

Middle Eastern cuisines

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Middle Eastern cuisine

Middle Eastern cuisine or **West Asian cuisine** is the cuisine of the various countries and peoples of the Middle East. The cuisine of the region is diverse while having a degree of homogeneity.^[1] Some commonly used ingredients include olives and olive oil, pitas, honey, sesame seeds, dates, sumac, chickpeas, mint and parsley. Some popular dishes include kibbeh and shawarma.



Labneh and Hummus, served with pita bread. All are common Middle Eastern foods.

History and influences

Originally known as the Fertile Crescent (the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers), the Middle East was 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. As a crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa, this area has long been a hub of food and recipe exchange. 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 Arabian warriors to conquered lands, and spices were brought back from the Orient.^[2]



Fatayer, a meat pie in Middle Eastern cuisine

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 had an impact on 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. Chateau Ksara is also very popular for its arak, the Lebanese version of raki and ouzo. Al-Maza is Lebanon's primary brewery, which was also, at one time, the Middle East's only beer-producing factory. Lebanon has always been well known in the region for its wines and arak, making it an exception when it comes to lack of alcohol in the region.^[3]

Under the Ottoman Empire, sweet pastries of paper thin phyllo dough and dense coffee were brought to the area.

Elements

Cereals

Cereals constitute the basis of the Middle Eastern diet, both historically and today. Wheat and rice are the major and preferred sources of staple foods. Barley is also widely used in the region and maize has become common in some areas as well. Bread is a universal staple —eaten in one form or another by all classes and groups— practically at every meal.

Aside from bread, 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.

Flavorings

Butter and clarified butter (also known as samna) 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.

Most regions in the Middle East use spices. Typically, a stew will include a small amount of cinnamon, cloves, cumin, and coriander. Black pepper is common, and chili peppers are used occasionally, especially as a separate sauce or as a pickle. Parsley and mint are commonly used both in cooking and in salads. Thyme and thyme blends (za'atar) are common in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, 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

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. Prominent among the meat preparations are grilled meats, or kebabs. There are a wide variety of these grills, with many regional specialties and styles. 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. It is not usually prepared in domestic kitchens.

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.



Jerusalem mixed grill

Vegetables

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. 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, a dish 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 are crucial to the diet of the region, second only to cereals. 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, now popular in Europe and America, 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.

Dishes

Stuffed vegetables are a dish most associated with the Middle East in the popular mind. They are commonly called dolma, the Turkish word meaning "stuffed," but also the Arabic mahshi. Grape leaves, chard, and cabbage are stuffed with rice, ground meat, pine nuts, and spices, and then stewed in oil and tomato. Many vegetables are similarly stuffed and stewed or baked, such as squash, onion, tomato, eggplant, peppers, and even carrots.

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.^[4]

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.

Beverages

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. In the 1980s, instant coffee also became popular. Aside from coffee, there is also an alcoholic drink called arak. It is most famous for its potency and milky-white color when water is added, producing the drink nicknamed "the milk of lions". Water and ice are almost always added because of an alcohol content between 30% and 60%. Arak is colorless in its pure form and is aniseed-flavored. In the Middle East, arak is served in social settings and with mezze.^[5] A common drink served during Ramadan is Qamar El Deen, a thick and sweet apricot drink. The apricots are boiled with sugar and water until they are thick and placed on wooden planks left in the sun until dry. A fruit leather is left, which is then melted with water and sugar and drunk.^[6] Another popular drink is Jallab. It is made by diluting a mixture grape molasses, dates, and rose water and served with crushed ice. Some also serve it with raisins or pine nuts.^[7] Ayran is a beverage made from yogurt.

Etiquette

In some areas of the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf countries, 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 and around the Arab world, 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.^[8] It is proper etiquette to compliment the host on the food and his hospitality. Similarly, it is important to try every plate on the table. If a guest does not leave food on his plate, the host generally fills it immediately.^[9] The Middle East places emphasis on enjoying meals with family and friends.

During the month of Ramadan, food consumption increases dramatically throughout Muslim communities. Breaking the fast becomes a banquet, with exchanges of invitations between kin and friends, and public banquets held by charities and associations. Cafes and pastry shops are open at night, and a carnival atmosphere prevails in the streets. Many Muslims, following the reported example of the Prophet, break their fast with a date, followed by a variety of dishes. Sweet pastries and puddings are always present on Ramadan nights everywhere. The end of Ramadan is marked by a festival, Id 'al-Fitr, a feast that breaks the fast, during which a great quantity and variety of sweets and pastries are consumed. The other major Muslim feast is that of 'Id al-Adha, the feast of the sacrifice, which occurs during the pilgrimage month. At this time an animal, usually a sheep or a goat, is slaughtered in every household that can afford it, and great banquets are prepared, with an obligation to give food to the poor.

