

Cuisine of the Islamic World

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Overview

Cuisine of the Islamic World provides a captivating look into one of humanity's richest food cultures. The book describes how a cuisine that was initially quite simple developed into a sophisticated epicurism and how different foods and stimulants were used around Bedouin camp fires and at the tables of medieval rulers and are still used in modern meals, not to mention celebrations.

Cuisine of the Islamic World also explores the rainbow of food culture among Muslims in Finland, such as Tatars, Kurds and Somalis. Individual raw ingredients and whole dishes have spread across the globe through the Islamic nations: the best known stimulant, coffee, was first consumed by Sufi mystics. Included is a collection of recipes from nations as far-flung as Morocco and China that will entice the taste buds.

This book will be enjoyed by everyone who wants to understand the many different meanings and intercultural connections of Islamic cuisine—from lovers of gourmet delights to food industry professionals.

Cuisine of the Islamic World was awarded the Finnish Science Book of the Year award in 2010. Quoting from the judging panel's decision: "The book is an outstanding introduction to modern global history and develops both respect and curiosity in the reader towards Islamic culture and world

views. And to top everything off, the end of the book includes a sizable collection of Islamic recipes, which will tempt readers to move from words to actions – i.e. to both cooking and cultural tourism.”

Hospitality

Hospitality was a part of ancient Arabic pastoral culture, according to which anyone being entertained was in turn expected to entertain others. Serving food strengthens the bond between people and seals agreements. The saying “there is salt between us” in Arabic indicates strong bonds of friendship: salt has been consumed together. The connection created by dining is described in the saying: “Cursed, the son of cursed is he, who eats what is offered and then betrays the one who offered it.” Hospitality and relationships are still so important that, according to one Muslim, “visiting is a families’ greatest hobby.” Relationship networks must be maintained. In Saudi Arabia, especially in Mecca, the central cultural value is *tajammul*, which means maintaining face, as well as the reputation and respect of the family. A crucial way of receiving *tajammul* is to offer the right kind of food, in the right way, to the right people. It is essential to adhere to proper etiquette and politeness. The generous and lavish entertaining of guests raises the host’s status.

A guest who arrives without invitation is not expected to bring a gift. If the guest has been previously invited, gifts are a must, consisting perhaps of sweets or fruits, which the host will serve immediately. A guest is always offered something, and, depending on the location and the time of year and day, this may be water, fruit juice, a soft drink, tea or coffee, as well as sweets, nuts and fruit. In sending invitations, the fact that food will be offered is not mentioned specifically, but instead indicated by

statements such as “honor our house by coming to drink tea.” In this way the one extending the invitation displays modesty and humility. Muslims in China will only show hospitality to other Muslims, because the diet of China’s majority population, the Han Chinese, contains pork as the most common meat, and the Muslim would not consider himself to be a good host if offering food that lacked pork. On the other hand, a Muslim visiting a Han Chinese unannounced might embarrass himself and the host by having to refuse the offered food.

In Islamic countries, visits are expected when someone has had a child, is sick, has returned from a journey – especially from a pilgrimage – or if a death has occurred in the family. This cultural difference regarding visiting surfaced when we lived in Cairo in the 1980s. Our elderly landlady suffered a heart attack, and we, in our Finnish way, thought to let the patient rest and recover in peace. Fortunately one of the landlady’s servants informed us that the lady pilgrim was awaiting our visit. There we then sat in the convalescent’s home sharing get-well wishes as the servants offered tea and sweets to us and dozens of other visitors.

Part of hospitality is attempting to persuade the guest to stay over for dinner. The basic idea is that the host must be generous and the guest must not be greedy. The host family must nevertheless downplay what they have to offer, and the guest must hesitate and only accept after a delay. In Arabic literature, this basic etiquette is parodied in stingy hosts and greedy, rude gatecrashers. Custom in Arabic countries maintain that even if you have just eaten, food must still be served in such quantities that enough will be left over afterwards to indicate that everyone has had their fill. In Iran, however, all that one takes or is served must be finished, as leftover food means that you did not enjoy it. If there is no food at home when surprise visitors arrive, food will be borrowed from neighbours, ordered from a

restaurant, or the guests can even be taken out to eat, which is starting to become the norm among educated urbanites. For example in Syria, women's attitudes toward cooking are more relaxed, the use of semi-finished goods is normal and labouring in the kitchen is not considered to be any special achievement. On the other hand, in Iraq for example, a feast meal is nothing unless the hostess has slaved for hours in the kitchen.

In many countries, meals are preceded by discussion and socializing while enjoying refreshments. Finland's Tatars, however, invite guests directly to the dinner table, and the actual socializing takes place afterwards over tea. In the Middle East, formal feast meals – only attended by men – are consumed quickly and without conversing: for example, a multi-course meal in Yemen might be over in 15 minutes. The purpose of organizing the meal and the bounty of the spread is not so much to feed hungry guests as to demonstrate the status and wealth of the host. Therefore, the main element of the meal is that most valued of ingredients, meat. Men serve to other men, while women focus on food preparation in the kitchen. Male hosts will also shell nuts for the guests, cut meat and serve onto their plates. In many countries, gatherings of women are often spontaneous and informal, and in these cases, eating takes place over casual conversation. In Yemen, women always have a thermos bottle of coffee or tea ready at home for visitors, and when they go out to visit someone who is ill, in mourning, or has recently given birth, these bottles are taken along.

