time. Dough should be thick, smooth, and shiny.

- With oiled hands, take a piece of dough, size of a walnut, roll it into a ball, and then flatten it slightly. With the index finger, make a dimple in the middle, almost like a hole, but not quite, this will be the navel.
- Fry the fritters in batches. Start by dipping 4 to 5 pieces into about 3in/7.5cm deep oil, 250°F/ 130°C. As the pieces puff out and rise to the surface increase heat to 300°F/ 150°C and continue frying until pieces are golden brown, about 15 minutes. After each batch lower heat to 250°F/ 130°C and start all over again. This method is to ensure that the pieces will puff and cook evenly inside and out. If oil is too hot to begin with, the fritters will not puff out and the outside will brown quickly, leaving the inside still doughy.
- Drain the fritters and roll them in cold syrup. Transfer them to a platter and let them cool completely. If wished, put a small amount of whipped cream in the dimple, and sprinkle the pieces with a little ground pistachio.



Um-Hayder's Colander Dati
 see recipe overleaf on page 452

UM-HAYDER'S COLANDER DATLI

Makes about 30 pieces

I called this dessert after the name of a friend who suggested this recipe to me. Actually, it is not her name *per se*, but as the rules of decorum in our culture dictate, as soon as a married couple have a child, friends start calling them after the name of their first born. *Um* plus the name of the child for the mother, and *abu* plus the name of the child for the father.

Tatli is a Turkish generic term for 'dessert' and 'sweet.' In Iraq, however, *datli* is specifically used to designate fried or baked pastries drenched in syrup. Many similar desserts were made during the medieval times, and they were quite popular at the time. The number of recipes for preparing them attests to this, but they were known by different names. Categorically, they came under the name *zalabiya ghayr mushabbaka* (unlatticed *zalabiya*) or *zalabiya furniyya* if baked in the oven (as in the following recipe).

In shaping this pastry, a colander is used to give it an attractive form. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that in medieval times the same thing was done to make the pastries look like mulberries toot. In a recipe in 13th-century *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*, flour was kneaded with clarified butter into stiff dough. Then a piece of dough, size of a mulberry, was put in a sieve (*ghirba*), and the direction was to press the middle with your finger so that it makes a cavity and the outside would take the impression of the sieve and make it look like a mulberry (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 630-31).

¼ teaspoon dry yeast

1 tablespoon granulated sugar

½ cup (125ml) warm water

1 cup (4oz/115g) all-purpose/plain flour

1 cup (4oz/115g) semolina (see Glossary)

¼ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon ground aniseed

½ teaspoon cardamom

½ cup (125ml) oil

Oil for frying, or preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

One recipe *Medium Syrup* 000

➤ Dissolve yeast and sugar in warm water, and set aside for 5 minutes.

➤ Put flour, semolina, salt aniseed, and cardamom in a big bowl. Add oil and rub together with the fingers until well mixed. Make a well in the middle and pour in yeast mixture. Stir with a fork or a wooden spoon in a circular movement, and then knead lightly to make a slightly soft dough.

➤ Divide dough into 30 balls (size of a small walnut, each). Have a plastic or metal colander with round holes ready. With your index finger, flatten each ball on the inner curve of the colander elongating the piece while pressing. Peel off gently and loosely join the two longer sides of the piece. This pressure on the colander will imprint an interesting design on the outside of the piece. Fry as you shape

➤ To fry the pieces, put about 3in/7.5cm deep oil in a small heavy pot. When oil is hot enough, start frying (test by dipping a small piece of dough, if it immediately sizzles, oil is ready). Deep-fry in batches 5 to 6 at a time for about 7 minutes or until golden brown. If pieces brown fast, this means oil is too hot. Adjust heat accordingly. Drain pieces in a colander lined with paper towel/kitchen paper. Fry another batch, and while it is cooking, dip the drained pieces, and while still warm, in the prepared warm syrup. Keep them for a minute or so, then take them out and arrange them in a pile on a platter. Sprinkle with some ground pistachio, if liked.

➤ Alternatively, you may bake the pastries. Shape them as in the third step, and because they are going to be baked, you can sprinkle the pressed pieces with chopped nuts and cinnamon before pinching the sides. Arrange the pieces on an ungreased baking sheet, seam side down. Bake in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until golden brown. Take them out of the oven and immediately dip them in the prepared warm syrup. Arrange them on a platter and sprinkle with some ground pistachio, if liked.

YEAST CAKE DRENCHED IN SYRUP

Ali Baba | *Furniyya* | *Datli* Makes 24 cupcakes or 12 mini bundts/tube pans



1 tablespoon dry yeast

1 cup (250ml) warm milk

4 cups (16 oz/ 450 g) all-purpose/plain flour

½ teaspoon salt

⅓ cup (3oz/85g) granulated sugar

½ cup (4oz/115g) butter, melted

3 eggs, at room temperature, beaten

For Perfumed Syrup: 3 cups (715ml) water

1¾ cups (14oz/400g) granulated sugar

4 strips lemon zest

3 coriander seeds

1 sprig mint

1 tablespoon lemon juice

1 tablespoon rose water, or orange blossom water

For garnish: whipped cream (any kind will do), ground pistachio, and preserved fruits

Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

Babas to the West are small and light yeast cakes moistened with rum-flavored syrup. Western culinary records attribute the invention of this dessert to a 17th-century Polish king. One day he was eating a dry, day-old *kugelhopf* (a raisin-studded yeast cake) when he had the idea of moistening it with rum, and garnishing it with sweetened whipped cream. He was very much impressed by the result. He called it *Ali Baba*, after an *Arabian Nights* hero, thus, probably unknowingly, paying tribute to the first innovators of such moist pastries. Later on simple syrup was added to the cake to balance the strong rum flavor, and the name was shortened to *Baba* (Heatter 230-31)

By the 9th century, such sumptuous pastries were already cooking in the kitchens of the medieval Baghdadis. A cake like this was called *zalabia furniyya*, made by putting fermented batter in an earthenware pot and baking it in the *tannour* oven. When done, it was inverted on a platter, cut into sections, and moistened with nothing stronger than honey, sweetened milk, and melted butter (al-Warraq, Chapter 100). See comment on *datli* in the precious recipe, and next chapter on cakes.

➤ Dissolve yeast in warm milk and set aside for 5 minutes.

➤ In a big bowl, combine flour, salt, and sugar. Make a well in the middle and add yeast mixture, melted butter, and eggs. With a wooden spoon, incorporate liquids into the flour in a circular movement. Then knead lightly with your fingers to soft and rather sticky dough. Let it rise, covered, at a warm and draft-free place for about 45 minutes.

➤ Punch down the dough. With oiled hands, take pieces, size of a walnut each, and shape them into balls and put them in well-greased 24 cupcake molds, or 12 mini bundt/ring pans. Set aside, uncovered, at a warm draft-free place for about 45 minutes or until well risen.

➤ Meanwhile, prepare syrup by combining all ingredients in a medium pot. Bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve sugar. Cook for 10 minutes on medium heat. Keep warm and strain before using.

➤ Bake the cakes in the preheated oven for about 15 minutes or until puffy and golden brown. Allow to cool for 10 minutes. Prick pieces with a fork or a toothpick, and then spoon half of the warm syrup all over the pieces. After 10 minutes, warm up the remaining syrup and pour it all over the cakes. Allow to cool.

➤ When completely cold, decorate them with a dollop of whipped cream and preserved fruit. Garnish with ground pistachio.



Sindibad's 7-layered Cake/Gateau 000

A Basic Cake Recipe

Fruit Cake, too Good to 'Recycle'

Marble Cake

Chocolate Cake

A Slice of Rainbow Cake

Black and White Cake/Gateau

Chess Board Cake

Egg-White Frosting/Icing

Sponge Cake

Domed Steam Cake

Banana and Pistachio Layer Cake/Gateau

Gold 'n Spicy Pumpkin Cake/Gateau

Golden Apple Squares

Spicy Prune Cake/Gateau

Chocolate Frosting/Icing

Raisin cake

Golden Coconut Cake

Iraqi Éclairs

Cream-filled Spirals

No-bake Cake Truffles

Cakes

Al-Keik

الكعك

In my budget there is no (place for any) one to bake cakes.
(A Sumerian Proverb, Gordon, 66)

The Sumerians were conscious of the superiority of their cuisine. Criticizing the way the Bedouins of the western desert had their food, they said if you gave them flour, eggs and honey for a cake they would not know what to do with them. In addition to such references to cakes, ancient cuneiform tablets going back to the third millennium BC have preserved interesting records with regard to pastry making.

We learn that besides the regular breads, they made a better variety by "beating in" various fatty substances, such as vegetable oils and animal fats. Honey was sometimes added. The cakes were made with even higher quality flour and with "noble fat," which might well have been clarified butter. Those cakes took the shape of lumps, rings, crescents, pillars and even turbans. In the first millennium BC date breads were made by dicing dates and mixing them with oil and flour. They were called 'takkasu' or 'makkasu' (Limet 137; Levey 52). Some cuneiform texts even give the proportions in which the ingredients were to be mixed for cakes made to go to the temple and the palace. Evidently, ordinary people did not enjoy such refined cakes. It was beyond their means. Cakes have always been emblematic of luxury, refinement, grace, and beauty. In Iraq today a pretty woman is called *keka*.

A Sumerian text gives the following ingredients for a cake (Limet 134):

1 sila (1 liter) butter
1/3 sila white cheese
3 sila first quality dates
1/3 sila Smyrna raisins

(It is to be assumed that excellent flour would have been added.)

Here is another Babylonian cake recipe, which dates back to the time of Hammurabi:

X sila flour
X sila dates
½ sila and 5 gin (1 gin is equivalent to 8 grams) butter
9 gin white cheese
9 gin grape juice
5 gin apples
5 gins figs

Both recipes seem to be reasonably proportioned, and they might well be the prototypes of the fruitcakes, as we know them today. In Sumerian, these pastries were called 'gug,' and Akkadian 'kuku,' and the similarity between these words and ka'k and cake is striking.

By the eighth century, pastry making reached a high level of sophistication and refinement. The medieval bakers were no less inventive than their predecessors were. They made a variety of pastries, which resemble what we call today cakes and puff pastries. They were easily prepared in the convenience of the medieval kitchens, which were equipped with the clay oven tannour. Some of the pastries were prepared at home and taken to the neighborhood commercial *furn* 'brick oven' to bake in controlled heat.

The cakes names ranged from *furniyya* (oven-baked), *shahmiyya* (made with tallow), and *liyiyya* (made with sheep's fat tail, a delicacy by their standards) to the fancy *abu-Lash*. *Furniyya* was more like a sponge cake in texture, which explains why it was also called *isfanjiyya* or *safanj* (sponge/like a sponge). It was made of thin leavened batter, baked in the *tannour*, and drenched in syrup, warm milk, or just sprinkled with sugar (al-Warraq, Chapter 100).

In *shahmiyyat al-khawas* (cake for the elite), leavened dough was made and then thinned with 20 egg whites. It was poured into a pot lined with pounded *shahm* (tallow) and lowered into the *tannour*. While baking, a stick was inserted at several places to create holes in it. When

SINDIBAD'S 7-LAYERED CAKE

Kekat il-Sindibad il-Bahri Makes 16 servings



cake was done, some of these holes were stuffed with ground nuts and dates, and others were filled with honey, until the cake had its fill (al-Warraq, Chapter 98). *Liyiyya* is sweet puff pastry, which is sprinkled with sugar or drenched in honey. It is quite similar to what nowadays is called Napoleons, except that, instead of butter, pounded fat from the sheep's tail was used (al-Baghdadi's augmented *Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada* 428-29). *Qatayif Abu-Lash* was somewhat like a layer cake/gateau, made by piling *qatayif* crepes on a plate, sprinkling each layer with sugar and pistachio, and drizzling it with sesame oil, syrup, and rose water. The layering is repeated until the plate was full (*Kanz al-Fawa'id* 116, 126). Another version was given in *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb*, where it was suggested that the cake might be made with milk and sugar (Ibn al-'Adeem 2: 630). In 13th-century *Andalusian Anwa' al-Saydala*, we come across a couple of cake recipes, which incorporated eggs in the batter, and were baked in the brick oven *furn*. The cake was simply called *qursa* 'round pastry' (216). As for the present, as early as the 1920s, people were able to buy European types of cakes from commercial bakeries. At homes, sponge cakes would most probably have been the cake to bake, and quite successfully. In *Recipes from Baghdad*, first published in the 1940s (see Introduction, Section *Modern Times*), May Beattie says that efficient white-enameled ovens "with glass doors and thermometer" were available in Baghdad at the time, but she adds, "Many a feather-weight sponge cake has come out of what is little better than a large tin can" (4). Most of the circulated cake recipes were measured by *istikan* (small tea-glass), a glass, or even just eye measurements. By the sixties gas ovens at homes were common and various cakes were baked more often.

A unique and sensational cake, a relic of the past. I am sure it will be your favorite, and you will thank me for making it available to you as I am thankful to my neighbor, Um-Zeynab in Mosul, who imparted it to me, and who in turn got it from a friend baker, who in turn learnt it from... etc, etc, perhaps back to the Middle ages. The mere fact that it calls for bakers' ammonia for its leaven belies its history (see Medieval Leavens 000.). My neighbor used to get her ammonia supply from Turkey and split it with me, and the cake was simply called *keik il-amoniac*, after the name of the leaven. I adapted this cake in honor of the hero of my childhood Baghdad's renowned sailor, Sindibad and his seven fascinating voyages as narrated in *One Thousand and One Nights*, more commonly known in the West as *The Arabian Nights*. I knew of Sindibad even before I learnt to read. In the cold winter nights, we used to gather around the brazier, eat toasted chestnuts and walnuts and listen to my father narrating the endless wonderful adventures of Sindibad, or Sandabad as he pronounced it. When bedtime came, the whispers of my eldest sisters planning their own voyages around the world would lull me to sleep. There was also my schoolmate, Nazhat, a born



storyteller, who used to tell us the stories of Sindibad during recess, in installments like Shehrazad. While narrating, she would be drawing on the dirt ground maps of continents and seas with a stick. When Sindibad did something irrational, which brought him trouble and loss of fortune, she would get all heated up while narrating and let fly some gentle expletives, at which we would all roar with laughter. But soon enough, the bell would ring us back to the mundane decisions and revisions of the practical problems of life. Brandishing her ruler, our teacher would demand, $8 \times 7 =$ what? Oh gosh, think, quick, is it 65? or 56? Did Sindibad go to school? My neighbor usually makes the cake with six large layers and flavors it with vanilla. Like the old recipes, it did not come with exact measurement of flour, you go by the feel. Such as, you know you have added enough flour when the dough feels as soft as your ear lobe, which always works, by the way. The other ingredients were measured by istikan (traditional tea glass, capacity $\frac{1}{3}$ cup/85g/80ml). In my version, the cake is constructed of seven layers, flavored with cardamom and rose water, the “perfumes of Arabia.”

For the filling:

3 heaping tablespoons flour
 3 heaping tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour
 A pinch of salt
 $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups (18oz/510g) granulated sugar
 8 cups (2 quarts/ 2 liters) milk
 2 eggs, beaten
 1 tablespoon rose water
 1 tablespoon vanilla
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (2oz/60g) butter

For the dough:

2 eggs
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup (85g) granulated sugar
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup (80ml) milk
 $\frac{1}{3}$ cup (80ml) oil
 1 teaspoon vanilla, and/or 1 teaspoon cardamom, or to taste
 1 level tablespoon baker's ammonia, or
 1 level tablespoon baking powder
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups (11oz/300g) all-purpose/plain flour
For garnish: $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely ground pistachio
Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

☞ Since the filling and layering of the cake are done immediately after you start baking, you need to cook the filling first, keep it warm while you make the dough.

☞ Preparing the filling: Put flour, cornstarch, and sugar in a medium heavy pot (non-stick not recommended). Add milk gradually, stirring all the time with a wire whisk to prevent lumping. Add the eggs and whisk very well. Bring the mixture to a quick boil, stirring most of the time. Then continue stirring on medium-high heat until the milk mixture bubbles and thickens, thicker than a pudding, 10 to 15 minutes. Put away from heat, and stir in butter and flavorings. Mix well, and set aside, covered, at a warm place. (Note: if, while stirring the pudding, you notice that some has stuck to the bottom of the pot, do not attempt to dislodge it because the burnt particles will mix with the pudding and discolor it. That's also why non-stick pots are not good for this task.)

☞ Preparing the dough: In a big bowl, combine all dough ingredients except flour. Beat well using a mixer, about 3 minutes. Beat in 1 cup (4oz/114g) flour using a mixer. Then, with the fingers of one hand or a fork, stir in the rest of the flour in a circular movement. Scrape off any dough that might have clung to your fingers, and knead lightly and briefly with one hand. If it is a little bit too sticky, sprinkle a little more flour, but no more than 2 to 3 tablespoons. The finished dough should be soft and not so sticky. A never-failing simple clue: the perfect dough should feel as soft as your ear lobe.

☞ Divide the dough into 7 equal parts and sprinkle them with a little flour to prevent them from sticking to each other.

☞ Preparing the pans: You need at least 2 pans, 10 in/25.5 cm in diameter (or approximate size). I have 5 of these pans, which makes the process of baking and filling the cake go so fast. Same size aluminum pans will also be perfect. Cheap and reusable. However, even with just two pans, the process will still be fast enough, as you will see. The pans are to be greased only once even though they are going to be used again (with non-stick and aluminum pans, no need to grease at all). Put a serving dish a little bigger than the pan close to the oven (perhaps the counter top next to it), and place the filling pot on the stove top (thus it will stay warm, and close to you).

☞ Now, lightly dust the working surface with flour. With a rolling pin, roll out a dough portion into a very thin disc, almost as big as the pan, it does not have to be perfect. Transfer it to the pan and adjust it, by pulling and pressing so that it covers the entire bottom of the pan. Try to patch holes, not necessarily all.

☞ Bake for 6 to 8 minutes or until golden and browned at spots. While this one is baking prepare the other piece, and spread some of the filling on the surface of the empty serving dish. If you have many pans, you may bake as many as your oven can take at a time. Place them on two shelves, middle and upper third, and arrange them so that they will not be on top of each other. They might not cook all at the same time, so take out the ones that are

cooked, and rotate and replace as needed.

☞ Now, take the baked pan out of the oven. Immediately, take the disc out by loosening the sides with the help of a metal pancake flipper, and place it on the serving dish, up side up, no need to invert it. Immediately, cover the entire surface with some of the filling.

☞ Repeat with the rest of the layers, so that you end up having a stack of seven filled layers of cake. Spread the top layer with a generous amount of the filling, and immediately sprinkle the top liberally with ground pistachio (if you wait until the topping develops a skin, the pistachio will not stick to it).

☞ Serve chilled, and refrigerate any leftovers.

Suggestions:

This cake makes a delicious birthday cake, only do not put filling on the top layer, otherwise your added frosting/icing will slide down the sides. Let the cake cool completely, and then decorate it with your favorite frosting.

Flavor the dough and filling with cocoa powder or instant coffee, and drizzle the top with melted chocolate. For a pretty presentation, decorate the cake with strawberries or any other berries of your choice.

Opposite: Sinbad 7-layered cake flavored with coffee

Medieval Leavens

Using a fermented batch of dough as a leavening agent in making bread and pastry was a common practice during the medieval times. In fact, it was one of the earliest fermenting and leavening techniques ever used by man. However, the Arabic medieval cookbooks mention other natural leavens such as *boureq* (borax), of which there were many types. The variety that concerns us here is known as *boureq Armani* (Armenian borax), also called *boureq al-khubz* (baking borax) and *boureq al-ajeen* (borax for dough). It looks like white flour, and bakers dissolved it in water and brushed the bread with it before baking to give it a lustrous gloss. In al-Warraq's recipes, it was incorporated into the dough itself as a leaven. It was also used to give the pastries a brittle and nicely dry texture, as in making *zalabiya* (Chapter 100).

Another variety of borax is called *natroun* (*natron*, soda niter), this is the African variety formed naturally in the soda lakes in Egypt and other parts of Africa. In one of the medieval recipes of pastries similar to doughnut, namely *al-Qahiriyya*, a small amount of this substance was called for (Al-Baghdadi, augmented version *Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada* 432). At any rate, medieval physicians did not approve of taking such substances internally, unless for medical reasons, since they were deemed bad for the stomach.

There was also *nashadir*, which is ammonium bicarbonate, or baking ammonia, also known as hartshorn, which unlike the previous two, is still used in baking but in a very limited manner. In the medieval cookbooks, I have come across the

substance with relation to making vinegar. It was mixed with crumbled hot bread and thrown into vinegar in order to bleach it without distillation. It was also suggested that *buraq al-jeen* (boric acid, borax) might be added for the same purpose (al-Warraq, Chapter 21).

Bakers' ammonia is an old-fashioned leaven, which is replaced by baking powder and baking/bicarbonate of soda in today's baking. In Europe, it was used in the 16th century to solidify jellies, and no recipe using it as a leaven has been found prior to the 18th century. It is still used in the Scandinavian countries, Turkey, and a few Arab countries, to keep pastries, such as cookies/biscuits and crackers, light and crisp. It is safe and completely breaks down into gases when heated without leaving any solid residue. The only drawback is that it gives off an unpleasant (ammoniac) but harmless odor while baking (for the first five minutes or so), which then completely dissipates leaving behind extra crisp pastries and cookies/biscuits. This explains why it is used only with small flat pastries such as cookies, and the layered cake above.

Baking ammonia is sometimes hard to come by, but an equal amount of baking powder may substitute for it. The resulting cake will be good, but not as crisp and light as the one with the baking ammonia. You may find it in Middle Eastern stores and at the international isles of major supermarkets. If you live in the United States, you can order it from King Arthur's Flour (www.KingArthurFlour.com, or call toll-free 1-800-827-6836).

One last remark, after using bakers' ammonia, make sure to close the container tightly and keep it in a cool place (refrigerator). Otherwise, next time you need it you will find nothing more substantial than air in your container, as I discovered so much to my dismay.

A BASIC CAKE RECIPE

Infinite Variety

Il-Keka 'l-Asasiyya Makes 24 servings

Here is a recipe, which I have developed throughout my baking years as an all-purpose cake mix. Its versatility easily lends itself to a wonderful variety of cakes fit for all occasions, from birthday cakes to simple snacks. In making the cakes, I experimented with vegetable oil, such as canola and extra light olive oil, instead of shortening or butter, and got quite satisfactory results. Though this might not reduce the number of calories, it will definitely make your cake healthier.

4¼ cups (17oz/480g) all-purpose/plain flour
½ teaspoon salt
3 teaspoons baking powder
¾ cup (180ml) vegetable oil (such as Canola)
¼ cup (60ml) applesauce, optional
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
6 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla, or/and 1½ teaspoons cardamom
1½ cups (320ml) milk
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- ☞ Sift flour, salt, and baking powder into a bowl, and set aside.
- ☞ In a big bowl, beat oil, applesauce, and sugar, about 3 minutes. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition, about 3 minutes. Mix in vanilla or/and cardamom.
- ☞ Add flour mixture in 4 batches alternately with milk. Do not over mix or beat, otherwise cake will develop a tough texture. The aim is to blend ingredients.
- ☞ Pour batter into a greased and floured 10in/25cm tube/ring pan, or two round 9in/23cm pans, or depending upon what you're going to do with the cake.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 45 minutes for the fluted pan, and about 20 minutes for the layered cake pans, or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean.
- ☞ Leave the cake to cool in the pan on a rack for 10 minutes, and then invert it on the rack. Serve the cake plain or decorated, or use and serve as directed in the following recipes.

Note:

Any of the toppings and icings suggested in the following recipes may be used to frost the plain basic cake.

FRUIT CAKE TOO GOOD TO 'RECYCLE'

Kekat il-Fawakih il-Mujaffafa



This cake works as an energizer for me, a slice with a glass of milk taken in the morning would keep me ticking until dinnertime.

4 cups (3lb/1.35kg) dried fruits like currants, raisins, sweetened cranberries, chopped apricots, figs, dates, prunes, etc.
1 teaspoon grated orange peel
½ cup (1½oz/45g) finely shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut
1 cup (250ml) hot tea or coffee, may be spiked with a bit of brandy
1 recipe basic cake mix, reduce sugar to 1½ cups (12oz/350g)
½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted walnuts or hazel nuts, broken to pieces
½ cup (2oz/60g) ground toasted almonds, or ¼ cup (2oz/60g) almond butter or peanut butter
½ teaspoon cinnamon, optional
¼ teaspoon nutmeg, optional
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

MARBLE CAKE

Il-KeKa 'l-Marmariyya

☞ In a big bowl, soak dried fruits, orange peel, and coconut in hot tea or coffee. Keep soaked, covered, for a few hours, turning mixture several times. The fruits will soak up most of the liquid if not all of it. However, if any is left, reserve it and use it to replace part of the milk called for in the cake recipe.

☞ In a big bowl, prepare the cake mix as directed in the basic recipe above.

☞ With a wooden spoon stir in the prepared dried fruits, nuts, and optional cinnamon, and nutmeg.

☞ Grease and flour the baking pan. For this cake, I usually use one long loaf pan 16-by-4-by-4½ inch (40.5x10x11.5cm). Two regular loaf pans or a big tube/ring pan will be just fine (Suggestion: after greasing the pan, line it with rolled oats instead of regular flour). Sprinkle the bottom of pan with halves of walnut or whole almonds or hazelnuts. Pour batter and level with a spatula.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 70 minutes or until golden brown, and an inserted toothpick comes out clean. If surface starts to brown before cake is done cover it loosely with aluminum foil.

☞ Place the pan on a rack, and let the cake cool completely, then invert and set it aside for a few hours before slicing. If wrapped well, this cake can stay good in the refrigerator for more than a week. It freezes very well, too. I cut the cake into serving size pieces, wrap them individually in plastic wrap/cling film, and keep them in the freezer for future use.

I have always been a fan of marble cake ever since my eldest sister started making it when I was still a child. She used to flavor it with cardamom and vanilla.

1 recipe of the *Basic Cake Mix 000*

2 tablespoons granulated sugar

¼ cup (1oz/30g) cocoa powder

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Make batter as directed in basic recipe. In a medium bowl set aside one third of the batter.

☞ In a small bowl, mix cocoa powder and sugar. Stir in a little milk or water, just enough to turn the mix into a thin paste, about 3 tablespoons. Stir this cocoa paste into the set aside third of the batter and mix well until well blended.

☞ Grease and flour 10in/25cm tube/ring pan, and fill it as follows: With a tablespoon put several dollops of the white batter in the bottom of the pan. Next, using a teaspoon, scoop some of the brown batter on top of each dollop of the white batter. Repeat, alternating between batters, until you use them up. Shake the pan to level the surface of the batter.

☞ Bake and cool as directed in the basic recipe.

Suggestion:

You may add another shade to the brown by dividing batter into 3 parts: leave one third white, the second flavor with the cocoa mix, and the third flavor and color with 1 tablespoon instant coffee dissolved in a small amount of water. Fill the pan by scooping the three batters in tablespoons and alternating between the three colors, similar to what is instructed above.

CHOCOLATE CAKE

Kekat il-Kakaw

A chocolate cake you can enjoy without too much guilt.

3¼ cups (13oz/370g) all-purpose/plain flour

½ teaspoon salt

3 teaspoons baking powder

¾ cup (180ml) vegetable oil

¼ cup (60ml) applesauce, optional

2 cups (16oz/450g) sugar

6 eggs

2 teaspoons vanilla

2 teaspoons cardamom

¾ cup (3oz/85g) cocoa powder

1⅓ cups (320ml) milk, divided

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Sift flour, salt, and baking powder into a bowl, and set aside.

☞ In a big bowl beat oil, applesauce, and sugar, about 3 minutes. Add eggs one at a time, beating well after each addition, about 3 minutes. Mix in vanilla and cardamom.

☞ Dissolve cocoa powder in half of the milk, set aside.

☞ Add flour mixture in 4 batches alternately with the rest of the milk. Stir in the dissolved cocoa. Do not over mix or beat, otherwise cake will develop a tough texture. The aim is to blend the ingredients.

☞ Pour the batter into a greased and floured 10in/25cm tube/ring pan, or two round 9in/23cm pans.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about an hour in the ring pan, and about 20 minutes for the layered cake pans, or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean.

☞ Leave to cool in the pan on a cake rack for 10 minutes, and then invert the cake on the rack.

☞ Serve plain or decorated.

A SLICE OF RAINBOW CAKE

Kekat Qous w' Qazah

This multi-colored cake is a pleasure to look at and to eat. It is especially popular with children of all ages. It will also make a handsome birthday cake if you decorate it with some frosting/icing.

¼ cup (1½oz/45g) currants or raisins

¼ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely chopped nuts

½ cup (2oz/60g) crumbs of graham crackers

¼ cup (1oz/30g) cocoa powder

1 recipe of *Basic Cake Mix 000*

***Food colorings:* red, green, and blue, a few drops of each**

¼ cup (1oz/30g) shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut, optional

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Grease and flour a 10in/25cm tube/ring pan, or any other pan with similar capacity. Spread raisins and nuts in the bottom of pan and set aside.

☞ Mix cracker crumbs with cocoa powder and set aside.

☞ Prepare the batter as directed in basic cake mix.

☞ Divide and color batter as follows: Besides the mixing bowl, have three small bowls ready. Put a quarter of the batter in each small bowl leaving one quarter in the mixing bowl uncolored, but mix with it coconut if used. Color batter in the three bowls by adding a few drops of food coloring into each. Thus you end up having three different colors of batter - green, red, and blue.

☞ Start by spreading the green batter in the bottom of the pan, even up the surface with a spatula. Next, sprinkle the surface with one third of the crumb mix letting it cover the entire surface.

☞ Spread the uncolored batter on top of the green, and sprinkle it evenly with the second third of the crumb mix.

☞ Repeat with the red batter, and top it with the rest of the crumbs.

☞ Evenly spread the blue portion on top of all. To sum up: Green batter-crumb mix-white batter-crumb mix-red batter-crumb mix-blue batter.

☞ Bake and cool as directed in the basic recipe.

Frost/ice and decorate the cake to your fancy.

BLACK AND WHITE CAKE

Kekat Abyadh w-Aswad

Make a handsome cake by neatly alternating white layers with cocoa-flavored layers.

1 recipe Basic Cake Mix 000

½ cup (2oz/60g) cocoa powder

¼ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar

½ cup (1½oz/45g) shredded/desiccated

unsweetened coconut

¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted and chopped nuts

Frosting/icing of your choice to assemble the cake

(see, for instance, Egg-White Frosting below)

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Prepare batter as directed in the basic recipe. Divide it into two equal portions. Leave one white, and color the other with the cocoa mix as follows: Put cocoa powder and sugar in a small bowl then add a little milk or water (about ¼ cup/ 60ml), stir to a thin paste, and then add to half of the batter. Add the coconut to the white batter, and the chopped nuts to the dark batter.

☞ Grease and flour two round 9in/23cm pans. Spread the white batter in one pan, and the dark batter in the other. Bake and thoroughly cool as directed in the basic recipe.

☞ With a serrated knife halve each cake horizontally. Then stack and fill as follows: on a serving platter put the top half of the dark cake, cut side up, and spread it with some filling. Next, put the bottom half of white cake, cut side down, and cover it with some filling. Top it with the bottom half of the dark cake, cut side up, and spread it with some filling. Finally, put the top part of the white cake, cut side down. Cover top and sides with the remaining frosting.

EGG-WHITE FROSTING/ICING

Talbeesat Bayadh 'l-Beidh

This is my favorite frosting. It has a meringue-like consistency that requires no fat. Its sweet taste can always be balanced by sprinkling it with chopped toasted nuts. In the commercial bakeries of Baghdad and other large cities in Iraq, this frosting rather than the shortening-based ones is used for decorating birthday and wedding cakes. In a way, it is a variation on the royal frosting, but unlike the latter, it does not dry out and get chalky after a while. If you want to keep the frosting white, it is better to use clear vanilla, or powdered vanilla rather than the regular brown variety. A stand mixer will be helpful in making this frosting. The following amount is enough for filling and frosting the basic cake. It is a good idea to mix the filling with thoroughly drained and chopped canned fruits.

1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar

¼ teaspoon citric acid or cream of tartar, or

1 teaspoon lemon juice

½ cup (125ml) water

2 egg whites

1 teaspoon vanilla

½ teaspoon cardamom, optional

For garnish: Finely chopped toasted nuts

☞ Combine sugar, citric acid, and water in a medium heavy saucepan. Bring to a boil, stirring until sugar dissolves. Then let sugar boil gently, undisturbed, skimming if needed, until medium consistency is reached. You can tell by placing a drop on a cold dry plate. It should keep its shape when the plate is tilted, 4 to 6 minutes.

☞ While syrup is cooking, put egg whites in a clean and dry medium bowl. Start whisking until somewhat stiff. Slowly and in a thin thread, pour one third of the syrup, whisking all the time. Return the remaining syrup to heat, and resume cooking until it thickens but before it starts to change color, 5 to 6 more minutes. Add thickened syrup in a thin thread to egg white, whisking all the time.

SPONGE CAKE

Keka Isfanjiyya Makes 16 servings

☞ Add vanilla and cardamom if used, and continue whisking until frosting is stiff enough to hold its shape. Use immediately.

☞ To color frosting, it is better to use paste food-coloring rather than the regular liquid variety to prevent frosting from having a runny texture.

☞ Since this frosting is sensitive to humidity, after frosting the cake put it in a warm oven until the outside of the frosting forms a kind of protective skin. You can tell by touching the surface of the frosting. If it does not stick to your finger, it is ready. A hair drier blown on hot but gentle cycle will also do the trick. However, if you choose to sprinkle nuts on the frosting, do this immediately after you ice the cake and before the frosting forms a skin.



CHESS BOARD CAKE

Kekat il-Shitrinj

Another attractive way of making Black and White Cake is to bake the black and white batters separately in 2 loaf pans. When cool, divide each into 4 parts, horizontally and vertically. Alternate colors for a chess board effect, sticking pieces together with the frosting/icing. Cover the entire surface with the rest of the frosting.

The medieval bakers made safanj 'sponge' cakes using fermented *zababia* batter which, when baked, developed a spongy texture ideal for soaking it up with syrups and melted butter. In a simple version, the batter was baked in the *tannour*, then it was turned over onto a plate and cut into four parts. While still hot, it was moistened with fresh milk and sprinkled with sugar. In some more elaborate preparations, the baker would stick a big reed (to be removed after baking) in the middle of the batter. The hole was used to pour syrup and melted butter for the cake to soak up (al-Warraaq, Chapter 100; *Anwa' al-Saydala* 215). In another 10th-century preparation, simply called unlatticed *zalabya*, batter was made of flour or cornstarch, milk, and eggs, lots of them. It was whipped until frothy and reached the large bowl's top. The batter was put in a pot, which in turn was put inside a larger

DOMED STEAM CAKE

Kekat il-Bukhar Makes 12 servings

one. Water was poured so that the delicate egg mixture was baked in a kind of water bath. When done, the cake was overturned onto a large bowl until it cooled off. It was then sliced and drenched in milk, and clarified butter. Sugar and ground black pepper were sprinkled for garnish (al-Warraq, Chapter 100). Black pepper was believed to aid digestion of sweet pastries.

In Iraq today the most popular cake to bake at home is the sponge cake, light and flavorful.

The following is an easy and light sponge cake in which soda drink is used to give it a moist texture. Instead of the original lemon flavored 7-Up, you can use other varieties. My favorite is 7-Up flavored with cherry.

3 eggs

1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup (250ml) 7-Up (not diet), open can only when ready to use

2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour

¼ teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon baking powder

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a medium bowl, beat eggs with an electric mixer until thick and lemon colored, about 5 minutes. Add sugar in three batches beating well after each addition, and then add vanilla, and 7-Up.

☞ Sift together flour, salt, and baking powder. Add to the egg mix all at once, and stir just until well blended.

☞ Grease and flour a 10-cup capacity bundt/ring pan, and shake off excess flour. Pour batter into pan, and bake in the preheated oven for 40 minutes or until the cake is springy to the touch and surface is golden brown.

☞ Immediately, invert cake pan on a tray or plate sprinkled with confectioners' icing sugar, but do not remove the pan. Let the cake cool completely in this position, undisturbed. The cake will fall off into the plate or tray after a while. When completely cool, remove the pan, and decorate the cake to your fancy.

A unique cake baked on top of the stove. A reminder of how our medieval ancestors sometimes baked their cakes when *tannour* was not used. For one of al-Warraq's 10th-century cake recipes, a steam pot was created. First, batter was prepared by mixing flour and cornstarch, and whipping them vigorously with milk and eggs. Then the bottom of a big pot was lined with reeds. The batter was poured into a smaller pot, covered with a lid, and placed on the reeds. The big pot was put on fire; water was poured into it, and was left to simmer, covered, until cake was done. After turning it onto a platter, the cake was sliced and moistened with milk and melted butter, with a generous sprinkle of sugar, and a little bit of black pepper (al-Warraq, Chapter 100).

The function of the steam pot in the following cake is to allow steam to gather on top of the cake, thus keeping it moist, which is critical in the dome formation, as you'll see in the following instructions.

