The Middle East: A Culinary Crossroads
by The Global Culinary Initiative Committee

The diverse cuisines of the Middle East are like multi-colored threads that, when woven together, create a vibrant and colorful tapestry. The region’s rich, varied, and multicultural history has deeply impacted the culinary scene of the Middle East.

Early civilization began around river areas like the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris-Euphrates river basin in Mesopotamia—a boomerang-shaped region known as the Fertile Crescent. Because its rich soil gave birth to agriculture and grain domestication, it is called the “cradle of civilization.” Fermentation was being used in Egypt to leaven bread and to make mead and beer.

Several empires ruled over the swath of land—some dating back more than 5,000 years. Each one established its own ethnic identity, religious traditions, customs, and foodways, leaving a lasting impact. During the Abassid Period (752 CE to 1258 CE), the golden age of Islam, great refinements were made in cooking that transformed it into an art.

The Silk Road, a network of ancient trade routes, passed through the Middle East—a swath of land that was a geographic crossroad for caravans traveling from China to Europe and Africa. The region benefited from the transport of goods including foodstuffs like spices, tea, rice, livestock, fruits, and vegetables. Scholar and author Valerie Hansen believes the Silk Road changed history because travelers “planted their cultures like seeds of exotic species carried to distant lands.” The exchange of customs, religious beliefs, philosophy, ideas, and even recipes was extensive. While regional Middle Eastern dishes, flavors, and customs have many differences, the most significant ones are due to religious dietary laws that govern food preparation. Israel observes the Jewish laws of kosher; in all Muslim countries, there is an observance of halal. Commonalities include similar dishes, the use of certain cooking methods, and ingredients such as olives, chickpeas, yogurt, sesame seeds, honey, dates, mint, and spices. Hospitality shown to guests is legendary, especially in matters of food. The important ritual of serving coffee is welcoming, with an elaborate etiquette of its own.

The “greater Middle East” includes several countries in southwest Asia and North Africa as geographically defined by MENA (Middle East North Africa.) Turkey is often included; the region was ruled by the Turkish (Ottoman) Empire (14th century-early 20th century). Turkey is a bridge between the Middle East and Europe, with whom it shares strong ties. Military conflict, with the resultant diasporas it creates, is another reason the foodways of different nations spread into other cultures. Such is the case with the present Middle East political situation generating massive shifts of populations. We hope this newsletter pushes beyond daily headlines to inspire exploration of the ancient traditions, ingredients, culinary techniques, and vibrant flavors that characterize the exciting foodways of the Middle East.

Culinary Tour of the Middle East

- Exhibition at Yale University: Middle Eastern and Islamic Cuisine—The Tradition Continues. View photos of clay tablets from the Babylonian Collection; inscribed in Akkadian with the oldest known cooking recipes (about 1750 BCE).
- In this article by food writer Claudia Roden, gain insight into the complexity of the Middle East’s history from the hummus wars to the etiquette of serving guests.
- It’s all about kings and queens! Visit Radio Cherry Bombe at Heritage Radio Network to hear Dame Joan Nathan talk about Jewish cuisine and King Solomon’s Table, her celebrated cookbook.
- A good harvest and a shared meal are at the center of an enduring culture in the West Bank. Palestine’s dishes become special with fragrant seasoning blends like za’atar, a blend of wild thyme, sesame, sumac, and salt.
- Not only is Afghanistan’s food delicious, but it symbolizes hospitality and generosity, and it is key to understanding the country’s culture and history.

Follow the trail of blue links for stories, inspirations, and ideas to develop chapter cultural exchanges. The scope of this newsletter is limited, but we encourage further, independent exploration.
• The Sultanate of Oman is the oldest independent state in the Arab world and is described as “the eastern gateway to the Middle East.” Rich in spice and flavors, the cuisine is well worth savoring!
• These ten dishes begin to tell the layered story of Beirut’s cultural and political history.
• The food of Iran is an exquisite expression of an exceptionally ancient culture, with many unique cooking methods and ingredients.
• This article from The Telegraph will whet your appetite for a taste of exquisite, sophisticated Persian cuisine.
• Tablets found in the ruins of ancient Iraqi show recipes prepared in temples for religious festivals. Modern Iraqi foods reflect this rich inheritance. Here is an overview of Iraq's culinary history.
• Here are “Ten Iraqi Foods That Will Acquaint You with the Primitive Flavors of Mesopotamia.”
• The Syrian table is a sophisticated expression of a multicultural country. The Guardian deals with the meaning of food in all its complexity as it related to contemporary Syrian refugees—some in the U.S.
• A picturesque review of irresistible Turkish foods, cultural traditions, landscapes, and antiquities.
• A photo album of 27 delicious Turkish foods that everyone must try.
• Click on Turkish cuisine to understand why it is one of the world’s greatest!
• A guide to Turkish culture and cuisine.
• Saudi Arabia is the strictest in observing the laws of Islam. Religion dictates the etiquette of serving meals; men and women eat separately. Coffee is central to the Saudi’s obligation to be hospitable.
• The Middle Eastern diet is a close cousin of the healthy Mediterranean diet. Here is a quick summation of their similarities.