Globalization

In North America, Middle Eastern food first came became popular in the 1990s^[citation needed] with the so-called Mediterranean Diet. According to the Mayo Clinic, the benefits included reduced risks of heart disease, Alzheimer's disease and cancer.^[citation needed]

Geographical varieties

-  Assyrian cuisine
-  Bahraini cuisine
-  Emirati cuisine
-  Iranian cuisine
-  Iraqi cuisine
-  Israeli cuisine
-  Jordanian cuisine
-  Kuwaiti cuisine
-  Lebanese cuisine
-  Omani cuisine
-  Palestinian cuisine
-  Saudi Arabian cuisine
-  Syrian cuisine
-  Yemeni cuisine

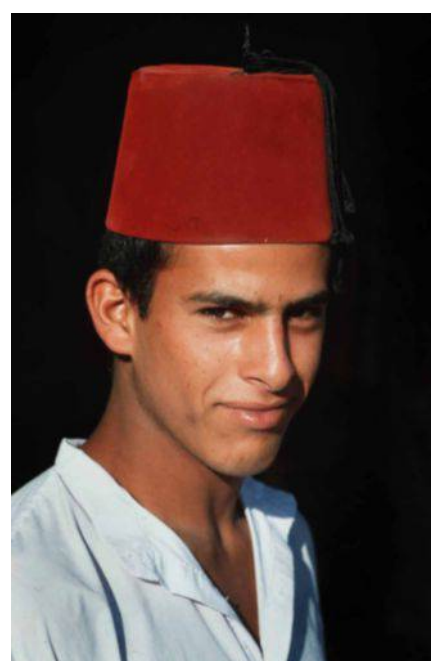
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Etiquette in the Middle East

Many matters of **etiquette in the Middle East** are connected to Islam as it is written in the Qur'an and how it has been traditionally understood and practiced throughout the centuries. Prescribed Islamic etiquette is referred to as Adab, and described as "refinement, good manners, morals, ethics, decorum, decency, humaneness and righteousness".^[1]

As such, many points discussed in this article are applicable in other regions of the Islamic world. This holds especially true in Muslim majority countries outside Middle East.



The Middle East contains a multitude of societies with different traditions regarding etiquette. Bedouins like this young man wearing a fez are traditionally renowned for their hospitality.

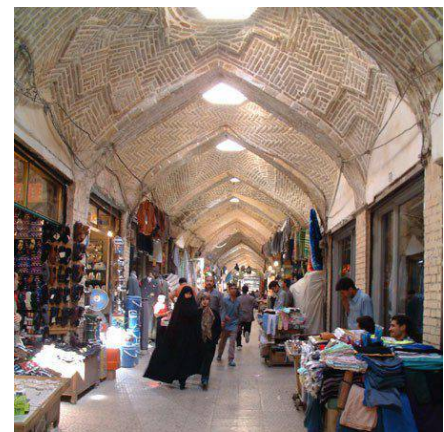
The Middle East is home to many people who follow faiths besides Islam. Most notable among them are the churches of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Copts and other adherents of Oriental Orthodoxy, Maronites, Melkites and other Catholics of the Eastern Rites as well as the Roman Rite, Zoroastrians, Bahá'ís, and various Jewish denominations.

In many cases, however, Muslims and non-Muslims in the Middle East will share characteristics, whether it is the prohibition against pork ordained by both Islamic and Jewish dietary restrictions, a preference for the beverage widely known elsewhere as "Turkish coffee", or knowledge of how to conduct business in a crowded souk without being cheated. It is a place where people with different beliefs often share the same traditions.

Points of etiquette

Although the Middle East is a large expanse of geography with a variety of customs, noting the following points of etiquette can be useful when dealing with people around the world who have been raised according to the traditions of the Middle East or, in some cases, Muslim societies elsewhere.

- Regarding head attire specifically, the etiquette at many Muslim holy sites requires that a headscarf or some other modest head covering be worn. For women this might be a hijab and for men it might be a taqiyah (cap), turban, or keffiyeh. A kippah or other head covering is expected for men in synagogues and other places where Jews pray. Orthodox Christian sites might require the removal of hats by men but will expect women to cover their hair with a kerchief or veil.
- Public displays of affection between people of the opposite gender, including between married people, are frowned upon everywhere more conservative values hold sway. Public displays of affection include activities as minor as hand-holding.
- In many cases, people of the same gender holding hands while walking is considered an ordinary display of friendship without romantic connotations.^[2]
- In a related point, many people in the Middle East claim a more modest amount of personal space than that which is usual elsewhere. Accordingly, it can seem rude for an individual to step away when another individual is stepping closer.^[3]
- Special respect is paid to older people in many circumstances. This can include standing when older people enter a room, always greeting older people before others present (even if they are better known to you), standing when speaking to one's elders and serving older people first at a meal table.^[4]



The traditional marketplaces of the Middle East might seem chaotic and intimidating to foreigners who don't comprehend the time-honored etiquette that governs transactions within. Shown here is a Bazaar in Iran.

- In Iran, the "thumbs up" gesture is considered an offensive insult
- Displaying the sole of one's foot or touching somebody with one's shoe is often considered rude. This includes sitting with one's feet or foot elevated. In some circumstances, shoes should be removed before entering a living room.^[5]
- Many in the Middle East do not separate professional and personal life. Doing business revolves much more around personal relationships, family ties, trust and honor. There is a tendency to prioritize personal matters above all else. It is therefore crucial that business relationships are built on mutual friendship and trust.^[6]



Hospitality is held in high regard throughout the Middle East. Some hosts take pride in the laborious preparation of what is known in Europe as "Turkish coffee", grinding fresh-roasted coffee beans to a fine powder, dissolving sugar and carefully regulating the heat to produce a result that meets exacting standards.

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