1½ cups (6½oz/190g) all-purpose/plain flour

¼ cup (1oz/30g) cocoa powder

¼ teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon baking powder

5 eggs, separated

1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar, divided

2 teaspoons vanilla

1 tablespoon lemon juice, add enough cold water to make ⅓ cup (80ml) liquid

½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda

For the filling:

Whipped cream of your choice

Slices of fresh fruit or drained canned fruit

For the topping:

3 rounded tablespoons cornstarch/cornflour

1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar

2 cups (475ml) milk

¼ cup (1oz/30g) cocoa powder

¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter

1 teaspoon vanilla

For garnish: **2 tablespoons ground pistachio or nuts of your choice**

☞ Mix flour, cocoa powder, salt, and baking powder. Set aside.

☞ Beat egg yolks in a bowl until lemon colored, about 2 minutes. Gradually add ¾ cup (6oz/180g) sugar, 2 minutes. Mix in vanilla. Dissolve baking soda in the diluted lemon juice [do this just before adding to cake mix], and beat, 1 minute.

☞ Add the flour mix all at once and fold lightly and quickly with a wooden spoon just until mixed. Set aside.

☞ With clean and dry beaters whisk egg whites until soft peaks form. Gradually add ¾ cup (6oz/180g) sugar and continue whisking until peaks stand firm but not dry, about 5 minutes.

☞ Using a wooden spoon fold third of the egg-white mix into the yolk mix. Then gently and quickly fold in the remaining egg-white mix in two batches. Fold just until evenly incorporated, try to keep as much air as possible.

☞ Pour the batter into a greased medium-size pressure pot. Put lid on but remove the pressure valve, and close the hole with a piece of paper towel or kitchen paper.

☞ Cook on very low heat for 40 to 45 minutes or until steam starts to come out of the hole, and a smell of baking cake starts to emit. A diffuser will be useful here. To test for doneness, insert a thin skewer through the steam hole. If it comes out clean, cake is done. Start testing after 35 minutes of cooking. Do not overcook, otherwise surface will set and you will not be able to have it domed.

Above: Fruity ripe yellow dates



☞ Immediately after it is done, invert the cake onto a heatproof bowl, the upper rim of which matches that of the pot. Remove the pot and seal the bowl with plastic wrap/cling film. The purpose of this is to prevent any steam from escaping while cake is cooling. This will help the cake develop its characteristic domed top. When completely cool, put the cake on a serving plate domed-side-up. Cut it into two parts horizontally, and fill it with cream and fruits.

☞ The cake is then covered with the hot topping, and here is how to prepare it: Combine the dry ingredients of the topping in a small heavy pot. Add milk gradually, stirring all the time with a wire whisk to prevent lumping. Cook on medium heat, stirring frequently until it bubbles and thickens, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat, add butter and vanilla, and mix well. Immediately cover the entire surface of the filled domed cake with the topping. Give the surface an interesting swirly look. Sprinkle surface with your choice of garnish, and refrigerate for about 2 hours before serving.

BANANA AND PISTACHIO LAYER CAKE/GATEAU

Kekat il-Moz wil-Fistiq Makes 16 slices

It is possible that the ancient Mesopotamians knew of bananas. Some of the Assyrian bas-reliefs show, among other food items on the tables, an object which appears to consist of a number of finger-like sections joined at their base, somewhat resembling a bunch of bananas. It is certain; however, that it was known and consumed during the Middle Ages. It is once mentioned in the *Qur'an* as one of the delicious fruits that grow in the Paradisiacal Garden of Eden (called *talh*, in *Surat al-Waqi'a*, verse 29).

The 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook includes a recipe called *judhabat al-moaz*, made by layering cut bananas with thin *ruqaq* breads, and sprinkling them with sugar, until the pot was filled. The pot was then baked in the *tannour*, under a roasting chicken to get all the drippings while it was roasting (al-Warraq, Chapter 92). In 13-century *judhabat al-moaz*, banana pieces were dipped in batter, fried, then immersed in syrup, thrown into pounded sugar, arranged between two flat breads, and put under a roasting chicken to receive the drippings (Ibn al'Adeem 2: 633). They sound so much like the fried bananas sold by vendors on the streets of Thailand and other South-Asian countries.

We also learn from the stories in *The Arabian Nights* that banana leaves were used for wrapping groceries. In the modern scene, the trees still grow in some gardens, but the bananas they yield are tiny.

In the following recipe the cake is perfumed with rose water, which, combined with bananas and pistachio, gives it an unusually delicious medieval flavor.

For the cake:

- ½ cup (125ml) oil
- 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup (about 7oz/200g) mashed banana (2 medium ones)
- ⅔ cup (2oz/60g) desiccated unsweetened coconut
- 2 teaspoons rose water
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2½ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ⅔ cup (160ml) buttermilk (or ⅔ cup milk, mixed with 1 tablespoon lemon juice)
- ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
- ½ cup (2oz/60g) walnut, broken into small pieces

For the frosting/icing:

- ½ cup (4 oz/ 115 g), packed, brown/soft brown sugar (light or dark)
- ¼ cup (60ml) heavy/double cream
- 3 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup (3oz/85g) confectioners'/icing sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon rose water or/and vanilla

For the filling:

- 1¾ cup (430ml) chilled heavy/double cream
- 3 heaping tablespoons confectioners'/icing sugar
- 1 tablespoon rose water

For garnish:

- ¼ cup (1oz/30g) coarsely ground pistachio
- Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5



GOLD 'N SPICY PUMPKIN CAKE

Kekat il-Shijar il-Ahmar Makes 16 slices

A variation on the Banana and pistachio Layer Cake/ Gateau. Pumpkin gives the cake an appealing golden hue and moist texture.

For the cake:

- ½ cup (125ml) oil
- 1½ cups (13oz/370g) granulated sugar
- 3 eggs
- 1 cup (about 7oz/200g) canned puréed pumpkin (not pie filling)
- ⅔ cup (2oz/60g) shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 2½ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder

For the frosting/icing:

- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon cinnamon
- ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
- ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
- ⅔ cup (160ml) buttermilk (or ⅔ cup milk, mixed with 1 tablespoon lemon juice)
- ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
- ½ cup (2oz/60g) walnut, broken into small pieces

For the filling/icing:

- ½ cup (4oz/115g), packed, brown sugar/soft brown sugar (light or dark)
- ¼ cup (60ml) heavy/double cream
- 3 tablespoons butter
- ½ cup (3oz/85g) confectioners'/icing sugar, sifted
- 1 teaspoon rose water or/and vanilla

For the filling:

- 1¾ cup (430ml) chilled heavy/double cream
- 3 heaping tablespoons confectioners'/icing sugar
- 1 tablespoon rose water

For garnish:

- ¼ cup (1oz/30g) shelled and toasted unsalted pumpkinseeds, coarsely ground pistachio, or walnut halves

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ To make the cake: Put oil, sugar, and eggs in a big bowl. Beat well for 2 minutes. Mix in mashed banana, coconut, rose water, and vanilla, and beat well.

☞ In a medium bowl, sift flour, baking powder, salt, and cardamom. Stir baking soda in buttermilk, and immediately, stir flour mix into oil mix in three batches, alternating with buttermilk (in two batches), and then add walnut pieces. Stir just until batter is combined, avoid overbeating.

☞ Grease and flour two 9in/23cm round baking pans. Divide batter between the two pans, and bake in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes, or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean and surface is golden. Let stand for 10 minutes on a rack, then invert and cool completely on the rack.

☞ To make the frosting/icing: In a small saucepan, combine sugar, cream, and butter. Bring mixture to a boil, on medium heat, stirring to allow sugar to dissolve. Boil gently for about 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Let it cool off to room temperature.

When you finish assembling and filling the cake with the whipped cream (see following step), go back to the cooled off frosting, and add the confectioners' sugar, and stir. Then stir in rose water and/or vanilla, until smooth (it should be neither too thick nor too runny in consistency). Use it immediately, as directed in the following step.

☞ To make the filling, and assemble the cake: Put the filling ingredients in a small chilled bowl, and whip until the cream holds its shape. Cut the cakes into halves horizontally. Put one layer, topside down on a serving platter, and cover the surface with a third of the filling. Cover it with the bottom half, cut side down, and spread surface with a third of the filling. Cover it with the bottom half of the other cake, cut side up, and spread the last third of the filling on its surface. Next, cover it with the top layer, cut side down. Press the pile of layers gently with your hand to help them stick together.

Immediately, spread the finished frosting (see above step) on the top surface of the cake, allowing it to come slowly and nicely down the sides, like icicles. Sprinkle pistachio all over the surface, and chill the cake for at least an hour before serving it.

GOLDEN APPLE SQUARES

Kekat il-Tuffah Makes 18 pieces

☞ To make the cake: Put oil, sugar, and eggs in a big bowl. Beat well for 2 minutes. Mix in pumpkin, coconut, and vanilla, and beat well.

☞ In a medium bowl, sift flour, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, cardamom, and nutmeg. Stir baking soda in buttermilk, and immediately, stir flour mix into oil mix in three batches, alternating with buttermilk (in two batches), and then add walnut pieces. Stir just until batter is combined, avoid overbeating.

☞ Grease and flour two 9 in./23 cm round baking pans. Divide batter between the two pans, and bake in the preheated oven for about 30 minutes, or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean, and surface is golden. Let stand for 10 minutes on a rack, then invert and cool completely on the rack.

☞ To make the frosting/icing: In a small saucepan, combine sugar, cream, and butter. Bring mixture to a boil, on medium heat, stirring to allow sugar to dissolve. Boil gently for about 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Let it cool off to room temperature. When you finish assembling and filling the cake with the whipped cream (see following step), go back to the cooled off frosting, and add the confectioners' sugar, and stir. Then stir in rose water and/or vanilla, until smooth (it should be neither too thick nor too runny in consistency). Use it immediately, as directed in the following step.

☞ To make the filling, and assemble the cake: Put the filling ingredients in a small chilled bowl, and whip until the cream holds its shape. Cut the cakes into halves horizontally. Put one layer, topside down on a serving platter, and cover the surface with a third of the filling. Cover it with the bottom half, cut side down, and spread surface with a third of the filling. Cover it with the bottom half of the other cake, cut side up, and spread the last third of the filling on its surface. Next, cover it with the top layer, cut side down. Press the pile of layers gently with your hand to help them stick together. Immediately, spread the finished frosting (see above step) on the top surface of the cake, allowing it to come slowly and nicely down the sides, like icicles. Sprinkle the toasted pumpkinseeds or pistachio all over the surface, or arrange walnut halves in a decorative manner. Chill the cake for at least an hour before serving it.



A light cake, delicious and easy to make. Any kind of sweet eating apples will do. Cooking apples are not recommended for this cake because they will not have enough time to soften while baking.

For the cake:

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup (160ml) oil
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (60ml) apple sauce, optional
 1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 4 eggs
 Grated rind of 1 lemon
 1 tablespoon lemon juice
 2 teaspoons vanilla
 1 teaspoon cardamom
 $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (3oz/85g) currants or raisins, optional

SPICY PRUNE CAKE

Kekat il-'Injas Makes 16 slices

For the topping:

5 to 6 medium apples (about 3lb/1.35kg), peeled, cored, and sliced into $\frac{1}{3}$ in/8mm thick pieces
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (2oz/60g) slivered/flaked almond or chopped walnut
 2 teaspoons cinnamon
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (2oz/60g) granulated sugar
 Confectioners' icing sugar for garnish, optional
 Preheat oven 350°F / 175°C / gas mark 4

☞ In a big bowl, beat oil and applesauce if used, along with sugar, eggs, lemon rind, lemon juice, vanilla, and cardamom, about 3 minutes.

☞ Sift together flour, salt, and baking powder, and add them to egg mixture all at once. With a wooden spoon or mixer stir until well blended, about 2 minutes. Fold in raisins if using any.

☞ Spread the batter evenly in a 15-by-10-inch (38x25.5cm) greased and floured baking pan. The batter will spread thinly but will puff when baked.

☞ Arrange the apple slices on the entire surface in rows, slightly overlapping the pieces. Scatter nuts evenly on the apple, sprinkle cinnamon, followed by the sugar.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 35 to 40 minutes or until the top is golden brown, and an inserted toothpick comes out clean (make sure to insert it into the batter and not the apple).

☞ Allow cake to cool in the pan on a rack. Do not invert. Cut it into squares while still in the pan. Sprinkle the pieces with confectioners' sugar before serving, if liked.



Prune was a valued fruit in ancient Mesopotamia. In *The Assyrian Herbal*, a monograph on Assyrian vegetable drugs, it was mentioned as a kind of conserve, which should be eaten with butter and honey (Thompson 129-30). In Akkadian, it was called '*antahsum*' (cf. Arabic '*injas*'), and was used in cooking as a souring agent (see Introduction, Section VI.3). The ancients' belief in '*antahsum*' medicinal power has been scientifically confirmed in recent studies. At any rate, prunes are delicious and we can eat them for sheer delight, as in this sumptuous cake. Simply sprinkle it with confectioners' icing sugar, or cover it with chocolate frosting, given below, for more dressy occasions.

1½ cups (10oz/285g) prunes
 1¼ cups (310ml) brewed tea, or water with a tea bag
 ½ cup (125ml) oil
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 3 eggs
 1½ teaspoons vanilla
 2½ cups (9oz/250g) all-purpose/plain flour
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 ½ teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon cinnamon
 ¼ teaspoon ground nutmeg
 ¼ teaspoon ground cloves
 ½ teaspoon baking/bicarbonate of soda
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) walnut, broken into small pieces
Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

☞ Put prunes and tea (or water and tea bag) in a small pot. Bring to a boil, then simmer for about 10 minutes, or until prunes soften. Drain the prunes, but reserve the drained liquid. Let them cool off to room temperature. Discard the tea bag if used.

☞ In a big bowl, put oil, sugar, eggs, and vanilla, and beat for 2 minutes. Set aside.

☞ Sift together flour, baking powder, salt, cinnamon, nutmeg, and cloves, and set aside.

☞ Now, cut the drained prunes into smaller pieces, and set aside. Add enough cold water to the reserved liquid to make it measure ¾ cup (160ml), and add to it the baking soda.

☞ Immediately, stir the flour mix into the egg mix, in two batches, alternately with the measured prune liquid. Gently stir in walnuts and cut prunes.

☞ Pour the batter into any of the following pans, greased and floured:

10-cup capacity bundt/ring pan will need about 45 minutes of baking.

9-by-13-inch (23x33cm) pan for a sheet cake will need about 35 minutes of baking.

Two 9 in./23 cm round baking pans, for a layer cake/gateau. This needs about 40 minutes of baking. After the cake is done, use the filling and frosting/icing of Banana and Pistachio Layer Cake 000-00, and follow instructions there.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven (follow times mentioned in step above), or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean. Let the cake cool in the pan on a rack for 10 minutes, then invert it, and serve plain or frosted.

Suggestion:

After the cake is baked and cooled, drizzle it with a simple frosting/icing: mix 1 cup (6oz/180g) sifted confectioners' / icing sugar with 1 to 2 tablespoons of liquid, such as rose water or milk until of spreading consistency.

After the cake is baked and cooled, cover it with the following simple and delicious frosting/icing:

CHOCOLATE FROSTING/ICING

Talbeesat il-Kakaw

Amount suggested below will be enough to cover a sheet cake in a thin layer. Double the amounts if a thicker frosting is desired.

¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
 1 teaspoon vanilla, almond extract/ essence, or rose water (see Glossary)
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) cocoa powder
 1 cup (6oz/180g) confectioners' /icing sugar, sifted
 3 to 4 tablespoons warm water
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted walnut, broken into small pieces

☞ In a small pot melt butter, and remove it from the fire when it starts to boil.

☞ With a wire whisk, stir in vanilla (or whatever you choose to us) and cocoa powder. Then stir in powdered sugar in batches alternately with water until smooth and of spreading consistency. If for some reason mixture looks oily and separated, beat in a little bit more warm water as needed until the frosting looks smooth and of spreading consistency. Do not give up on it. It will be smooth again.

☞ After you spread the cake with the frosting, sprinkle the toasted nut pieces all over the cake.

RAISIN CAKE

Kekat il-Kishmish Makes 16 servings

If you are a *kishmish* (raisin) fan as I am, you'll love this cake. It is relatively lighter than the traditional cakes.

¾ cup (180ml) oil
 1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 4 eggs, separated
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 1 cup (6oz/180g) raisins
 ⅔ cup (160ml) milk or tea, may be spiked with a bit of brandy
 1 teaspoon finely grated lemon rind
 2½ cups (10oz/285g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 2 teaspoons baking powder
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a big bowl, mix oil and sugar. Add the egg yolks gradually, beating after each addition, about 3 minutes. Add vanilla. Stir in raisins, milk, and lemon rind.

☞ Sift together flour, salt, and baking powder, and stir into the oil-yolk mix.

☞ In a small bowl, and with clean and dry beaters, whisk egg whites until stiff peaks form but not dry, about 3 minutes.

☞ With a wooden spoon, fold third of the beaten egg white into the oil-yolk mix. Then add the rest of the egg white in two batches, folding gently and quickly, until well blended.

☞ Pour the batter into a greased and floured 10in/25.5cm tube/ring pan, and bake in the preheated oven for about 40 minutes or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean.

☞ Let the cake cool in the pan on a rack for 10 minutes, and then invert it. When cool, sprinkle it with confectioners' / icing sugar if wished.

Raisin Cake



GOLDEN COCONUT CAKE

Kekat Joz il-Hind Makes 14 to 16 slices

My passion for coconut goes back to the times when my father used to gather us around him and tell us of the adventures of *Sindibad al-Bahri* (or *Sandabad* as he used to pronounce it). In one of his voyages, *Sindibad* happened to land on a desert island where a herd of monkeys, stationed on top of palm trees, attacked him by throwing down coconuts at him. We thought that was very funny, and the story would unfailingly stir in us the desire to eat fresh coconut. We loved the ritual of puncturing it first to take out the milk (whey-like liquid), and then hammering the shell to get out the crunchy pulp. We used to eat a lot, only to regret it after a while when all the fat we gulped down would take its toll on us, and make us feel nauseated.

Coconut in Iraq is also called *joz nargeela* because the emptied coconut shell was used to contain water for the *nargeela* (hookah). The shell had other uses for the medieval cooks. In al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, a small hole was pierced in the bottom of half an emptied shell, and was used as an instrument in making *zalabiya*. Nowadays we use funnels instead.

Here is an easy and delicious cake for you, which comes out of the oven ready with the topping. You also have the option of not using the topping, and filling and frosting it any way you like. Use any of the fillings or icings scattered in this chapter.

For the cake:

½ cup (125ml) oil
¾ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
2 eggs
1 teaspoon vanilla
½ teaspoon ground cardamom
1¼ cups (7oz/200g) all-purpose/plain flour
1½ teaspoons baking powder
¼ teaspoon salt
½ cup (125ml) milk
½ cup (1½oz/45g) shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut

For the topping:

¼ cup (2oz/60g) melted butter, do no substitute
⅔ cup (3oz/85g) granulated sugar
½ cup (2oz/60g) all-purpose/plain flour
½ cup (1½oz/45g) shredded/desiccated unsweetened coconut
¼ cup (1oz/30g) walnut, broken to pieces
1 teaspoon vanilla, or/and ½ teaspoon ground cardamom, or both

Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

- In a medium bowl, put oil, sugar, eggs, vanilla, and cardamom. Beat well for 2 minutes.
- Sift flour, baking powder, and salt. Stir into the egg mix in two batches, alternately with milk. Fold in the coconut.
- Grease and flour 8-by-8- inch (20x20cm) baking pan, and spread batter evenly. Then mix the topping ingredients, and spread it evenly on the batter. Press the topping lightly.
- Bake the cake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes, or until an inserted toothpick comes out clean and topping is golden. If topping starts to brown before cake is done, drape it with aluminum foil. Let the baked cake cool in the pan on a rack, and then turn it carefully into the serving dish. If wished, drizzle the topping with melted chocolate or confectioners' icing sugar mixed with a little rose water or milk, until of spreading consistency.

IRAQI ÉCLAIRS

Makes 34 pieces

Éclairs, simply called *kek*, are quite popular in Baghdad. Baghdadi bakers make the shells crispier and lighter than the European éclairs, and the filling, a little thicker and lighter. The following rendition is the closest I could get to this version. I like to flavor these cakes with the perfumes of Arabia, namely cardamom and rose water. A sturdy mixer like Kitchen aid would really come to your aid in this recipe, since the mixture would be a little stiffer than the regular cake batter (use the flat beaters). Another tip, baking shells in a hot humid oven for the first 30 minutes is the clue to successfully puffed éclairs. Make sure that the filling and the shells are completely cool before you fill the cakes, otherwise steam will soften the shells.

*For the shells:*

2 cups (475ml) boiling water
⅔ cup (160ml) oil
¼ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour
4 eggs and 2 egg whites, beaten
½ teaspoon ground cardamom, or/and
1 teaspoon vanilla

For the filling:

1 cup (4oz/115g) flour
A dash of salt
1¼ cups (10oz/285g) granulated sugar, adjust to taste
5 cups (1.25 liters) milk
2 egg yolks
1 tablespoon rose water, 1 teaspoon cardamom, or/and
1 teaspoon vanilla
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
For Chocolate Glaze:
½ cup (125ml) water
½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (2oz/60g) butter
½ cup (2oz/60g) cocoa powder
1 teaspoon vanilla or rose water
1½ cups (6oz/180g) instant dried milk (such as Nido), if lumpy, press through sieve
If needed, about ¼ cup (1oz/30g) confectioners' icing sugar; or additional cocoa powder or dried milk if semi sweet glaze is preferred
Oven temperature: 400-325°F (200-160°C/ gas mark 6-3

- To make the shells: In a medium heavy pot combine water, oil, salt, and sugar. Bring to a boil. Then add flour all at once, and stir vigorously with a wooden spoon until thick dough forms and starts to pull away from the sides of the pot, about 2 minutes. Put away from heat, and allow to cool slightly (cool enough not to cook eggs when added).
- With a mixer, add eggs to the flour mix one at a time, beating well after each addition. Add cardamom or/and vanilla. The finished dough will be soft and sticky, about 5 minutes. If dough climbs up on the beaters of the hand-held mixer while beating, push it down with a spoon.



☞ With oiled hands, take a small mound (size of golf ball) and roll it lightly between the hands to shape like a sausage, about 3 in./7.5 cm long. Arrange the pieces on an ungreased baking sheet, leaving space between pieces.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven (400°F/200°C/gas mark 6), and put a small pot of hot water on the lowest rack to help create moisture and let the cakes puff more easily. After 30 minutes lower heat to 325°F (160°C/gas mark 3), remove the pot and continue baking for about

Above: Caramel-topped éclairs

20 minutes or until the pieces are golden brown. Take them out of the oven and let them cool completely.

☞ With a small sharp pointed knife, make a slit along one of the sides. Open it up a little, and put enough of the filling (see following step) to fill the cavity. Cover the top with the chocolate glaze (directions below), by taking a small amount with a spoon or a knife and spreading it on the piece.

☞ To make the filling: In a small pot, combine flour, salt, and sugar. Add milk gradually stirring all the time with a wire whisk, and then whisk in the egg yolks. Bring to a boil on medium-high heat, stirring constantly until mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. Put away from heat and stir in the chosen flavoring and butter. Let cool completely, covered.

☞ To make the Chocolate Glaze: In a small pot bring water and sugar to a boil and let them cook gently for about 5 minutes (do not let liquid thicken into syrup). Add butter and stir to melt it, and put it away from heat. Using a hand held mixer or spoon, stir in sifted cocoa powder until well blended, and add vanilla or rose water. Next, gradually beat in the dried powdered milk. The glaze should develop a medium consistency, neither too thick, nor runny. If needed, add the additional confectioners' sugar or cocoa powder or dried milk, just enough to make the glaze thick enough to hold its shape.

Suggestions:

Instead of Chocolate Frosting, caramelized sugar with broken toasted nuts may be used (see Almond Brittle 000).

CREAM-FILLED SPIRALS

Makes 12 pieces

Another favorite cake, known by the generic name *kek*. It is easy to prepare at home if ready-made puff pastry is used. To make the characteristic spiral shapes, bakeries usually use special cone-shaped molds. To make molds, cut pie aluminum pans in half, and then fold each half to form a cone. Overlap the sides and secure them so that they will not open up while baking.

Apparently, medieval bakers were familiar with the technique of puff pastry. It was called *muwarraga* (layered), and *musamma* (made with clarified butter). The first method was to roll out dough thinly, spread it with melted *samn* (clarified butter), fold, and repeat several times. The second method was to roll out dough thin, spread it with *samn*, roll it like a reed, coil it, and then roll it out thin. Both methods create pastry with lots of layers (*Anwa' al-Saydala* 179; al-Tujibi 72-73). In al-Baghdadi's 14th-century augmented version, a puff pastry called *liyiyya* (from *liyya* sheep's tail fat) was made with white flour dough. It was rolled out thinly, spread with pounded tail fat, and folded. The procedure was repeated several times. Before baking, it was sprinkled with sugar (435-36). Here is how to make the spiral cakes:

One 16oz (450g) package puff pastry sheets
1 egg white for glazing, whisked until foamy
1 recipe filling for *Iraqi Éclair* (recipe above)
About ½ cup (2oz/60g) coarsely ground toasted
peanuts or pistachio
Preheat oven 400°F / 200°C / gas mark 6

☞ Thaw pastry according to package directions. Divide sheets lengthwise into 12 strips.

☞ Wind strips around greased aluminum cones, starting from the pointed tip. Secure the strip by pressing it to create a pointed tip, and then overlap layers to cover the entire cone.

☞ Arrange the cones, seam side down, on a baking sheet. Brush them with the whisked egg white, and bake them in the preheated oven for about 20 minutes or until golden brown and crisp.

☞ Allow the pieces to cool slightly, then carefully take them out of the molds (You can reuse the molds).

☞ Fill the completely cool cones, with the chilled filling. This is important to keep the cakes pleasantly crisp. Immediately dip each cone in chopped nuts to cover the filling completely.

NO-BAKE CAKE TRUFFLES

Makes 24 pieces

A lovely way for using up stale cake. I remember as child in Baghdad, I used to look forward to Fridays when the little balls of moist dark cake, rolled in white shredded coconut, made their appearance at the neighborhood bakery. They were delicious and the mystique behind their weekly appearance made them all the more desirable. It was many years later that I knew the secret - they were made once a week because the bakers waited until a good amount of stale cake accumulated to make them. They are easy to make, and the ultimate flavor is determined by the stale cake used, and flavors and liquids chosen to bind the mixture.

1½ pounds (675g) left over cake (10 to 12 slices)

½ cup (2oz/60g) toasted walnut

½ cup (2oz/60g) chocolate or cocoa powder

½ cup (6oz/180g) apricot jam

3 to 4 tablespoons liquid, it could be orange juice, tea, or coffee, may be spiked with a bit of brandy or rum

¼ cup (2½oz/75g) shredded/desiccated

unsweetened coconut

☞ Process the cake in a blender or food processor until it turns into fine crumbs, a minute or two. Transfer crumbs to a big bowl, process walnut until coarsely chopped, and add it to the cake crumbs. Add cocoa or chocolate powder and jam, and mix well.

☞ Add the liquid, and work lightly with the fingers or fork until mixture is moist, but still firm in consistency. To test, take a small amount and press it between the fingers. It should hold together.

☞ Moisten your hands with orange juice or coffee, and form into 24 balls, the size of a walnut each. Put coconut in a dish. Roll each ball as you form it in the coconut. Arrange the finished balls in a big dish, in one layer. Set aside at room temperature for about an hour before using. Nice to nibble with coffee.

Jokes on Fools and Nitwits

Two nitwits were trying to strike a 'genuine' exchange of ideas: The first one said, "I found out that I cannot sleep when I drink coffee." The second one, wishing to challenge him, said, "Allow me to disagree with you here, my friend, I personally found out that I cannot drink coffee when I sleep."

A nitwit put a sign outside his store to attract customers in the heat of summer, "We guarantee the ice we sell here is very cold."

A fool bought the European type of chewing gum for the first time in his life. In Iraq this imported sweet gum is called 'ilich abu 'l-saham (Spearmint gum) or 'ilich ingileez (English gum) to differentiate it from the indigenous sugarless gum 'ilich mai' (resin of terebinth tree, see 000 above). The nitwit kept on chewing it the whole day, and when bedtime came, he said I am not going to sleep until I finish it all.

A nitwit went to the doctor complaining that his eye hurts whenever he drinks his tea (usually served in a small thin glass called istikan and a small teaspoon to stir the generous amount of sugar put in it, see picture 000). The doctor looked at him and said, "Next time when you drink your tea, dear fellow, remember to remove the teaspoon first." (Culled from circulating jokes in Iraqi websites, English rendition mine)

Opposite: Hand-washing machine (al-jazari)



COOKIES/BISCUITS

AND SWEET PASTRIES



Kleicha: Iraqi Traditional Cookies/Biscuits 000
 Jam Pie
 Sugar Cookies/Biscuits, *Shakarlama*
Tahini Domino Cookies/ Biscuits
Ka'ak: Sweet Sesame Ovals,
 Iraqi Biscotti (with Dry Yeast), *Bakhsam*
 Iraqi Biscotti (with Baking Powder), *Bakhsam*
 Giant Sesame Cookies/Biscuits, *Baraziq*
 Aniseed Rings
 Nut and Jam Bars
 Nut-filled Crescents
 Diamonds of Almond and Sugar
 Virgins' Breasts: Almond Cookies/Biscuits
 Gluten-free Almond Cookies/Biscuits

Cookies/Biscuits and Sweet Pastries
Basakit Wa Mu'Ajjanat Hilwa
 بسانك ومعجنات حلوة

"Fine flour is appropriate for women and the palace"
 (A Sumerian proverb, Gordon 65)

The ancient Mesopotamians knew about 300 kinds of bread and pastries, some of which were basic types similar to the flat breads still cooking in the region, and others were 'improved' by adding different kinds of flours, spices, dried fruits, oil, milk, beer, and sweeteners. Their pastries ranged from the 'very large' to the 'tiny,' and were shaped differently such as rings, pillars, turbans, crescents, hearts, heads, hands, ears, and even women breasts. Around 1780 bc more than 50 different molds were discovered in the palace at Mari, believed to

have been used for forming breads into unusual and decorative shapes.

The 'improved breads,' that is pastries to which fatty substances and sometimes honey and dried fruits were added, were called '*ninda*' in Sumerian. Pastries made with 'excellent flour' and 'noble oil' were called '*gug*' in Sumerian, and '*kuku*' in Akkadian, from which, undoubtedly, all our *ka'ak* and cakes were derived. All these breads and pastries were baked in the clay oven *tannour*, known in Akkadian as '*tinuru*.' (Bottéro, "The Cuisine of Ancient Mesopotamia" 38; Limet 133-35; Levey 49. For cakes, see Chapter 17).

Making and consuming pastries at times of religious festivals have always been the custom ever since ancient times. So much in demand were those pastries that confectioneries were attached to Babylonian and Assyrian temples. They made the sacred cookies/biscuits, consumed in large numbers during religious occasions, and pastries, which worshippers of the goddess Ishtar crumbled and left for her doves.

It is interesting to learn that they also made what they called '*qullupu*' cookies/biscuits. Dough made of wheat flour and sesame oil was filled with raisins or dates and baked in the *tannour* (Levey 49). Ever since, this type of cookies became the trademark, so to speak, of the bakers in the Mesopotamian region. During the medieval period, similar ones were baked in the ovens of Baghdad. Raghuneen was filled with dates or nuts and shaped in wooden molds, and *khushkananaj* was filled with nuts and shaped like crescents. They are the *kleicha* of today. Cookies were quite popular in medieval times. Besides *khushkananaj* and its variants, other types were made such as *mutbaq* (sandwich cookies) and *mukallal* (with topping of pistachio and sugar). Some cookies were even given some daring sensational names such as *nuhoud al-'adhara* (breasts of virgins) describing simple almond cookies. They made the dry and sweet cookies, called *ka'k*, usually shaped like rings, as well as the thin crisp *barazij*. Crackers such as *aqras fateet* (crumbly) were made of fermented dough, kneaded with oil of skinned almonds, cut out into discs with a cutter, sprinkled with

hulled sesame seeds, glazed with a feather, and then baked in the *tannour* until browned. They baked varieties of crackers *aqras jaffa* (dry cookies) sprinkled with sesame seeds, and *khubz al-abazeer* (crackers with spice-seeds). A platter of *aqras mumallaha* (salted cookies) was always available in case someone craved something salty in the midst of the sweet-cookies orgies.

Kleicha: Iraqi Traditional Cookies/Biscuits

كَلْبِيحَة

Kleicha is the most traditional cookie in Iraq. Historically it may be traced back to the ancient Mesopotamian '*qullupu*' and the medieval Irneen and *khushkananaj* cookies (see Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Festive Cookies/Biscuits below). Following is an excerpt from my article describing the 'ritualistic' traditions involved in making *kleicha* ("The Iraqi Cookie Kleicha, and the Search for Identity" Repast, Fall 2008 vol. xxiv, 4: 4-5):

Kleicha is usually made at home in huge amounts - in the good old days, I should add. The cookies were baked in the *tannour*... or more conveniently sent to the neighborhood bakery, and then stored in covered wicker baskets. I remember when my mother used to prepare us for the *kleicha* day - usually two or three days before the beginning of the '*Id*'. "Making it earlier is risky," so my mother used to reason with us, "by the time the '*Id*' comes not enough *kleicha* would be left." Making these cookies required everybody to pitch in. The dough was usually assembled in a huge bowl called *nijana*. The method is somewhat similar to that of pie dough, but it requires much more kneading. We youngsters would hang around mesmerized by the whole process, and intoxicated by the aromas.

The flour - usually white - was measured and mixed with the enticing blend of spices called *hawayij* (lit. 'the required ingredients'), the most prominent of which was cardamom. Cinnamon, aniseeds, and nigella were also added but in smaller amounts, and of course a bit of salt. Fragrant melted *dihin hurr* (rendered butter of cows'

milk) was then poured while still warm, and the mixture was rubbed between the hands until it resembled breadcrumbs. Warm water was added along with a small amount of yeast, and the mixture was kneaded and kneaded until it turned into a huge smooth ball of dough. That was no easy task because the dough was supposed to be somewhat stiff.

While the dough was set aside to rise, varieties of fillings were prepared. The most popular was walnut, coarsely pounded in the large copper mortar and pestle, mixed with sugar and cardamom, and slightly moistened with rosewater. Other nuts were also used the same way, and sometimes shredded coconut and pounded toasted sesame seeds. For the date filling, the dates were stoned - a low-skill task usually assigned to us kids, who were cautioned against sampling the dates while on the job - and then mashed on a quiet fire with *dihin hurr*, and spiced and enhanced with cinnamon, cardamom, rosewater, crushed coriander, and toasted whole sesame seeds.

The ones to be stuffed were given to grownups to make, since they required a certain level of expertise. The nut-filled ones were formed into half moons or crescents with deftly twisted edges. The ones with dates were usually formed into filled balls and then pressed into a concave wooden mold carved with beautiful geometric designs. This mold is called *qalab al-kleicha* (cookie mold). To expedite the process, some of them were made like Fig Newtons, nothing to be proud of.

The most fun was after all the fillings had been used up and the time for making the *kleicha* thins, called *khfefiyat*, was announced. The leftover dough would be rolled out thinly and plain round cookies were cut out with the *istikan*, a small thin-glass teacup. We would also make free form ones, the most common being daggers and dolls. These unfilled cookies would be indented in an artistic geometric manner using the blunt edge of a knife or the tip of a big key, or simply pricked with a fork. When baking time came, huge trays were sent to the neighborhood bakery, along with several eggs for glazing before baking. There, the cookies would be baked to



A typical wooden cookie mould

perfection. As soon as they cooled down, they were put in huge wicker baskets, covered with muslin cloth beautifully embroidered around the borders, and then stashed at a high place, inaccessible to children. For the following week or so, we would be gorging ourselves with these delicious cookies.

Times have changed, though. With smaller families and the availability of home gas ovens, people started making smaller quantities year-round, including, of course, for the religious feasts. The family would also make sure to send their newly wedded daughter, still a kitchen novice, to her new home with a respectable stock of *kleicha* to offer to her guests. It is also the cookie of choice for exclusively-women afternoon parties called *qabool*. Besides, it makes good provisional food for travelers and picnics because it travels very well.

Even during the embargo years, scarcity of fine flour was not a deterrent. People even used *hunta soda* (lit. 'black wheat', i.e., whole wheat) when white flour was dear. And even in the trying times of the present and despite the hardships and expenses, people still make sure that *kleicha* will be available for the '*Id*', for "'*Id* is not '*Id* without *kleicha*'" they would say. Commenting on such traditions and festive rituals in Iraq, and all the ensuing expenses and troubles, an interviewed husband protests, "But can anyone of us husbands convince the wife not to make *kleicha* in these difficult times?" "I doubt it," he says resignedly. I doubt it, too, for we all grew up on these customs, which are so much engrained in our social and religious lives.

Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Festive Cookies/Biscuits, and the Quest for Meaning and Identity of *Kleicha*:

البحث عن معنى الكليجة

Muslims make *kleicha* for the two major religious feasts. *'Id al-Fitr*, a three-day feast, celebrates the end of the fasting month of *Ramadhan*. It begins with the appearance of the new moon. The second is *'Id al-Adhha*, a four-day feast celebrating the end of the pilgrimage rites in Mecca. Iraqi Christians bake *kleicha* for Christmas and Easter Sunday, which celebrate the birth and resurrection of Christ, respectively. Easter usually falls on the first Sunday after the first appearance of the full moon following March 20. Jewish Iraqis used to bake it for the joyous festival of Purim, which occurs on the 14th day of Adar, usually in March. They called it *ba'ba' bit-tamigh* (date-filled balls). It was stuffed with dates and made into a rounded disc by pressing it into a wooden mold.

For a cookie so popular and familiar, it is rather puzzling that people are in the dark as to how the cookie acquired its name, its origin, or how it came to be associated with religious festivals. My probing into such questions led me to the following:

Looking for older citations of *kleicha* in Arabic books, I discovered that Ibn Battuta, in his famous 14th-Century travels, mentioned he was offered *kalija* in Khuwarizm, a Persian province now in Uzbekistan. He further explained that they were pastries kneaded with *samn* (clarified butter), so it should have been some sort of rich pastry.

Opposite: A tray of Kleicha

The earliest citations of *kleicha* in the extant medieval Arabic cookbooks are:

1. Two recipes in the 13th-Century cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habib* attributed to the Aleppan historian Ibn al-'Adeem mention *kaleeja* (كليجا) as a round shape for a cookie/biscuit, and *qalab al-kalija* as a cookie mold (2: 658, 625). Judging from a recipe in al-Baghdadi's 13th-Century cookbook, the function of the mold was to give the cookie disc a decorative design (Arberry 212).
2. The name also occurs in the anonymous 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id*, where the cookie dough was cut out into discs with a round cutter said to be similar to that of *kaleeja* (105).

As for medieval *kleicha* recipes, we do have them but under the guise of the modified Persian name *khushkananaj* (variant *khushkanan*), which literally means 'dry bread,' merely descriptive of the cookie's texture. So familiar were these pastries at the time that some medieval cookbook writers opted not to include recipes for the ordinary types because no one needs them, they explain. Still, we are lucky enough to have access to some. The most popular shape was the crescent since these cookies were especially baked for the Muslim religious feasts, the time when they were exchanged as gifts among relatives and friends. These 'crescents,' in effect, mimic the new moon, which heralds the beginning of feasting. According to a recipe in Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's 10th-Century *Kitab al-Tabeeh*, a small piece of somewhat stiff dough is flattened and shaped like a tongue, and after some filling - similar to what we use today - is placed on it, the dough is folded lengthwise, sides well sealed, and then baked in the *tannour*. As for the folded stuffed discs with twisted edges - similar to what we do today - these were compared to half moons (Chapter 101).

There are also recipes for a variety stuffed with nuts and sometimes with dates, formed into sealed balls, and then pressed into a decoratively carved wooden mold (*qalab al-kaleeja*). Al-Baghdadi (212) and Ibn

al-'Adeem (2:651) call it *irnin*. *Irnini* may mean 'sweet-smelling Lady' - an appropriate name for a fragrant cookie, to be sure - but more significantly, it is one of the names of the ancient Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar. It is here where we have our clue: Ishtar and her spring festivities and rituals.

This famous Akkadian goddess was known as Inana (Lady of Heaven) in Sumerian mythology. She was the most important goddess, daughter of the moon god Sin and sister of the sun god Shamash. She was goddess of love, war, sexuality, and fertility in humankind. Interestingly, she was also described as goddess of the grains, which explains why women knead dough to make cakes to her. Her planet was Venus, she was called the Morning and Evening star, and her name was often strongly associated with the moon. Besides, due to her journey to the underworld to bring back her shepherd-husband Dumuzi (biblical Tammuz), she was also responsible for the mysteries of death and rebirth. Her spring festivals celebrated the return of life, announced by the first New Moon of the season, around the end of March and beginning of April.

In celebration of the goddess Ishtar and the New Year, special pastries were baked as offerings to her. The confectioneries attached to temples were specialized in making these sacred rich pastries using the finest ingredients, such as flour, date syrup, honey, butter, sesame seeds, sesame oil, and the so much valued rosewater. These luxurious pastries were consumed in large numbers at times of such religious festivals. The worshippers of the goddess Ishtar also crumbled some cookies and left them for her sacred doves. Of these temple pastries, we are fortunate to have specific descriptions of a cookie mentioned by name. It is called *qullupu*, a name, suggestive of its shape: round like the moon. The term was derived from the Akkadian roots *kll* and *kly* meaning 'to complete,' and *kull*, 'whole'. In light of this, etymologically the Iraqi *kleicha* was derived from this ancient Semitic root.

The ancient *qullupu* cookies were prepared by filling portions of dough made with fine wheat flour and



sesame oil with raisins or dates, and then baking them in the *tannour* (Levey 49). We have good reason to believe that they were made, more or less, like the medieval *khushkananaj* filled cookies, *irnin*, and the modern Iraqi *kleicha*. Many pottery molds were discovered in the palace at Mari (in present-day Syria near the Iraqi border) dating to around 1780 bc. They are believed to have been used for forming breads and pastries into unusual and decorative shapes (Ellison "Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia" 91).

Now, with all this emphasis on the cookie mold in Ancient Mesopotamia and medieval and modern times, I am almost tempted to suggest that perhaps the name of the *qullupu* pastry might not have been derived merely from its round shape but also from the fact that a *qalab* (mold) is used in shaping them. However, none of the dictionaries of ancient Sumerian and Akkadian supports this interpretation, so far. (For more details, see my article "The Iraqi Cookie, *Kleich*, and the Search for Identity" *Repast*, Fall 2008 vol. xxiv, 4: 4-7

KLEICHA DOUGH

Makes about 25 pieces

Traditional *kleicha* is usually made with *dihin hurr* (clarified butter). The following is a much lighter version, but yields equally delicious cookies/biscuits. The amount given below is usually doubled or tripled to make an assortment of shapes and fillings.

3 cups (12oz/350g) all-purpose/plain flour
1 tablespoon sugar
 ¼ **teaspoon salt**
 ½ **teaspoon baking powder**
 ½ **teaspoon cardamom**
 ½ **teaspoon ground aniseed**
 ¼ **teaspoon cinnamon**
 ¼ **teaspoon whole or crushed nigella seeds**
 (see Glossary)
 ¾ **cup (180ml) oil (or half melted butter and half oil)**
 ⅔ **cup (160ml) water or milk**

☞ In a big bowl, combine all the dry ingredients. Pour oil (or oil and melted butter), and rub the mixture between your fingers until it resembles breadcrumbs. Add water or milk, and stir the mix in a circular movement to incorporate liquid into flour. Then knead for about 5 minutes to form a pliable dough of medium consistency.

Fillings for *Kleicha*

The most commonly used fillings are nut and date fillings. The rest are used as variations.

Walnut filling (Hashu 'l-Joz):

Traditionally, walnuts are used for filling these cookies/biscuits, but other nuts may be substituted. Toasting the nuts before grinding them will help bring out their aroma.

2 cups (8oz/225g) shelled walnut
 (may substitute with almond or pistachio)
1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
2 to 3 tablespoons rose water

☞ Put all the ingredients, except rose water, in a blender or food processor and grind for a few seconds or until coarsely ground. Sugar will prevent nuts from getting pasty. Turn into a bowl and sprinkle the mixture with rose water. Stir with a fork to allow particles to somewhat stick together. Shape as shown in *Shaping Kleicha* below.

Date filling (Hashu 'l-Tamur):

Traditionally, dates are softened by cooking and mashing them with lots of clarified butter (*ghee*). Cocoa powder enhances the taste and color of the dates, but it is a modern addition.

2 cups (12oz/350g) pitted dates
About ¼ cup (60ml) water or orange juice
2 tablespoons butter
1 teaspoon cocoa powder, optional
 ½ **teaspoon cinnamon**
 ½ **teaspoon ground cardamom**
 ½ **teaspoon coarsely crushed coriander or aniseeds**
 ¼ **cup (1oz/30g) toasted sesame seeds**
1 teaspoon rose water or orange blossom water

☞ Put dates, water, and butter in a heavy skillet or a medium heavy pot. Cook over low heat mashing dates with the back of a wooden spoon until they soften. Mix with the rest of the ingredients, and shape as shown in *Shaping Kleicha* below.

Coconut filling (Hashu Joz il-Hind):

2 cups (6oz/180g) unsweetened shredded/desiccated coconut
1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 ½ **teaspoon ground cardamom**
1 to 2 tablespoons rose water or orange blossom water

☞ Mix the ingredients, and shape as you do with walnut-filled variety, shown in *Shaping Kleicha* below.

Toasted Sesame Filling (Hashu 'l-Simsim):

2 cups (8oz/225g) toasted sesame
1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
1 to 2 tablespoons rose water

☞ Pulverize toasted sesame and sugar in a blender or a food processor. Mix with cardamom and rose water, and shape as you do with walnut-filled variety, shown below in *Shaping Kleicha*.

Cheese filling (Hashu 'l-Jibin):

2 cups (8oz/225g) shredded mozzarella cheese
 ¾ **cup (½oz/45g) finely chopped parsley**

Mix the ingredients, and shape as shown below in *Shaping Kleicha*.

Shaping *Kleicha*

The shapes are so traditional that they make *kleicha* instantly recognizable.

Walnut-filled Kleicha (Kleichat il-Joz):

For these cookies/biscuits, use walnut filling given above, or any of the suggested alternative nuts. The smaller the cookies are made, the prouder the maker would be of her/ skill and dexterity. But since the tiny ones are time-consuming, the following instructions will yield medium-sized ones. Here is how to shape them:

☞ Take a walnut-size piece of dough and with your fingers flatten it to a thin disc. Put about 1 heaping teaspoon of walnut filling (or alternative fillings) in the middle. Fold the disc in half; and seal it by first pressing along the edge, and then pinching and twisting inwards the sealed edge with the tips of your thumb and index fingers, which will give the cookie its characteristic look.



Date-filled Kleicha (Kleichat il-Tamur):

Following are the two traditional ways for shaping date-filled *kleich*:

☞ Take a piece of dough size of a walnut, and flatten it with the fingers into a disc. Put a heaping teaspoon of date filling in the middle of the disc. Gather the edges and seal them well to prevent date from showing. Form into a slightly flattened ball, make a dent in the middle with your thumb, and shape a kind of border around the upper ridge of the flattened ball, by pinching it with an upwards twist. Alternatively, if you have the wooden mold (*qalab il-kleicha*) put the stuffed piece into the concave, press it well, and then tap it out.

☞ Using a rolling pin flatten half the dough into a rectangle, ¼in/6mm thick. Fill two thirds of the rectangle, lengthwise; with half of the date filling by taking pieces of the filling and flattening them between fingers and spreading them on two thirds of rolled out dough. Fold the unfilled third on the middle third, and then turn the other third on the already folded third. Press firmly. With a sharp knife cut into slices about 1in/2.5cm wide. Prick them lightly at 2 or 3 places with a fork, and arrange them in a baking sheet, bottom side down, i.e. avoid letting the cut-side touch the surface of the baking sheet, as this might cause the date filling to burn.

JAM PIE

Paay il-Mrabba Makes 16 pieces

Date-filled/Cheese-filled Flat and Thin Discs (Khfeḥi 'l-Tamur):

Attractive flat thin discs, about 4 in./10 cm in diameter, can also be shaped using the date filling (I sometimes use the cheese filling in the same way, but this is not so traditional).

☞ Take a piece of dough, size of a golf ball. Flatten it with a rolling pin, and put about 1 heaping tablespoon of date or cheese filling in the middle. Gather the edges, and seal them together to prevent the filling from coming out. On a flat surface, roll out the piece with a rolling pin to form a flat circle, as thin as it gets without tearing it. Prick the surface with a fork at several places. You have the choice of sprinkling some sesame seeds on them after brushing them with eggs.

Unfilled Kleicha (Khfeḥiyat):

Dough can also be left unfilled (some people choose to add some sugar to the dough, in this case melt ½ cup (4oz/115g) sugar in the amount of water specified). Here is how to shape it:

☞ With a rolling pin, flatten dough to ¼ in/6mm thickness, and shape it into the traditional discs using the brim of istikan (small teacup made of thin glass), or anything similar. Decorate by pricking with a fork or by denting the surface at several places with the tip of a big key to make geometric designs. Cookie cutters can also be used. Free form shapes are sometimes made, such as daggers, coiled serpents, dolls, and date palms.

Baking Kleicha

☞ Preheat the oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6.
☞ Beat an egg in a small bowl. I highly recommend adding a few threads of saffron to the beaten egg, for color and aroma.
☞ After you are done filling, shaping, and arranging kleicha in a lightly greased baking sheet, brush the pieces with the beaten egg, and bake them in the preheated oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown.



We always tend to associate pies with Western style pastries, but as we have seen in the Introduction, pie-making technique has its roots in the ancient Mesopotamian cooking. The medieval Baghdadi cooks had their own experimentations. *Al-baseesa*, for instance, is made by mixing flour, eggs, oil, and yeast to make a stiff dough. Half of it is rolled out into a disc as big as the pan, with an extra for the edges, just like the way we shape the bottom piecrust today. Then a filling of honey and clarified butter is spread in the bottom crust, and is covered with the top layer, and sealed very well. The pan is lowered into the *tannour* to bake. To serve, the pie is broken into pieces with the fingers and sprinkled with sugar (al-Warraq, Chapter 98). The medieval generic name for such pastries was *mukhbbazat*.

3 cups (12oz/350g) all-purpose/plain flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
1 teaspoon sugar
¼ teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon cardamom
¼ cup (180ml) oil (or half melted butter and half oil)
⅔ cup (160ml) water or milk
About ½ cup (6oz/180g) jam of your choice
Milk and sugar for glazing
Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

SUGAR COOKIES/BISCUITS

Shakarlama Makes about 20 pieces

☞ In big bowl, mix flour, baking powder, sugar, salt, and cardamom. Add oil (or butter and oil) and rub with the fingers, until mixture resembles breadcrumbs. Add milk and knead briefly until it gathers into a ball.

☞ Divide dough into 2 parts (one a little bit smaller than the other), and with a rolling pin, flatten them into 2 circles the size of a large dinner plate, about ¼ in/6mm thick. Put the slightly bigger disc on a greased ovenproof flat dinner plate and trim the edges with a knife. Cover the surface with jam, leaving about ½ in/1cm of the edge unfilled. Cover with the other disc pressing the two layers gently to get rid of air pockets. Seal the edge in a decorative way, and prick the surface with a fork at several places.

☞ Brush the surface with milk and sprinkle lightly with sugar. Then bake it in the preheated oven for 45 minutes, or until golden brown. Let cool off, and then cut it into 16 wedges.

Shakarlama is traditionally shaped into 4 in./10 cm discs studded with the characteristic toasted almond in the middle of each. The well-made ones are pleasantly brittle, and almost melt in the mouth before you even start chewing them. This is one of those recipes in which you cannot compromise when it comes to fat. Bake them when you have a crowd to entertain. Etymologically, we tend to think of *shakarlama* as a borrowed Persian word. It might well be, but ultimately it is an Arabic word, meaning 'sugar discs,' (*-lama* is originally the Arabic *lama* = shape into a disc, meaning in *Taj al-'Arous*, s.v. **الشمع**).

In the rest of the Arab countries, *shakarlama* is called *ghurayyiba* (f. diminutive of *ghareeb* 'exotic'). In Turkey during the Ottoman era, it developed into *kurabiye*, and first mention of it occurs in the 18th century (Yerasimos 233). To my knowledge, the earliest recipe for this kind of cookie is provided by al-Warraq in his 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 101). The recipe belongs to Abu Sameen, who was the personal chef of the Abbasid Caliph al-Wathiq (d.8447). It was called *khushkananaj ghareeb* (خشكاناج غريب) 'an exotic variety of dry cookies/biscuits.' It was a truly exotic delicate sugar cookie, made if 2 parts sugar and one part fine flour, with some sesame oil to help give it some moisture. The mix was pounded in a mortar until it becomes one homogenous mass. A small rounded bowl was used as a mold. It was stuffed tightly with some of the sugar mix and then turned over onto a large level pan with low sides, leaving a space between pieces. The pan was then lowered into a slow-burning *tannour*. When baked, the cookies were removed from the pan with a thin spatula. The recipe instructs to carefully slide the spatula underneath each cookie and transfer it to a clean platter, where they were arranged in one layer.

Sugar Cookies/Biscuits



TAHINI DOMINO COOKIES/ BISCUITS

Biskit bil-Rashi Makes 46 bars

1 cup (8oz/225g) shortening or butter
 1 cup (6oz/180g) confectioners'/icing sugar
 1 egg white
 1 teaspoon rose water or orange blossom water,
 optional
 1 teaspoon cardamom
 2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour
 1 teaspoon baking powder
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 20 skinned whole almonds, toasted
 About ⅓ cup (2oz/60g) confectioners'/icing sugar
 for sprinkling
 Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ Using a mixer beat shortening or butter in a big bowl. Add sugar, egg white, rose water if used, and cardamom, and beat them well for about 3 minutes
- ☞ Sift together flour, baking powder, and salt. With a wooden spoon, stir them into the shortening mix. Then lightly knead to make dough of medium consistency.
- ☞ Pinch off a piece, size of a walnut, and form it into a ball, which you flatten a little and put on a lightly greased baking sheet. Repeat with the rest of the pieces leaving about 1in/2.5cm space between them to allow for expansion.
- ☞ Press an almond in the center of each piece, and bake them in the preheated oven for 20 to 25 minutes, or until they just start to change color at the edges. Take them out of the oven and let them slightly cool off in the baking sheet before removing them, so that they do not break. While still warm, sift confectioners'/icing sugar on them.

I have made up this easy version of sugar cookies using my favorite ingredient tahini/sesame paste (rashi in Iraq). You can make them in 5 minutes and bake them in 30 minutes. They are delicately sweet, flaky in texture, and their taste is reminiscent of the traditional halwa tahiniyya, known in the West as 'halvah.' For a more elegant presentation, they can be made into domino bars as suggested below.

½ cup (125ml) oil
 ½ cup (125ml) *tahini*/sesame paste
 1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 1 egg
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 1 teaspoon cardamom
 2 cups (8oz/225g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ cup (2oz/60g) chopped toasted walnuts
For decoration: 1 pound (450g) melted dark chocolate, 3 ounces (85g) melted white chocolate, and colored mini chocolate chips, optional
 Preheat oven 350°F/ 175°C/ gas mark 4

- ☞ In a medium bowl mix oil, *tahini*, sugar, egg, baking powder, salt, and cardamom. Beat well with a mixer for about 2 minutes. With a wooden spoon, stir in the flour, and fold in nuts. Knead lightly and briefly just to combine ingredients together into a ball.
- ☞ Lightly grease 13-by-9 inch (33x23cm) baking pan and spread and press mixture in the pan very well.
- ☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes, or until golden brown. Then let the pan cool off on rack for 15 minutes. With a sharp thin knife, carefully cut it into bars, 1½ by 1in (3x2cm) each (i.e. size of a domino piece). Let the cookies/biscuits cool off completely in the pan.
- ☞ Dip each piece in melted brown chocolate, and with the help of white chocolate and colored mini chips make them look like domino pieces. Alternatively, serve them plain, or with a simple drizzle of melted chocolate.

KA'AK: SWEET SESAME OVALS

Ka'ak bil-Simsim Makes 44 to 50 pieces

Ka'k is a confusing word. In standard Arabic, it is a generic name for cakes and cookies/biscuits. In Middle-Eastern countries other than Iraq, *ka'k* can be sweet stuffed cookies, like our *kleicha*. It can also be savory ring breads sprinkled with sesame. Iraqi *ka'k*, on the other hand, is dried oval-shaped cookies. They are porous and brittle, and as such, they are excellent for dunking in sweetened tea, which is fact is the most popular way for consuming them. They are made in two varieties. *Ka'ak abu 'l-simsim* is sprinkled with sesame and is somewhat sweet. *Ka'ak abu 'l-dihin* is made plain without sesame, and is faintly sweet.

Nobody bakes *ka'ak* at home. It is usually bought from specialized bakeries, and the best place to go to in Baghdad is *Ka'ak il-Seyyid*, a family owned business established in 1906, whose well-guarded recipes have passed from one generation to the other. Several *ka'k* recipes were given in the extant Arabic medieval cookbooks. They might differ in some details, but they were all invariably dry, and as such, were valuable provisions for travelers. It is said that Prophet Muhammad used to sustain himself with *ka'k* and olive oil during his long days of meditation in the mountain cave. The most characteristic shape was the ring (but see *Ka'k* Recipes from al-Warraq below). We learn from the Lexicon *Taj al-'Arous* that there was a famous *ka'k* market in Egypt called *souq al-ka'kiyyeen*, and that the best variety was made in the Levant. The name *ka'k* may ultimately derive from the ancient Sumerian '*gug*' or the Akkadian '*kuku*,' which designate refined and dainty pastries used to be baked for the affluent.



It is a good idea to toast sesame seeds before using them in the recipe to allow them to brown nicely while baking. To toast the seeds, put them in a skillet on medium heat, shaking and stirring frequently. Or you can toast them in a moderate oven, stirring several times, about 5 minutes.

1 cup (250ml) oil
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 2 eggs
 ¾ cup (180ml) milk
 ⅓ cup (80ml) honey
 1 tablespoon vanilla
 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
 1 teaspoon crushed aniseed
 6½ cups (26oz/735g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 2½ teaspoons baking powder
 1½ cups (6oz/180 g) toasted sesame seeds,
 Oven temperature: 375-300°F (190-150°C/gas mark 5-2)

IRAQI BISCOTTI

Bakhsam with Dry Yeast Makes about 40 pieces

☞ In a big bowl, beat oil, sugar, and eggs with a mixer. Stir in milk, honey, vanilla, cardamom, and aniseed. Add 2 cups (8oz/225g) of the flour, salt, and baking powder, and mix well. Next, with a wooden spoon, stir in the rest of the flour until incorporated, and then knead briefly with slightly floured hands to form a somewhat sticky soft dough.

☞ Put sesame seeds in a bowl, and with slightly floured fingers (use the least amount possible), divide the dough into 45 to 50 portions, size of a walnut, each. Start by rolling a piece in the sesame seeds, allowing it to pick up as much as possible. Then form it into a flattish longish oval, ½ in/8mm thick and 2½ in/6.5cm long, by shaping and pressing the piece between your hands, which will also help the sesame seeds stick to the cookie.

☞ Arrange the pieces in ungreased baking sheets (you will need two large ones, 11-by-17-in./28x43cm), leaving a little space between pieces. In the preheated oven (375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5), start by baking the first pan on the middle shelf. After 10 minutes, shift it to the upper shelf, and put the second one in its place. After 10 more minutes, lower heat to 300°F/ 150°C/ gas mark 2, and let cookies bake and dry out slowly for about an hour (you might need to rotate the pans half way through).

Writing in the 13th century, botanist Ibn al-Bayter mentions a variety of *ka'k* (see above) called *baqsamaat* (بِقْسَامَات). He also calls it *khubz Rumi* (Byzantine bread), and comments that in the western Islamic region people call it *basmaat*. A recipe in Ibn al-'Adeem's 13th-century *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* makes it quite clear that *baqsamaat* is twice-baked (2: 661-61). This is no other than biscotti as we know it today. A casual reference to *bashmaat* in 13th-century *Andalusian Anwa' al-Saydala* confirms this: the direction in a recipe is to slice a piece of cheese as you do with *bashmaat* (75).

Neither 10th-century al-Warraq nor 13th-century al-Baghdad mentioned this variety of twice-baked *ka'k*, so it must have been introduced to the region at a later date. Today, both types of the dry cookie - *ka'ak* and *bakhsam* - are quite popular in the region. We buy them by the bagfuls and dunk them in our afternoon tea. Like *ka'k*, Iraqi *bakhsam* is made barely sweet to balance the sweetness of the tea traditionally served. They are also useful in another way. When pounded, they replace breadcrumbs in some of the dishes.

The following recipe uses dry yeast. However, if you are pressed by time follow the alternative recipe given below. Both will yield deliciously crunchy cookies, though somewhat sweeter than they are traditionally made.

1 tablespoon dry yeast
 1 tablespoon sugar
 1 cup (250ml) warm milk
 1 cup (250ml) oil
 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
 4 eggs
 1 teaspoon vanilla or/and cardamom
 2 teaspoons whole aniseeds
 6½ cups (26oz/735g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 Preheat oven 425°F/ 220°C/ gas mark 7

☞ In a small bowl, dissolve yeast and sugar in warm milk. Set aside for 5 minutes.

Bakhsam



Ka'k Recipes from al-Warraq's 10th-Century Cookbook

In medieval Arabic sources, *ka'k* was described as a variety of dry cookies/biscuits usually formed into rings, made with or without sugar. However, as the following recipe shows, *ka'k* was available in other shapes, such as squares (amounts replaced with modern equivalents):

Take 7½ pounds fine samidh flour (high in starch and bran free). Make it into dough using 10 ounces ground sesame seeds, which have not been extracted of their oil [i.e. *tahini*/sesame paste], 1 ounce almond oil, and 1 teaspoon salt. For each 7½ pounds [of flour] add 2 ounces white sugar and 1½ grams saffron. Knead the mixture with 1 ounce yeast [and some water]. When dough is fully fermented, rub it with a little fat and rose water beaten together. Roll it out on a board into a square and cut it out into smaller squares. Bake them in the *tannour* by sticking

them [into the inner wall]. When done, take them out and leave them at the top of the tannour for a short while, to dry out, God willing. (Chapter 13)

Another *ka'k* recipe is called *aqras fateet* (crumbly crackers). It is taken from the copy of the gourmet Abbasid prince Ibrahim bin al-Mahdi (d.839):

Take 2½ pounds fine *samidh* flour (high in starch and bran free), and take for it ½ pound *tabar zad* (white cane sugar) dissolved in 2 cups water. Knead vigorously and set dough aside to ferment [Apparently, yeast was used in making the dough]. After dough has risen, pour on it 5 ounces oil of skinned almonds and knead lightly. Then cut out dough into regular even-sized discs using a mold (*qalab*) and sprinkle them with hulled sesame seeds. Prick the pieces with a feather and bake them in the tannour until they are golden. Take them out of the oven and set them aside in the open air for about an hour until they dry out. When eaten they will crumble in the mouth. (Chapter 13)

☞ In another bowl, use a mixer to beat oil, sugar, vanilla or/and cardamom, aniseeds, and 3 eggs and 1 egg yolk. Reserve 1 egg white for brushing the pieces. Stir in yeast mixture.

☞ In a big bowl, mix flour and salt. Make a well in the middle and pour in the liquid mixture. With a wooden spoon stir in a circular movement to help liquids incorporate into flour. Knead for about 5 minutes to form a somewhat sticky dough of soft to medium consistency. Oil dough on both sides, and let it rise, covered, at a draft-free warm place for about 45 minutes.

☞ Punch down the dough and form it into two regular cylinders, about 15 in./38 cm long. Transfer them to a baking sheet. Allow a good space between the

cylinders to allow for expansion. You can also put them in 2 separate baking sheets, instead. Flatten the cylinders slightly and let them rise, covered loosely, at a warm place for 45 minutes, or until they double in bulk.

☞ Beat the reserved egg white until foamy and brush the cylinders with it. Bake in the preheated oven for 15 minutes or until cylinders are golden brown. Let them cool on a rack. Then with a serrated knife, cut them into ½ in/1cm slices crosswise

☞ Arrange the pieces on baking sheets, cut side down, and re-bake at 325°F (170°C/ gas mark 3 for about 45 minutes, or until they are golden brown, and dry and crisp. Half way through baking, you will need to turn the pieces once to allow both sides to brown, and rotate positions of baking pans.

IRAQI BISCOTTI

Bakhsam with Baking Powder Makes about 48 pieces



Easy to make biscotti, crisp and fragrant. It is an adaptation of the basic cake mix given in Chapter 17. I mix the regular flour with some rice flour to give the cookies a nice grainy texture.

- ¼ cup (180ml) oil
- 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
- 3 eggs, beaten
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 teaspoon cardamom
- 2 teaspoons whole aniseeds or fennel
- 1 cup (250ml) milk
- 3½ cups (14oz/400g) all-purpose/plain flour
- 1 cup (6oz/180g) rice flour
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 cup (4oz/115g) walnut, broken to large pieces
- Oven temperature 375-325°F/ 190-170°C/ gas mark 5-3

- ☞ In a big bowl and using a mixer, beat oil, sugar, eggs, vanilla, cardamom, aniseeds, and milk, about 2 minutes.
- ☞ Sift together flour, rice flour, salt, and baking powder, and add them to the egg mix all at once. Stir until flour is completely incorporated, about a minute. Fold in nuts. The batter will be on the thick side.
- ☞ Spread batter in greased and floured 10-by-15-inch (25.5x38cm) baking pan, and bake it in the preheated oven 375°F (190°C/ gas mark 5), 35 to 40 minutes or until golden brown and an inserted toothpick comes out clean. Invert it on a rack and let it cool thoroughly.
- ☞ With a serrated knife cut it in half lengthwise, and then cut it crosswise into ½in/1cm strips. Arrange the pieces, cut side down, in two large baking sheets, in one layer. Re-bake in a slow oven at 325°F (170°C/ gas mark 3) for about an hour or until pieces are golden brown, and dry and crisp. Rotate position of sheets half way through baking, and turn the pieces once to brown on both sides.

Barad (Hailstones): A Medieval Crispy Treat

The following recipe is given in al-Baghdadi's 13th-century cookbook. The puffed, small pieces of crisp pastry are bound together with honey and then cut into pieces. They remind me of the rice-crispy cookies/biscuits of the modern West: Take best white flour, make into a dough, and leave to rise. Put a basin on the fire, with some sesame-oil. When boiling, take in a reticulated ladle some of the dough, and shake it into the oil, so that as each drop of the dough falls in, it sets. As each piece is cooked, remove with another ladle to drain off the oil. Take honey as required, mix with rose water, and put over the fire to boil to a consistency: then take off, and while still in the basin, whip until white. Throw in the *barad* (hailstones), and place out on a soft-oiled surface, pressing in the shape of a mould. Then cut into pieces, and serve. (Arberry 211)

GIANT SESAME COOKIES/BISCUITS

Baraziq Makes 20 large pieces

Traditional *baraziq* bought from bakeries are crisp huge round cookie/biscuit, encrusted with green pistachio on one side, and golden sesame seeds on the other. One of their ancestors might well have been *barazijj barazeedhaj* breads mentioned in al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 13). They were described as relatively thin white crisp breads, leavened with borax *buraq* (see Medieval Leavens 000). Some were sweet and others were not. When baked, they looked as beautiful as crystal trays. The cookies are usually enjoyed plain. Glazing them with frosting perfumed with rose water is my addition. You may drizzle melted chocolate on the immaculately white spacious surface of the glazed cookie. You may even draw pictures or write brief messages with chocolate frosting.

- ½ cup (4oz/115g) butter, and ½ cup (125ml) oil
- 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons water or milk
- 1 teaspoon vanilla
- 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
- 1 teaspoon ground aniseed or fennel
- 4½ cups (18oz/510g) all-purpose/plain flour
- 2 teaspoons baking powder
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ cup (2oz/60g) coarsely ground pistachio or walnuts
- ½ cup (125ml) honey, heated
- ¾ cup (2 ½oz/75g) toasted sesame
- For glaze:** 1 cup (6oz/180g) sifted confectioners'/icing sugar, 1 tablespoon rose water, and about 3 tablespoons whipping cream or milk
- Preheat oven 400°F/ 200°C/ gas mark 6

- ☞ With a mixer, beat together butter, oil, sugar, eggs, water or milk, vanilla, cardamom, and aniseed, about 2 minutes.
- ☞ In a separate bowl, mix flour, baking powder, and salt, and add them to the creamed mix all at once. With a wooden spoon, stir them in a circular movement until well incorporated. Then knead lightly and briefly until the mixture gets together and forms into a ball.



- ☞ Divide dough into 20 golf-ball size pieces. You may make them smaller if you prefer.
- ☞ Put pistachio, honey, and sesame in three small separate bowls (heating honey will make brushing it on the cookies/biscuits much easier).
- ☞ Dip each ball in pistachio first, allowing it to pick up as much nuts as possible. Then put it on a greased baking sheet, and flatten it with the fingers to ¼in/6mm thickness, shaping it into an oval or a round disc. If wished, crimp edges by pinching with thumb and index finger. Brush the disc with honey, and sprinkle it generously with sesame seeds. Repeat with the rest of pieces. Leave a space between them to allow for expansion.
- ☞ Bake in the middle of the preheated oven 12 to 15 minutes or until golden brown. Leave in the pan for a few minutes to allow them to set, and then transfer them to a rack using a thin metal pancake turner. Let them cool completely, and serve them plain. Alternatively, you may glaze and decorate them as in the following step.
- ☞ To glaze the pieces, mix confectioners'/icing sugar, rose water, and enough milk or whipping cream to form a glaze of spreading consistency. Pour it on the cookies/biscuits, and set aside until set. Decorate to your fancy.

ANISEED RINGS

Biskit il-Habbat Hilwa Makes about 20 rings

These are one of my favorite cookies/biscuits, delicately flavored with aniseed. Relatively low in fat, and lightly sweetened.

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup (80ml) water
 2 heaping tablespoons whole aniseeds
 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups (9oz/250g) all-purpose/plain flour
 1 teaspoon baking powder
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (3oz/85g) confectioners'/icing sugar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) oil
 1 egg, divided
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ Boil aniseeds and water in a small pot for about 3 minutes. Let them steep for about 10 minutes, and then strain them. Keep the liquid and discard the seeds.

☞ In a big bowl mix flour, baking powder, confectioners'/icing sugar and salt. Add oil and rub between the fingers until mixture resembles breadcrumbs.

☞ Make a well in the middle and pour the strained liquid and beaten egg white. Stir with a wooden spoon to incorporate the ingredients. Then lightly knead to form dough of medium consistency.

☞ Divide dough into 20 pieces, size of a walnut each. Roll each piece like a pencil $\frac{1}{2}$ in/1cm in diameter, overlap ends to form a ring, then seal well to prevent them from opening up while baking. Arrange the rings in a greased baking sheet, leaving a little space between pieces, and brush them with beaten egg yolk. Bake in the preheated oven for 15 to 18 minutes, or until golden brown.

NUT AND JAM BARS

Biskit il-Joz wil-Mrabba Makes 60 bars

Easy to make cookies/biscuits with which you can use your favorite jam or use up the small quantities of jam that no one is interested in any more. By doing this, you'll end up having a variety of cookies spread with different kinds of jams and nuts. The shredded dough on top of the spread jam will give the cookies an attractive texture.

For the dough: $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (180ml) oil
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
 5 eggs
 1 teaspoon vanilla or/and cardamom
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon almond extract/essence
 1 teaspoon grated lemon rind
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ cups (17oz/480g) all-purpose/plain flour
For the topping: 2 cups (24oz/675g) jam of your choice, or use different kinds of jam
 1 cup (4oz/115g) chopped nuts
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a big bowl, put oil, sugar, eggs, vanilla or/and cardamom, almond extract, lemon rind, baking powder, and salt. Beat for 2 minutes. Add flour, stirring with a wooden spoon to incorporate ingredients. Knead briefly to somewhat soft dough, and let it rest for 10 minutes.

☞ Set aside a small portion of the dough (size of a medium orange), and let it chill until needed. Press the rest of the dough in a greased 17-by-11-inch (43x28cm) baking pan (if dough is sticky handle with floured hands). Prick the entire surface with a fork, and bake in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes.

☞ Take the baking pan out of oven, and immediately spread the surface with jam. In case many kinds of jam are used, divide into sections and spread each section with a different jam. Using a hand-grater shred the chilled set-aside dough all over the spread jam. Next, scatter the nuts all over the surface. If using different jams, use different nuts for each section, for more variety.

☞ Resume baking for 25 more minutes or until surface is golden and jam is bubbly. Take it out of the oven, and let it set for about 10 minutes, then cut into diamonds or bars.

NUT-FILLED CRESCENTS

Krosan bil-Joz Makes 48 crescents



This recipe yields a great number of nicely shaped, delicately flavored cookies/biscuits, filled with nuts of your choice.