Passport and Plates
• “It’s poetry on a plate!” Rose petals, pomegranates, pistachios, saffron, apricots, and exotic spices are culinary treasures this writer enjoyed while in Iran to explore the Persian kitchen.
• Egyptian food may be a bit of a mystery to the traveler. This site showcases local pizza, spit-cooked meats, stuffed vegetables, and zesty pickled vegetables.
• Egyptian food may not have the complexity of its neighbors, but it has an aura lent by 5,000 years of history. This street food article promises you will “eat like a pharaoh.”
• London’s mezze movement is here to stay.
• It’s polite to observe the etiquette and customs of the Middle East whether traveling abroad or locally visiting friends.
• In “Tracing the History of Middle Eastern Cuisine and Setting Roots in Los Angeles,” a food writer examines his families’ migration and offers historical culinary tidbits.
• Honey & Smoke—A Sweet Sensation! One of London’s most popular and hardest restaurants to book. Put it at the top of your bucket list if you travel to the UK.

Global Trends
• For one of the top food trends of 2018, look to the Middle East.
• Why modern Israeli food is America’s favorite new cuisine.
• Dame Amy Emberlin of Zingerman’s Bakehouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan, shares three reasons why tahini is a fast-growing food trend.
• Dame Egrantyn Yuh writes about a Vancouver dinner series that is helping support recently arrived refugees. This story celebrates Syrian cuisine.

The Middle Eastern Pantry
• Here’s a list of essential pantry ingredients from Jamie Oliver for flavorful Middle Eastern cooking.
• Spices and herbs are the foundation to any delicious Middle Eastern meal and make it so unique.
• This food writer uses ingredients and cooking methods from her parent’s home country, Iran, to create a modern cuisine that captures the essence of the region yet represents his own style.
• Pita is the flatbread of the Middle East and simple to make at home.
• Here is a report on Middle Eastern ingredients and spices.
• Seven healthy ingredients for creating Middle Eastern dishes.

Kitchen Utensils and Essentials for Middle Eastern Cooking.
• A chef’s blog of basic, useful information about the Middle East.

Recipes
• Shug (also spelled shug or zhug) is a Yemeni hot sauce that was brought to Israel and may be the “sriracha of 2018.”
• Videos of author Dame Amy Riole (Washington, D.C.) preparing Egyptian dishes like koushani (from Nile Style, photo, page one.) Based on lentils, rice, and pasta with a spicy sauce, it’s often sold as street food. Amy says it’s “Cairo in a cup.” Nile Style won a Gourmand Award for the best Arab Cuisine Cookbook.
• A treasure trove of authentic Middle Eastern recipes to make. Try the dukkah—an amazing seasoning blend with ingredients like hazelnuts, sesame seeds, coriander, and cumin.
• Visit this link at the Library of Congress to hear Amy Riole’s discussion of cuisine and culture in the Arab World.
• Watch Persian culinary expert Dame Najmieh Batmanglij (Washington, D.C.) prepare Persian Jeweled Rice and Cauliflower Kuku, similar to the frittata. www.najmieh.com/ cookbooks
• Najmieh Batmanglij’s online collection of Persian recipes includes Pistachio and Pomegranate Meatballs, (photo, page two).
• Here are 48 beautifully photographed Middle Eastern recipes plus several from Azerbaijan, “the world’s last, great, undiscovered cuisine.”
• The New York Times compiled the recent and archived work of Grande Dame Joan Nathan. The award-winning food anthropologist/culinary historian specializes in global Jewish foodways.
• Summer recipes from Honey & Co: The Cookbook. The popular London restaurant features Middle Eastern cuisine. A new cookbook, Honey & Co at Home will be released July 5.

Chapter Programs
• Plan a chapter potluck of Middle Eastern dishes with a culinarian who teaches how to make rice pilaf! Share the recipes and enjoy the meal together afterwards.
• Offer a discussion for Dames who read about the evolution of culinary paths and ancient records of Middle East food preparation. Serve exotic cookies and Moroccan mint tea.
• Based on this link, learn about top Middle Eastern dishes—then have a dining-out experience to taste the dishes explained.
• Invite a knowledgeable dietitian for a discussion of the Mediterranean diet. Here is a link for recipe ideas for a tasting party.
• Host a chapter viewing of the documentary, In Search of Israeli Cuisine, narrated by Chef Michael Solomon. The film explains why Israeli foods have changed from the “white cuisine” (eggs, potatoes, onions, chicken, carp, bread, and noodles) favored by original Eastern European settlers to a more flavorful Mediterranean diet. Available on Netflix.
• April is National Arab American Heritage Month. Plan a special event for your chapter in 2019.

Cookbooks

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