

MIDDLE EAST CUISINE

INTRODUCTION

The cuisine of the region includes Arab cuisine, Egyptian cuisine, Iranian cuisine, Israeli cuisine, Jewish cuisine, Assyrian cuisine, Armenian cuisine, Kurdish cuisine, Greek cuisine, Cypriot cuisine and Turkish cuisine.

In Arab countries of the Middle East, especially in the Arab states of the Arabian gulf, it is common for people to take their food from a communal plate in the center of the table. Rather than employing forks or spoons, people traditionally dine without utensils; they scoop up food with their thumb and two fingers or pita bread. In the Arab culture, the left hand is considered unclean Even left-handed people eat only with the right hand. A common exception is that the left hand may be used to hold a drinking glass when eating greasy food with the right. The Middle East places emphasis on enjoying meals with family and friends.

Some commonly used ingredients include olives and olive oil, pitas, honey, sesame seeds, dates, sumac, chickpeas, mint and parsley. Some popular dishes include Kebabs, Dolma, and Doner Kebab. The Middle East is a transcontinental region centered on Western Asia and Egypt. Arabs, Turks, Persians, Azeris and Kurds constitute the largest ethnic groups in the region by population, while Armenians, Assyrians, Circassians, Copts, Greeks, Jews, Somalis, Shabaks, Mandaeans and other ethnic groups from significant minorities.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the Middle East dates back to ancient times. Several major religions have their origins in the Middle East, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the Baha'i faith, Mandaeism, Unitarian Druze, and numerous other belief systems were also established within the region. The Mongol invaders, Moors of Spain, Ottoman Empire and many other cultures including influences from the spice islands can be seen in the food and culture of this region. During the Persian Empire (ca. 550–330 BCE), the foundation was laid for modern Middle-Eastern food when rice, poultry and various fruits were incorporated into the local diets. Figs, dates and nuts were brought by merchants to conquered lands, and spices were brought back from the Orient. Under the Ottoman Empire, sweet pastries of paper thin phyllo dough and dense coffee were brought to the area.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION

The Middle East generally has a hot, arid climate, with several major rivers providing irrigation to support agriculture in limited areas such as the Nile Delta in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates watersheds of Mesopotamia, and most of what is known as the Fertile Crescent (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers - Sumeria, Akkad, Assyria and Babylonia). Most of the countries that border the Persian Gulf have vast reserves of crude oil.

FOOD AND CULTURE

This is the region where wheat was first cultivated, followed by barley, pistachios, figs, pomegranates, dates and other regional staples. Fermentation was also discovered here to leaven bread and make beer in Mesopotamia, and the earliest written recipes come from that region also.

As a crossroads between Europe, Asia, the Caucasus and North Africa, this area has long been a hub of food and recipe exchange. The area was also influenced by dumplings from Mongol invaders; turmeric, cumin, garlic and other spices from India; cloves, peppercorns and allspice from the Spice Islands; okra from Africa; and tomatoes from the New World, via the Moors of Spain. Religion has also influenced the cuisine, neither Jews nor Muslims eat pork, making lamb the primary meat. Since the Qur'an forbids alcohol consumption, the region isn't noted much for its wine except in religiously mixed Lebanon, where vineyards like Chateau Ksara, Chateau Kefraya and Chateau Masaya have gained international fame for their wines.

STAPLE DIET

Cereals -

Cereals constitute the basis of the Middle Eastern diet. Wheat and rice are the major and preferred sources of staple foods. Barley and maize are also widely used in the region. Bread is a universal staple eaten in one form or another by all classes and groups.

Wheat is also used in the forms of burghul and couscous. Burghul is cracked wheat, made by partially cooking the wheat grains in water, drying it in an oven or in the sun, then breaking it into pieces, in different grades of size. Typically, it is cooked in water, with flavorings, much like rice. Burghul is also used in making meat pies and as an ingredient in salads, notably in tabbouleh, with chopped parsley, tomato, lemon, and oil. Freekeh is another common grain, made from immature green wheat.

There are many types of rice produced and consumed in the region. Plain rice is served under grilled meats or with meat/vegetable stews. In more complex rice dishes, there are layers of meat, vegetables, sauces, nuts, or dried fruits. Lamb and mutton have always been the favored meats of the Middle East. Pork is prohibited in both Islam and Judaism, and as such is rarely eaten in the region. Vegetables and pulses are the predominant staple of the great majority of the people in the Middle East. They are boiled, stewed, grilled, stuffed, and cooked with meat and with rice. Beans and pulses are crucial to the diet of the region, second only to cereals.