For the dough:
 2 eggs, reserve white of one egg for glazing
 1 cup (250ml) milk
 1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 $\frac{2}{3}$ cup (160ml) oil
 1 teaspoon ground cardamom
 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups (18oz/510g) all-purpose/plain flour
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt
For the filling:
 1 cup (4oz/115g) toasted nuts of your choice (about 6oz), finely chopped
 $\frac{1}{2}$ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar
 1 teaspoon orange blossom water, or any flavor of your choice
 1 teaspoon cinnamon
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

The Story of Croissant

The crescent and the star are commonly recognized as traditional Islamic symbols. They evolved from earlier Mesopotamian pagan practices. The crescent and the eight-rayed stars of the ancient goddess Ishtar were drawn on so many excavated cuneiform tablets and cylinder seals. They were believed to have a certain mystical power. Shaping pastries into crescents also shares the same roots, and the tradition continues to this day (see also *Mesopotamia, the Cradle of Festive Cookies* 000). As to how the crescent, an Islamic symbol, became the shape of the famous European pastry croissant, here is the story: In 1863, the Ottoman Turks launched an assault on Vienna and were close to succeeding. Inside the city one night during the tense hours before the final assault, a baker, putting his dough in a warm spot to rise, noticed that the puffed-up batter quivered and shook in his bowl. Then, listening tensely he heard a muffled boom. Guessing the Turks had already started their march towards the city, he sent his son running to the military headquarters to tell them the news. Immediately all forces throughout the city were put on the alert. The Turkish attack was met with cannon balls and mortar fire. When finally the Turkish forces were driven out, the baker was given a job in the royal kitchen. To celebrate the victory he created crescent-shaped rolls like the crescent moon on the Turkish banner. The Austrians called them *kipfel*, literally "crescent." Later, when Mary Antoinette became the queen of Louis XIV, she brought the recipe for the crescents with her to Paris, and the French chefs started making the rolls with rich pastry, today known all over the world as croissant. (Watson 154-55)

DIAMONDS OF ALMOND AND SUGAR

Biskit bil-Loz wil-Shakar Makes 28 squares

☞ In a medium bowl, put eggs, milk, sugar, oil, and cardamom. Beat well with a mixer for a few minutes.

☞ In a big bowl mix flour, baking powder and salt. Make a well in the middle, and pour in egg mixture and stir with a wooden spoon to incorporate the ingredients. Knead briefly to make dough of soft to medium consistency. If too sticky, sprinkle with a little flour. Let it rest for 10 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, make the filling: Mix nuts with sugar, orange blossom water, and cinnamon.

☞ Divide dough into 6 portions. On a lightly floured surface, roll out each portion into a circle about 8in/20cm in diameter and ¼in/6mm thick. Divide the circle into 8 triangles and put 1 teaspoon filling on the wide edge of each portion. Start rolling from the wide edge down to the tip. Curve in tips to form into crescents.

☞ Arrange the crescents on a greased baking sheet leaving a little space between pieces. Brush them with the reserved whisked egg white, and bake them in the preheated oven for 15 to 20 minutes, or until golden brown.

These cookies/biscuits were my mother's answer to our nagging request for something nice and sweet to have with tea. They are reminiscent of al-Baghdadi's medieval *aqras mukallala* (a cookie with a topping, 213). She usually made them following her eye measurements, which unfortunately were not always the same.

¼ cup (180ml) oil
 1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar
 2 eggs
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 2 teaspoons ground cardamom
 1 cup (250ml) milk
 4½ cups (18oz/510g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ teaspoon salt
 2½ teaspoons baking powder
For the topping:
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) butter, melted
 1 teaspoon vanilla
 ¼ teaspoon almond extract/essence
 ¾ cup (3oz/85g) slivered/flaked almonds
 ⅓ cup (3oz/85g) granulated sugar
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a medium bowl, mix oil, sugar, eggs, vanilla, cardamom, and milk. Beat well.

☞ In a big bowl, mix flour, salt, and baking powder. Make a well in the middle, and add the oil mix. Stir in a circular movement with a wooden spoon until thick batter forms.

☞ Spread the batter in a well-greased 11-by-17 inch (28x43cm) baking sheet. Even up the surface with oiled fingers. Then, in a small bowl, mix melted butter, vanilla, and almond extract, and spread the mix on the entire surface. Next, sprinkle the almonds all over, followed by the sugar. If you like cookies thinner, use a larger baking sheet, or divide between two pans.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 15 to 20 minutes or until golden brown, and almonds look toasted. Let it cool off for about 10 minutes, then cut it into diamonds or whatever shape you fancy.

VIRGINS' BREASTS

Almond Cookies/Biscuits

Biskit il-Loz/ Nuhoud il-'Adhara Makes 25 pieces

I found this recipe in al-Baghdadi's 14th-century augmented version of his cookbook (*Wasf al-At'ima al-Mu'tada* 416, 422), and 14th-century *Egyptian Kanz al-Fawa'id* (114). It must have been quite popular at the time, what with the delicious taste and sensational name. The recipe calls for equal parts (by weight) of flour, sugar, almond, and clarified butter. No water added. The instruction is to mix the ingredients into a homogenous mass and shape it into breasts, no details given on how to do this.

Here is a small batch using equal parts by weight, converted into volume measurements. The cookies are delicious and wonderfully aromatic. I had to improvise a little.

1 cup (4oz/115g) skinless sliced almonds, slightly toasted
 1 cup (4oz/115g) all-purpose/plain flour
 ½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar
 ¾ teaspoon baking powder
 ¼ teaspoon salt
 ½ teaspoon ground cardamom
 4 tablespoons butter, melted
 ¼ cup (60ml) oil
 3 tablespoons rose water
 25 raisins
 Preheat oven 375°F/ 190°C/ gas mark 5

☞ In a food processor, put almonds, flour, sugar, baking powder, salt, and cardamom. Pulse mixture until almonds are finely ground, about a minute.

☞ Slowly pour melted butter and oil through the spout while machine is on. Add rose water the same way. Mixture will gather into a ball, about a minute.

☞ Form into 25 balls, the size of a walnut each. Arrange them on a greased baking sheet, and press a raisin in the middle of each.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for 13 to 15 minutes. Do not let them over-bake. They might be a little soft while hot, but they will crisp when cold.

GLUTEN-FREE ALMOND COOKIES/BISCUITS

Biskit il-Loz Makes about 40 pieces

Easy to make with rewarding results, a variation on the traditional *lawzeena* or *hajji badam*. A couple of years ago I developed this cookie for a friend who cannot tolerate gluten. I have been making it ever since and always make sure my cookie jar is well stocked with them.

2¼ cups (9oz/250g) sliced almonds (with or without skin)
 ¾ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
 2 egg whites, slightly beaten with a fork
 ½ teaspoon cardamom
 1 teaspoon almond extract/essence
 About 1 teaspoon rose water
 Preheat oven 350°F/ 180°C/ gas mark 4

☞ In a food processor, grind almonds and sugar. Transfer them to a big bowl. With a fork, stir in egg white, cardamom, almond extract, and rose water. If the mix still looks a bit dry, add a few more drops of rose water. The final mix should hold together without being runny in texture.

☞ Line an 11-by-17-inch (28x43cm) baking pan with aluminum foil. Using two teaspoons form into balls, size of a small walnut each. Transfer it to the baking sheet by gently pushing it with the help of the other spoon. Leave a space between pieces to allow for expansion.

☞ Bake in the preheated oven for about 10 minutes. The cookies/biscuits should still feel a little bit soft to the touch, and they should not be allowed to brown, otherwise they will be too hard. Take out the aluminum foil sheet with the cookies on it, and place it on a cooling rack until the cookies cool off. Then peel them off the paper and serve.

FOOD PRESERVATION



- I Jams**
 Date Syrup, *Dibis* 000
 Watermelon Rind Jam
 Pumpkin Jam
 Cantaloupe/muskmelon Jam
 Carrot Jam
 Beets/beetroot Jam
 Quince Jam
 Fig Jan
 Dried Fig Jam
 Apple Jam
 Plum Jam
 Apricot jam
 Peach Jam
 Mulberry Jam
 Orange Jam
- II Pickles**
 A General Method for Pickling
 Stuffed Bell Peppers
 Pink Pickled Turnips and Beets/beetroot
 Pickled Onions
 Relish of Pickled Eggplant/Aubergine
 Pickled Lemon

Food Preservation

I JAMS
Al-Murabbayat
 المربيات

Man has never been short of devising ways and means for dealing with the surplus of his produce. From Assyrian cuneiform texts dealing with the medicinal powers of plants, we learn that some fruits like quince, figs, prunes, and cherries were made into a kind of conserve by keeping them in honey. There was a suggestion, too, for how to serve them. They were to be eaten with butter (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 129). In the extant Arabic medieval cookbooks, we have enough jam recipes to reassure us that not much is new under the sun in the realm of jam making, except that while today we enjoy them for sheer delight, our

Above: Apricot jam (see recipe page 508)

The First 'Honeyed' Man

Did you know that the Sumerian wife used to call her husband 'honey man'? He was also addressed as the honey of her eyes (Kramer *History Begins at Sumer* 319).

ancestors, ancient and medieval found them useful as medicine by mixing them with spices and herbs. In medieval Baghdad, Indian mango conserved in honey, *anbijaat* (from 'anba mango), was so popular that it gave its name to jam in general. Another imported variety was ginger conserve believed to be beneficial for cold-tempered people. Chapter 125 in al-Warraq's cookbook includes such recipes, in addition to honey pastes *juwarishnat*, used to aid digestion, cure simple aches and pains, or invigorate coitus. One of the recipes in the chapter is touted as an aphrodisiac, but the recipe cautions against giving it to women. It is a combination of spices: cinnamon, spikenard, cloves, ginger, long pepper, sea musk, and seeds of watercress and carrot. All pounded and made into paste with honey. The way jam is traditionally made now in the hot and dry Mesopotamian summer is to cook a huge amount of the fruit on the stove, and then spread it in somewhat shallow huge containers. On the flat roof of the house, the jam - covered with muslin cloth to keep away dust and flies - would be left to mellow and thicken for a week or so.

Above: Date syrup served with *geymer*



Following is a number of general rules and observations for making jam:

- ☞ Use heavy pots for cooking jam.
- ☞ Handle cooking jams with a wooden spoon.
- ☞ Let jam cook gently. Fold it carefully and frequently to prevent the fruit from sticking to the bottom of the pot.
- ☞ Skimming is important; otherwise, jam will develop a cloudy syrup.
- ☞ To test for doneness, put a drop of syrup on a dry cold dish, and tilt it. If the drop does not go flat, and keeps its domed shape, it is done.
- ☞ For sour fruits use 2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar for each pound (450g) of fruits and ½ cup (125ml) liquid.
- ☞ For less acid fruits, use 1½ cups (12oz/350g) sugar for each pound (450g) of fruits and ½ cup (125ml) liquid.
- ☞ For fruits high in moisture, like strawberries and pumpkin, follow same ratio of sugar per pound (450g) of fruit, but do not use any liquids. Just arrange the fruit in layers with sugar.
- ☞ Add lemon juice 5 minutes before jam is done.

DATE SYRUP

Dibis

This is perhaps the oldest form of preserved fruit. The Ancient Mesopotamians called it '*dispu*' (date-honey) from which the Arabic *dibs* derives. Date syrup is traditionally served with *geymer* (slabs of thick cream, Chapter 2 above). *Dibis* also makes a delicious winter dip when mixed with *tahini*/sesame paste (recipe 000 above). Writing in the 13th century, the famous Ibn al-Baytar says the best variety of *dibs* is made in Basra, and he describes how it is extracted in terms strikingly similar to what is done today. He first describes the pressure-method, which he calls *sayalan* 'oozing.' According to this cold press method, a weight is put on dates to let syrup ooze. Then he describes the boiling method according to which equal amounts of dates and boiling water are cooked until dates disintegrate. Then the mixture is beaten, strained, and put in big containers in the sun to thicken if it is made during the summertime. In winter, the strained mixture is returned to the pot to boil down to the desired consistency (266). Fresh dates are also made into jam. I found the following recipe in the 13th-century Bahgdadi cookbook, it is called Rutab Mu'assal (honeyed dates), and it sounds delicious:

Take fresh-gathered dates, and lay them in the shade and air for a day: then remove the stones, and stuff with peeled almonds. For every ten *ratls* (10lb/4.5kg) of dates, take two *ratls* (2lb/900g) of honey: boil over the fire with two *uqiya* (2oz/60g) of rose water and half a dirham (1.5g/¼ teaspoon) of saffron, then throw in the dates, stirring for an hour. Remove, and allow to cool. When cold, sprinkle with fine-ground sugar scented with musk, camphor and [spikenard]. Put into glass preserving-jars, sprinkling on top some of the scented ground-sugar. Cover, until the weather is cold. (Arberry 213-14)

WATERMELON RIND JAM

Mrabbat il-Raggi

With all the jams cooking in the region, there was a time when the only imported variety was the Australian jam of watermelon rind. It was good but it lacked the enticing aromas of the cardamom, rose water, and many other spices of the homemade varieties. Here is how you can make it at home:

- 1 pound (450 g) watermelon rind (measure after removing the green outer skin and all traces of pink)**
- 1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar**
- 1 strip lemon peel**
- 3 tablespoons honey**
- A few melon seeds**
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice**
- 3 whole pods cardamom**

- ☞ Cut rind into ½in/8mm strips. Cover in cold water and bring to a quick boil. Reduce heat, and simmer slowly until translucent, about 30 minutes. Drain, and reserve 1½ cups (375ml) of liquid.
- ☞ In a heavy pot, completely dissolve sugar in reserved liquid. Add honey and lemon peel, and bring to a boil, skimming as needed. Add the drained rind and seeds, and boil gently over medium heat, for 15 minutes. Remove from heat, cover, and set aside, overnight.
- ☞ Add cardamom pods, and boil again over medium heat until syrup thickens, about 15 minutes. Add lemon juice in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

PUMPKIN JAM

Mrabbat Shijar Ahmar

Pumpkin is popular for its salted and toasted seeds and the delicious jam it yields.

1 pound (450g) pumpkin pulp
1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (1oz/30g) walnut halves
3 cardamom pods
1 tablespoon lemon juice

- ☞ Cut pumpkin into small cubes or strips, layer with sugar and walnut in a heavy medium pot, add the cardamom pods, and set aside overnight.
- ☞ Cook on low heat, stirring gently to let sugar dissolve completely, and skim as needed. Let jam boil gently until syrup is thick and pumpkin is tender and translucent, about 30 minutes. Add lemon juice in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.



CANTALOUPE/MUSKMELON JAM

Mrabbat Batteekh

- ☞ Follow same instructions given in Pumpkin jam above, except substitute 1 pound (450g) melon pulp for pumpkin. The firmer the pulp is the better.

CARROT JAM

Mrabbat Jizar



Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook included an array of jam recipes *murabbayat*, ranging from delicate rose-petal conserve *jalanjabeen* to radish conserve (Chapter 125). Although I have not ventured to do the latter yet, other jams, such as carrot and citron *utruij* conserve, are quite familiar now.

1 pound (450g) carrots, shredded, or cut into strips or cubes
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
½ cup (125ml) water
3 pods cardamom
1 tablespoon lemon juice
¼ teaspoon ground ginger

- ☞ In a heavy pot, layer carrots with sugar and set aside, overnight.
- ☞ Add water and cardamom, and cook gently on medium heat, folding and skimming as needed. Make sure that sugar is completely dissolved. Let the mix cook gently until syrup is thick and carrot is tender and translucent, about 30 minutes. Add lemon juice and ginger in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

BEETS/BEETROOT JAM

Mrabbat Shuwander

Beets make beautiful jam. I always use it in cookie/biscuit recipes that call for a top layer of jam.

1 pound (450g) peeled and shredded beets/beetroot
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
3 pods cardamom
1 tablespoon lemon juice
½ teaspoon ground ginger

- ☞ Put beets in a medium heavy pot and cover with water. Bring to a boil, and then simmer until tender, about 20 minutes.
- ☞ Add sugar and cardamom, stirring well to make sure all sugar grains are dissolved. Let the mix boil gently for about 20 minutes. Add lemon juice and ginger in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.



Above left: Carrot jam
Above: Fig jam (recipe overleaf page 506)

QUINCE JAM

Mrabbat Hewa/Sifarjal

The Akkadians called quince '*supurgil*' (cf. Arabic *safargal*). In the Iraqi dialect, it is known as *hewa*. The ancient Assyrians preferred eating quince simmered in honey, and they had it with butter. Quince needs to simmer slowly, so that pulp may soften and release a wonderful aroma, and its pale flesh develop an attractive brownish-orange hue.

3 medium quinces, peeled, cored, and quartered
1¼ cups (14oz/400g) granulated sugar
3 pods cardamom
1 tablespoon lemon juice

- ☞ If you like chunky jam, cut each quarter of quince into thick slices crosswise. Shred quince for a smoother texture. Cover pieces in cold water, about 3 cups (715ml). Bring to a boil, then reduce heat and simmer very slowly, covered, until quince is tender, about 2 hours. Then drain the quince, and reserve 1 cup (250ml) of the liquid.
- ☞ Dissolve sugar in the reserved liquid. Add cardamom, and cook gently over medium heat, skimming as needed, until syrup starts to thicken. Next, add the drained quince, and continue cooking gently until quince is tender and syrup is thick, about 20 minutes. Add lemon juice in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

FIG JAM

Mrabbat Teen

Figs grow successfully in the middle and northern regions of Iraq. A top quality variety is called *teen wazeeri*. Vendors carrying wide wicker baskets full of luscious figs, customarily cry their excellence saying, "Wazeeri ya teen, lawi ya teen," as they roam the streets of Baghdad, a catchy phrase they must have inherited from their medieval fellow vendors. We know for sure that *teen wazeeri* was a highly valued brand of figs in 10th-century Baghdad (Abu Hayyan al-Tawheedi 170). According to al-Mas'udi (d.957), the best figs grow in Wazeeriyya, a district in the city of Samarra, north of Baghdad, where the palace of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mu'tasim was built (d.842). He describes it as the sweetest of all kinds of figs, with thin skin and tiny seeds (561).

Since figs are highly perishable, it is the custom of the Kurds in the north, where it is most abundant, to preserve the surplus in two ways. Fresh figs are threaded into long 'necklaces' and dried. They were also made into jam. Long strings of flattened dried figs and attractive huge jars of golden fig jam are common attractions at the shops in the northern cities.

Fig jam makes delicious dessert. Put 2 to 3 figs in the bottom of a small bowl with some of the golden syrup and pour hot custard (not so sweet) to cover it. Alternatively, reverse the order -put the custard first then decorate it with fig jam. Garnish with cream and ground pistachios. If you happen to live at an area where fresh figs are readily available make jam as follows, if not, then use dried figs as directed in the next recipe.

1 pound (450g) fresh figs
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
3 pods cardamom
1 tablespoon lemon juice
¼ cup (1oz/30g) toasted sesame, optional

- In a medium heavy pot, put figs and sugar in layers, and set aside, overnight.
- Put the pot on medium heat, add cardamom, and let it cook gently until sugar dissolves, stirring carefully, and skimming as needed. Make sure all sugar granules are dissolved. Let the mix simmer until figs are translucent and syrup thickens, about 30 minutes. Add lemon juice and toasted sesame if used, in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

DRIED FIG JAM

Mrabbat Teen Mjaffaf

1 pound (450g) dried figs
¾ cup (6oz/180g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (60ml) honey
3 pods cardamom
4 whole cloves
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon toasted sesame seeds, optional

- Cover figs in 3 cups (715ml) water and let soak overnight. Then put them with the water in a medium pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat, and simmer, covered, for about an hour.
- Stir in sugar, honey, cardamom, and cloves. Set aside, overnight.
- Bring figs to a boil, then lower heat and simmer gently for about an hour or until figs are translucent and syrup thickens. Add lemon juice and toasted sesame if used, in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

APPLE JAM

Mrabbat Tuffah



For this jam only the locally grown, small and white, sweet and sour apples are customarily used. Excavations have revealed that such apples grew thousands of years ago in the region. The ancient inhabitants used to dry them as strings threaded with apple slices cut crosswise. Since these summertime apples are small, they are usually conserved whole. The best substitute is crab apples or small cooking apples.

1 pound (450g) small cooking apples, peel and leave them whole with stems on if possible; or core and quarter them
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
½ teaspoon mastic, or 1 teaspoon mastic cream (see Glossary) or 3 pods cardamom
1 tablespoon lemon juice

- Cover apples with cold water, and cook until half-done and still firm, about 10 minutes. Drain them, and reserve ½ cup (125ml) of the liquid.
- Put sugar and the reserved liquid in a heavy pot, and bring to a boil, stirring frequently until sugar dissolves, skimming as needed. Add the apples and mastic or cardamom, and continue cooking gently on medium-low until syrup thickens and apples are translucent, about 40 minutes. Add lemon juice in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

PLUM JAM

Mrabbat 'Injas

Plums make tasty and attractive jam.

2 pounds (900g) plums (about 12 medium ones), any variety will do
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
3 pods cardamom

- Put plums in boiling water for 2 to 3 minutes or until peel comes off easily. Remove skin, cut into halves to remove the stone or leave whole with the stone.
- Put the plums in a medium pot (they will sit in one layer), and cover them with 1 cup (250ml) water. Let them boil gently until half done and still firm, 3 to 4 minutes. Remove the plums carefully with a slotted spoon, and set them aside.
- To the remaining liquid in the pot, add sugar and cardamom. Bring to a boil, stirring frequently and skimming as needed. Make sure all sugar granules are dissolved.
- Return the plums to the pot, and let them cook gently until syrup thickens, about 30 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar. If you conserve them whole, then you need to be careful with the stones when you eat the jam.

APRICOT JAM

Mrabbat Mishmish

Commercial apricot jam is available everywhere, but the special touches given to the homemade jam will make it worth the trouble.

1 pound (450g) apricot, cut into halves and stones removed
2 cups (16oz/450g) granulated sugar
3 pods cardamom
4 to 5 toasted whole almonds
1 tablespoon lemon juice

☞ Cover apricots with 1 cup water and bring to a boil until half cooked, about 3 minutes. Then drain the apricots, reserving $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (180ml) of the liquid.

☞ Put sugar, cardamom, almonds, and the reserved liquid in a heavy pot. Bring to a boil stirring frequently and skimming as needed. Make sure all sugar granules are dissolved, about 5 minutes.

☞ Add the apricots, and cook gently until they are translucent and syrup thickens, about 30 minutes. Add lemon juice in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

PEACH JAM

Mrabbat Khokh



Above: Peach jam
 Opposite: Apricot jam

Follow the same instructions given in Apricot Jam. Instead of apricots, use 5 medium peaches (about 1 pound/450g), either nectarines or the furry ones. You do not need to peel the nectarines but you might want to peel the furry ones (just immerse them in boiling water for a few minutes then peel them).

MULBERRY JAM

Mrabbat Tukki

Mulberry trees have been growing on the land of Mesopotamia ever since ancient times, but the interest was largely in their wood rather than the fruit itself. We know for instance that the Assyrian king Tiglath-Pileser cut them down "with the double purpose of destroying fruit trees, and supplying himself with wood" (Thompson *The Assyrian Herbal* 181). The luscious mulberry fruit has never had a significant market value. White mulberry is small and sweet, but the black variety *tukki 'l-Sham* is much larger, and sweet-sour. *Tukki 'l-Sham* is preserved in sugar, and as such, it is sold all year round. I remember we used to buy this delicacy from wandering vendors who carried them in huge wicker baskets, balanced on their heads. As soon as we heard the familiar call coming from afar, "*tuki 'l-Sham ya sherbet*" (meaning, as juicy as a luscious drink), the nimblest of us would rush out to stop him, and the most eloquent would be begging for money from our parents, and in seconds we would be all out ready for a treat. The man would put down his basket, and put away the muslin cloth used to protect those rubies from the nosy flies. Each of us would get a handful of the sweetened mulberries heaped on a mulberry leaf or a piece of paper. This treat normally came accompanied with a 3in/7.5cm long thorn *sillaya* (about) taken from date palm fronds. We would use the thorn as a fork because red mulberries are too messy to handle with the bare fingers. The jam is originally made with white or red mulberries. However, other kinds of berries may be substituted following the same method:

1 pound (450g) berries
1½ cups (12oz/350g) granulated sugar
(a bit more if berries are sour)
1 tablespoon lemon juice
(do not use if berries are sour)
1 tablespoon rose water or
orange blossom water

☞ In a heavy pot, put sugar and berries in layers and set aside, overnight. Then cook the mix on medium heat until sugar dissolves completely, stirring occasionally, and skimming as needed, about 15 minutes.

☞ Remove the berries with a slotted spoon, and set aside. Continue cooking the syrup until it starts to thicken, about 10 minutes. Then return the berries and continue cooking gently until they are plump and translucent, and syrup thickens, about 10 minutes. Add lemon juice if used, and rose water or orange blossom water in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

ORANGE JAM

Mrabbat Purtuqal

In Iraq, citrus jam is sometimes made with varieties, which might be hard to find in the Western market. *Trinj* (citron), for instance, is a huge citrus fruit mainly bought for its thick peel, usually made into jam. In medieval times, it was known as *utrujjiturunj*, and its conserved peel *murabba* was valued for its medicinal benefits. *Rarinj* (orange of Seville) is a cheap variety of orange, which has a thick bitter rind. Its pleasantly sour juice is made into *sherbet* (syrup for making a refreshing drink), and its thick peel is thoroughly scraped and made into jam. Orange with a thick peel can be easily substituted as in the following recipe.

7 thick-skinned oranges
 3 cups (24oz/675g) granulated sugar
 3 pods cardamom
 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 1 tablespoon orange blossom water or rose water
 (see Glossary)

- ☞ Wash oranges thoroughly and cut off both ends; divide them into halves lengthwise; then cut them into thick slices crosswise. Discard seeds.
- ☞ In a big bowl, immerse orange sections in cold water. Put a heavy plate on top to keep them submerged. Set aside, overnight. Then drain them and discard the liquid.
- ☞ Put the drained orange in a heavy pot and cover with water. Let boil gently for 40 minutes. Drain the pieces, and discard the liquid.
- ☞ In the same heavy pot, mix sugar, cardamom, and 2 cups (473ml) water. Bring to a boil, stirring to make sure all sugar granules are dissolved. Skim as needed.
- ☞ Add the orange pieces, bring to a boil, then let the mix cook gently for 30 minutes. Cover the pot and set it aside for 24 hours.
- ☞ Resume cooking the orange mix on medium-low heat, stirring occasionally until peels look translucent and syrup thickens, about an hour. Add lemon juice, and rose water or orange blossom water in the last 5 minutes. Test for doneness, then let the jam cool off completely, and store in a sterilized jar.

The First Romeo and Juliet: A Babylonian Legend

If you want to know how red mulberry came into existence, then read the following:
 A play within Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* tells the tragic love affair of Pyramus and Thisbe, which bears noticeable parallels with the playwright's *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare's source was Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. 8 AD). One of the stories in this Roman book tells how in the city of great Babylon the lovely Pyramus and Thisbe lived in adjoining houses from early childhood. They always played together and after they grew older, they fell in love. Their parents in the meantime quarreled, which resulted in a bitter feud, and they forbade any contact between the lovers. They, nevertheless, discovered a chink in the wall dividing the two houses, and every night, when everybody else was asleep, they whispered sweet words to each other through the crack in the wall until dawn. When they said good night, each kissed his side of the wall. Once they agreed to meet on the coming night of the full moon outside the city.

*The tomb of Ninus was the mark they chose
 There they might rest secure beneath the shade,
 Which boughs, with snowy fruit encumber'd, made:
 A wide-spread mulberry its rise had took
 Just on the margin of a gurgling brook.*

Thisbe, who arrived first, encountered a lion, which had just killed an ox. She fled in terror dropping her veil, which the lion bloodied while tearing it to pieces. When Pyramus arrived later, he found the torn, bloody veil, and believing Thisbe dead, killed himself with his own dagger. The returning Thisbe found her dying lover under the mulberry tree, and in her grief plunged his dagger in her own heart. The mingling blood of the two unhappy lovers spurted over the mulberry tree, coloring its fruit red.
 Ovid concludes:

*The whiteness of the mulberry soon fled,
 And rip'ing, sadden'd in a dusky red:
 While both their parents their lost children mourn,
 And mix their ashes in one golden urn.*



Melon rind (top) and orange peel jam (below)

For the Love of Oranges or Cucumbers?

I once got a present of a nice jar of marmalade expressly made for the Metropolitan Opera of New York city. The marmalade was delicious, but what intrigued me more was the label itself. The marmalade was called "The Love for Three Oranges" after an opera by the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev, written in the 1920s. It was essentially an adaptation of Carlo Gozzi's 18th-century satirical parody of the melodrama, *Fiaba l'amore della tree melarance*.

It is the story of a prince who is cursed by the witch Fata Morgana to fall in love with the three oranges. This triggered some memories in me. My mother used to tell us the story of "The Love for Seven Cucumbers," which bears an uncanny resemblance to Prokofiev's piece. In her version a prince makes fun of an ugly wicked witch, she gets offended and curses him saying, "May you fall in love with the seven cucumbers." The prince's curiosity is aroused, and he sets out looking for them everywhere. Finally, he finds them, and opens one immediately. A beautiful dame comes out of it. She urgently demands some water but there is none around, so she perishes. This happens to six of them, so he decides to open the last one at the riverbank. The moment he opens up the cucumber a

beautiful young woman comes out and urgently asks for water. He scoops some from the river and lets her drink. He falls in love with her and decides to marry her, but asks her to climb up a tree and hide while he goes home, tells his parents, and comes back with an entourage that befits her state. While the prince is away, the witch comes to the place where the princess is hiding. She looks at the surface of the still water, and catches sight of the reflection of the princess's face. Mistaking it for hers, she says, "I never thought I am that beautiful." The princess above hears her and laughs at her. The witch transforms her into a dove and takes her place in the tree. The prince comes back with his parents and followers, he lifts the veil, and so much to his dismay, he finds an ugly woman instead. Embarrassed, he puts back the veil, resigns to his fate, and takes her with him to the palace to marry her. Eventually the prince discovers the truth, the witch is punished and the prince marries the beautiful princess. It is quite likely that fables and stories like these were transmitted from Mesopotamia to Spain where, during the middle ages, the Arabs founded a prosperous Islamic rule. The troubadours who flourished in southern France and Spain from the 11th to the 13th century must have played a considerable role in dispersing such stories, amongst other things, to the rest of Europe.



II PICKLES

Al-Turshi

الطرشي

Pickling is one of the most ancient methods for preserving food. In the excavated Assyrian cuneiform tablets, we come across occasional references to pickled meat. They also made the fermented 'siqqu' sauce for kitchen and table use. They made it out of fish, shellfish, or grasshoppers, so much similar to the oriental fish sauce. The ancients used to nibble on pickled locusts. Apparently the taste for such 'delicacies' continued up until the Middle Ages and possibly later. We know from al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes that these creatures were consumed pickled and made into a condiment called *sihnat al-jarad* (Chapter 40). That was a smart way of using the swarms of locusts, which used to attack the region periodically.

The medieval cooks were as diligent as their ancient counterparts were. They preserved their surplus of meats and vegetables by keeping them in vinegar. In the extant medieval Baghdadi cookbooks, we have recipes for making vinegar, both simple and herbal. Pickled fish, beef, and poultry were called *masgouf*; and pickled vegetables were *mukhlalat* (i.e. kept in *khal* vinegar). The healing and appetizing quality of vinegar and foods prepared with it did not escape them either. Of their benefits, 13th-century al-Baghdadi recommends them "to cleanse the palate of greasiness, to appetize, to assist the digestion, and to stimulate the banqueter" (Arberry 205). Included in his chapter were recipes for pickling vegetables and herbs such as mint, eggplant/aubergine, and turnips. It is now believed that a small amount of vinegar taken daily helps burn calories, and it is a natural way to counter act the storing up of excess fat within the body.

Nowadays no meal is complete without the familiar bowl of *turshi* (pickles) along with salad or a dish of fresh herbs. With the pickled vegetables, some people also like to take a sip or two of the pickling juice. The commercially made pickled mango would sometimes replace the homemade pickles, especially with *Masgouf* (recipe 000 above). We even snack on them at times. It is quite common to see a cucumber-pickle vendor



carrying a large basket on his head wandering the busy streets of Baghdad.

Pickling-vinegar in Iraq is made from dates and grapes. Apple cider would make a satisfactory substitute. Because vegetables are kept in undiluted vinegar, they stay good for a long time even without refrigeration. Vegetables usually used for pickling are peppers, both sweet and hot, cucumbers, cabbage, cauliflower, green/French beans, green tomatoes, green unripe grapes, sunchokes (also known as Jerusalem artichokes), lemons, small onions, olives, turnips, beets, carrots, and eggplant/aubergine.

*Relish of Pickled
Eggplant/Aubergine
(recipe page 517)*



A General Method for Pickling

Stage One:

☞ Wash vegetables and soak them in a briny solution for 2 to 4 days depending on the kind of vegetables to be pickled (see below).

To make brine:

☞ For each 5 cups (1.25 liters) cold water, mix in ¼ cup (2½oz/75g) uniodized salt.

Here is how to prepare the vegetables, and how long to keep them in the brine:

Peppers, different kinds: slash them, keep in brine for 2 days

Cucumbers: slash them, keep in brine for 2 days.

Cabbage: cut the head into fourths, keep in brine for 3 to 4 days.

Cauliflower: Divide into florets, keep in brine for 3 to 4 days.

Green/French beans: Keep in brine for 2 days.

Green tomatoes: cut into fourths, keep in brine for 2 to 3 days.

Green unripe grapes: keep in brine for 4 days

Sunchokes (Jerusalem artichoke): wash them very well to get rid of sand, keep them in brine for 3 to 4 days.

Stage Two:

☞ Drain the vegetables, discard the brine, and immerse them in vinegar, here is how to prepare it:

☞ Bring vinegar to a boil and add as many as you like of the following spices and herbs (quantities are left to your special preference):

Pieces of fresh ginger

Crushed chili pepper

Curry powder and turmeric

Bay leaves

Whole seeds of fennel, mustard, cumin, caraway, and coriander

Baharat (see Glossary)

Skinned whole garlic cloves

Sprigs of fresh or dry herbs, such as parsley, mint, and dill

Sliced lemon

☞ Allow vinegar to cool before using it. Keep vegetables in vinegar for about a week before using the pickles.

General Remarks for Making Pickles

Use non-metal utensils when handling pickles.

Use glass or earthenware jars to keep pickles, and store jars in a dark place.

Try to keep pickles always submerged in vinegar solution. I do this by stuffing the empty space between vegetables and the lid with a handful of dried sprigs of mint or any other dried sprigs of herbs.

Use dry utensils when handling pickles, otherwise white moldy film will form on the surface, which will make pickles look unappetizing. If mold does appear, however, you can still use the pickles, just skim off the white stuff, and rinse pickles before using them.

PICKLED STUFFED BELL PEPPERS

Turshi Filfil Mahshi

Follow rules given above for pickling peppers, but instead of slashing a pepper cut it in half lengthwise, but keep it intact by leaving the upper part uncut. Keep peppers in brine as given in the first stage. Drain them, and then fill them with the following mixture, enough for filling 6 to 7 large peppers:

1 cup (2oz/60g) chopped parsley

1 cup (6oz/180g) shredded cabbage

1 cup (6oz/180g) shredded carrots

½ cup (3oz/85g) chopped onion

1 tablespoon thinly sliced garlic

1 tablespoon curry powder

1 teaspoon crushed chili pepper

1 teaspoon ground ginger

½ teaspoon uniodized salt

☞ Fill peppers with the above mixture and tie each with a sprig of fresh parsley, if wished. Arrange peppers in a pickling jar and drench them in the prepared vinegar following directions given above. Keep for about a week before using.



Pink pickled turnips and beet/beetroot

PINK PICKLED TURNIPS AND BEETS/BEETROOT

Turshi 'l-Shalgham/ Mkhallalaa

Give the humble turnips and beets a makeover by pickling them. We know that both vegetables were used in cooking ancient Babylonian stews (see Introduction VI.1). In the ancient Akkadian language, turnip was 'liptu' (cf. Arabic lift) and beetroot was 'shumundar' (cf. medieval *shamandar* and today's *shwandar*) While beetroot was not mentioned in medieval Baghdadi recipes, turnip was. It was prepared as stews and pickles. Pickled turnips, in particular, must have been quite popular. The anonymous 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* includes an extensive number of recipes for pickling them. For instance, we have stuffed turnips, yellow turnips, turnip pickle made with yeast, or made with pomegranate juice (195-202). Combining turnips and beets must have started later.

Traditionally, turnips and beets are preserved in brine and kept in large earthenware jars called *bastouga*. They are left for forty days on the sunny side of the flat roof of the house, to let it mellow under the gentle warmth of the winter sun. However, this method does not seem to work well in other climates, and it has to be adjusted. Besides, who has the patience to wait for full forty days?

The following is a fast method, which works anytime anywhere. Turnips and beets are essential for making this kind of pickles. Beets will give the vegetables a beautiful pinkish hue. The addition of carrots, cauliflower, and sunchokes is optional, but they do add a desirable variety, especially sunchokes. In Iraq, they are called *almaaz*, a possible variant on the Turkish 'yere/masi.'

