

Traditional Middle East Foods

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ABSTRACT: Food is always a fundamental issue, because it is at the core of human activity. If the health of both man and the planet is to be safeguarded, food production may be geared toward meeting the dual requirement of food safety and environmental sustainability. The Middle East is a region that connects the East and the West, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean, Russia, and the warm seas. Tourists love to try out all the different foods which originate from the nation they are visiting. Travelling to the Middle East would be no exception. Although there is no substitute for actually visiting the Middle East, food can make you feel that you are there. Some of the cuisines are centuries old and reflect the culture of trading in spices, herbs, and foods. The region has many similarities, but also unique traditions. This paper is an introduction to various delicious dishes in the Middle East.

KEYWORD: food, culture, food philosophy, Middle East food, religion.

INTRODUCTION

Currently the nations that comprise the Middle East are Bahrain, Cyprus, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Palestine, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen Middle Eastern food stems from a variety of cultures around the Mediterranean, Red, Arabian, and Caspian seas. It includes Arab, Armenian, Assyrian, Azerbaijani, Cypriot, Egyptian, Georgian, Iranian, Iraqi, Israeli, Kurdish, Lebanese, Palestinian, Moroccan, Syrian, and Turkish cuisines [1]. Early civilizations in the Middle East paved the way for modern farming and cooking. Due to its unique location between Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Middle East became a hub for the exchange of goods and culture. Some Middle Eastern nations share border as well as culinary characteristics with Mediterranean nations. A common distinction is that Mediterranean cuisines are often sea-based, while Middle Eastern cuisines are often land-based. The food of this region has been influenced by a variety of sources, including trade with the Horn of Africa, India, Iraq, and the Mediterranean.

The Middle East generally has a hot, arid climate, with several major rivers providing irrigation to support agriculture. This is the region where wheat was first cultivated, followed by barley, pistachios, figs, pomegranates, dates, and other regional staples. While regional differences within the Middle East can mean

many different things, there are also different dishes that have arisen simply because of differences between resources and cultures.

FOOD PHILOSOPHY

Anthropologically, a region's traditional food is important in understanding its culture, architecture, national dress, traditions, etc. People's identity, culture, and tradition can be seen during the presence of food. People in Middle East traditionally do not use forks or spoons; instead they scoop up the food with pita or use a thumb and two fingers. In Arabic culture, people use the right hand since the left hand is considered unclean. Forks, spoons and knives are used in formal situations, following the British-style. It is common for people to take their food from a communal plate in the center. Figure 1 shows the a family sitting down to eat [2].

Religion has impacted the Middle East cuisine by making lamb the primary meat since both Jews and Muslims do not eat pork. Alcohol consumption is also forbidden among the Muslims. Halal foods are those eaten by Muslims based on the teachings from their holy book, the Quran. Kosher foods are those eaten by followers of Judaism based on the teachings of their holy book, the Torah.

People in the Middle East tend to ate at home rather than eat out. They use restaurants to celebrate an important event. Chinese, European, Italian, German, Korean, and Japanese cuisines are now available throughout the Middle East. American-style fast food restaurants like McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Burger King, and TGI Fridays are becoming popular.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS

Local ingredients and religion play key roles in shaping the food in the region. Dates, fava beans, chickpeas, and barley are staples as locally sourced ingredients, while lamb and mutton became the predominant meat as a result of religious laws banning pork. While much of Middle Eastern food does include ingredients like minced or ground meat or meat skewers, there are also a host of traditional dishes that are vegetarian such as rice pilaf, burghul, and labneh. Common traditional Middle East ingredients include purslane, parsley, mint, olive oil, rice, lentils, beans, onions, cucumbers, garlic, tomatoes, pine nuts, a variety of spices, cheese, butter, yoghurt, and other dairy products from cows, sheep, goats, and camels. Some of these ingredients are discussed as follows [1-3]:

1. *Grains*: These form the basis of the Middle Eastern diet. Wheat and rice are considered staple foods. Barley is also widely used in the region, and maize in addition has become common in some areas. Semolina is also consumed extensively.
2. *Rice*: This is often eaten with meals. It is usually steamed and then prepared in various ways. There are many types of rice produced and consumed in the region. Rice is a staple at most meals in Iran. Iranian dishes and foods are known for being rice-based. Iran has been popular for its wide rice production.
3. *Bread*: This is a universal food eaten in some form by all classes at nearly every meal. It is a good side dish for nearly all meals in the Middle East. The white bread *barazidhaj* was made with high-quality wheat flour. The most popular bread is pita, one of the oldest types of bread in the world.
4. *Cereals*: They 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.
5. *Coffee*: This is a worldwide stimulating drink brewed to help people stay awake for evening worships, particularly during Ramadan. There is a unique way of preparing coffee in the Middle East called Turkish coffee, which involves using unfiltered, finely ground coffee beans. Turkish coffee is one of the most well-known and loved drinks of Middle Eastern cuisine.

6. *Olive Oil*: Lebanon has an ancient tradition of producing high-quality olive oil, which is used to braise vegetables in a number of traditional dishes.
7. *Tea*: This is usually served in glasses. A cup of tea may be refilled if it is less than half full.
8. *Yogurt* is commonly consumed plain. It is also used in cooking and in salad dressing, or diluted as a drink.
9. *Vegetables*: These are staple foods in Middle East. They are usually boiled, stewed, grilled, stuffed, and cooked with meat and rice. Leaf vegetables include cabbage, spinach, and chard. Root vegetables include onions, garlic, carrots, turnips, and beets.
10. *Fruits*: Common fruits and nuts include dates, grapes, oranges, lemons preserved Arabic style, bananas, apricots, sweet plums, figs, melons, apples, pistachios, and almonds.
11. *Tomato*: This is the most ubiquitous ingredient in Middle-Eastern. It is used in salads, cooked in stews and broth, and grilled with kebab.
12. *Eggplant* is commonly fried and dressed with yogurt and garlic. Baba ghanoush is eggplant roasted over an open fire, mashed and dressed with tahini lemon juice, garlic, and cumin.
13. *Spices*: Most regions in the Middle East use spices. Cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves, cumin, and coriander, black pepper are commonly used, while chili peppers are used occasionally. Garlic is common to many dishes and salads.
14. *Meat*: Lamb and chicken are the most used, beef and camel are also used to a lesser degree, other poultry is used in some regions, and, in coastal areas, fish. Pork is not commonly eaten--for Muslim Arabs and Jews. It is both a cultural taboo as well as being prohibited under Islamic law.

DIFFERENT DISHES

Dishes served as appetizers and sides dishes are often called mezes. Some dishes are named after the region they come from. The following are popular food in the Middle East [4]:

1. Falafel
2. Hummus
3. Shakshuka
4. Pita
5. Baba Ghannouj
6. Turkish Coffee
7. Baklava
8. Tabouleh
9. Pilaf
10. Fried Kibbeh
11. Kebabs

Each of these tasty dishes have a different story, cooking techniques, and ingredients. We will cover some of them [4-7]:

1. *Hummus*: This is probably the most popular dish in the Middle East. Some have the opinion that there are fewer things tastier in this world than a plate of fresh hummus. Hummus consists of chickpeas, tahini, olive, and spices. Mix it up and try fresh herbs with traditional spices like onion powder and cumin. Hummus is easy to make at home. One can blend the ingredients in a food processor and serve with pita bread, carrots, or apples. The delicious dish can be easily consumed both at meals and between meals. Although it is mostly consumed for breakfast with pita bread and vegetables, it can be served with fried meat. Hummus can be spread on anything from a sandwich or baked potato to the traditional hot pita bread. Hummus is shown in Figure 2 [6].
2. *Pita*: This is central to many dishes in the Middle East. It is a hearty bread, which is yeast-leavened. Bakers cook it at a high temperature. It forms a pocket shape, making it perfect to load other ingredients inside. Making pita is simple and you can do it at home. Pita differs from nation to nation in terms of cooking technique and shaping. Hence, we have Lebanese bread, Syrian bread, etc. Figure 3 displays some Pita [5].
3. *Shakshuka*: This is a dish native to Egypt, but the city of Tel Aviv is where you get the best version of it. Shakshuka is a tomato-based dish in one pot, and it features poached eggs on top. Traditionally, it is a breakfast food, but one can eat it for dinner.
4. *Borek*: This is made with thin phyllo dough and is one of the essential dishes of the region. This is one of the oldest culinary values of Middle Eastern cuisine. Borek is a meal with particular importance. Dough pieces are prepared using flour, water, and salt, and it comes in many different shapes and sizes. Spinach, cheese, minced meat, grated potatoes, etc. can be the stuffing of the Börek. It is a must-have dish for special occasions.
5. *Kebab*: Grilled meats (*kebabs*) are popular, with many regional varieties. Differentiating from region to region, culture to culture, a kebab can mean any grilled meat. It can be cooked in the oven or sautéed and even stewed, a delicious example being eggplant kebab. *Kebabs* are typically street or restaurant food, served with bread, salad and pickles. They are not usually prepared at home. Figure 4 shows a typical kebab [5]. Fast food and take-way meals include kebabs served on bread and falafels.
6. *Baba Ghanoush*: The basic composition remains the same across the Middle Eastern region: roasted eggplant, tahini, garlic, and spices. It is one of the many delicious spreads that comprise the backbone of Middle Eastern cuisine. The origin of this Levantine dish is unknown. Traditionally, it is served as part of a Mezze spread and partnered with hummus,
7. *Falafel*: This is a staple in Middle Eastern cuisine, and you will find it in street markets. Falafel balls are a deep-fried street food. It is deep fried in oil and served on pita bread with salad vegetables. The fried balls include chickpeas or beans and are customary in Egypt. It is a widespread street food that many people enjoy around the world. It can be incredibly delicious when prepared from scratch at home. It is rich in proteins and is a staple for many vegetarians.
8. *Malabi*: This is a creamy, milk-based dessert that is famous in the Middle East. The delicious pudding is flavored with rose water, giving it a sweet yet mellow flavor. In Israel, malabi can be found everywhere, from street stands to restaurants.
9. *Kleicha*: This is basically filled cookies. If Iraq has a national cookie, it should be kleicha. Whenever there is a special gathering, religious holiday, or any event, every Iraqi makes this cookie known for the flavor of its rich and spicy filling.

10. *Lamb Salad*: This is a very common salad to be eaten during Ramadan since it is easy to prepare. The salad is prepared with fresh za'atar leaves. It is light and can be served as a main course or as a side dish.
11. *Fattoush*: This delicious bread salad is common in Arabic countries such as Lebanon and Syria. Fattoush is made with mixed greens and small pieces of fried Arabic bread. It often also includes pomegranate. This is again known as a great salad to share with others, making the dining experience a way of bringing people together and bonding over the mouth-watering cuisine. This salad is both filling and heavenly tasting. Figure 5 shows Fattoush salad [6].
12. *Labneh*: This a strained yogurt that forms an important part of Middle Eastern food culture. It is made by stirring a pinch of salt into full-fat thick yogurt and then placing this mixture into a cheese cloth. After about 12 hours or so, excess liquid has seeped through the cloth and you are left with thick and creamy labneh which can be rolled into balls.
13. *Seafood* is very popular in the Middle East and you can expect some specialties involving lobster, crab, shrimp, tuna, kingfish, and red snapper. Many hotels serve seafood buffets and the different dishes can be sampled at your leisure
14. *Mediterranean Diet*: This emphasizes plant-based foods and healthy fats. People eat mostly veggies, fruits, and whole grains. Olives are fruit that comes from a gnarled tree and are a staple of the Mediterranean diet. People eat them for meals and snacks, and use olive oil for cooking. Olive oil is the main source of fat. Research shows the Mediterranean diet can lower your risk of cardiovascular disease. Figure 6 shows how to plan your meals around a Mediterranean diet [7], while Figure 7 shows a typical Mediterranean dish [8]. More will be discussed on Mediterranean diet in Chapter 11.

APPLICATIONS

In the Middle East, special foods are dedicated to special events such as birthdays, wedding, and festivals especially for the Ramadan.