Dairy products -

Butter and clarified butter (also known as smen) are, traditionally, the preferred medium of cooking. Olive oil is prevalent in the Mediterranean coastal areas. Christians use it during Lent, when meat and dairy products are excluded, and Jews use it in place of animal fats such as butter to avoid mixing meat and dairy products. Arabs commonly consume milk, fresh or soured. Yogurt, a Turkish contribution, is commonly consumed plain, used in cooking, used in salad dressing, or diluted as a drink. White cheeses, like the Greek feta and haloumi, are the most common in the region.

Herbs and Spices -

Most regions in the Middle East use spices. Cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, cumin, and coriander, Black pepper are commonly used, and chili peppers are used occasionally. Parsley and mint are commonly used both in cooking and in salads. Thyme and thyme blends (za'atar) are common in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, and Palestine, and a mixture of dried thyme and sumac (crushed sour berries) is a common breakfast item with oil and bread. Sumac is also sprinkled over grilled meat. Garlic is common to many dishes and salads.

Meat -

Grilled meats and kebab preparations are popular. The most common are the cubed cuts on skewers, known as shish kebab in most places. Chicken may also be grilled in the same fashion. Another common variety is kofta kebab, made from ground meat, sometimes mixed with onions and spices, shaped around the skewer like a long sausage and grilled. Kebabs are typically a street or restaurant food, served with bread, salad, and pickles.

Meat and vegetable stews, served with rice, bulgur, or bread, are another form of meat preparation in the region. Kibbeh is a pie or dumpling made with meat and cereal. The most common are made with ground meat (typically lamb) and burghul, worked together like a dough, then stuffed with minced meat that has been fried with onion, aromatics, and, sometimes, pine nuts or almonds and raisins. This can either be in the form of individual small dumplings (usually shaped like a torpedo), or in slices like a cake, baked on an oven tray with the stuffing placed between two layers of the dough. One variation is kibbeh naye, raw kibbeh, which is made by pounding raw meat and burghul together with seasoning and served with dips of lemon juice and chili sauce.

Vegetables -

Among the green leaf vegetables, many varieties of cabbage, spinach, and chard are widely used. Root and bulb vegetables, such as onions and garlic, as well as carrots, turnips, and beets are equally common. Squash, tomato, eggplants, and okra are distinctive elements in the cookery of the region. Eggplant is often fried in slices and dressed in yogurt and garlic, or roasted over an open fire, then pulped and dressed with tahini (sesame paste), lemon juice, garlic, and cumin known as baba ghanoush. Tomato is the most ubiquitous ingredient in Middle Eastern cookery. It is used fresh in a variety of salads, cooked in almost every stew and broth, and grilled with kebab.

Beans and Pulses -

Fava beans are eaten both green and dried. Dried, they are boiled into one of the most popular Egyptian foods- ful medames, a domestic and street food, eaten for breakfast or any other meal, mashed and dressed in oil, lemon, and chili. Similar dishes are found in all other parts of the region. The famous Falafel was originally made from dried fava, crushed and formed into a rissole with herbs and spices, then fried. It is also made from chickpeas or a mixture of the two. Green fava are cooked like other green beans, boiled and dressed in oil, or stewed with meat. The haricot beans and black-eyed beans are also common. Lentils, split peas, and chickpeas are widely used in soups, with rice, in salads, or with meat. Hummus, made from chickpeas and sesame paste, originated in Syria and Lebanon.

Popular Dishes

Meze is a selection of small dishes served to accompany alcoholic drinks as a course or as appetizers before the main dish in Arab countries, Turkic countries, and Iran.

Dolma is Stuffed vegetables preparation.

Mezze is common throughout the Middle East. It consists of a number of small dishes that are picked at leisure: cheese, melon, nuts, various salads and dips, such as tabbouleh, hummus and mutabbal, pickles, and also more substantial items, such as grilled meat, kibbeh, and sausage.

Turkish coffee is the most well known beverage of the region. It is thicker than regular coffee and is made by boiling finely ground coffee in water and then letting the grounds settle