3 pounds (1.35kg) medium or small turnips

2 to 3 carrots, or 1 pound (450g) baby carrots

1 small head of cauliflower

2 pounds (900g) sunchokes (Jerusalem artichokes)

2 pounds (900g) beets/beetroot

Uniodized salt for sprinkling

For the briny liquid:

2 tablespoons uniodized salt

12 cups (3 quarts/ 2.75 liters) liquid (blend of beet 'juice' and white vinegar)

4 to 5 juniper berries or corns of black pepper, optional

PICKLED ONIONS

Turshi 'I-Busal

☞ Wash vegetables very well. Cut off both ends of turnips and scrape away any brown areas. Do not peel. If turnips are small just cut across, stopping about $\frac{1}{4}$ in./6 mm short of the other side, leaving the two halves intact. With medium turnips, cut crosswise into halves, then lengthwise into thick slices. Scrape carrots and cut them into thick slices. If baby carrots are used just leave them as they are. Divide cauliflower into florets. If sunchokes are small, just slash them; if big, cut them into halves.

☞ Put turnips, carrots, cauliflower, and sunchokes in a big colander fitted into a bowl. Sprinkle vegetables generously with salt, fold them, and let them drain overnight. Toss the several times while draining.

☞ Meanwhile, prepare the beets: Wash very well, and then cut off both ends. Put them in a medium pot, and add cold water to fill the pot up to three-quarters. Bring to a boil on high heat, then reduce heat and simmer the beets until cooked but still very firm, about 35 minutes. Let them cool off.

☞ When vegetables are ready, put them in two large pickling jars.

☞ Peel the skins of the cooked beets by rubbing them between the fingers under running water or with a knife. Cut the beets into thick slices and put them on top of the vegetables in the jars.

☞ Combine beet juice and enough white vinegar to make 12 cups (3 quarts/ 2.75 liters) of liquid. Stir in salt and juniper berries or peppercorns into the liquid, and pour it into the jars. Do not fill the jars to the brim, leave about $\frac{1}{2}$ in./1cm unfilled to allow for fermentation. If liquid is not enough, complement it with a solution made of half white vinegar and half cold water. Close the jars and turn them upside down 2 to 3 times to allow color to distribute evenly among the vegetables.

☞ Keep the closed jars in a cool dark place for about 5 days. Turn them upside down several times during that period to allow color to distribute more evenly.

☞ These pickles keep very well for 2 weeks unrefrigerated, and will last much longer if kept in the refrigerator.



Small onions make appetizing crunchy pickles. You can pickle them like in the general method given above, or follow this recipe:

2 pounds (900g) small pickling onions (such as pearl onions) washed, both ends cut off, and outer skins removed

Brine made of $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ oz/75g) uniodized salt dissolved in 5 cups (1.25 liters) water

6 cups (1.50 liters) white vinegar

$\frac{1}{3}$ cup (3oz/85g) granulated sugar

3 to 4 chili peppers for garnish

A few sprigs thyme

A few pepper corns or juniper berries

☞ Keep the prepared onions soaked in brine for 2 days. Then boil white vinegar and sugar together for 15 minutes, and let the mix cool off. Drain the onions and add them to the vinegar. Put them in pickling jars, along with chili peppers, herb sprigs, and peppercorns. Leave them aside for about 10 days and use.

RELISH OF PICKLED EGGPLANT/AUBERGINE

'Anbat Betinjan Makes about 2 cups/ 475 ml

'Anba'/'Amba is a popular condiment in the Iraq (for more on its uses and popularity see 000, 000). It is usually made from pickled green mangos, kept in wide-mouthed bottles, imported exclusively from India. In recent years; however, and during the imposed economic embargo, people were forced to make do with so many substitutes. Here is one of them. Eggplant is used instead of green mangos to make this delicious and appetizing relish. An inventive friend of mine, Na'eema, passed on this recipe to me.

1 medium to large eggplant/aubergine (about 16oz/450g)

3 cloves garlic, peeled and cut into chunks

1 red bell pepper, cut into strips 2in/5cm long and $\frac{1}{4}$ in/6mm wide

$\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon crushed hot chili, or to taste

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) olive oil

$1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon uniodized salt

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) cider vinegar

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (125ml) water

1 heaping tablespoon curry powder

1 teaspoon ground cumin

1 teaspoon whole yellow mustard seeds

2 teaspoons grated fresh ginger, or

1 teaspoon ground dried ginger

$\frac{1}{2}$ tablespoon arrowroot, diluted in a little cold water

☞ Peel eggplant, and cut it into strips about 2in/5cm long and $\frac{1}{2}$ in/1cm thick. Discard seeds if any.

☞ In a medium pot, put the prepared eggplant, garlic, bell pepper, crushed chili, oil, and salt. Bring to a quick boil, and then reduce heat to low and let the mix simmer gently until eggplant is cooked, about 20 minutes.

☞ Add vinegar, water, curry powder, cumin, mustard seeds, and ginger. Resume simmering, covered, for about 20 minutes. Fold 2 to 3 times while simmering.

☞ A minute before you decide to turn off the heat, add the diluted arrowroot. Mix well and simmer for one minute then turn off heat.

☞ Let the mix cool off completely, then store it in a sterilized pickling jar, and keep it in the refrigerator for about 2 days before consuming it, to allow flavors to blend. It will keep for about one month if refrigerated.

Suggestions:

If green mangos are available substitute eggplant with 3 medium mangos. Peel and cut them into medium chunks. However, since mangos cook faster than eggplant you need to watch them to prevent them from getting mushy. Follow instructions given above.

Another interesting way of making easy relish is to prepare the sauce without eggplant. When it gets cold, add to it your choice of already pickled vegetables.

For a quick treat, I sometimes buy jars of pickled baby cucumbers or peppers, drain them completely in a colander, and then add them to the sauce after it cools down.

PICKLED LEMON

Turshi 'I-Laymoun

Lemons make refreshing pickles. Following is an attractive way for preparing them:

☞ Slash lemons on 4 sides. Press uniodized salt into the slashes. Put them in a colander, and set them aside for 24 hours so that lemons may lose their bitterness. Next, arrange the lemons in a jar and cover them with white vinegar. Put a few chili peppers, herb sprigs, and peeled garlic. Close the jars tightly, and leave them for 2 to 3 weeks before using them.

BEVERAGES



- I Hot Drinks**
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Beverages
 Al-Mashroubat
 المَشْرُوبَات

I HOT DRINKS
 Mashrubat Harra
 مَشْرُوبَات حَمَارَةٌ

In Iraq tea is served several times a day no matter what season it is. Loose Ceylon tea is the blend preferred. Tea bags are a convenience we can do without. To prepare a pot of tea, a medium-sized teapot and a large kettle are all it takes to brew the perfect tea, even for a big family. However, in some households, a *samawar* is used to keep the tea-drinking ritual going all day. It is a "tea-maker" with a boiler, which in the old days was fuelled by coal. Most of them nowadays come with electric heaters. The teapot is put on this boiler and tea is allowed to brew slowly by the heat of steam. It is very convenient for large gatherings. In the old days, it was

Opposite: Taverns and the prohibition of wine
 Above: Tea and baklava

the centerpiece, around which family members would sit cozily, chatting and sipping hot tea from the small glasses.

Traditionally, a thick and heavy brew is made by adjusting the teapot on the opening of a boiling kettle, and letting tea gently simmer by the heat of steam. When tea leaves come up to the surface, tea is ready to use. It is then served diluted with boiling water, often with plenty of sugar, in a small delicate glass called *istican*, which is either fitted in a metal holder, or put on a small saucer. Kurds in northern Iraq would put a small lump of sugar in mouth and let it dissolve slowly as the unsweetened tea is sipped. This method is called *chai dishlama*. Two or three *isticans* of tea are the average amount served per person. In the morning, tea is normally served in regular cups with some milk. On all other occasions, *istican* is the cup to use.

The afternoon is another occasion for drinking tea, more or less, like the British high tea. The whole family gets together and enjoys snacks such as *ka'ak* and *bakhsam* (dunking cookies/biscuits). The children of course would insist on having their own share of tea, and because tea is believed to be the notorious culprit behind bed-wetting accidents, they would cunningly be lured into having an extremely light tea, called *fudha wa dhahab* (silver and gold). It is made by filling the *istican* almost to the top with boiling water and some sugar - that will be silver. Then a small amount of tea will gently be poured with the help of the back of a teaspoon so that tea will stay afloat and not mingle with the water - that will be gold. Tea is also served after supper, a light meal, normally between seven and eight o'clock. This obviously sounds like a lot of tea, but in the light of new scientific discoveries, this might not be a bad habit after all, except for the sugar, of course.

Tea is often flavored with cardamom, or sometimes with sprigs of fresh mint, but not for breakfast. For a change, or for medicinal purposes, other teas are served, such as dried lime tea (*chai noumi Basra*), believed to be good for curing dizziness, nausea and headaches. Cinnamon tea, usually a winter drink, is

believed to protect against the cold. During the days when people used to go to public baths, cinnamon tea was the drink to sip after having a bath. Herbal teas are also quite common. Chamomile tea (*chai beboun*) is good for colds and sore throats. Blue flower tea (*chai warid mawi*), made from dried flowers of *anchusa* (of the borage family), and *ward lisan al-thor*, known in medieval times as *maru abyadh* (a species of mint family) said to have a euphoric quality. *Chai koajarat* is a sour, clear, and ruby-red tea. It is made from hibiscus flowers, and is named after Gujarat, a western India state,

As for coffee, a strong and thick brew is made of it, called gahwa *Arabiyya* (Arabic coffee/jaka Turkish coffee). Arabic coffee is normally made in a *dalla*, a long-handled container with a wide base that tapers at the top. The conical shape helps the coffee to foam while it boils up. Coffee is made in small quantities, and is usually served in a tiny cup called *finjaan*. It cannot be made in advance since heating it would spoil the foamy creamy top, the mark of good Arabic coffee. It sometimes comes flavored with ground cardamom. Unlike tea, the occasion determines how much sugar to use. In rural areas and at funerals coffee is usually served sugarless (*murra*), on happy occasions it is sweet (*hulwa*), and for daily consumption it is left to personal preference.

Coffee is normally served around brunch time. For guests, it is made whenever they come. A typical way for women to pass the time while socializing is to invert the small cup on its saucer, let the dregs flow down, and wait until they settle, forming different shapes and patterns. The connoisseur in the art of reading fortunes amongst them would be asked to interpret those formations. They can be a (*surrat floos*) bundle of money, a prospective journey (*sikkat safar*), a groom ('arees), or whatever the imagination dictates. Until recently, men used to spend the evenings in coffeehouses called *gahwa* or *chaikhana* (teahouse), where they socialize while sipping coffee, different kinds of tea, smoke *nargeela* (hookah), and play



Top: Traditional teapot
Above: Reading finjaan

On Drinking Coffee at the *Mudhif* (Rural Guesthouse)

Coffee prepared in rural areas is usually thin in consistency, unsweetened, and flavored with lots of cardamom. In fact, cardamom is like a gauge of hospitality. The more cardamom used the more honored the guests are. At the *mudhif* (rural guesthouse), preparing coffee is usually a man's job. The coffee maker roasts the coffee beans, then, in a brass mortar and pestle, he rhythmically pounds the coffee, most probably to a tune in his head. The coffee is served in small cups *finjan* with no handles, with some more rituals as the following excerpt reveals:

The mores require that both preparations [grinding and making coffee] should be done in the presence of the guest, and no host would dream of offering previously prepared coffee... A servant approaches the seated guests carrying in one hand the coffeepot and in the other doll sized cups. Into the cup he pours about a dessertspoonful, and this the guest drinks - if he can, for it is almost boiling - at a gulp. If he wants no more he shakes the cup quickly as he returns it; it is, in any case, bad manners to drink more than 3 cups before giving this sign. (Maxwell 26)



backgammon, domino, or chess. Reminiscing about life in Baghdad in the twenties (*Baghdad fil 'Ishreenat*, 126), 'Abbas Baghdadi says that the most famous *gahwa* back then was *Gahwat Hasan 'Ajami*, it was clean and beautiful with glistening Russian *samawars*. A quiet corner was set aside for student-customers where they can read and drink tea and coffee (prototype of *Barnes and Noble?*). He says 'Ajami's tea was extraordinarily delicious. Later on it turned out that his special touch was no other than a tiny piece of opium *tiryak* he used to put in his brewing teapot. Another attraction at 'Ajami's place was his pygmy server who used to entertain customers with his jokes and by farting at request. Another renowned coffeehouse was *Gahwat 'Azzawi*, where customers used to be entertained with music and dancing. It is immortalized in popular Iraqi folk songs.

At coffeehouses the fun doubles during the month of fasting, *Ramadhan* when a storyteller, *qussakhoun*, entertains customers with exciting stories of romance and heroism. In addition, a very popular ring game, *mheibis*, is often played by teams from different neighborhoods. Men would divide into two parties, covering their hands with a blanket. The ring is put in the hand of one of the participants and the other party has to guess in whose hand the ring is. One of them

Above: Tea and *ka'k*

would stand up and rule out the empty hands by asking them to open them up, thus until guessing is narrowed down to the hand that has the ring. Not an easy task as it sounds. The guessing party has to do a lot of face reading - an excited face, a suppressed chuckle, or an exaggeratedly serious and indifferent face could betray the holder of the ring. The penalty is a tray of *baklawa* and *zlabya* bought by the losing party to be shared by all. Meanwhile the children would be doing some trick 'n treating by going from door to door asking for money, singing:

ما حبيبة يا ماجينة حمل الحيس والخبنا
تنتروننا لو نطلبكم؟ بيت ملة نوروكم
ياهل العنوم تنتروننا لوزوم؟

Majeena ya majeena, loosen your purse and give us some of what you have.

Will you give us or shall we give you? We'll take you to Mecca if you do so.

You people on the roofs, are you giving us anything, or shall we leave?

All they get sometimes is a bucket of water poured on them by the roof people, and all they can do in return is to scurry away saying,

حسروا علينا الماي اهل الفكر !!
حسروا علينا الماي اهل الفكر !!

Oh, we've been drenched in water!!

Oh, the stingy ones, they drenched us in water!!

Old News is Good News: On the Benefits of Tea

Legend has it that tea was discovered in China in the third millennium BC. and its medicinal properties were recognized back then. One of the legends describes how refreshed the Chinese emperor, its discoverer, felt upon drinking it by chance. He said that he "felt a warmth passing through him, like a device testing every part of his body. This is why tea is named *ch'a*, the same word as the Chinese character meaning to test, check, or investigate." Tea later was given a new character, which also stressed its positive effect upon the body by bringing it back into balance with nature (Chuen *The way of Tea* 14). Around mid-8th century AD, the first Chinese encyclopedia *Ch'a Ching* was written by Lo Yu the scholar, and it was due to the scientific and cultural curiosity of the Arabs during that period that this important document came to be known to the world. Here is how this happened: On one occasion a Muslim emissary was sent to emperor Tang to obtain a copy: the Muslim was to offer 1,000 battle horses in exchange for a copy of *Ch'a Ching*. The Chinese emperor had not heard of the book but spent a long time looking for it. Eventually he found a copy for the emissary to take home and as a result, *Ch'a Ching* was translated into many languages and became well known throughout the world. Impressed by the Muslim interest, the emperor also read the book and recognized the talent of its author. (Chuen 18) The earliest citation of tea in medieval Arabic books on botany occurs in *Kitab al-Saydana* by al-Biruni (d.1048). He calls it *chai* (as we pronounce it today), and *chah*. He says it comes from China in a variety of colors: white, green, purple, tan, and black, the

white variety being the best and most fragrant. Al-Biruni adds that the Chinese cook the leaves, and store them in cubical containers after they are dried. Of its benefits, he has little to say. He says it is only good to ward off the harms of alcoholic drinks. He also tells us that in China people have it as a hot drink instead of wine in taverns, and that they believe it has the power to purify the blood (128-29). In *Al-Jami' li-Mufradat al-Adwiya* by Ibn al-Baytar (d.1248), tea is called *shah Sini*. It is imported as compressed black sheets, and when steeped in liquid this plant has a considerable cooling effect used to relieve headaches caused by excessive heat (408).

Now comes modern research to rediscover the benefits of tea and link it to good health. Like green tea, black tea has been discovered to be rich in antioxidants, those cancer-fighting agents; richer, in fact, than most fruits and vegetables. It is also believed that drinking tea could also lower the chances of getting coronary diseases and strokes, and prevent gum disease. Therefore, it does not sound like a bad idea at all to enjoy a cup of tea every now and then.

"The Tea Dialogue": An Iraqi Folk Song (*Khadri 'I-Chai Khadri*)

Brew the tea, brew it!
For whom shall I brew it?
What's wrong with you, dear,
you always look sad?
After my love is gone, folks,
for whom shall I pour my tea?
After my precious is gone, none is worthy of it.

DRIED LIME TEA

Chai Noomi Basra|Chai Hamudh

The Perfect *Istican Chai*

☞ Put 3 to 4 tablespoons of loose tea in a medium teapot and a few whole but cracked cardamom pods.

☞ Pour a little of the freshly boiled water to rinse the leaves and warm the pot. Quickly rinse off water leaving tea in the pot. Then pour hot water into the teapot until it is almost full. Let it brew very slowly on low heat (a diffuser will be very handy here), or remove the lid of the boiling kettle and put the teapot on the opening of the kettle. Alternatively, brew the tea in the traditional tea-maker, *samawer* if you happen to have one. However, brewed either way, never let it boil over. Tea is ready to use as soon as the leaves come up to the surface

☞ To serve, put sugar first in the *istican*, as this will prevent the delicate glasses from cracking when hot tea is poured into them. Pour to about one third of it with the brewed tea, and add hot water enough to come up to the rim (The proportions of tea and water would vary according to personal preference). This method is very handy when you want to serve a big number of people, which often is the case in most of the Iraqi families.

☞ However, to make a ritual-free tea for 2 or 3 people, just put 1 level tablespoon of loose tea leaves in the teapot with 2 whole cracked pods of cardamom, and pour freshly boiled water to fill the teapot up to three quarters of it. Brew the tea on very low heat or on steam by fitting the teapot on the opening of a kettle of boiling water as described above, for about 8 minutes. However you do it, avoid letting the tea boil, as this will cause it to develop a bitter acrid taste.

Naturally dried limes *noomi Basra* are imported from Asia to Iraq via the only port city in the country, Basra. These lemons make a refreshing sweet and sour hot drink tremendously popular throughout the entire region. It is usually served in the traditional Iraqi small transparent thin glass, *istican*. Here is a recipe for making tea enough for 4 to 6 people:

☞ Crack 3 dried limes. Take all seeds out, as they tend to make the tea develop a bitter taste. Put the lime in a medium teapot and fill it up to three-quarters with boiling water. Let it brew gently on low heat until it starts to boil, about 8 minutes.

☞ Serve the tea sweetened with sugar. If you find it too sour for your taste, dilute it with boiling water. This tea can also be served cold with some ice-cubes, just like the American iced tea.

CINNAMON TEA

Chai bil-Darseen

Make regular tea as directed above and add to it a small stick of cinnamon or 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon. Let it simmer gently with the tea.

**Verses by Iraqi Folk Poet
Mudhaffar al-Nawwab**

We passed by your abodes, Hamad,
While traveling on the night train.
We heard the pounding of coffee beans,
And of its cardamom, we had a fragrant whiff.

HIBISCUS FLOWER TEA

Chai Koujarat



Dried Hibiscus flowers make a delicious and beautiful ruby-colored translucent tea. In other parts of the Arab world, it is known as *karkady*. At the traditional Baghdadi teahouses *chaikhana*, it is served along with the regular tea and coffee, but at a little higher price. Besides its delicious taste, it has other medicinal benefits. It is believed that it helps women feel comfortable with their sexuality, particularly those who have suffered trauma in the past and are unable to express warmth and love (McIntyre, 42).

☞ To make this exotic herbal tea, put about 1 tablespoon hibiscus flowers and a little hot water in a teapot to rinse the flowers and heat the pot. Pour off water quickly but leave hibiscus in the teapot. Add about 2 cups (475 ml) boiling water and let it brew very slowly for about 15 minutes.

☞ Serve with sugar to taste. This tea can also be served cold with ice-cubes.

ARABIC COFFEE TURKISH COFFEE

Gahwa 'Arabiyya

The following is a basic amount enough to make one *finjaan* of coffee. It is traditionally made in a *dalla*, a small long-handled container with a wide base that tapers at the top. A small saucepan with a pouring tip may be used instead.

1 heaping teaspoon finely ground coffee (not instant)
1 level teaspoon sugar, or to taste
1 finjaan (small coffee cup) or
1/3 cup (80ml) water
A pinch of ground cardamom, optional

☞ Put coffee, sugar, and water in the *dalla*. Stir with a teaspoon to allow sugar and coffee to dissolve. Bring to a boil on medium heat, stirring occasionally until coffee starts to rise, and the surface develops a creamy frothy 'face.' To extract maximum flavor from coffee, as soon as it starts to rise, take *dalla* off the heat and allow it to recede, then put it back on heat and let it rise again. Repeat this procedure three times, but avoid letting coffee overboil. Making this coffee takes only a few minutes, so watch it. If it is allowed to boil, coffee will lose its 'face' and that would be shame, for Arabic coffee without a face is nothing to be proud of.

☞ If making more than one serving, distribute the creamy froth evenly among the small cups first, and then pour the rest of coffee to fill cups almost to the rim.

Note:

The thick dregs, which eventually settle in the bottom of the cup after serving it, are not to be sipped. However, as soon as you are done drinking your coffee, twirl the remaining coffee in your *finjaan*, turn it upside down on the saucer, making a wish while doing so. Wait for about 10 minutes to allow the dregs to settle, and then ask the *finjaan*-reader in the gathering to read your fortune in it.

Coffee and Tea for the Record

Thick coffee served in small cups known worldwide as Turkish coffee has its roots farther back in time than the Ottoman era. Though the beginnings of the cultivation of coffee shrubs are obscure, we do know that the world is indebted to the Abyssinian (Ethiopian) province of Caffa (from which the name of coffee derived) and the Arabs who helped spread its use in the Middle East.

The beginnings of the custom of consuming coffee beans (*bunn*) as a hot brewed beverage (*qahwa*) are obscure. From the scarce information available to us today, we know that coffee beans spread to Yemen around the middle of the 6th century AD during the Abyssinian invasion of Southern Arabia. Then reports dealing with the history of coffee jump to the middle of the 13th century with the story that the legendary founder of the export city of al-Mukha (Mocha), Shaykh Abu Hasan al-Shadhili, discovered the bean on the Yemeni terraced mountains, and that the villagers introduced him to the beverage. The story goes that al-Shadhili admired its stimulating properties and began spreading the word about it as the best aid for religious thoughts and meditations (Ukers *All About Coffee* 7-19; Hattox *Coffee and Coffeehouses: The Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* 12-26).

I am of the opinion that what happened to coffee between the mid-6th and 13th century is obscured by the fact that it was alluded to as *bunchum* (variants: *bunkum*, *mansham*) and *bunk*. The bean - husk and kernel - was used toasted and crushed mostly as medicine and a deodorant. We can trace the earliest depiction of the bean and its benefits to the book of medicine Al-Hawi by the famous physician al-Razi (d.923), where it is called *bunchum*. Ibn Sina (d.1037) and al-Biruni (d.1048) called it *bunk* and echoed al-Razi's description, from which we learn that it was used externally and internally.

With its hot and dry properties, *bunk* was recommended to fortify the organs. They said it was good for the stomach, it purified the skin and dried

up moisture underneath it, it scented the body and checked odors of the depilatory *nura* (lime). As for its effects on the brain, Ibn Sina (238) gave symptoms with which modern caffeine-addicts are quite familiar: it over stimulates the mind *yushawwish* - in modern terms, it causes the jitters. Besides, al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook gives recipes for toasted *bunk* (*bunk muhammas*), which are elaborate preparations of hand-washing and fumigating compounds. They help get rid of greasy odors (Chapter 129).

Al-Biruni mentioned that *mansham* - by which, I believe, he meant the whole coffee bean - was brought from Yemen. He said it was well known in al-Hijaz but people in Iraq were not familiar with it. He compared it to *butm* (a big variety of terebinth berries) and said it was brittle, yellowish, and fragrant (352). These clues most probably point to the early stages of using the bean before it spread outside Yemen and al-Hijaz. The beans' taste was described as slightly sharp and astringent. Ibn Sina said having it as a drink caused headaches, but toasting the seeds would improve it in this respect. Ibn al-Baytar mentioned having the toasted seeds as *naql* (*mezze*) with drinks, as was done with pistachio and salted toasted almonds. Besides, the whole plant - leaves, blossoms, and seeds - was said to inhibit sexual desires and dry up semen. This might also explain why coffee was so popular among Sufis, that is, besides keeping them awake for longer hours. Besides, sexually aroused women were fumigated with it. The seed was also said to stimulate menstruation, and even cause abortion (Ibn al-Baytar 115-16, 185).

There is also an indication that *qahwa* beverage was known between the 6th and the 13th centuries, albeit on a limited scale. During the time of the Persian King Khosrau (d.579), 'Uday bin Zayd, his scribe, was given a tour in Damascus, with which he was apparently not impressed. This was what he said on the drinks offered to him:

قد سقيت للشعور في دار بشر قهوة مرة بماء سخين

He said the wine (*shamul*) he was given was no more than bitter *qahwa* boiled in water (al-Asbahani 144).

II COLD DRINKS

Al-Murattibat/Mashrubat Barida

المُرْتَبَاتُ [مَشْرُوبَاتُ بَارِدَاتٍ]

Though the medieval Arabs used to call dark varieties of wine *qahwa*, I suspect the boiled dark coffee brew is meant here because it is described as bitter, a taste more characteristic of coffee than wine. If so, then what we have here is the beginnings of the evolution of the name *qahwa* to designate this dark coffee brew, which indeed does look like dark wine. The coffee beverage itself was later called 'wine of the believers' as it became the favorite drink of the Sufis. Within several centuries, coffee drinking slowly spread and gained popularity in the Arab Muslim world and with it spread the coffeehouses, first in Mecca and Medina, then to Cairo, Damascus in Syria. It reached Constantinople in 1554, and from there it spread to other parts of the world (Wason 149, 152-53; Brothwell 172-3).

As for tea, in its region of origin, China, it was not until the 14th century AD that the Chinese started using leaf tea and brewed it as we do today. Prior to that, it was compressed into bricks, and crushed to powder that was put in boiling water in cauldrons. By 1500, the first teapots as we know them were made. The white porcelain teacups were favored for they flattered the reddish-brown color of brewed tea. By the beginning of the 17th century, tea reached Europe via the Dutch traders. As for the Middle East, there is no definite date for its arrival, but we do know that the Arabs and Turks were acquainted with it from their trade dealings with the Chinese, and brought it home with them along the *Silk Road* (Brothwell 172). At first, it was used as medicine to relieve headaches caused by excessive heat, and to ward off harms of drinking alcohol. It took a long while for tea to pick up as a hot beverage, but once it did, it got hold of us all, thanks to caffeine (also see 000 above).

Back in the ancient Mesopotamian times the sweet water of the Tigris and Euphrates was part of the meal, and there is evidence that special vessels for chilling water were known. A very simple device was used to filter and keep water cool. Water was poured into a porous unglazed clay vessel, which in turn was placed within a second glazed vessel to retain the filtered water, which slowly seeped through the walls of the inner container. Some of this filtered water would inevitably evaporate in the process and keep the water cool. Many earthenware vessels with pointed bottoms were excavated, and it was noted that they must have been placed upon stands of wood or plaited straw. Such simple cooling techniques never fell out of use in rural areas up until now and in the cities up until the early 1960s.

The vessel is called *hib* in the modern Iraqi, as it was in medieval times. It is a huge porous clay receptacle usually seated on a wooden stand. The water seeping through the pores of the container would evaporate and keep water inside it cool. A small clay pot, called *nagout* (the dripper), is put underneath the *hib* to receive the filtered drops of water falling from the bottom of the *hib*. Water accumulated in this pot is exemplary in its purity.

During the summer nights when people sleep on the flat roofs, smaller porous clay jars, called *tunga*, were put on the low walls of the roof, and the mouths of these containers would be covered with muslin cloth to keep water clean. In al-Warraq's cookbook, water cooled this way was called 'air-cooled water.'

Ice-cold water was also known ever since ancient times, and during the medieval era, it was a popular drink. People used to serve it sometimes perfumed, as we indeed still do, with a bit of rose water and cardamom. However, the medieval Baghdadi cookbooks caution against drinking too much ice water with the meal, since it might cause indigestion. Besides ice-cold water, al-Warraq gives many recipes for drinks made with milk and yogurt, or fruit juices from grapes, carrots and lemon, and some alcoholic drinks. Most of

Nothing like Water

He who drinks too much beer, must drink water
(A Sumerian proverb)
So nothing substitutes for water? Or is it that the
ancients recognized the dehydrating effects of
excessive intake of alcohol upon the body?

these thirst-quenching drinks were flavored and colored with a variety of aromatics such as rose water, saffron, and mastic.

Ice itself was brought down to Baghdad from the mountains in the northern region. It was transported packed in lead iceboxes, and was stored in special basements to be used year round, but especially during the summer.

Nowadays the most popular cold beverage, besides water, is a yogurt drink called *shineena*. It is usually served with the meal, especially in the summer.

The *sherbets* (cordials) - diluted fruit syrups served with cubes of ice - are definitely the drinks for happy occasions, such as weddings, circumcisions, birthdays, and graduations. In the ancient scene, juice of fruits like apples, figs, pomegranates, and grapes, were evidently popular, but it is not known whether they were consumed fresh or as cordials. Although nowadays no one would think of making fig juice, for instance, pomegranate juice is still very popular. Up until the near past, it was common to see a licorice-drink peddler in the *souqs* (market places) carrying a beautifully decorated container on his back, and tinkling with his small brass bowls to attract attention to his merchandise. Another welcome sight in summer is the tamarind-drink stalls where sweetened tamarind drink is served with lots of crushed ice, much like slush. Raisin drink *sherbet zibeeb* was equally popular.

As for alcoholic drinks, on the land of barley and dates it should not be surprising that beer and *arak* ('*araq*)

are the sort of alcoholic drinks consumed in the region. *Arak* is distilled from fermented dates. It looks like clear water when bought, and it comes flavored with mastic. It is not for nothing that it is nicknamed 'the lion's milk.' Firstly, it looks like milk when diluted, and secondly, it is very strong and crude, and is definitely a man's drink, and a lion-man at that. No self-respecting woman would be caught drinking it. Grape wine is the specialty of the northern region where grapes grow in abundance. It is made mostly at monasteries for local consumption. Nevertheless, the whole region is mostly populated by Moslems, and with the restrictions on the consumption of alcohol, alcoholism is not one of the major social problems, although such problems do exist.

A Topsy story

Beer was the drink of choice at the ancient Mesopotamian homes, consumed on daily basis by men and women alike. They believed that it brought joy to the heart and happiness to the liver. When a new building was built, the first brick used was made from clay mixed with honey, wine, and beer. Another reason for its popularity could simply be attributed to the fact that though water was abundant in the area there was always the fear that it might be contaminated, what with all the laundering and leather tanning that was going on in the rivers (Mieroop 159).

The earliest beer was Sumerian. Around 40 per cent of their barley yield was used for beer production, and by the third millennium bc, they knew how to make different kinds of the drink by using a variety of techniques in soaking, crushing, fermenting or sweetening the product. The added spices, such as cassia, oils, and aromatic plants, which helped in its preservation and improving its flavor. There is even a possibility that they used hops in making it (McIntyre *Flower Power* 129). They made ordinary and first quality beer, clear and dark, freshly brewed and well aged, bitter beer, and sweet and pleasant with honey, grape juice, and pomegranate. Interestingly the oldest sign

A Sleeping Potion, Tried and Effective

The following is an excerpt from *Tales from Old Baghdad: Grandma and I* (1997) by Iraqi writer Khalid Kishtainy, acclaimed by critics as the multi-faceted Renaissance man.

Lion's Milk

"Bring me my sleeping medicine, my boy," said Grandma and I went and fetched the bottle of *arak* from the kitchen cabinet together with a jug of fresh water. The mixture of *arak* with the fresh, cool water in the glass turned white, almost like buttermilk, but with a slight tint of purple clouding the edges of this ancient liquor, distilled from fermented dates and flavored with mastic... Drinkers could make no mistake as to its identity, but the innocent, like grandma, went on wondering. It was something they had smelt before, they knew it before, somewhere, sometime, but could never put their fingers on it and swear by the Almighty that this was it. Mastic was an ingredient which came into many mixtures and compounds, edible and inedible. I, and sometimes my brother, Basim, prepared the mixture as recommended by Dr Max Macowiskey, only with the proportion of alcohol doubled, trebled and sometimes quadrupled according to our generosity, and gave it to her in the fake crystal glass... Nobody had seen the milk of the lioness or indeed any lion in Iraq, stuffed or alive, but the name of lion's milk was more than apt, at least in view of the police records. However, to a woman of Grandma's age and history, the lion's milk acted like a conversation laxative, which was indeed the description given to it by Aunt Salima.

"A sleeping medicine," she pouted. "If you ask me it is a talking laxative. Nothing more than that and

nothing less."... "I don't need a medicine for my tongue," Grandma replied, "I know more of the world than all of you put together." To prove her point she started telling me a brief history of old Mesopotamia. "You see, this land was inhabited by infidels, idol worshippers and blasphemous homosexuals who denied and persecuted Abraham, peace be upon him, for which God punished them by turning them into stones. I saw them with my own eyes at a place called Nineveh and another place in the desert called Hatra. They were giant people standing so high and the women showed their faces and locks of hair. Some of them had wings and legs of bulls and other animals. Yes, and some of them stood unashamedly in the nude. Vain people they were. God punished them by turning them into hard stones with each one of them having his sins and wickedness written down on their chests. It is not Arabic and no one can read it except God and his angels. It is God's alphabet. I saw it with my own eyes as we - I and your Grandpa - traveled on our horses across the desert at the head of the Turkish army. We all stood and wondered at the work of God. The whole city and its inhabitants turned into stones and dust."

"Grandma," said I, "why did God write down their sins and punishment in a language which he alone can understand. It is a pity, I wish he wrote the stuff in a language which we could read and understand." "Don't say such things about God's work. And what is the use? The more people read and learn the more wicked they become. Just look at all the ministers and governors we have. Have they learned anything from their books and readings? Not a bit. They only learnt how to steal and rob the people." Grandma had another sip of her sleeping medicine whose bitter taste seemed to upset her and cause her to make faces and twist her lower lip in a convulsed way. (30-31)

for brewer in the Sumerian language had the ideogram for 'shim', which stands for 'aromatic plant' (Limet 145; Levey 55-6).

Beer was also served as a sweet non-alcoholic beverage by using it before it starts to ferment (Ellison, "Methods of Food Preparation in Mesopotamia" 92). This variety of non-alcoholic beer remained a staple drink in the region especially with the advent of Islam and its prohibitions of alcohol. During the time of the Prophet Muhammad and upwards, this drink was called *fuqqa*' (the bubbly). Recipes for making it are preserved in al-Warraq's cookbook and other medical Arabic cookbooks. This drink is still known today in modern Turkey, where it is called *boza*.

Brewing beer and drinking, or I might say guzzling it, was an important activity in their lives as it was occasionally depicted in their art. Beer was consumed frequently at meals, but also on other occasions such as social gatherings and sealing business deals. It was also imbibed for pleasure at home or taverns (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* 92).

Due to the way beer was made, it came with sediments that had to be filtered while drinking. For this, they used special long tubes made of reeds with perforated ends. The wealthy coated theirs with gold. Judging from scenes depicted in their seals, it was the custom to serve beer in a communal vat.

The oldest beer recipe comes in a Sumerian hymn written around 2800 BC. It is dedicated to the goddess of brewing, appropriately named Nincasa, 'the lady that fills the mouth.' Brewing was the only craft that was patronized by a female goddess, simply because it was practiced by women only, first at home to satisfy the family's needs and then in taverns. We know for sure that around 1800 BC, during the rule of King Hammurabi, women were responsible for selling and running alehouses. In his legal code, Hammurabi condemned alewives who over charge by throwing them into water (i.e. trial by water). They were also responsible for reporting any illegal activities in their taverns;

otherwise, they would be burned to death. 'Sisters of gods' (priestesses) were prohibited from opening a tavern or frequenting any. The penalty for this was burning to death.

Wine from dates, raisins, elderberries, and dried figs were also made and were sold in the ancient streets of Mesopotamia by wandering vendors. Wine from grapes was made annually, and was stored in sealed jars. However, it was not as affordable as beer, and there was not enough for the masses. Cultivating grapes was known in Mesopotamia as early as the third millennium BC, especially in the northern regions, that's why wine was sometimes called the 'mountain beer' (Nemet-Nejat 158). Many of the early kings and governors recorded that they built irrigated vine terraces, and Sargon II had extensive wine cellars. Mesopotamian wine was reputed to be so good that the king of Ceylon used to import it from Iraq. Many varieties of wine were mentioned in their records such as ripe 'cooked', strong, sweet, clear, white, red, good-quality, inferior-quality, old wine, called so perhaps because it turned vinegary as opposed to recent wine (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine in the World* 95).

Beer remained the drink of the common people until cereals came to be of more value as food, when irrigation spoiled the soil and grain became more difficult to grow. At that stage, the Mesopotamians changed their drinking habits and started to drink more of date wine, also called beer. It finally became the most common alcoholic drink.