- *Food for Wedding*: Middle Eastern Weddings have their own unique and colourful wedding traditions and customs. Middle eastern weddings start with a marriage proposal. After the proposal is accepted by both parties and the bride and groom have given their consent, then engagement happens. Just like many cultures, cake cutting has found its way into an Arab wedding tradition. Middle East Wedding Foods and Delicacies include Falafel, Pita, Baba Ghannouj, and Turkish coffee. A typical wedding celebration is shown in Figure 8 [9]
- *Food for Ramadan*: This a month of fasting and a holy month in Islamic culture. Throughout the month, Muslims fast from dawn to dusk, only eating after a prayer at sunset. The evening meal is a social event shared in homes or mosques. Dates are traditionally the first things eaten to break the fast. Dates are of the few foods that grows in the desert. Many Muslims like to break the fast in a mosque with a meal of dates, oranges and other fruits. At the end of Ramadan, everyone celebrates with a large feast and festivities known as Eid al-Fitr [2].
- *Food for Health*: The prevalence of diet-related non-communicable diseases is on the rise in the countries of the Middle East. Diet Westernization and urbanization have led to an expansion in out-of-home meal consumption in low-middle income countries. Childhood Obesity is recognized as an important health problem in the United States and other parts of the world. Researchers have identified culture and acculturation as major factors influencing obesity across several ethnic groups. In Arabic culture, mothers are responsible for creating and maintaining a home environment that fosters healthy eating behaviors among family members including the children.

CHALLENGES

Nutritional challenges affect all countries in the world. Malnutrition affects one third of people worldwide. The current global food and nutrition challenges are particularly evident in the Middle East. First, the region is undergoing a “nutrition transition,” with eating habits shifting away from the traditional diet of fruits, vegetables, fish, and healthy oils, globally recognized as a model for healthy living and environmental sustainability. Food preferences between societies have evolved with time, offering differences from traditional food to modern food. Consumer perception toward traditional Middle East food has changed due to globalization along with business and marketing. Second, climate change brings about a number of challenges in terms of agriculture sustainability and food security, increasing competition for natural resources and putting agriculture at risk. Third, population growth, coupled with migratory flows, creates the need for a more comprehensive understanding of how food and migration are linked [10].

CONCLUSION

Food issues are factors of various pressures (on resources, on societies) and sometimes even of tensions between nations. The popularity of Middle Eastern food is growing rapidly and is probably due to a number of factors. The Middle East has a variety of delicious dishes, full of distinctive flavors like paprika, garlic, turmeric, and cumin. The traditional Middle East food is known for its exotic, rich, and aromatic flavors present in both daily and special occasions. Middle Eastern restaurants are great for vegetarians and meat eaters alike. Middle Eastern cuisine has incredible richness because of the influence of many countries and cultures involved.

The Muslim prohibition on pork is widely recognized. In Muslim nations, pork is not available and sheep and other animals are slaughtered using the halal method. Beef is considered somewhat of a luxury. February is Middle Eastern cuisine month. More information about traditional Middle East food can be found in the books in [11-20].

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Figure 1. A family sitting down to eat [2].



Figure 2. Hummus [6].



Figure 3. Some Pita [5].



Figure 4. Typical kebabs [5].



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Figure 5. Fattoush salad [6].

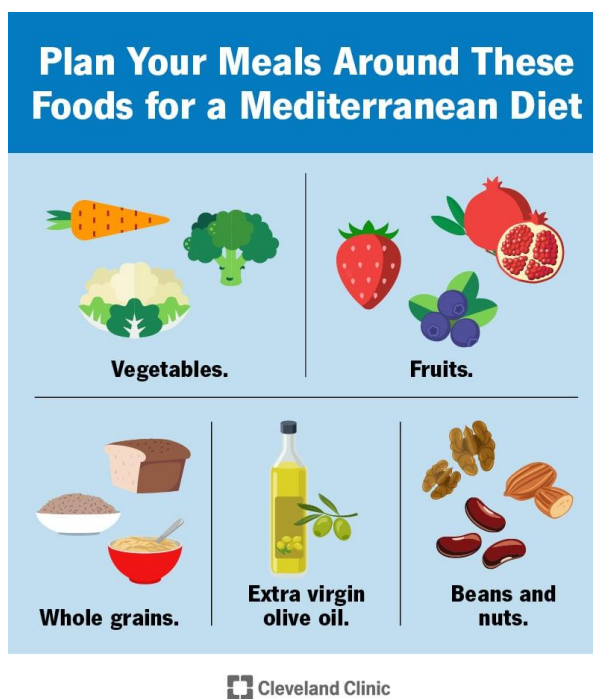


Figure 6. How to plan your meals around a Mediterranean diet [7].



Figure 7. A typical Mediterranean dish [8].



Figure 8. A typical wedding celebration in the Middle East [9]