After meals, it is polite to bid to the host family “will your table always be generous to all” or “will your hands stay healthy.” Normally either tea or coffee is served with fruits and pastries after the meal. In Arabic countries, the lighting of incense means that the visit is over. In Iran, the same message is delivered by offering sweets. In Yemen, incense is burned and perfume is offered at the end of the meal. When a guest departs, according

to Hadith “it is part of sunnah (the Prophet’s custom), that the guest must be walked all the way to the door.” This means that the guest is escorted to the outside gate of the house, sometimes even all the way to his own home.

The Syrian historian Ibn Kathir (c. 1372) reports in his commentaries on the Quran that wherever the Prophet sat after entering became the center of the space. Abu Bark, the first khalifa, sat on his right side, and Umar, the second khalifa, sat to his left. Derived from this is the custom that the most important person at an event, or any rare guest, sits in the middle, with the next most important person to his right side. The person on the left is the third most important. This hierarchy of places proceeds downwards such that those of lowest rank, such as children and servants, sit closest to the doorway. Especially in the countryside, the most honored person in the house or the head of the family will be served first and with the best portions. It is expected that the person of honor will initiate the meal, and others will only eat after he has begun. A certain contemporary of the Prophet said: “When we were eating with God’s ambassador, none of us would touch the food until God’s ambassador had begun.”

Dining within the family is less formal, especially in urban settings. Sitting in a circle creates a feeling of equality and closeness, and this is why round and oval tables are preferred to angular ones. Sitting opposite each other is considered more appropriate for formal or conflict situations, whereas equals sit side by side. Therefore, in the Middle East, friends, bridal couples and lovers sit next to each other or at an angle – while in Finland, for example, friends normally sit opposite each other. Professor Forough Hekmat of the University of Tehran describes Iranian hospitality in his cookbook published in 1961. His description also applies well to the Islamic world beyond Iran:

”To a Persian, a guest is a “gift from God,” and therefore will be offered the best the host has—that is, the best food and the most comfortable chair. The host never sits at the head of a table but instead remains in the background, and it is not rare that he himself will go hungry, because he is so dedicated to satisfying the needs of his guests and their enjoyment. Even if the guest were an enemy, the host cannot even imagine being impolite to him. When there is a guest in the house, the host does not sit if the guest is standing, does not turn his back to him, and does not speak impolitely.”

Hospitality will often be directed even at complete strangers. For example, while traveling it is almost impolite not to offer to share one’s provisions with others. It is very common for families having a picnic in a park or outdoors to invite random passers-by to join their party. In these cases it is, however, still most appropriate to decline the offer and simply politely wish blessings on the diners.

The women’s side and the men’s side

Muslim tradition has been to keep the sexes separate from each other. Both nomad tents and urban homes have traditionally had a side for the men, the reception area, which is entered directly from outside, as well as a more interior women’s side, which includes the rooms for cooking and sleeping. Male guests do not normally go farther into the home than the reception area. Even in modern homes, at least in the larger cities, there is a clear division between the private and public spaces: the living room is located near the outside door and the bedrooms are to the rear of the home.

In small apartments, it is not always possible to separate the

space into private and public areas, and so the entire home becomes private. This was the case in the 1980s in a small Libyan town, where the women managed the houses and the men spent their days outside the home. Since the women in the neighborhood frequently visited each other in the daytime, it was not appropriate for the man of the house to come home in the middle of the day. Once, Irmeli was having tea with the women at an acquaintance's house when the man of the house came home unannounced. For reasons of propriety, he did not enter the home, but rather told his wife his business through the slightly ajar door. At another home, the man of the house spent a portion of the day under a canopy he had built outside, where he could receive his guests whenever he wanted. His wife did, however, prepare tea for any guests, bringing it out on a tray, but she did not join them, rather returning to her own space indoors.

Nowadays, separation of the sexes in Middle Eastern cities is not as common. In rural areas the traditions may still be followed, but life in the cities has westernized to the point that women and men socialize together much more freely than before. City dwellings are built for nuclear families, and they do not have space for multiple generations or siblings' families. Family ties are still important, and because single-person households are practically nonexistent, unmarried women and men normally live with their parents. Nowadays everyone sits around the same table in urban homes. Children are often served first, and they are normally allowed to leave the table as soon as they are finished. Everyone serves himself, but the lady of the house generally watches closely that everyone gets enough food. At informal meals, food is not consumed in silence, but instead guests and the host family join in lively discussions.

About the Authors

Dr. Helena Hallenberg, PhD, has studied Islamic saint worship and concepts of health among China's Muslims. Along with Helena Allahwerd, she edited the book *At the Gates of Islam (Islamin porteilla)* (Finlandia Nonfiction Award honorable mention) and has published numerous articles about Islam, as well as works about Chinese healthcare (*Vitality the Chinese Way [Elinvoimaa kiinalaisittain]*), *Pharmacy in the Kitchen [Apteekki keittiössä]* and *The Gate of Life [Elämän portti]*). She has worked as an Arabic language assistant instructor at the University of Helsinki, as a researcher for the Finnish Academy in Chicago and Hohhot, China, and is currently an instructor of Chinese medicine.

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