Wine Recipes in al-Warraq's 10th-Century Baghdad Cookbook

وصفات الخمر في كتاب الورداني

Drink recipes in al-Warraq's cookbook are covered in ten chapters, almost half of which deal with making intoxicating drinks using raisins, dates, date syrup, honey, sugar, and sugar taffy. A chapter is dedicated to beer, but it is the non-alcoholic variety called *fuqqa*'

A Babylonian Cure for the Topsy

The ancient Mesopotamians used to consume beer, and sometimes wine, on daily basis. In their recorded literature, one often comes across descriptions of stages, symptoms, and even warning signs of intoxication. In the poem of the Creation, during a banquet, the gods become talkative and excited under the influence of alcohol. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the temple prostitute introduces Enkido, destined to be Gilgamesh's companion, to civilization by saying:

*"Eat bread, Enkido, the glory of life,
Drink wine, Enkido, the custom of the land."
Then Enkido ate bread till he was full,
Then drank wine, seven beakers.
His spirit loosed itself, he grew merry,
His heart rejoiced and his face glowed. (10-11)*

Heavy drinking was tolerated provided it did not impair one's judgment. The intoxicating effects of alcohol were well known and taken quite seriously. Drunkenness was treated as a case of poisoning. Here is the diagnosis and the cure:

If a man has drunk too much strong wine, if his head is confused, if he forgets his words, and his speech becomes blurred, if his thoughts wander, and his eyes are glassy, the cure is to take [here follows a prescription containing 11 drugs] and to mix them with oil and wine at the approach of the goddess Gulal [i.e. in the evening]: in the morning before sunrise, and before anyone has kissed the patient [here we learn it was the custom to exchange good-morning kisses] let him take the draught. He will recover. (Contenau 64)

(the bubbly drink). Unlike wine, it was usually served before the meal. *Fuqqa*' was described as a cooling refreshing drink, albeit bloating. It was also used to treat acute thirst caused by hangovers. Following is a specimen of al-Warraq's wine recipes (Chapter 119). It is sun-fermented wine called *shamsi* (*shams* 'sun'):

Choose fully ripe juicy grapes and press them in the press. Let the resulting juice warm up under the sky for three nights. Prepare pitched (muzaffat) wine vessels and fumigate them with mastic and moistened aloe wood. Empty the juice into the vessels and spread grape leaves all over the juice to cover it [leaving a hole in the middle] to allow the fermentation gases to escape. Keep the jars like this for 5 days, and then seal them with mud. Put them in a sunny place for 40 days after which keep them under a shade. The longer this wine is allowed to age, the better it gets in aroma, taste, and color, God willing.

The Question of Prohibiting Intoxicants in Islam

مسألة تحريم السكرات في الإسلام

Prohibiting consumption of alcohol happened in stages: In the early revelations of *Qur'an*, wine seems to be approved as a sign of God's grace: "Of fruits of palm-trees, and of grapes, ye obtain wine, and also good nourishment." The second stage was when the Qur'anic verse prohibited Muslims from praying while intoxicated. The third stage was stated in this verse, "They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say; in both of them there is a great sin but also benefits for men, but their sin is greater than their benefits." In the last stage, intoxicants and games of chance are said to be the work of the devil, and are to be avoided. At this stage wine was condemned as *haram* (prohibited) and unclean. In medieval times, there was an ongoing debate on what constituted wine *khamr* (as this was the word

One Reason why Women should not Drink Wine

I came across this joke in *The Unique Necklace* (Al-'Iqd al-Fareed), a fascinating mine of information on medieval Arab culture by the Andalusian scholar and poet Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi (d.940). It tells of a group of men - most probably in pre-Islamic times, who gave some wine to a Bedouin woman to taste for the first time in her life. A short while after she drank it, she asked the men, "Do your women drink this stuff?" They said, "Yes, they do," at which the Bedouin woman said, "Then let me tell you something guys, I bet none of you knows who his father is" (1023).

used to designate wine in the *Qur'an*). During the Prophet's time, the most common wines were made from five ingredients: dates, barley, wheat, raisins, and honey. The rule was clear, whatever intoxicates, whether it is called *khamr*, *nabeedh*, *tila*, *dadhi*, etc, and obscures the mind and self-control is *haram* prohibited. Drinks made from the above ingredients but kept only overnight in un-pitched leather vessels, and no more than three days, these were permissible. After that, the drink becomes intoxicating (*muskir*). The rule was that any wines allowed to boil on actual fire were permissible, whereas those allowed to ferment/boil in the heat of the sun were prohibited. Despite such regulations, there was always the debate regarding this issue, and opinions swayed between

two extremes. Eleventh-century physician Ibn Sina, for instance, declared that wine was permitted for intelligent people but forbidden for fools. On the other hand, there were those who believe that any contact with wine makes the object prohibited. Medieval physicians thought wine could benefit the body. Tenth-century physician al-Razi, for instance, says that wine heats up the body, aids digestion and its penetration to the body, and can abate thirst if mixed with water. It fertilizes the body if taken after highly nutritious food, drives out excretions, improves the color of the drinker's complexion, and aids sleep. However, he cautions that it should be taken diluted after the meal, and without getting to the stage of intoxication if the aim is to cool down the body. He adds that if it is taken for recreational purposes, then just to the stage where one is moderately affected by it. Even so, it has to be taken only once or twice a month. Generally, drinking wine was tolerated during the Abbasid period and after, and it mostly depended on who was the ruler at the time. As we see above, al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook contains a considerable number of recipes for intoxicating drinks. Therefore, we can safely conclude that prohibition of wine in Islam did not mean that wine was not produced or consumed. Christians, for instance, used to ferment wines at the numerous monasteries and convents of Syria, Iraq and Egypt. In medieval Islam, the monasteries and orchards around them were popular recreational spots for Muslims and non-Muslims to enjoy excellent wines and listen to music and singing. Wine shops were plentiful in the main cities such as Baghdad, but they were run by non-Muslims. Besides, drinking scenes and brothels, both verbal and pictorial were depicted in widely circulated medieval manuscripts. The following are recipes for some of the refreshing and delicious drinks the Iraqi cuisine offers:

YOGURT DRINK

Shineena

☞ To make one glass of this drink, dilute yogurt (any kind will do) with cold water, in the ratio of 1 part yogurt to 3 parts water. Add a pinch of salt if using plain yogurt. Whisk to create foam. Serve immediately with a few cubes of ice, and garnish with a sprig of mint. For a short cut, use buttermilk instead.

Fruity Drinks

Cold fruity drinks may be made from fresh fruit juice or preserved fruit syrup diluted in chilled water. Of the popular winter juices 'aseer are carrot juice and orange juice. In the summer, they would mostly be pomegranate juice or cantaloupe/muskmelon drink. In making pomegranate juice, only the seeds are used, since the rind and membranes make the drink rather bitter and acrid if crushed with the seeds. A regular juicer is used to extract juice from the seeds.



CANTALOUPE/MUSKMELON DRINK

'Aseer Batteekh

3 pounds (1.35kg) cantaloupe or any sweet variety
1 cup (8oz/225g) granulated sugar, or to taste
About 3 cups (715ml) cold water
½ cup (125ml) fresh lemon or lime juice
Crushed ice, or cubed ice
1 tablespoon rose water
Sprigs of mint for garnish

☞ Remove skin and seeds from melon and cut it into 1in/2.5cm pieces and purée with sugar in blender or food processor, in batches, until completely smooth.
 ☞ Pour mixture into a container and stir in cold water (you may use less if you prefer a more concentrated taste), and lemon juice, and refrigerate.
 ☞ To serve, stir in ice and rose water, pour into glasses, and garnish with mint sprigs.

The First Drinking 'Straw' in History

Due to the way beer was fermented in ancient Mesopotamia, it came with sediments, which were removed by strainers and funnels. The most elaborate examples of such devices were found at the royal tombs of Ur. In order to get rid of the remaining sediments, they used to drink beer through filtering tubes. Thus, driven by necessity, they invented the first drinking 'straw' in history.

BEETS/BEETROOT JUICE

Mei Shuwander

This drink might sound unusual, but on the land of Mesopotamia, it is a common homemade drink, delicious, healthy, and easy to prepare.

3 cups (715ml) liquid reserved from boiling beets, which have been peeled and washed before boiling
½ cup (4oz/115g) granulated sugar, or to taste
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
1 teaspoon rose water

☞ Dissolve sugar in beet juice while it is still hot, and let it cool off completely. Stir in lemon juice and rose water, and serve cold.

Preserved Fruit-Syrups /Cordials *Sherbet*

Sherbet is preserved syrup made from fruits. It is usually stored in sealed bottles. To serve, it is diluted with cold water to taste, with a few cubes of ice. It was a very popular drink in medieval times, served chilled usually after the meals, as they were believed to aid digestion with their sweetness. The most basic syrups of this sort were *jullab*, made with rose water and honey or sugar (see *Jullab: Sweet Migration* 000), and *sakanjabeel* syrup made with vinegar and honey or sugar, valued for its cooling effects. Because these concentrated syrups keep very well, a bit of summer delights can always be preserved for year-round enjoyment. They are usually bought in sealed bottles, and a bottle or two of these syrups would make an acceptable present when visiting a friend at a hospital or as a simple graduation gift. Following are some interesting recipes to try.

Chilling Drinks in Ancient Mesopotamia

Although it is not known whether the ancient Mesopotamians manufactured ice, there is evidence they used it to chill their drinks. Wine was kept in ice in the wine storeroom just before serving it. One can safely assume the ice used was the natural snow that fell on the mountains in the northern region, as the following letter indicates. It is from a hospitable king who, around 2500 BC, offered ice and wine to a king who happened to be visiting nearby: *Tell Yasmah-Addu: King Aplahanda [of Carchemish] sends the following message: There is now ice available in Ziranum, much of it. Place your servants there to watch over it so they can keep it safe for you. They can bring it to you regularly as long as you stay there. And if no good wine is available there for you to drink, send me word and I will have good wine sent to you to drink. Since your hometown is far away, do write me whenever you need anything, and I will always give you what you need. (Oppenheim 108-109; Hunter 25)*

The natural snow might have been stored hardened and compressed. We also know that they used hailstones when sudden storms hit the country (judging from today's weather, this usually happens in springtime). They were collected and piled up and stored underground in straw, keeping them long enough to cool drinks in the households of the affluent. Such iceboxes or ice rooms were "never used to preserve anything else" (Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 61). Some of the iceboxes kept to meet immediate use were found in the north-west of modern Iraq where winter frosts can be long and harsh. At warmer places, icehouses dating from about 2000 BC were found at the palace of Zimri-Lim, ruler of Mari (Hunter 25). They are "brick buildings buried with drainage pipes to extract the water (Bottéro *Everyday Life* 88). Evidently, they had the means to carry ice over long distances.

SYRUP FOR RED MULBERRY SHERBET

Sherbet Tukki 'I-Sham

☞ For each cup of strained mulberry juice, use 1 cup (8oz 225g) granulated sugar. Dissolve sugar completely in juice. Heat up mixture, then put the pot away from heat before syrup starts to boil. Let it cool off, and then keep it in sterilized bottles sealed with melted wax.
 ☞ To serve, dilute the required amount with cold water, to taste, along with ice cubes or crushed ice. The same can be done with other varieties of berries.

SYRUP FOR TAMARIND SHERBET

A delicious and healthy drink. The vendors make it doubly attractive by filling the glass with finely crushed ice scooped from a mound of crushed ice kept in a glass container. The following recipe calls for dried compressed tamarind available in Middle-Eastern or Indian grocery stores.

8 ounces dried tamarind, broken to small pieces
4 cups (2lb/900g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice

☞ Soak tamarind in enough water to cover it. Set it aside overnight. Then boil it with the water in which it was soaked until mushy. Strain by pressing with the back of a spoon against the sieve to squeeze down all juice.
 ☞ Measure the strained liquid to see how much plain water you need to add to make a total of 6 cups (1.50 liters). Do not mix yet. Add sugar to measured water, and dissolve and boil until medium syrup is formed. Then add the tamarind juice to syrup and let mixture boil for 5 minutes. Next, add lemon juice and boil for 5 more minutes.
 ☞ Keep the cooled off syrup in a bottle, which you seal with wax. To serve, dilute the required amount with cold water, to taste, along with ice cubes or crushed ice.

Chilling Drinks in Medieval Baghdad

Serving drinks chilled, whether water or alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks, was quite common in medieval Baghdad. They used natural snow *thalj* as well as manufactured ice *jamad*. To harvest natural snow, special icehouses, shaped like conical domes, were built in the colder northern parts of the region. They were situated against high walls to help keep them cool during the day. Ice formed in shallow ponds around the area was gathered and stored in pits inside these icehouses (Hassan and Hill 231). They also had the means to transport it to the cities and preserve it there, where in the summer it was most needed. Manufactured ice was called *jamad*. We can safely assume that it was made using *nashadir* (ammonia) because the ability of this substance to cool and freeze was well known at the time (al-Biruni 365). From 10th-century book of anecdotes by al-Tannukhi (68), we learn that specialized merchants used to deal with storing and distributing snow and ice. Of its other uses, crushed ice was sprinkled on a platter of fresh dates in the hottest days of summer to cool down its heating properties. It was also spread around dishes of sweet syrupy pastries such as *qatayif*, for the same purpose. Honey on the comb *shahd* was served the same way to keep honey wax chilled and brittle to the bite. Likewise was done to cold savory dishes *bawarid* (al-Warraq, Chapters 31, 47, 90, 95, 102). Cold storage also proved convenient for transporting foods to Baghdad from distant lands. They were kept fresh by packing them in lead iceboxes (Hassan and Hill 231).

SYRUP FOR ALMOND SHERBET

Sherbet il-Loz

Medieval Thirst-Quenching Drinks

In al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook, several chapters are allotted to drinks of different types, which help quench thirst and refresh the body in the heat of summer. Some of them are made from fresh fruits such as apple, lemon, quince, pomegranate, plum, apricot, and unripe grapes. All these drinks are sweetened with honey and flavored with spices such as cloves, cinnamon, mastic, and saffron (Chapters 117, 118, 122, 123, 124).

There are also recipes for syrups made from fruits such as apples and quince, which are served diluted with chilled water and ice, as we do today. Here is a syrup recipe described as "a thirst-quenching, healthy drink" (Chapter 118, with modern weight equivalents):

Put 20 pounds (9 kg) of refined sugar in a tajeer (copper cauldron with a rounded bottom). Add 2½ cups (600 ml) juice of jummar (heart of the date palm) and 2 pounds (900 g) poppy seeds. Bring mixture to a boil, and then add 10 cups (2½ liter) grape juice, 4 cups (1 quart) mulberry juice, and 1½ grams camphor. Boil the mixture well, then take it away from heat, empty it into glass jars (qawareer), and use it. It is a healthy, tried-and-true drink.

I got hooked on this milky refreshing drink at quite an early age when I used to accompany my mother on her monthly visitations to a pleasant, well-to-do distant relative, to pay the house rent, and to have a chat with her. I always looked forward to these visitations for the house she lived in was huge and traditionally built with an open yard in the middle, at the center of which there was a small garden and a basin with a fountain. One of her daughters was my age and there in the orchard we used to play with a doll's house her father made for her, and sweep around it with tiny charming sweeps made from date palm fronds. Every time we visited, we were offered delicious and milky almond drink, flavored with rose water.

2 cups (8oz/225g) ground skinned almonds
3 cups (24oz/675g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice
½ teaspoon almond extract/essence
1 tablespoon rose water

☞ Add 2½ cups (590ml) boiling water to the ground almonds, let them steep for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. Strain in a sieve fitted on a big bowl.

☞ To the remaining ground almonds, add 2½ cups (590ml) boiling water, and repeat procedure in previous step.

☞ Repeat same procedure described above, but this time add 3 cups (715ml) boiling water to get a total of 8 cups (2 liters) of strained liquid.

☞ Add sugar, lemon juice, almond extract, and rose water to the strained liquid, and dissolve by stirring. Allow the syrup to cool off, then bottle and seal with wax.

☞ To serve, dilute the required amount with cold water, along with ice cubes or crushed ice.

SYRUP FOR POMEGRANATE SHERBET

Sherbet il-Rumman

Fresh pomegranate yields an exotic drink, which unfortunately cannot be enjoyed fresh for long. Here is an easy way to preserve the juice.

2 cups (475ml) pomegranate juice
3 cups (24oz/675g) granulated sugar
¼ cup (60ml) lemon juice

☞ Use juicer to extract the juice from pomegranate seeds (discard rind and membranes before juicing, to prevent the drink from getting bitter and acrid). Gradually stir in sugar into the juice, and let it dissolve completely. Then add lemon juice and mix well. Bottle the syrup and seal it with wax.

☞ To serve, dilute the required amount with cold water, along with ice cubes or crushed ice.

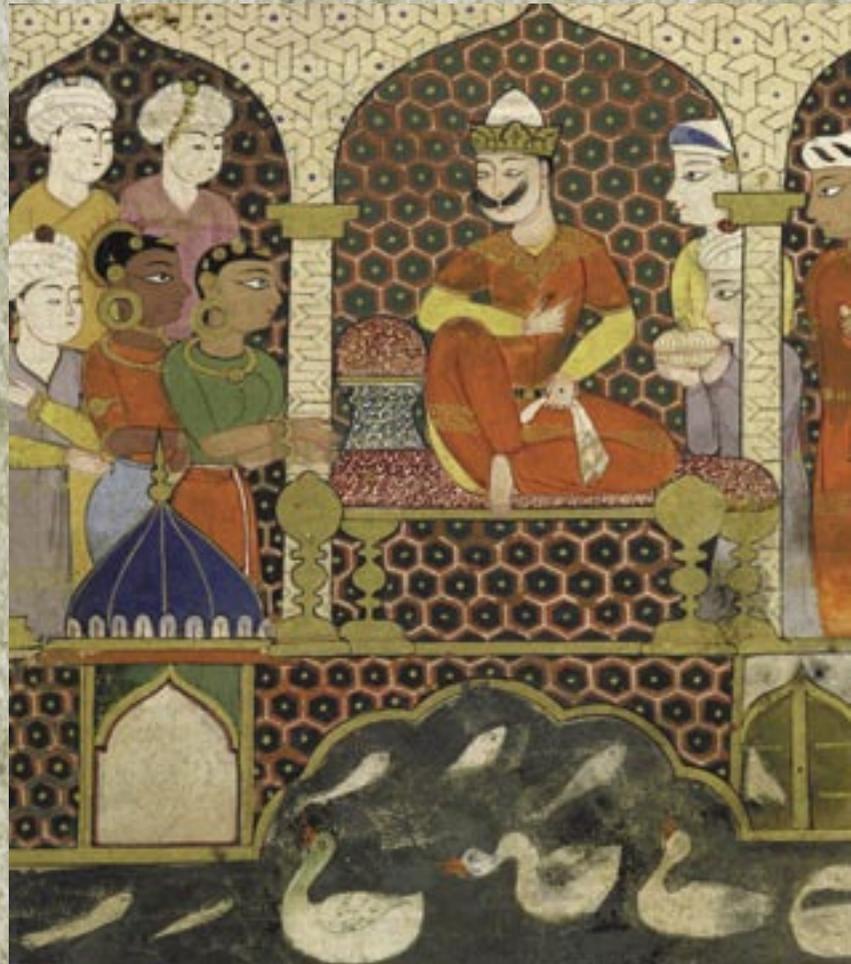
A Song To an Unhappy Little Girl from Basra (port city, southern Iraq):

Hela Ya Rummana, Hela Yumma
 (Hey Ho, my little pomegranate!
 Hey Ho my darling [lit. mother])
 (Iraqi folk song for children, my translation)
 Hey Ho, my little pomegranate!
 Hey Ho my darling.
 Who is the unhappy one here?
 Hey Ho my darling.
 Sa'diyya [or give your girl's name] is the
 unhappy one here.
 Hey Ho my darling.
 And who is to make her happy again?
 Hey Ho my darling.
 Her father will make her happy again.
 Hey Ho my darling.
 He is the one who made her gold earrings.
 Hey Ho my darling.
 And a ring and a necklace.
 Hey Ho my darling



SUGGESTED MENUS

SUGGESTED MENU



- Breakfast 000
- Friday's Weekend Brunch
- Lunch
- Dinner
- Formal Dinner Menus
- Ramadhan Dinner
- Dinner Buffet
- Ladies' Tea Parties *Qaboulat*
- Mezze Dishes
- Table Manners and the Custom of Washing the Hands
- Oral Hygiene in Medieval Times
- Protocols of Treating Dining Guests

Suggested Menus

Food: that's the thing! Drink: that's the thing!
 (A Sumerian saying, ca 3500 BC, Gordon 142)
 In preparing a meal of a foreign cuisine, it is useful to know what combination of dishes make an authentic lunch or dinner. The following are suggested menus for different meals, seasons, and occasions.

BREAKFAST

Il-Rayooq

"Fast Food Restaurants" of *The Arabian Nights*

In an *Arabian Nights* story, a young man, named Jawdar, was given magic saddlebags, which provided whatever dishes one asked for. He went to his mother and asked her to wish for a dish. She wished to have hot bread and a slice of cheese, a simple meal that befitted her humble social status. The son, however, had a surprise feast for her, more luxurious and more expensive:

O my mother, what suit thine estate are browned meat and roast chicken and peppered rice (ruzz mufalfa) rice with separated grains]. And it becometh thy rank to eat of sausages and stuffed cucumbers (actually stuffed gourd) and stuffed lamb and stuffed ribs of mutton and vermicelli with broken almonds and nuts and honey and sugar (kunafa), and fritters (pancakes qata'if) and almond cakes (baklawa)." (Burton 6: 235-36)

The way the saddle worked was that after the eater had satisfied his or her appetite, the only thing to do was to empty leftovers into other dishes (a doggy bag!), and return dirty platters to the saddlebags. It was as easy as that, no waiters to tip or bills to pay.

Hot sweet tea is always served with breakfast, and some people prefer to have it mixed with a little milk. Canned condensed sweetened milk sometimes replaces fresh milk.

Summer Breakfast

- ☞ White cheese, warm bread, slices of cucumber, fresh mint, and olives.
- ☞ White cheese, warm bread, and cubed watermelon.

Winter Breakfast

- ☞ *Bastirma* (Iraqi sausages) with eggs, warm bread, and sliced salad vegetables.
- ☞ *Geymer* (thick cream), or butter, warm bread, with date syrup or jam.
- ☞ Fried eggs, sunny-side up, sliced tomatoes browned in a little oil, and warm bread. The eggs may also be served hard or soft-boiled.
- ☞ White cheese or canned cheddar cheese sandwiches.

Friday's Late Breakfast (Weekend Brunch)

Late breakfasts are normally reserved for Fridays, the one-day weekend of the week. They can be vegetarian or with meat.

- ☞ *Tashreeb bagilla* (dried fava/broad beans with flat bread), slices of salad vegetables, pickles, and sweetened hot tea.
- ☞ *Hareesa* (porridge of wheat, usually cooked with meat), and tea.
- ☞ Chilli fry (cubed meat simmered in vegetable sauce), warm bread, sliced salad vegetables, and tea.
- ☞ *Makhlama* (egg omelet) in any of its varieties, with warm bread, slices of salad vegetables, and lots of herbs and greens. Sweetened hot tea.

SUGGESTED MENUS

LUNCH

Il-Ghada

In Iraq, the main meal of the day is lunch, normally served around one o'clock. It is mostly rice and stew, served with lots of greens and herbs, salad, and sometimes pickles and 'anba (pickled mango). Supper, a lighter meal, is served around 8 o'clock. Nawashif (dry dishes) are the kind of dishes usually served for this meal. However, for convenience sake, I'm suggesting some light lunch menus mostly soups and nawashif to fit in with the Western eating patterns, and will reserve the more serious stuff for dinner. You may replace the suggested prepared desserts with seasonal fruits.

Summertime Lunch Menus

- ☞ Rice with fava/broad beans served with yogurt sauce, *sanbousa* (pastries filled with meat or vegetables), a bowl of colorful tossed salad
- Chilled cream-filled *baklawa*, with tea or coffee
- ☞ *Kebab* (grilled ground/minced meat), or *guss* (*gyro*), or *falafel* sandwich, with a glass of *shinina* (yogurt drink), and a small bowl of *tabboula*
- Chilled *mahallabi* (milk pudding), fresh fruits, tea or coffee
- ☞ *Hummus* with warm bread, a dish of *dolma* with yogurt sauce
- Knafa* (shredded dough filled with nuts or sweet cheese), or fresh fruits, tea or coffee
- ☞ *Msaqqa'a* (fried eggplant slices drenched in yogurt sauce), with warm bread, lentil patties, or zucchini squares or pancakes
- Pistachio ice cream, Arabic coffee

Wintertime Lunch Menus

- ☞ Lentil soup with warm bread
- Boureg* (stuffed fillo dough) any of its varieties, with salad, any variety
- Warm rice pudding, with tea or coffee
- ☞ Cream of turnip and Swiss chard soup, with warm bread
- Iraqi grilled kebab sandwich, with a bowl of salad
- A slice of cake with tea or coffee
- ☞ Spinach soup with warm bread
- Cheese and macaroni casserole, or chicken and macaroni casserole
- Stuffed dates or prunes, with Arabic coffee
- ☞ Tomato soup with rice
- Kubbat Halab* or any other variety of *kubba*, and a bowl of salad
- Zlabya* (fritters) or stuffed *qata'if* (Arabian pancakes) with Arabic coffee

On Gluttony and the Unfairness of the Human Condition

(Poem from al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, Chapter 131, my translation)

*The poor man gnawed and sucked at the bone,
and dreamt he saw meat.
But ever since he has not been able to sleep.
[Another] the doctor warned not to eat much,
But he would not listen and ate to satiety.
Against the doctor's orders, with food upon food
he stuffed himself, [and said],
"What's life without food and drink even though
it leads me to sin?
Hail the bowls prepared to honor the guests
with mounds of fat and meat.
Pay homage not to the site of the [beloved's]
ruins and rocks,
More worthy are the relics of eating
hard and meat."*

DINNER

Il-'Asha

Simple menus for the family

Summertime Dinner Menus

☞ Okra Stew with white rice, wedges of raw onion, lots of herbs and greens, and pickles.

Yogurt drink

Simmered *loubya* (fresh black-eyed beans, or string beans)

Watermelon, and tea

☞ *Sheikh mahshi* (stuffed eggplant), served with rice, or dolma, with salad and pickles

Simmered fresh fava/broad beans

Yogurt drink, with fresh dates

Tea

☞ Zucchini/courgette stew with rice.

Salad and pickles

Kubba or *boureg* (stuffed fillo dough)

Yogurt drink

Any kind of *halawa* (candies and confections), or seasonal fresh fruits

Tea

☞ *Timman tacheena* (rice cooked with vegetables and meat) in any of its varieties, with yogurt sauce.

Any kind of salad

Simmered *loubya* (fresh black-eyed beans, or string beans)

Cake, chilled cream-filled *baklawa*, or fresh fruits

Tea

☞ *Mtabbag simach* (layered fish with spicy rice), with greens and herbs

Simmered *loubya* (fresh black-eyed beans, or string beans)

Watermelon, and tea

Wintertime Dinner Menus

☞ White beans stew or spinach stew, with rice.

Salad and pickles

Boureg (stuffed fillo dough)

Date sweetmeat, or any other kind of *halawa* (candy)

Tea

☞ *Kubbat hamudh shalgham* (stuffed rice dough with turnip soup), with warm bread, and greens and herbs

Any of the syrupy desserts with tea or Arabic coffee

☞ Chicken simmered in tomato sauce with rice or bulgur of your choice

Salad and pickles

Potata chap (stuffed potato dough)

Halawa of golden vermicelli noodles, seasonal fruits

Tea

☞ Eggplant/aubergine casserole with stuffed bulgur dough discs, served with rice or bread. Greens and herbs

Fresh green/French beans simmered in olive oil

Fruit, or any of the syrupy desserts.

As is the custom with people in the Arab world, many dishes are prepared for the guests. With the exception of dessert, all the major dishes would be spread on the table for guests to make their pick. If you wish, bring food to the table course by course after the medieval Baghdadi fashion, beginning with the appetizers, and *bawarid* and *nawashif* dishes (cold and sauceless), followed by the main hot dishes. End the meal with dessert and tea or coffee.

Dinner Menus for More Formal Occasions

☞ Drained yogurt rolled in nuts and *za'tar* and served with warm bread

Hummus or *baba ghannouj* (baked puréed eggplant/ aubergine with *tahini*/sesame paste), served with warm bread

Biryani or *parda palaw* (rice pies),

served with stew of your choice

Colorful tossed salad

Breaded cauliflower or zucchini/courgette pancakes

Baklawa, tea or coffee

SUGGESTED MENUS

☞ Zucchini/courgette soup

Tabboula, and *msaqqa'a* (fried slices of eggplant drenched in yogurt sauce), served with warm bread

Aromatic shanks braised in vegetable sauce, served with rice of your choice

Chicken *shish kebab* on a bed of greens and herbs and onion relish. Serve with warm bread

Cake of your choice

Tea or coffee

☞ Lentil or mung bean soup

Beets/beetroot salad, and eggplant/aubergine

simmered in olive oil, with warm bread

Baked fish with yellow rice and raisin sauce, served with greens and herbs

Any variety of *boureg* (stuffed fillo dough)

Any variety of syrupy desserts

Tea or coffee

☞ Chicken soup with vegetables

Tabboula and *hummus* with warm bread

Different kinds of grilled dishes, such as *kebab* (grilled ground/minced meat), and *tikka* (grilled lamb cubes), served with warm bread, and lots of greens and herbs

Vermicelli and zucchini/courgette pancakes, lentil patties

Yogurt drink

Znoud il-sit (cream-filled rolls, fried and

dipped in syrup)

Tea or coffee

☞ Drained yogurt with warm bread

Tabboula and *msaqqa'a* (fried slices of eggplant/ aubergine drenched in yogurt sauce), with bread

Leg of lamb in sweet-sour sauce, served with rice of your choice

Colorful tossed salad

Sindibad's seven-layered cake

Tea or coffee

A Menu from the Arabian Nights

In the story of Azeez and 'Azeeza in *The Arabian Nights*, a table was set for dinner. In the middle of a big tray there was a china dish containing four chickens reddened with roasting and seasoned with spices. Around this centerpiece, four bowls were arranged: one containing sweetmeats, another pomegranate-seeds, a third *baklawa*, and a fourth, honeyed pancakes. (Burton 2: 311)

A Representative Menu for Iftar Dinner during the Month of Ramadhan

Fresh or dried dates with yogurt drink

☞ Lentil soup

Stew with rice, with fresh greens and herbs

Kebab (grilled ground/minced meat), or '*uroog* (ground/minced meat with chopped vegetables, made into

patties and fried)

Kubba, the fried variety

Tamarind drink, believed to be the best thirst quencher

Tea

Later in the night *baklawa* and *zlabya* (fritters

dipped in syrup)

Preparing a Big Meal for the Feast after *Ramadhan*

The place is al-Nuhra, a small village in southern Iraq; time is late 1950s; and the occasion is celebrating the end of *Ramadhan*, the month of fasting, by cooking a big feast for the sheik of the village, his guests, and tribesmen. As is the case anywhere else, at any given point in history, the elite enjoy the gourmet food, whereas the rest have to be content with simpler and more basic foods:

The women had been at work since five o'clock, but now at ten, instead of losing heart at the prospect of the 300 lunches to be served hot at noon, they were gayer than ever... For the feast, a cow and five full-grown sheep had been killed...The kidneys, liver, heart and brains were set aside for special dishes; the head, stomach and feet of three of the sheep were turned over to the sheik's daughter Samira, who would clean them and make them *patcha*, a local delicacy. The other two sheep were to be roasted whole over a charcoal spit and the eyes and ears offered as treats to the most honored guests. The piles of slippery meat were washed and washed under the water tap, then went into salted water to be boiled until tender over fires of dried palm fronds that were blazing all over the eastern corner of the court. This boiled meat and its broth, together with bowls of vegetable stew, mounds of rice and piles of wheat bread, formed the meal, which would be served to the tribesmen. The sun climbed higher, and the heat from the fires added to the general discomfort; the women were

sweating profusely through their black garments. In one corner the sheik's daughters and their cousins were peeling squash, chopping spinach and cutting up onions and tomatoes for the vegetable stew, to be flavored with a bit of fat meat, garlic, salt, celery leaves and raw ground turmeric. Three women were mixing and patting barley dough into flat loaves; a small girl sat brushing the flies away from rows of plates of cornstarch pudding.

"What are you cooking?" I asked Alwiya, and she showed me into the kitchen, a long mud-brick room without smoke holes, where six or eight women were stirring and tending enormous pots cooking on open fires. The smoke hung in the room like dense fog, and the women would stir for a few moments, then walk to the door to wipe their streaming eyes and mop their sweat-streaked faces. Yet they laughed as they did so.

"These are the dishes for the sheik and the special guests," Alwiya said. This explained the women's good nature despite the heat and smoke. They had been chosen as the best cooks, to prepare food for Haji's tray.

"Don't stay in here, Beeja [Elizabeth]- it's too hot," warned Alwiya with a hand on my shoulder. But I wanted to see the food, so the pots were uncovered one by one: ground/minced liver stewed with tomatoes, *kubba*, fried eggplant, *patcha*, saffron rice. Four chickens were being grilled over charcoal in the bank of round brick ovens along one side of the kitchen." (Fernea, 118-20)

Dinner Buffet

The following suggested dishes are ideal for buffet presentations. They will look good on the table and require the minimum of eating utensils. Choice and number of dishes is determined by the occasion, number of guests, and your time:

- ☞ *Hummus* or *baba ghannouj*, served with bread
- Drained yogurt, rolled in toasted nuts and *za'tar*, served with crackers or bread
- Tabboula*, or lentil salad
- Falafel*, with a side of *tahini*/sesame paste sauce
- Dolma*
- Sanbousa*
- Boureg* (stuffed fillo dough rolls), or *fatayer* (stuffed triangles)
- Kubbat Halab* (rice dough stuffed with meat) or *potata chap* (stuffed potato dough)
- Casserole of green/French beans with cubed potatoes, served with rice of your choice
- Casserole of cauliflower with meatballs, served with rice of your choice
- Eggplant/aubergine casserole with discs of stuffed bulgur dough, served with bread or white rice
- Stuffed zucchini/courgette simmered in yogurt sauce
- Meatballs simmered in dill sauce, served with yellow rice
- Sheikh mahshi (stuffed eggplant/aubergine simmered in tomato sauce), with white rice
- Biryani* (spicy rice with meat), served with zucchini/courgette stew
- Maqlouba* (eggplant upside down), served with yogurt sauce
- Chicken drumsticks simmered in cumin sauce, served with white rice
- Sweet and sour salmon simmered in almond-prune sauce, served with white rice
- Cake, such as golden apple squares, prune cake, or pumpkin cake
- Assortment of baklava and knafa, or any other pastries drenched in syrup such as *luqmat il-qadhi* (the judge's morsel) or stuffed *qatayif* (Arabian pancakes)
- Tea and coffee

The Legendary Banquet of Ashurnasirpal II

The following banquet menu was found inscribed on a clay brick placed near the doorway to the throne-room of the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (9th century BC) in Kalhu near Nineva (also known as Nimrud). The cuneiform inscriptions tell of a huge feast thrown in celebration of the opening of the royal palace. Put exactly, he invited 69,574 guests from the surrounding countries as well as the people of Kalhu. The basic features of the banquet menu included:

- ☞ Meat dishes cooked from 1,000 fattened head cattle, 1,000 calves, 10,000 stable sheep, 15,000 lambs, and for the goddess Ishtar alone 200 head of cattle and 1,000 *sihhu*-sheep, 1,000 spring lambs, 500 stags, 500 gazelles, 1,000 ducks, 500 geese, 500 *kurku*-geese, 1,000 *mesuku*-birds, 1,000 *qaribu*-birds, 10,000 doves, 10,000 *sukanunu*-doves, 10,000 other assorted small birds, 10,000 assorted fish, 10,000 *jerboa*.
- ☞ 10,000 assorted eggs.
- ☞ 10,000 loaves of bread (some sources say the number refers to tablefuls of bread, which sounds more credible)
- ☞ 10,000 jars of beer, 10,000 skins with wine.
- ☞ Side dishes such as pickles and spiced condiments made from a variety of seeds, sesame oil, vegetables, fruits, salted seeds, parched barley, garlic, turnip, lentils, spices, onion, nuts, mixed jujubes, 300 (measures) carob pods, eggplant/aubergine, and olives.
- ☞ Desserts such as sweet fruits of pomegranates, grapes, dates, figs, honey, rendered butter, milk, cheese, and shelled pistachio nuts.
- ☞ Perfumed oils, and sweet smelling objects.

We are also told that the guests wine and dined for ten days, and that they were provided with the means to clean and anoint themselves. At the end of the cuneiform tablet the king declared that he did his guests due honors and sent them back to their own countries, healthy and happy. (Cited in Pritchard 102-104; Bottéro *The Oldest Cuisine* 101-103)

A 9th-Century Abbasid Banquet Menu

Here is a poem by 9th-century prominent Abbasid poet and gastronome Kushajim. It describes a banquet in which *bawarid* (cold dishes) are presented. It must have been a grand feast judging from the number of the items served:

When to banquet we are eager
Well the table floweth o'er,
And the ready cook doth fill it
With the choicest foods in store

First a roasted kid, a yearling,
With its inwards firmly strung,
And upon it, well to season,
Tarragon and mint are hung.

Next a chicken, full and tender,
Fattened many moons ago,
And a partridge, with a fledgling,
Roast with care, and nicely done.

After pastry of *tardina* [meat paste,
pressed thin and fried]

Follows *sanbusaj*, well fried:
Eggs vermillioned after boiling
Lie with olives side by side.

Strips of tender meat in slices, [sandwiches]
Dipped [brushed] in oil of finest make,
Tempt anew the flagging palate,
And the appetite awakes;

Lemons, too, with *nadd* [perfume compound]
besprinkled,
Scented well with ambergris,
And, for garnishing the slices,
Shreds of appetizing cheese.

Vinegar that smarts the nostrils
Till they snuffle and they run;
Little dates like pearls that glisten
On a necklace one by one.

Sauce of *buran* served with eggplant,
That will tempt thy very heart,
And asparagus - enchanted
With asparagus thou art!

Lastly, Lozenge
[*lawzeenaj*, *baklawa*-like pastry],
soaked in butter,

Buried deep in sugar sweet.
(Arberry 22-23)

SUGGESTIONS FOR LADIES' TEA PARTIES

Il-Qaboulaat

Up until the early sixties, when society was still, relatively speaking, gender segregated, women used to hold their own tea parties, called *qaboul*. They were a kind of get-together parties usually held in the afternoons. Males in the family were kicked out of the house while the party was on. Thus women would feel free to discard their *abayas* (black cloaks covering the body from head to feet), and other headdresses. Some would sing or belly dance, whilst others would be cracking toasted watermelon and pumpkin seeds. *Ka'ak* and *baqsam* (dunking sesame cookies/biscuits), *kleicha* (Iraqi traditional cookies), and *khubz 'uroog* (flat *tannour* bread with meat and vegetables) were the usual pastries offered, to be washed down with sweetened hot tea. In high-class *qaboulat* an array of other food items was offered.

Women still have their get-together parties, but that is not their only option as it was before. The following list includes both savory and sweet dishes, some are finger foods, and others require a fork. Number and kind of dishes chosen will be determined by the occasion, number of guests, and your time.

Tabboula
Baba ghannouj
Lentil patties
Zucchini/courgette squares
'Uroog Musiliyya (baked mixture of meat and bulgur dough, cut into squares or wedges)
Dolma of grape leaves, simmered in olive oil
Spinach rolls
Sanbousa
Boureg (stuffed fillo dough)
Dill weed balls
Kleicha (Iraqi cookies/biscuits)
Any variety of the sweet cookies/biscuits
Apricot balls
Any variety of the cakes
Tea, coffee, or other beverages such as *sherbet*

SUGGESTED MEZZE DISHES

Mezzaat

For drinking parties, a number of savory small dishes are prepared, collectively called *mezze*. Below are the most popular ones:

Lablabi (chickpeas simmered to tenderness)
Bagilla (dried fava/broad beans simmered to tenderness)
Slices of pickled cucumber
Leaves of romaine/cos lettuce, and sliced cucumber
Nuts such as pistachio, hazelnut, almonds, and peanuts
Tabboula
Hummus and *baba ghannouj*
Sometimes grilled meat and liver are also offered.
Grilled sparrows, when in season

RSVP: A Babylonian Dinner Invitation

"I am going to have a house-warming," so goes the invitation, "come yourself to eat and drink with me. Twenty-five women and twenty-five men shall be in attendance."

This invitation was written by Kadasman-Enlil, king of Babylon about 3500 years ago, and sent to Akhenaten (Amenhotep IV) pharaoh of Egypt. It was written in Akkadian, which at the time was an international language used by many countries with whom the Babylonians and Assyrians had relations (Hunter, 45).

Mezze: A Bit of History

The custom of serving an array of small platters with alcoholic drinks is not a modern phenomenon at all. Arabic medieval sources provide us with ample information on food items served and recipes for preparing some of them.

In medieval times, these dishes and foods were collectively called *naql* because the drinkers alternated between nibbling on them and sipping their wine.

Evidently, the modern name *mezze* has affinities with such traditions because one of the names of wine was *al-muzza*, which was synonymous with 'delicious wine,' somewhat sweet and bitter, or having a pleasant slight tongue-bite to it. *Muzz* was also descriptive of a sweet and sour taste. *Mezze* may also mean 'a sip.' To enjoy wine, the drinkers were supposed to have it slowly and in sips until they get intoxicated. From the 15th century Indian cookbook *Ni'mat Nama*, which reveals considerable affinities with the Abbasid cuisine, we know that such *naql* dishes have already started to be called *mezze*, translated as 'tidbits' (72).

Naql dishes were not meant to be filling, but taken just to satisfy one's hunger, induce a feeling of thirst, and delay intoxication or prevent hangovers. The most familiar foods offered were:

- ☞ Toasted salted nuts. Almonds were taken to slow down intoxication, and pistachios to sweeten the breath.
- ☞ Sour and sweet-sour fruits, such as pomegranate, apples, quince, raisins, rhubarb, and jujube were taken to prevent headaches.
- ☞ Rock candy (*nabat al-sukkar*), and sugar reeds steeped in rose water
- ☞ Tiny sausages, called *laqaniq/maqaniq*

☞ Dry cookies/biscuits, and filled savory pastries like *sanbusaj (sanbousa)*.

In one of the medieval recipes, directions were to make *sanbusaj* pastries as small as fava/broad beans and serve them with toothpicks. The recipe also encouraged the cook to make a large number of these nibbles because one cannot have enough of them.

☞ Grilled sparrows ('*asafeer*) were popular in such drinking sessions and were believed to be aphrodisiac. Indeed, so popular were they that the 14th-century anonymous Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* includes no less than 11 recipes. The sparrows were valued for their aphrodisiac properties. Indeed, even today, you can still nibble on grilled sparrows in springtime, if you go to the small 'pubs' scattered on the hills of the beautiful Christian village of Tel il-Kief (hill of merriment) north of Mosul. It seems that this region has always had a reputation for serving sparrows with drinks, as a recipe of griddled sparrows in 14th-century Egyptian cookbook *Kanz al-Fawa'id* shows (60). The recipe explains that this dish is offered as *naql (mezze)* in Baghdad and Mosul (see Like Sparrows for Cupid 000, for more details).

☞ Different kinds of cured meat *qadid* were also presented. One of al-Warraq's recipes described how to prepare it in a fancy way. The uncooked meat strips were wound around reeds before roasting them lightly in the *tannour*. They would come out as delicate spirals of cured meat that crumbled in the mouth. These were served with fried or baked small and thin breads, similar to chips/crisps, or thin bread slathered with sesame paste *tahini* or other condiments, and then sliced into strips (Chapter 89).

☞ They even ate a special kind of pure clay for their *naql*. It was called *teen Nisaburi* (obtained from Nisabur, city in northern Iran). The purpose for nibbling on it in drinking sessions was to sweeten the breath, fool the appetite, and stop vomiting. Physicians, nevertheless, discouraged eating it because it was very slow to digest (Ibn al-Baytar 462-72).

TABLE MANNERS AND THE CUSTOM OF WASHING THE HANDS BEFORE AND AFTER HAVING A MEAL

Although it is more customary nowadays among city-dwellers to use forks and spoons when having food, eating from communal dishes with the hand (actually with three fingers of the right hand) is still practiced in rural and Bedouin regions. To the novice it is not an easy task at all. Here is a description of the clumsy first attempts of an Englishman eating rice and stew with a group of marsh-dwellers, in southern Iraq:

Eating the Arab manner requires to be learnt, and at the beginning I found it humiliatingly impossible... the fingers enclose the rice, and when the hand reaches the mouth the thumb pushed the rice up into it - if, that is to say, there is any rice left to push. The first evening, I found, there rarely was. The mere fact of being cross-legged made the rice a disconcertingly long way off, and no matter how large a handful I set out with, so to speak, it had dwindled to a few grains by the time the hand reached the mouth. (Maxwell 24-25)

Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq in his 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook dedicates two chapters to table manners, which stem from this same custom of eating from communal dishes. Of table manners to be observed: The diner should start the meal with salt and end it with it. One should not untighten the belt, break the bread into small pieces, covet what is not in front of him. He should not lick his fingers, pull out food particles stuck between his teeth, or look at the communal dish, visually exploring it for the next eligible morsel. Chicken should be cut into parts using a knife and not pulled apart with the hands. Dipping a piece of bread again into the sauce after biting it was severely criticized. It was not good manners to look at a person while eating.

It was said of the Umayyad Caliph Mu'awiya (d.680) that when he was once having dinner with a Bedouin the latter lifted a morsel of food to his mouth, the caliph told him to remove a hair that was in his food. The Bedouin was offended and left abruptly.

Washing the hands before and after eating was strictly observed due to the communal custom of having a meal. Special compounds were used for this purpose. Al-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook provides us with some elaborate labor-intensive preparations for soap-like mixtures such as *ushnan* (alkali powder), *mahlab* compounds to help remove the greasy odors, along with the aromatic *bunk muhammas*, which contains ground toasted coffee beans among other ingredients. According to al-Warraq's account, when the meal is over the diner should start rubbing his hands with *mahlab* followed by toothpicks (*khilal*) to remove remaining particles of meat. He then washes his hands with *ushnan* and rubs them with it thoroughly, and then rinses them out. Next, he takes some *ushnan* specially made for washing the mouth and rubs with it his mouth, teeth, beard, around the mouth, around the nails, between the fingers, and under rings, but taking off the rings altogether is recommended. He then rinses his hands and mouth, takes fresh *mahlab* and *ushnan* and washes his mouth with them.

Next, he uses *bunk* and *su'd* (cyperus), then rinses his mouth and hands with water. Finally, he perfumes his hands and beard with rose water. When an Abbasid vizier was asked why he spent so much time washing his hands, his reply was that the rule was to spend as much time washing them as they spent eating the food (Chapter 130).

In *The Arabian Nights* there is so much feasting, eating, drinking, and carousing going on. With all these gastronomical activities, washing the hands before and after the meals is like a ritual that Shehrezad, our storyteller, never fails to mention, albeit in passing, whenever her characters have some food. One of her stories tells what happened when one of the characters neglected this ritual: On his wedding night to a beautiful damsel, he was offered for his dinner, among other dishes, *zurbaja* stew, a delicate stew usually yellowed with saffron and seasoned mostly with cumin. He said, "I did not long hesitate; but took my seat before the [*zurbaja*] and fell to and ate of it till I could no more." After this, he wiped his hands, but forgot to wash them. Then he continues, "When I found myself alone with her on the bed I embraced her, hardly believing in our union; but she smelt the strong odors of the [stew] upon my hands and forthwith cried out with exceeding loud cry, at which the slave-girls came running to her from all sides." To give him an unforgettable lesson, he had his thumbs and great toes cut off (Burton, 1: 278--80). The punishment definitely sounds cruel to us but it does show how essential washing the hands was to these people.

"You Talkin' to me!?"

It is good manners not to pay a friend a visit at mealtimes. If one does so, one would be looked down upon as an intruding, unwelcome guest. To illustrate this, al-Warraq in his 10th-century cookbook (Chapter 131) tells an anecdote on the famous Abbasid boon companion Ibn Dihqana (d.891):

Look what happened to Muhammad bin 'Umar when he was eating with his friends and a sponger (tufayli) intruded upon him. Out of modesty 'Umar invited him to join in, at which the tufayli said, "You talkin' to me?!" (*wa liman yuqal*), and he instantly swooped down to the table, reciting these verses:

Every day neighborhoods I roam, I smell the cooking then the flies.
When I see provisions for a wedding, circumcision, or gathering friends,
I would not hesitate to intrude, neither fearing reproach nor the doorman's box.
Holding in slight esteem whomever I intrude, having no fear, nor scare.
You will see me like an eagle snatch whatever they offer of kinds of food.
More enjoyable is this than exerting myself, or debt, or baker's or butcher's tyranny.

ORAL HYGIENE IN MEDIEVAL TIMES

To keep teeth clean and avoid bad breath, medieval physicians highly recommended following a regular oral routine. *Siwak* (variant *miswak*) was used to brush the teeth before praying and after waking up from sleep. It is the most ancient toothbrush used ever since ancient Mesopotamian times and it is still used to this day throughout most of the Islamic world.

Wood commonly used for making *siwak* is taken from the *arak* tree described as a green sweet-smelling bushy tree with lots of branches and leaves, identified as a variety of saltbush (scientific name *salvadora persic*). The wood stems with their pleasant scent, antibacterial properties, and fibrous texture help clean the teeth and mouth. As described in medieval sources, *siwak* was used by rubbing the teeth and gums with it vertically and horizontally, or it was chewed. When *arak* wood was not available, it was substituted with other kinds of wood, or by rubbing the teeth with *su'd* (cyperus). In extreme cases, a coarse piece of cloth was used to rub the teeth and gums, or they were rubbed with the bare fingers, mostly done by toothless people (al-Ghazali *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Deen* 143).

Toothpicks (*khilal*), made mostly of willow tree twigs (*khilaf*), were applied after the meal to get rid of food particles, especially meat, which regular mouth washing does not remove. It was considered good manners (*adab*) to do this. Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq recites verses a poet composed on a man whom he befriended but has never seen using toothpicks:

سألت عمراً خلد
فقال لي ما الخلال؟
قلت حمور وطيب
للس فيه جمال
بنفي الثغور وفيها
كثرة ومجال
فقال فذلك شيء
فيما أدره مجال!

I asked 'Umar for khilal, but he said,
"What is khilal?"

I said, "It is a nice little piece of wood which
bestows beauty to the teeth.

It purges the mouth, which its battlefield
it makes and reiterates its attacks."

At which he said, "Get out of here!

There is no such thing!"

PROTOCOLS OF TREATING DINING GUESTS

Of Miles and Men

In his 10th-century cookbook, Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq entertains his readers with an anecdote, which satirizes stinginess (Chapter 131). It tells of two men who used to socialize together regularly. When one of them was invited to the other person's house and happened to eat a whole bread, the host's servant-boy would announce, "Sire, he has walked a mile (*mee*)." If he happened to eat two whole breads, the servant-boy would say, "Sire, he has walked a league (*farsakh*)." The hosting friend would then say, "Fie upon you boy! Bridle him!" at which the boy would bring a glass of water for the man to drink with the food, announcing, "He is now walking with his bridle, Sire." The guest finally understood what was going on, and when it was his turn to invite this friend of his, he served the bread broken to pieces. When the friend asked him why he was offering the bread like this, he said, "So that we will not know the miles from the leagues.

One of the basic traditional protocols of dining is that the host and hostess should wait on the dining guests, and are to eat only when all their guests' needs are satisfied. It is the custom, too, that the host and hostess should urge their guests to eat more of the food, and should not accept, "no" for an answer. Here is what an Abbasid poet said about this (al-Warraq, Chapter 131):

*How am I to trick into eating a bashful guest?
My tricks may put him off:
Whereas my insistence his shyness may increase,
My silence, will my accusation of stinginess be.*

Traditionally the host's generosity and hospitality are, quite often than not, measured by the variety of the foods offered and its quantity. That is why, for instance, serving the crunchy crust of the rice, delicious as it is, is not considered appropriate, because it would be an indication that what you see of the rice on the table is all that there is, and this is not supposed to be. Our Sumerian hosts have long ago set the rules of hospitality, as stated in the following ancient proverb:

*Let it be plentiful - lest there be too little!
Let it be more than enough - lest it have to be added to!
Let it be boiling hot - lest it get cold! (Gordon, 465)*

It is the custom to say "*Bismillah*" (in the name of God) at the beginning of the meal. Saying "*Al-hamdu lillah*" is an indication that the person has finished eating, so it was a breach of decorum on the part of the host to say this while his guests are still eating. To illustrate this, al-Warraq (Chapter 131) tells an anecdote. Two people were having a meal, and while still eating the guest heard the host saying "*Al-hamdu lillah*," at which he got off the table saying, "I swear to God never to come back to this place again. What is the meaning of thanking God at this point in the meal? It is as if you want to notify us that we are done eating," and he took pen and paper and wrote down these lines:

SUGGESTED MENUS

*Thanking God is a good thing at all times but not at the beginning of a meal.
You will thus embarrass your guests as if bidding them to hasten with the meal.
You will bid your still hungry guests farewell, which is not the way the generous deal.*

Although, as a rule, the eaters are discouraged from chattering or laughing a lot while eating since this might cause particles of food to scatter from between the teeth and tongue, it was considered good manners on the part of the host to engage the guests with pleasant exchange of conversations. They say the talkative host loosens his recoiling guests, entertains them, and encourages them to eat more as he keeps on urging them. In fact, this was deemed part of hospitality. Here is what a poet said about this:

*صاوت زاولاً وصدقتاً ما استنى (إله المديت طرفاً من القري
Lucky is the one treated to food and talk,
For tabletalk is part of hospitality.*

It is also known of Prophet Muhammad's grandson al-Hasan bin 'Ali bin Abi-Talib (d.670) to have once said,

*القهوا القهوي حتى القهوا القهوا من القهوت فأبها القهوت القهوت من القهوت
"Sit at dinner tables as long as you can and converse to your hearts desire, for these are the bonus times of your lives."*

Al-Warraq also mentions that it is commendable for departing guests to say, "May the faithful eat your food and the fasting in *Ramadhan* have their meals at your table. May the angels pray for you and Allah count you among his own" (Chapter 131). Today's departing guests might say, "*Beit il-'amir*" (May your prosperous house be for ever blessed by God).

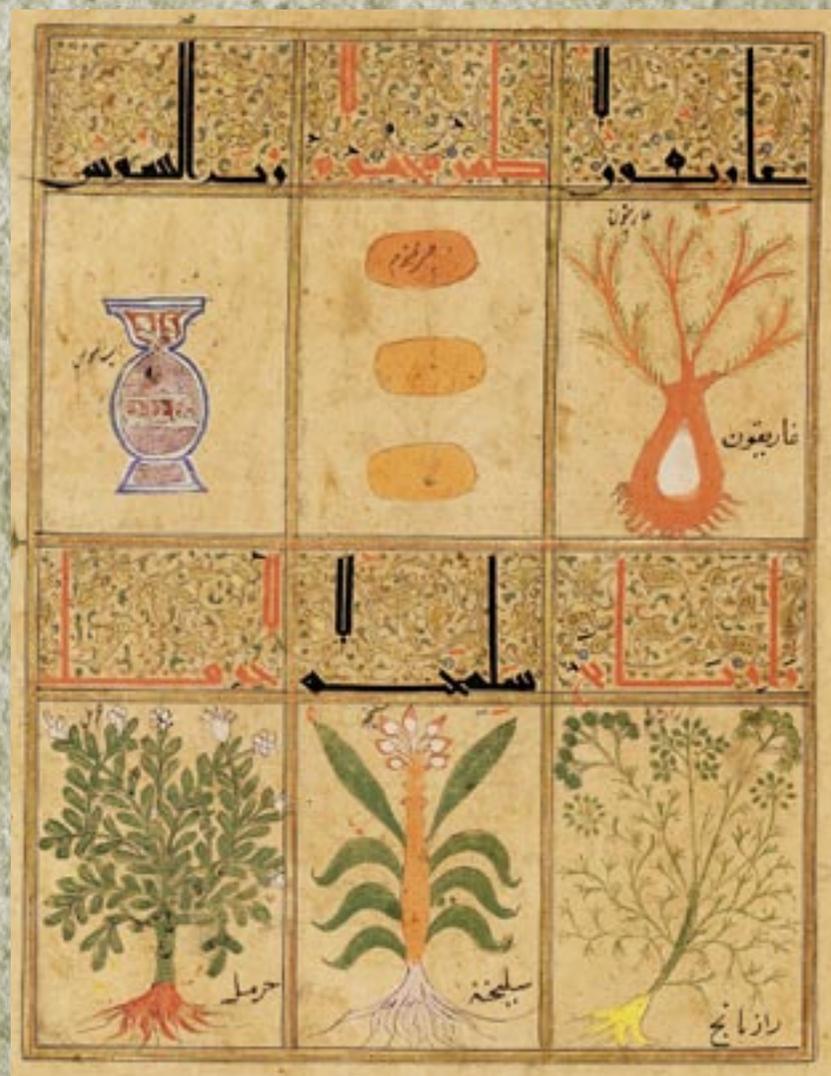
To Snooze or not to Snooze: There's the Rub

Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq aptly concludes his 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook *Kitab al-Tabeeh* with a chapter on the benefits of sleep after having a meal. Medieval physicians recommended taking a nap regularly since this would improve one's temper and make the face look radiant with health. It was also believed to be beneficial to the brain, heart, and joints, provided the eater slept on his back supporting the head with a low pillow. Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur followed this regimen regardless of where he was, so we are told. At any rate, one should definitely avoid oversleeping on a full stomach (Chapter 132).

In other medieval sources, we also learn that this advice had to be reversed for those who had late night meals. In such cases, the recommendation was to have a light walk after eating. Even as few as a hundred steps would do the trick (Ibn 'Abd Rabbihi *Al-'Iqd al-Fareed* 1007).

Indeed, all this still rings so true.
We all grew up on the adage:
*After lunch, lie down,
After supper, have a walk.*

GLOSSARY



The whole country is scented with them, and exhales an odor marvelously sweet.
(Herodotus, 484-425 BC, on Near Eastern spices)

As far back as the Sumerian times, the Iraqi cuisine had the tendency to use combinations of spices to add rich flavors to the food. From the culinary Sumerian records, we learn that 'naga' was a seasoning for the poor, and 'gazi' was for the well-to-do families. According to a Sumerian proverb, "the poor man is the one who does not have the *gazi* when he has meat, nor does he have meat when he has *gazi*." Mills to grind spices and seeds reached a high degree of specialization. The cumin mill, for instance, was different from the one used for crushing mustard seeds. And the tradition continued. The proof is the extant medieval recipes, which incorporate a balanced harmonious combination of spices, most of which we still use.

Today, if you stroll along *Souq al-Shorja*, a crowded roofed spice bazaar in Baghdad, you'll fill your senses probably with the same aromas that Herodotus inhaled some 2500 years ago. They are the aromas of the *baharat* (mixed spices), cardamom, cinnamon, rose water, and mastic gum, to mention but a few.

Following is a list of the most commonly used spices and ingredients, the majority of which are available at regular grocery stores. For ingredients unique to the Iraqi cuisine, more readily available substitutes are given, whenever possible.

ALLSPICE

Allspice (*kababa*, although it is not exactly it *per se*) is a tropical spice which grows mainly in Jamaica. Columbus introduced to the Old World. The reddish-brown berries were mistaken for peppers at first, and hence the Spanish name "*pimiento*," later Anglicized to pimento. Allspice berries are the size of small peas, and have a somewhat rough skin. They have a pleasantly fragrant aroma that resembles a peppery compound of cloves, cinnamon, and nutmeg, and hence the name allspice. This spice goes very well with meat dishes

A Typical Baghdadi Pantry in the Early Twentieth Century

In his entertaining description of life in Baghdad in the twenties (*Baghdad fi 'l-'Ishreenat* 271-72) Abbas Baghdadi enlists the contents of his family's pantry. It is a spacious room in which you see earthenware jars (*basateeg*) filled with date syrup, pickles, Kurdish cheese kept in brine, *dihin hurr* (clarified butter/ghee), and sacks of bulgur, shelled whole wheat, crushed wheat (*jireesh*=farina), rice, and dried boiled-locusts. Containers of chickpeas, oats, mung beans, lentils, dried white beans, and dried truffles are lined up on one side of the room. You can also see 'necklaces' of threaded dried eggplant, okra, and tomatoes draped on ropes. Tomato paste is kept in earthenware jars. Date bunches are hung on large nails, and sticky pressed dates such as *zahdi* are kept in baskets made of woven date palm fronds (*khassaf*); *Khistawi* dates are kept in goat-skin bags. Other varieties of dates, dry and non-sticky, such as *zahdiljasib* and *ashrasi* are kept in baskets. In pantries of households that have relatives in Basra, you might also find a tin-can (*tanaka*) of *barhi m'assa*, [excellent variety of dates seasoned with sesame seeds, aniseeds (*habbat hilwa*), and fennel (*ghaznayaj*) and preserved in its oozing honey-like juice], as well as *khilal matboukh* [dates cooked when still not fully ripe], braided cheese, Indian curry powder, and dried shrimp.

and is used whole in pickles. It is better to buy whole allspice berries and grind them as needed. They are brittle and crush easily.

What the Old World, east and west, originally used before the arrival of allspice was actually cubeb from the Arabic *kababa* (also known as *habb il-'arous* 'the bride's seed'). Cubeb berries are similar in taste to

allspice. They are dark brown berries of the pepper family, a little larger than peppercorns, with tails and wrinkled leathery surface. In medieval times, cubeb was a valued spice for cooking and medicine. For instance, the famous 10th-century physician Ibn Sina (291) recommended cubeb for curing gum disease. He also said that saliva of a man who had chewed cubeb would pleasure his female partner while making love, which definitely explains why this spice was also called 'seed of the bride.'

Nowadays, we substitute with allspice because it is cheaper and more readily available.

AMBERGRIS

Ambergris ('*anbar*') is a waxy, grayish substance located in the intestines of sperm whales, and found floating at sea, or washed ashore. It is valued for its scent, and is added to perfumes to slow down evaporation. In the medieval Baghdadi kitchen, it was used mostly to fumigate food and cooking utensils to get rid of unpleasant odors. Of its internal use, it was incorporated into confections in small amounts. It was also believed to strengthen heart and brain. A small amount of it mixed with a glass of wine would induce fast intoxication (Ibn Sina 337).

'ANBA/'AMBA

'*Anba*/'*amba* (pickled mango) is a tangy condiment popular in Iraq. It is usually imported from India in wide-mouthed bottles. It contains slices of unripe mango, vinegar, salt, mustard, turmeric, chili, and fenugreek seeds (*halba*). It is the last ingredient that gives 'anba its distinctive strong aroma. '*Anba* is originally Hindi for mango. The famous 14th-century Arab traveler Ibn Battuta describes how the Indians pickle the sour unripe fruit in brine and vinegar and eat it as an appetizing condiment with food. He compares its taste to olives. Preserved mango (sweet and pickled), collectively called *anbijaat* was very popular in Iraq during the Abbasid times. For recipes, see 000, 000, 000.

'ANBAR see *ambergris*

ANISE/ANISEED

Anise/aniseed (*habbat hilwa* 'sweet seed') Botanically, this plant is related to caraway, cumin, dill, and fennel. It is one of the oldest spices known and is native to the Middle East. The ancient Mesopotamians valued it for its medicinal digestive property and the ancient Romans were accustomed to serve anise-spiced cakes after a rich meal. In Iraq, it is sold at confectioneries as comfits in the shape of seeds coated with colored sugar, playfully called 'mice droppings.' Aniseeds are brownish-yellowish green. They are oval but a little shorter and plumper than cumin seeds, and tend to have bits of tiny stalks attached to them. Anise tastes and smells somewhat sweet, and licorice-like. It is widely used in savory and sweet dishes, and in flavoring drinks and liqueurs. Anise oil is sometimes used instead of licorice root to give food a licorice flavor. Anise loses its aroma very quickly so it is better to buy it in small quantities and grind it as needed. Aniseeds can be used interchangeably with fennel (*ghaznaya*), see entry below.

APRICOT LEATHER see *qamar al-deen*

ARROWROOT

Arrowroot is a starchy powder, which has no gluten, obtained from the dried cassava plant. It is mainly used in cooking as a thickener instead of cornstarch. The European settlers discovered it in the New World. The Arawak people who lived in the Caribbean Islands named the plant aru-aru, 'meal of meals' because they thought highly of the starchy nutritious meal made from it. It was also used as a medicine to draw poison from wounds inflicted by poison arrows, and hence the name. It has almost no taste, and has more thickening power than flour or cornstarch ($\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon arrowroot equals 1 teaspoon cornstarch). Since it thickens at lower temperatures it can be used in delicate sauces without leaving that starchy taste characteristic of undercooked cornstarch. Arrowroot is used mostly as a thickener in making ice creams (instead of the harder to find *sahlab*, see '*salep*' below), which helps reduce

amount of whipping cream used and gives ice cream a delightful chewiness. To use, dissolve amount required in a little cold water before adding it to hot mixtures.

BAHARAT

Baharat is an all-purpose blend of spices, somewhat similar to the Indian *garam masala* 'spice blend.' *Baharat* is used throughout the Middle East, but each region, or even each household, has its own favorite blend of spices.

In all probability, at some point of time during the Ottoman era the name *bihar*/*bahar* started to designate 'spice mix,' called so after Bihar, the old name of India, which is indeed the source of most of the spices used in the Middle East. Otherwise, during the pre-Ottoman period, spice mixes in the medieval Muslim Eastern and Western Arab world were called *atraf al-teeb*, *afwah al-teeb*, and *nawafih al-teeb* (literally 'blend of aromatic spices'). Besides using spices individually, medieval Arabic cookbooks sometimes required blends of spices. One of al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes, for instance, calls for *al-afaweeh al-arba'a* (the four aromatic spices) and the reader was expected to recognize this blend. But al-Warraq does not leave things to chance, he actually does provide its components: spikenard, cloves, cassia, and nutmeg (Chapter 122). We are equally fortunate that the 13th-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* volunteers with a list of spices used in the famous blend called *atraf al-teeb*/*afwah al-teeb*, and they are: spikenard, betel-leaf, bay leaves, nutmeg, mace, green cardamom, cloves, rose buds, seeds of elm tree (*lisan al-'asfour*), long pepper (*dar fulful*), ginger, and black pepper. All these spices were ground separately and then mixed (2: 518). When I moved to the United States from Iraq, I brought with me a couple of pounds of the spice mix *baharat* I bought from the famous spice market *al-Shorja*. However, as my supply started to dwindle, I was relieved to discover that what is sold in Western specialty stores as *garam masala*, the principal spice blend of north India, is more or less similar to my Iraqi *baharat*. Following are recipes for making the spice

mix *baharat*. You might like to adjust quantities to suit your personal preferences. If you make a large amount, keep it in the freezer in a well-sealed plastic bag and use as needed.

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup (2oz/60g) black pepper corns
 $\frac{1}{3}$ (1oz/30g) cumin seeds
 $\frac{1}{3}$ (1oz/30g) coriander seeds
 $\frac{1}{3}$ (1oz/30g) cardamom pods
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1oz/30g) allspice berries
 2 tablespoons whole cloves
 4 whole nutmegs, or $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1oz/30g) ground
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup (1oz/30g) allspice berries
 Ground chili, to taste
 3 cinnamon sticks, about 3in/7.5cm long, each
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup dried rose petals, optional
 2 tablespoons ground ginger
 1 tablespoon turmeric, optional

☞ Dry toast pepper corns, cumin seeds, coriander seeds, cardamom pods, cloves, and allspice berries. Let cool then grind in batches. Grate nutmeg separately and add it to the blend. Then mix all the ingredients very well and store in an airtight container.

☞ If you are in a hurry and have no need for a large amount of the blend, just mix the already ground spices in the following proportions: (Makes about $\frac{1}{2}$ cup/2oz/118ml)

2 tablespoons black pepper
 1½ tablespoons cumin
 1 tablespoon coriander
 1 tablespoon allspice
 1 tablespoon cinnamon
 1½ teaspoons cardamom
 1 teaspoon cloves
 1 teaspoon nutmeg
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon chili, or to taste
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ginger
 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon turmeric, optional
 1 teaspoon dried rose petals, optional

This type of spice mix usually looks brownish-black. When sometimes people refer to *bahar asfar* (yellow spice-mix) they usually mean blends mostly composed of curry powder and turmeric.

BARBEEN

Barbeen (purslane) is a succulent sprawling plant with small leaves, flat, fleshy, and paddle-like.

BASIL

Basil see *reehan* below.

BLACK PEPPER

Black pepper (*filfil aswad*) is the most widely used spice worldwide. It removes the unpleasant odors of meat (*zufar*), and facilitating its digestion.

BULGUR

Bulgur (*burgbul*) is a wheat product like cracked wheat but processed differently. Cracked wheat is made by crushing raw whole kernels, whereas bulgur is made from whole-wheat berries steamed first, dried, and then crushed. It is available in three grinds: grind #1 is suitable for making *kubba* and *tabboula*, and the coarser grinds #2 and #3 are suitable for making pilafs and soups.

BUTNIJ

Butnij (river mint), in medieval times was called *butanaj nahri* (river mint), described as a wild variety of mint. In Iraq today, *butnij* is always used dried. It is crushed and sprinkled over the traditional fava/broad bean dish *tashreeb bagilla* (boiled beans with bread sopped in its broth, recipe 000) before serving it, as this is believed to help with gaseousness which the beans usually cause. In the United States, I have seen it growing along creeks and riverbanks. Folklore has it if you want to drive away snakes, grow this herb around the house. Indeed so legendary is the enmity between the snake and this herb that if the chemistry between two persons does not work at all, people would say they

are *mithil il-hayya wi'l-butnij* (like *butnij* and the snake). If *butnij* is hard to find, it might be substituted with regular mint. Also see mint below.

CARDAMOM

Cardamom/green or lesser cardamom (*heil*) is a key spice in the Middle Eastern cuisine. Baghdadis like it so much they call it *teen il-Janna* (mud of Paradise). It is used in savory and sweet dishes such as rice, meat dishes, desserts, as well as beverages like tea and coffee. It is believed to be effective as a digestive and breath freshener. Among Bedouins, the lavish use of cardamom in coffee offered to guests is an indication of generosity on the part of the host. Green cardamom is the best; the white variety is simply bleached green cardamom. It is agreeably aromatic and slightly camphorous, and when chewed its aroma lingers for a while. If kept in sealed plastic bags and stored in the freezer, cardamom will stay fresh for a very long time.

CASSIA

Cassia (*darseen*) also known as Chinese cinnamon (in medieval Arab sources, *dar Seeni* 'tree of China') often confused with *qarfa* (Ceylon cinnamon), which is cinnamon *per se*, lighter in color and finer in texture than cassia. Cassia, therefore, is more suited for savory dishes. In today's Iraq, Chinese and Ceylon cinnamon are indistinguishably called *darseen*. In medieval Arabic books on botany, cinnamon was valued for its effectiveness in combating flatulence, curing stomachaches, and whetting the mind as well as the sexual appetite (Ibn al-Baytar 264). The medieval Arab physician al-Razi (d.923) recommended having cinnamon with dense porridges to facilitate their digestion, which explains why to this day a generous sprinkle of cinnamon on our *hareesa* is a must.

CHICKPEAS

Chickpeas/garbanzo beans (*hummus*) can be used whole or skinned and split. Whole chickpeas need to be soaked overnight. I always keep a bag or two of already soaked chickpeas in the freezer. They come

Cardamom and Nordic Breads

Have you ever wondered how cardamom, a typically Middle-Eastern spice, became one of the main spices used in the Scandinavian cuisine particularly in breads and pastries? Following is the story how such spices traveled to northern Europe as told by Judith Gabriel in "Among the Norse Tribes:"

More than a millennium ago, as fleets of Viking raiders were striking fear into the hearts of coast- and river-dwellers throughout western Europe, other Norsemen of more mercantile inclination were making their way east. With no less boldness and stamina, bearing luxurious furs and enticing nodules of amber, they penetrated the vast steppes of what is today Ukraine, Belarus and Russia and entered Central Asia. There they met Muslim traders who paid for Norse wares with silver coins, which the Vikings themselves did not mint, and which they coveted. Their routes were various, and by the ninth and tenth centuries, a regular trade network had grown up. Some Norsemen traveled overland and by river, while others sailed over both the black and Caspian Seas, joined caravans and rode camelback as far as Baghdad, which was then under Abbasid rule and populated by nearly a million souls. There, the Scandinavian traders found an emporium beyond their wildest dreams.

in handy when preparing an unplanned recipe that calls for whole chickpeas. In fact, you can do the same thing with all beans that require long hours of soaking. It is also a good idea to have a few cans of cooked chickpeas in the pantry for emergencies. You can make delicious hummus at a five-minute notice.

How Cinnamon and Cloves Came into Being

Legend has it that when Adam was driven out of Paradise he landed on the Indian mountain, and there he remorsefully wept for a hundred years until his tears flew in Sarandeeb valley. Out of his tears there grew cinnamon and cloves, and the valley's birds turned into peacocks. Then Gabriel came down and said unto Adam, "Raise your head for God has forgiven thee." (Ibn al-Jawzi *The Book of Anecdotes and Spiritual Medicine* 15)

CHILI

Chili (*filfil ahmar* 'red pepper') when called for in the recipes, it is usually the ground dried red chili peppers unless otherwise specified. Columbus found it in the Caribbean and brought it to Spain in 1514. It reached India in 1611 through the Portuguese and from there it spread to southern and western Asia. The date of its arrival to the Middle East is unknown. Food in Iraq is generally mild but people in the southern region tend to like it spicier and hotter due to the Indian influence. The so-called Hungarian paprika, referred to as Turkish pepper in Hungarian cookbooks, was in fact originally brought to Hungary by the Muslim Turks during the Ottoman rule. Use paprika whenever you want to add less heat but more flavor and color to your dish. Fresh hot peppers (*filfil harr*), both red and green, are available in Iraq and are used in cooking, pickling, as well as eaten raw with food, especially rice and stew.

CILANTRO

Cilantro (*kizbara kdadhra*) also called 'green coriander' or 'fresh coriander,' to differentiate it from coriander seeds. It looks somewhat like Italian flat-leafed parsley but it has a different, more pungent flavor. Use it sparingly; otherwise, it will overpower the rest of the seasonings in the dish.

CINNAMON see cassia above

CITRIC ACID

Citric acid (*lemon doozy*) is used in Iraq as a substitute for lemon juice especially in cooking the daily stews. Cooks find it quite handy because fresh lemon is not available year round. Unsweetened lemonade powder such as Kool-Aid can be used as a substitute for citric acid or lemon juice especially when added liquid to the dish is not desirable.

CLARIFIED BUTTER (*dihin hurr*) see ghee

CLOVES

Cloves (*qurunful*), with their biting sharp, hot, and somewhat bitter taste are used sparingly by Iraqi cooks. They are more commonly used with chicken since they help remove its greasy odor (*zufara*).

CORIANDER

Coriander (*kizbara*) comes in two forms: green leaves and seeds, and they have a completely different aroma and appearance. The green leaves are often called cilantro, see entry above. The seeds can be used whole or ground according to recipe directions. It is a very popular spice with cooks ever since ancient times. In Akkadian it was known as '*kisibaru*.'

CUBEB (*kababa*) see allspice

cumin (*kammoun*) is a strong aromatic spice whose pungent flavor persists for some time, and is used whole or crushed. In the ancient Akkadian it was known as '*kamunu*.' Arab medieval sources, such as Kitab al-Saydana by al-Biruni (d.1048) mention that cumin growers do not actually water the plant but keep on promising to water it until it sprouts (323), which explains why in our folk culture procrastinators and those who promise but do not deliver are compared to cumin growers, as the following saying shows:

أوعودك بالوعود اسقيت بالكوي

Read my lips, cumin, I promise to water you.

CURRY POWDER

Curry powder (*kari*) is a yellow blend of many spices which in fact is the creation of the British cooks in their attempt to emulate the Indian curry dishes to satisfy the appetites of the returned Anglo-Indians. Authentic curry dishes do not contain store-bought curry powders but a combination of spices freshly ground and added at several stages in cooking the dish. In her captivating *Curry: A Tale of Cooks and Conquerors* (141-42), Lizzie Collingham tells us that the curry recipes which first appeared in British cookbooks in mid-eighteenth century did not require the readers to use curry powder, and that for making curry dishes, coriander and cumin seeds, cardamom pods, cinnamon sticks, and other spices were bought separately. Collingham continues: *But as the Anglo-Indians began to think of curries as variations on one theme, they began to collect recipes for spice mixtures which they simply labeled 'Curry Powder.' By the 1850s British cookery books called for a spoonful of curry powder in most of their Indian dishes. Sometimes they supplied recipes for curry powders which the cook could make up in advance, but as the popularity of curries became widespread it became easy to buy curry mixes... Between 1820 and 1840 imports of turmeric, the main ingredient in British curry powder, increased threefold... By the end of the [19th-] century, even non-specialist grocers normally stocked three types of curry powder: a yellow, a brown, and a fiery, chili flavored red one.*

Curry powder used in Iraqi dishes is definitely the British yellow variety, which people sometimes call *bahar asfar* (yellow spice-mix).

DIHIN HURR (clarified butter) see ghee

DRIED LIME see *noomi Basra*

FARINA

Farina (*jireesh/jireesha*) is ground hard non-durum wheat, whitish in color and similar in texture to grits (crushed corn). It is consumed as a cooked cereal pudding in the West. In Iraq, it is called jireesh, and it is

The Assyrian Herbal: Ancient Book of Medicine

The Assyrian Herbal is a hand-stenciled publication, dealing with 660 Assyrian cuneiform tablets, which discuss vegetable drugs used to cure the known ailments at the time. It was published in book form, entitled *A Dictionary of Assyrian Botany*, in 1949. Evidently, so many herbs and plant extracts were used to the extent that herbs became synonymous with medicine. Campbell Thompson translated these cuneiform tablets into English in 1924. The text includes about 250 species of vegetables, occurring around 4600 times; 120 species of minerals occurring 650 times; and around 180 other unidentified species, to which must be added alcohol, fats, oil, honey, wax and milk. By going through such a rare text, one gets glimpses of what was available at the time in the Mesopotamian 'grocery stores.' Most of the identified objects still grow in the region, and to this day, many of the herbs mentioned in the book are still valued for their medicinal properties.

Interesting Tidbits from the Book:

- ☞ Fennel was used as a stomach comforter.
- ☞ Sumac was used to excite the appetite before the meals.
- ☞ Chamomile was used as a stomach medicine.
- ☞ Green juice of licorice was used for "feet that cannot walk", applied to swellings, and the roots were used as a drink for jaundice. Licorice powder was sprinkled on ulcers of the mouth.

☞ Thyme was used as a drug for the lungs, to be chewed and drunk for hardness of breathing. It was taken alone or in oil and beer for coughs and for the intestines. Oil of thyme was used for sprains and for decayed teeth. Its smell was said to have the power to revive an epileptic.

☞ Pomegranate rind was used to "bind the stomach." It was also ground and mixed with water and used as a dye.

☞ A cake of compressed figs was used as an application to a boil. Fig juice was used to wash the stomach.

☞ Bitter almonds were recognized as a powerful poison. Confections were flavored with "spirit of almond" or "almond flavor." One of the medicinal values of almond oil was laxative.

☞ It was advised that prunes, plums, cherries, and quince were to be eaten alone or with honey and butter. The reason for this was not supplied.

☞ Lentil cooked as soup was recommended as a "vegetable for lungs," and was given as a remedy for colds.

☞ Turmeric was used as an ointment for eyes, mouth, hands, and feet, and was also used for insect bites. As a drink, it was recommended for jaundice, and was fumigated for ears and nose.

☞ *Binj* was used as a drug for depression.

The Assyrian botanists also knew the narcotic properties of the poppies.

☞ Cardamom was prescribed for hollow teeth. Cavities were filled with gum Arabic.

☞ Garlic was used as a chew and fumigant for hard and painful breathing.

mainly used in making the shell for *kubbat jireesh*, and mixed with bulgur as a binding ingredient in making the shell for *kubbat burghul*. If you do not have access to Middle-Eastern stores, substitute with cream of wheat. Unlike bulgur, jireesh is not parboiled.

FAVA/BROAD BEANS

Fava/broad beans are known as bagilla in the Iraqi dialect and fool in other Arab countries. The Iraqi variety is much bigger than fool. The fresh young pods are cooked either whole or cut into smaller pieces

and used in appetizers and stews. As the outer jacket toughens towards the end of summer, only the beans are used. Some of the recipes require removing the bean skin. In this case, when buying them fresh, look for big pods that have a somewhat soft and leathery texture, which are signs of full growth. When out of season, frozen or dried fava beans are used. Dried skinned beans are also available at gourmet shops. Dry beans require about 24 hours of soaking. Half a cup (3 oz/85 g) of dry beans yields 1 cup cooked beans. To skin fresh fava beans, scald them in hot water first as this will cause the skin to separate from the bean. Freezing does the same thing to the beans. In this case, allow the beans to thaw, and then break the skin with a knife or fingernail. The bean will slide out quite easily from the skin.

FENNEL

Fennel (*ghaznayaj/raznayaj*) is similar in aroma and taste to anise (entry above) but not as sweet, and with a slight hint of camphor. Besides, fennel seeds are a little larger than aniseeds and they lack the distinctive bits of stalks characteristic of the anise. Etymologically, the name *raznayaj* evolved from the medieval *razyanaj*. *Ghaznayaj* is the way people of the northern city of Mosul pronounce it.

FENUGREEK

Fenugreek (*hilba*) the seed has a strong aroma somewhat similar to that of celery. In form, it is a fawn-colored three-sided seed. Uncooked and untoasted, it tastes rather bitter and astringent, but toasting brings out its flavor. Fresh green fenugreek is sold as an herb in bunches. It is also available in dried form. You will most probably find it in Indian stores under the name '*kasoori methi*.' Use only the small green leaves and discard the stalks because they impart bitterness to the dish.

GARAM MASALA see *baharat*

GARBANZO BEANS (*hummus*) see chickpeas

GHAZNAYAJ see fennel above

GHEE

Ghee (*dihin hurr*) is clarified butter (pure butter fat) used a lot in traditional general cooking, but especially pastries like *baklawa*. The practice of clarifying butter goes back to ancient Mesopotamian times. It prevented their butter from getting rancid quickly especially in hot weather. To make it at home, heat butter gently until it melts and foams. Reduce heat to low and let it simmer until foam subsides and sediments brown a little and sink to the bottom of the pot. You need to watch it at this stage to prevent sediments from burning. The clarified butter at this stage will have a lovely nutty flavor. Strain it with a fine sieve. One cup of butter will yield $\frac{3}{4}$ cup (180 ml) ghee.

GINGER

Ginger (*zanjabeel/irig harr*) is an ancient spice that has a warm aroma and taste. The Arabs transmitted it to Spain during the medieval times. In Iraq, it is available in its dried form only, and is usually used in blends of spices. Whole dried roots are used in pickling.

GRAPE LEAVES

Grape leaves (*waraq 'inab*) are used in the famous *dolma* dish. In countries or regions where grapes grow, grape leaves are used fresh. The best way to prepare fresh leaves is to wash them and stack them in a rather deep dish. Pour boiling water to cover and set aside for about 30 minutes. The leaves will change color. Strain and use as directed, or freeze for future use. To thaw immerse in hot water until all ice melts, and then strain. Canned grape leaves kept in brine can also be used. However, make sure to get rid of salt by immersing the leaves for a while in water. Repeat until you get rid of all the salt. Drape leaves on the sides of a colander to drain.

HILBA see fenugreek

HUMMUS see chickpeas

The Magical Powers of Olive Oil and Beer

Besides animal fat, vegetarian oils were quite common in ancient Mesopotamia. Olive oil in particular was deemed valuable due to its healing powers. Edward Chiera in his amusing book *They Wrote on Clay* proclaims that: *it is a fact that olive oil mixed with beer was the ancient predecessor of our oil shampoos and alcoholic massage as a remedy for baldness. And few are aware that our prescription of warm oil for earache was anticipated twenty-five hundred years ago by the Assyrians.*" (151)

Beer was also valued for its medicinal powers. Back in the Sumerian times a preparation was given to cure some sort of ailment. The instructions given were to pulverize pears and roots of the *manna* plant, and to mix them with beer and let the sick person drink it.

JIREESH see farina

JUNIPER BERRIES

Juniper berries ('*ar'ar*) are fruits of coniferous shrubs of the cypress family. The oily berries are the size of small peas with a pleasant bittersweet aroma. They leave a slight burning sensation in the mouth. They were used in ancient Mesopotamian cooking, and in medieval times, were incorporated into some meat stew dishes. Due to their astringency and hot and dry properties, they were useful medicinally. Medieval Arab physicians mention it is more powerful than any other plant to stimulate menstrual flow, spoil live fetuses, and dislodge the dead ones (Ibn Sina 335).

KABABA (*cubeb*) see allspice

KISHK

Kishk is dried dough of bulgur and yogurt. When needed, it is crushed, dissolved in some liquid, and

incorporated into soups, mostly cooked in northern Iraq. Arabic medieval cookbooks also mention *kishk Turkumani*, which is drained yogurt, shaped into loaves, and dried in the sun, as described in al-Baghdadi's 14th-century augmented version of his cookbook *Kitab al-Tabeeh* 323. This practice of enriching stews and soups by adding *kishk* is an ancient one, as the Babylonian stew recipes show (see Introduction, Section VI).

KIZBARA (seeds) see coriander

KIZBARA KDADHRA (fresh coriander) see cilantro

KNAFA

Knafa is shredded dough usually bought ready-made like fillo dough. It looks like fresh vermicelli noodles. The packages available in the Western markets might sometimes carry the name '*kataifi*.'

KURRATH

Kurrath (table leeks) with crisp tender leaves, a variety in which the interest is in the green leaves rather than the white bulbous root. It is more like garlic chives. This variety of leeks was known to the ancient Mesopotamians. They called it '*karasu*.' In medieval times, it was known as *kurrath Nabati* (Nabatean leeks) because it was indigenous to Iraq, to differentiate it from *kurrath Shami* (Levantine leeks), which was grown for the bulbous white roots rather than the leaves. *Kurrath* is eaten raw as a salad herb. It has a hot sharp taste, almost similar to onion and garlic combined.

LEMON DOUZI see citric acid

LEMON OMANI see *noomi Basra*

LENTILS

Lentils (*adas*) is a legume widely used in the entire Middle-Eastern region ever since ancient times, and was brought to the Americas by the Spanish missionaries. The Arabic word for lentils gave its name to the word meaning lenses in Arabic, which is

adasa (the Latin form of 'lense' was also derived from 'lentils'). It is a delicious source of protein, high in fiber, complex carbohydrates, and nutrients, and low in calories and fat. Lentils come in different colors: brown whole lentils (with the shell on), green whole lentils (with the shell on), and a smaller variety of green lentils referred to as French lentils. Red lentils are shelled, and are frequently used in soups, for they cook faster and disintegrate more easily. The so-called red lentils actually come in different hues: orange, yellowish orange, and lemony yellow, but they all taste the same. It is better to soak whole lentils before cooking them, whereas red lentils can be used whenever needed.

LIQUORICE

Liquorice (*'irg il-soos*, cf. Akkadian *'susu'*) was eaten by the kings of Assyria, and used as an herbal medicine. Historians tell us that Cleopatra used it to enhance her beauty. Nowadays it is sold as a refreshing drink believed to have rejuvenating properties. It also makes a delicious tea.

LONG PEPPER

Long pepper (*dar fulful/filfil daraz*) is rarely, if ever, used nowadays but in ancient and medieval times it was a well-known spice, often confused with its relative black pepper. It is the fruit of a mostly wild tropical vine, and consists of dense 1in/2.5cm catkin-like spikes, composed of a large number of tiny fruits with tiny seeds all adhering to the elongated axis. Daisy Iny (*The Best of Baghdad Cooking with Treats from Teheran* 1976) provides the modern Arabic name for this forgotten spice, *filfil daraz*. *Dar fulful* was its medieval name.

MAHLEB

Mahleb is the aromatic kernel of the black cherry pits. The scientific name is *'prunus mahaleb'* It is a small beige-colored oval seed, used ground mainly to flavor breads and pastries. The seeds are soft and have a nutty chewy texture to them. They taste a little bitter and sour when tried by themselves. In medieval times, it was an important component in hand-washing

compounds, recipes for which are given in al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook (Chapter 129).

MASTIC

Mastic (*mastaki*) is resin of a Mediterranean evergreen tree related to the pistachio tree (*pistacia lentiscus*). Mastic resin is extracted by slashing the trunk and large branches of the tree, and as the resin seeps it hardens into small translucent lumps. It is widely used in making chewing gum, incense, varnish, and for flavoring liquors, pastries, and desserts. In the medieval times, it was used in meat dishes and stews, as well. Since mastic tends to melt rather than dissolve into the food, it is advisable to pulverize the translucent light-yellow lumps before adding them. It also comes in the form of cream, much like marshmallow cream. This variety is good for dessert only because it is sweet.

MINT

Mint (*ni'naa'*) is an ancient herb known as *'ninu'* in ancient Akkadian. Its cool refreshing flavor is a staple in the Middle-Eastern cooking in general. In medieval times, mint was known by the generic Persian name *butanaj/fudanaj* and the Arabic *habaq/habak*. Of its varieties: *butanaj bustani*, which is cultivated mint, also called *na'na'*. This is today's mint *ni'naa'*. *Butanaj nahri* (river mint) a wild variety of mint. This is today's *butnij*, see entry above. Arab medieval physicians recommended it to sharpen the appetite and aid digestion. It was also believed to be good for the heart and coitus, and has the power to relieve bloating and headaches.

MISK

Misk (musk) is a greasy secretion produced in a glandular sac beneath the skin of the abdomen, behind the navel of the male musk deer. In the affluent kitchens of the medieval Baghdadis, it was valued for its wonderful aroma in cooking and perfume compounds and for its medicinal benefits, such as relieving headaches. It was also used as a deodorant and was believed to invigorate coitus and hearts of cowards.

MUNG BEANS

Mung beans (*mash*) are small, olive-green, rounded legume. In Iraqi cooking, they are used whole and unshelled. The Chinese use them for sprouting because they grow fast. Mung beans have an exceptionally high vitamin A content for a legume, and vitamin B and a little C. Soaking the beans for a couple of hours or so will cut down on cooking time.

NIGELLA SEEDS

Nigella seeds (*habbat soda* 'black seed'), sometimes referred to as 'black cumin.' They are black and are the size of sesame seeds, with a pleasant aroma and a sharp taste. The seeds pair very well with breads and pastries. They are believed to be effective in facilitating their digestion and combating flatulence.

NOOMI BASRA

Noomi Basra (dried lime/lemon Omani) is used to give a pleasant tang to some of the dishes and to make delicious tea. It may be substituted with lime juice (1 tablespoon lime juice and 1 teaspoon grated lime rind for each dried lime). However, the genuine dried limes will give the dish a distinguished aroma and taste. They are naturally dried on trees, and are imported from India and Oman through the port city of Basra in southern Iraq, and hence the name *noomi Basra*. Some of the recipes call for whole ones. In this case, they should be pricked with a pointed knife to allow cooking juices to penetrate. They can also be used crushed or ground (referred to in the recipes as 'prepared *noomi Basra*'). Remember to remove the seeds before grinding, because they tend to add a bitter aftertaste to it.

Dried limes are available in Middle-Eastern shops and the International isles in some of the major supermarkets. However, you can make your own dried limes by bringing the small round variety of limes to a full boil in some salted water for 5 minutes. Then dry them in a ventilated container such as a wicker basket, in a sunny or warm dry place for a few weeks. They should turn brown and sound hollow.

NUTMEG

Nutmeg (*joz al-teebl/ joz bawwa*) is the kernel of the seed of a large evergreen tree native to Indonesia. The lacy growth on the seed is called mace, which the medieval Arab botanists called *basbaasa*. Indians and Arabs valued the spice as a medicine for digestive disorders. It was used to treat liver and skin complaints, and to sweeten the breath. Mace and nutmeg are similar in aroma and taste. The aroma they give is rich, fresh, and warm. Nutmeg is mostly used with meat dishes and some pastries.

ORANGE-BLOSSOM WATER

Orange-blossom water (*ma'il-zahar*) is distilled liquid from orange blossoms (*qiddaah*) used mainly to flavor desserts and pastries. In Iraq today rosewater is more often used.

PARSLEY

Parsley (*krafus*) used in Iraq is the flat-leafed variety. It is a well-known herb and needs no introduction. However, Iraqi cooks also use another variety of parsley, whose leaves are more delicate and fragrant. It is *ma'danos* (chervil), which cooks in other Arab countries call *ba'dunis*. Medieval Arab cooks used this delicate variety in their dishes, but less often than the regular parsley. In medieval Arabic cookbooks and books on botany, this herb was variably referred to as *karafs jabali* (mountain parsley), *karafs sakhri* (rock parsley), *karafs maqdooni* (Macedonian parsley), and *maqdoonis*.

PICKLED MANGO

Pickled mango see 'anba above

POMEGRANATE SYRUP

Pomegranate syrup (*dibs il-rumman*) also called pomegranate molasses or concentrate. A recipe for making this syrup is given in al-Warraq's 10th-century Baghdadi cookbook (Chapter 126), where he calls it *rubb al-rumman*. It calls for reducing the pomegranate juice by boiling it down until of syrupy consistency.

The finished product is fruity and tangy, and is used in cooking for the pleasant acidity it gives to the dish. It is available at Middle-Eastern shops, and a bottle would go a long way.

POPPY SEEDS

Poppy seeds (*khishkhash*) have a slightly sweet and nutty taste. Roasting the seeds will extenuate their aroma. They come from the opium poppy plant known and used ever since antiquity. The plant contains compounds from which morphine and codeine are extracted, but these compounds are not present in the ripe dried seeds used for cooking. The seeds are thought to have a medicinal value. In a-Warraq's 10th-century cookbook, a recipe is given for curing chest pain and coughs. It is prepared by boiling poppy seeds, then straining them. The resulting liquid, mixed with some honey, is boiled down to syrup (Chapter 122).

QAMAR IL-DEEN

Qamar il-deen (literally 'moon of religion,' apricot leather) is made by mashing apricot and then drying it in form of thin sheets. We usually buy it folded and wrapped in yellow cellophane paper. This sour-sweet and chewy treat is eaten by itself as a snack or made into delicious drink and ice cream. The best quality is found in Syria where apricot trees grow in abundance. Evidently, *qamar il-deen* was known in medieval times. To my knowledge, the earliest citation may be found in 13th-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-Wusla ila 'l-Habeeb* by Ibn al-'Adeem, where it is given as a substitute for dried apricots (2: 611). Possibly this apricot leather was named after the excellent variety of apricot used in making it. It was called *qamar il-deen* and *mishmash lawzi* (almond apricot) because the kernel of its seed tastes like sweet almond (Ibn Battuta 91).

RASHI see *tahini* paste

RICE FLOUR

Rice flour (*taheen timman/ruzz*) is ground rice available at supermarkets, and used as a thickening agent in

cooking, or for making dessert and the shell for the stuffed dish *kubba*.

RARINJ/NARINJ

Rarinj/narinj is a variety of orange of Seville. The fruit has a lovely orangy aroma, very juicy with numerous seeds. It is used instead of lemon juice for salad dressings and in cooking. The skin is thick, rather bumpy, and bitter. Therefore, one needs to be very careful when extracting the juice. In al-Baghdadi's 13th-century *Kitab al-Tabeeh* (Arberry 41), a stew recipe of *naranjiyya* soured with *naranj* requires that one person peels the fruit and another does the squeezing so that his hand will not depict the intense bitterness of the peel.

RIHAAN

Rihaan is sweet basil, similar to the variety called Thai basil, with somewhat smaller leaves than the Italian variety and more aromatic, always consumed raw as a salad green. In medieval Arabic cookbook, this herb was called *badharooj*, and the physicians back then did not seem to have a high opinion of it. They said it is bad for the digestion, it breeds worms in the digestive system. It is also said to cause flatulence, impair the intellect, and darken eyesight. On the positive side, they said it has euphoric powers due to its fragrance.

RISHSHAAD

Rishshaad (garden cress/peppergrass) is an herb with ruffled leaves and pronounced peppery sharp taste. It is possible that the ancient Mesopotamian herb '*erishtu*,' hitherto unidentified, might well be the same as our modern *rishshaad*. At any rate, the herb was well-known to medieval Arab cooks. Ibn al-Baytar (195), for instance, points out that the best *rishshad* was grown in Babylon (south of Baghdad). Always consumed raw as a salad green.

ROSE WATER

Rose water (*may warid*) is one of the earliest distilled liquids made from the petals of what is known as

'Damask roses.' Although roses grew in the ancient Mesopotamian gardens, it is believed that the dried flowers used to be imported from Persia, and were made into rose water in the ancient temples. In medieval times, the best variety was *ma' ward Juri*, which was distilled from pink roses growing in Jur, a region in Persian. They were considered the most fragrant of all rose varieties, and it was mostly used in women's perfumes (al-Biruni 371). According to medieval Arab medicine, rose water has a rejuvenating power. It strengthens the brain, benefits stomach and liver, and eases hangovers and headaches. However, people are cautioned against having too much of it lest it should hasten hair whitening (Ibn al-Baytar 670).

SAFFRON

Saffron (*za'faran*) is the dried, thread-like, red-orange and sometimes yellow stigmas of the blue-violet, lily-shaped flowers (crocus). The deeper the color of the stigmas is the better quality saffron is. It was known ever since antiquity in Mesopotamia as well as the surrounding areas. It was used in food, wines, as a dye, in perfumes, and as a medicinal drug. In Akkadian it was called '*azupiranu*' from which the Arabic *za'faran* was borrowed. Around the eighth century AD, the Arabs transported it to Spain. It is one of the most expensive spices in the world, almost ten times as much as vanilla because the flower stigmas are very light and are handpicked. About 20,000 stigmas will produce only 4 ounces of saffron. Saffron can be used ground, but it should be mixed well with other liquid ingredients to distribute its flavor evenly. However, it is better to buy whole saffron threads and grind them yourself, since ground saffron could be adulterated very easily by mixing it with turmeric or other additives. Saffron should not be confused with safflower (Arabic *qurtum*), which is sometimes referred to as bastard saffron. Safflower is cultivated in China, the Middle East, and Mexico. Its color is more regularly orange than saffron, and it is much cheaper. It will make the food yellow but it has no flavor. Spanish saffron is of excellent quality

and is widely available. However, the deep-red Kashmiri saffron is the best. Saffron has a very distinctive flavor. A small amount goes a long way. It was used more often in the past than nowadays. For even coloring and economic use, soak the stigmas briefly in a little hot water and add to the dish. Avoid adding it to hot oil for it will lose its color, and will not impart its flavor to the food. Turmeric (*kurkum*) may substitute for saffron in meat and rice dishes, potatoes, and chickpeas. In medieval times, saffron was believed to increase the potency of an alcoholic drink when mixed with it to the point that the drinker experiences an ecstatic state of euphoria, almost to the point of madness. The physician Ibn Sina specifies that taking 14½ grams of it will induce an intense state of ecstasy that might lead to the departure of one's soul (265).

SALEP

Salep (*sahlab*) is a starchy stone-colored powder ground from the dried tubers of various species of Old World wild orchids. The Arabic name *sahlab* is a corruption of the medieval *khisi 'l-tha'lab* (literally fox's testicles) Satyrion, named so because the root of the plant begins as two egg-like soft tubers, and while one grows, the other diminishes in size. This also explains why the plant is also called *qatil akhihi* (brother killer). Arab medieval botanists describe the root as yellowish white and sticky, with a sweetish taste tinged with a slight sharpness, and a faint semen-like odor. It was regarded as a powerful sexual stimulant (Ibn al-Baytar 243). Like cornstarch, salep is used as a thickening agent especially for making ice cream. However, it is more powerful than cornstarch, and unlike the latter, it does not have a starchy after-taste when undercooked. About 50 per cent of it is a gluey substance. Also see arrowroot.

SEMOLINA

Semolina (*sameed*) The word 'semolina' is derived from the Latin '*simila*,' which means fine flour. Ultimately, the word goes back in origin to the Akkadian '*samidu*,' which was a type of groats. Nowadays semolina is

granular flour made from durum wheat, a variety of hard wheat with the bran and germ removed. It is rather yellowish in color, and its texture is similar to that of finely ground cornmeal. Like cornmeal, it can be sprinkled on the work surface to keep rising dough from sticking. Various grades are available, ranging from fine to coarse. Fine semolina is used to make puddings and pastas while the coarser grades are good for giving crumbly texture to cake mixtures.

SESAME SEEDS

Sesame seeds (*simsim*). Etymologically, the word 'sesam' is related to the Akkadian 'samassammu,' from which the Arabic *simsim* was derived. In ancient Mesopotamia, sesame was an important source of oil, and this became a staple of their diet to the extent that in the Old Babylonian period commercialized production of sesame was one of the economic mainstays of the palace administration. Sesame was immortalized in the *Arabian Nights* story of "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." Interestingly, the gang's command "open sesame" may suggest the way sesame pods suddenly burst open when they ripen, scattering the seeds all around the place. Throughout the world, sesame seeds are used with breads and pastries. In the Arab world, it is also used in making the popular candy, *simsimiyya*. Ever since ancient times, the Mesopotamians have exploited the possibilities of sesame seeds to the full. The seeds were used with pastries, and sesame oil was used for general cooking purposes, especially frying. It is also ground to make what is known in the rest of the Arab countries as *tahini*, derived from the Arabic verb *tahana* 'to grind.' In Iraq, ground sesame is called *rashi* (*rahshi* in medieval times).

SUMAC

Sumac (*summag*) is the red, tart berry of a bush which has been growing wild, and has been used in the Middle East ever since ancient times. It should not be confused with the poisonous sumac trees of North America. Only the husk is used because the seeds themselves are too

Salt of Life

In ancient Mesopotamian economic texts, salt was one of the important dietary staples. In Akkadian it was called 'tabti' which means 'good.' In their food-lists it was sometimes referred to as a 'brick of salt,' but apparently it also came in other forms such as a 'mass of salt,' 'crystal of salt,' and 'salt stone.' There was also 'me tabti,' which could be salt water or brine. It must have been an essential item for normal human maintenance for it always made an important item in the food allowances that the government used to give out to its subjects. It was very cheap, sold by special salt dealers. While traveling, it was stored in 'salt bags,' and at home, it was kept in 'salt cellars,' or in a special 'box for salt and mustard,' used as a condiment. Salting was also a means for preserving foods. A letter written around the first millennium BC declared, "the meat which has been sent to you, was put in salt." In their religious incantations, salt was repeatedly mentioned, such as, "May her tongue be salt." Another incantation incidentally stresses its importance, "You, salt, who are born in a bright spot, without you, no meal in the temple is prepared. Without you, god, king, lord, and noble do not enjoy a sacrifice." Salt also acquired an ethically symbolic significance. If an Assyrian said about a person "he is the man of my salt," he meant, "he is my friend." (Levey, 170-71) Salt was mentioned as a component in many ancient Mesopotamian medicinal prescriptions. To ward off evil, according to an Assyrian spell, it was sprinkled over a mixture of honey and water. It was also sprinkled on the ground after visiting the temple of Ashur. Of its devious usages, victorious Assyrian kings used to sprinkle it all over the ground of the defeated city. (Daniel Potts "On Salt and Salt Gathering in Ancient Mesopotamia" 229-32)

hard to eat. *Sumac* is not prized for its aroma as much as for its fruity and pleasantly sour taste, believed to have the power to enhance and excite the appetite. It is not well known in the West, and is only available in Middle Eastern stores.

Ground *sumac* husk tossed with raw thinly sliced onions is especially good with meat dishes like *Kebab*. When *sumac* is used as a souring agent instead of lemon juice, whole berries are used. They are soaked in hot water for about 30 minutes, and then strained. The resulting reddish juice will be added to the dish, and the strained berries are to be discarded. *Sumac* is also an important ingredient in *za'tar*, see entry below.

TAHINI

Tahini (sesame paste, *rashi*) is a smooth thin paste made from toasted ground sesame seeds. In medieval Arab sources, it was called *taheen simsim* (ground sesame), and *rahshi* (derived from the Arabic verb *rahasha* 'to grind into fine particles), from which our modern *rashi* definitely evolved. Besides using it in cooking, *tahini* was smeared on bread as a condiment the way we do nowadays with peanut butter, as one of al-Warraq's 10th-century recipes clearly demonstrates (Chapter 89). Medieval physicians recommended having *tahini* with honey or date syrup to help it go through the digestive system faster. I find this most interesting because it sheds light on the rational behind today's custom of combining *tahini* and date syrup in a very traditional sweet condiment called *dibis w'rashi*, that is besides the fact that together they taste intoxicatingly scrumptious.

Tahini is an important ingredient in the well-known dip '*Hummus bi tahina*.' It is also used in sauces for sandwiches, and in making '*tahini helva*.' In Iraq, the best *tahini* can be bought freshly ground from *Tell Keif* (the hill of merriment) in northern Iraq, about seven miles north of Mosul (ancient Nineveh). There, you can see *tahini* oozing out of the pressing machine and the delightful aroma of toasted sesame is everywhere. The area is also a very nice picnic spot in springtime where the grain fields stretch as far as the eyes can

see and colorful wild flowers cover the hills like precious carpets.

TAMARIND

Tamarind (*tamur Hindi* 'Indian dates') is the dark brown, bean-shaped pod of the tamarind tree, which has been growing in India for centuries, hence the name *tamur Hindi*. It is sold in sticky partially dried brown blocks of broken pods and pulp, or as a concentrate or syrup. The whole pods are sometimes available in major grocery supermarkets. Tamarind is used as a souring agent like lime or lemon. It has an aroma slightly similar to molasses, and a pleasantly sour and fruity taste. However, it should be used sparingly due to its strong flavor. To use the fibrous blocks of tamarind, soak the amount needed in hot water for about 30 minutes then rub it between the fingers and strain it to get rid of the fibers. It is especially good in curry dishes, and is particularly tasty in fish and meat dishes. It can also be served as a delicious and healthy drink. Medicinally it works as a very gentle, natural laxative. It is said to be rich in vitamins, and is good for the liver and kidneys. In the West, it is mostly used commercially in condiments like Worcestershire sauce. If you cannot find tamarind, use Worcestershire sauce as a substitute.

TURMERIC

Turmeric (*kurkum*) is a bright yellow spice made from the ground dried root-like part of a plant in the ginger family. It has been used in Mesopotamia ever since ancient times, and was recognized as a spice and medicine. In Akkadian, it was called '*kurkanu*.' Modern research shows that the active ingredient in turmeric, curcumine, has anti-inflammatory and anti-cancer properties. Marco Polo's comment when he saw it on his travels to China was that it is "a fruit that resembles saffron; though it is actually nothing of the sort, it is quite as good as saffron for practical purposes" (Norman 35). Apparently, it was he who set the tone for its use as a cheap substitute for saffron. It is lightly aromatic and

smells fresh of orange and ginger. In taste, it is pungent and a little peppery, musky, and bitter, so it is to be used sparingly. Like curry powder, it is traditionally cooked in a little oil with onion or meat, for instance, before mixing it with other ingredients. Thus, it becomes more aromatic and loses its bitter taste.

ZA'TAR

Za'tar (thyme) in Ancient Akkadian was 'zateru' from which the Arabic word was derived. Thyme is a member of the oregano family, and many varieties of the herb are available. True *za'tar* is the kind mostly used in the Eastern Mediterranean countries. It is identified as *origanum syriacum*. Also known as *marjorana syriaca*, *origanum maru*, and the English name is white oregano (in identifying the herb, I am indebted to Sarah Melamed, an American biologist living in Israel, through personal correspondence).

Za'tar is also a blend or a spice mix, the components of which are dried thyme, sumac, toasted sesame seeds, and salt, available at Middle-Eastern stores. This blend is often sprinkled on drained yogurt, meat dishes, vegetables, or used as a dip. It is sometimes mixed with olive oil and spread on bread before baking. I especially like to sprinkle it on my tossed salad. The proportions for making it vary from region to region and even from family to family. The following is an acceptable standard:

Two parts sesame seeds

One part ground dried thyme

One part ground sumac

A dash of salt

☞ Dry toast sesame seeds in a skillet or in the oven. Stir frequently since sesame tends to burn quickly. Allow it to cool completely, and then mix it with the rest of the ingredients. Keep mixture in an airtight container. It stays fresh longer if kept in the freezer.

Food of Life

Ancient Mesopotamian mythologies tell the story of Adapa and god Ea, "the inventor and great master of culture." We are told that when Ea created Adapa, he granted him wisdom but withheld eternal life. Adapa was a cook at Ea's temple at Eridu, and while once fishing, he was bothered by the wind, so he broke off its wings. Anu, lord of the gods and of the world did not like this because wind was essential for the economy of the land as it helped bring the rain. Therefore, Anu demanded to question Adapa about this. But Ea, Adapa's protector, advised him that when he goes there he should reject the first food and drink he would be offered because it would be "good for the dead," that is, for mortals. After that, he should request the second type of food and drink which would be "food of life" and "drink of life," which would make him immortal.

Anu played a trick on Adapa and served the second type of food first, which Adapa of course rejected, following Ea's advice. Anu was rejoiced because Adapa lost his chance of attaining immortality, and considered himself the winner in this battle of wits.

Not so fast, Anu. The Assyriologist Jean Bottéro (*The Oldest Cuisine* 123) is of the opinion that the real winner here is not Anu but Ea, the protector of Adapa, who was wise enough to foresee the trick that Anu would play on Adapa. After all, when Ea created Adapa, wasn't it his design from the start to grant him wisdom but never eternal life?

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1 My comments are based on 27 recipes of these 77 augmented ones. I am grateful to Anahita, member of SCA group (Society for Creative Anachronism), who provided me with synopses of 23 of Shirvani's recipes. She used Stephane Yerasimos' a la table du grand turc, which is a French rendition of Shirvani's cookbook. home.earthlink.net/~lilinah/directory.html, accessed Nov. 5th 2008.

2 home.earthlink.net/~al-tabbakhah/Misc_ME_Food/MECookbooks.html, accessed Nov. 5, 2008. I have not had the chance to have a look at the English translation of this document by Paul D. Buell et al, A Soup for the Qan: A Translation and Study of Chinese Dietary Medicine of the Mongol Era as Seen in Hu Szu-Hui's "Yin-shan Cheng-Yao" (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000).

