

## Middle Eastern Ethnic Cuisine

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Originally, the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula relied heavily on a diet of dates, wheat, barley, rice and meat; with a heavy emphasis on yoghurt products, such as *leben* (yogurt without butterfat). Ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine today is the result of a combination of richly diverse cuisines, spanning the Middle Eastern region from Iraq to Morocco and incorporating Lebanese, Egyptian, and others. It has also been influenced to a degree by the cuisines of India, Turkey, Berber, and others. Middle Eastern countries, as classified by the United Nations include: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

The Middle East was where wheat was first cultivated, followed by barley, pistachios, figs, pomegranates, dates and other regional staples. Fermentation was also discovered in the region to leaven bread. As a crossroads between Europe, Asia and Africa, this area has long been a hub of food and recipe exchange. During the Persian Empire the foundation was laid for Middle Eastern cuisine when rice, poultry and fruits were incorporated into the diets. Figs, dates and nuts were brought by Arab warriors to conquered lands. During Turkey's Ottoman Empire the sweet pastries of paper thin phyllo dough and the dense, sweet coffee was brought to the region. The area was also influenced by yogurt from Russia; 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 Spain. Religion has also influenced the ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine as neither Jews nor Muslims eat pork, making lamb the primary meat. In addition, the Qur'an forbids alcohol; consequently the region is not generally noted for its wines or other alcoholic drinks. In the case of the Middle East, a strong influential factor on food selection and preparation is religion. Certain dietary restrictions set by religion shape the main dietary patterns found in the Middle East.

Ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine is based on foods such as vegetables, fruits, fish, lean meat, beans and nuts. It is also known for its aromatic spices and subtle flavors. However, food consumption patterns and dietary habits in the Middle Eastern countries have changed markedly during the past decades; this is particularly true in some Gulf countries where there has been a great shift from traditional foods to more westernized diets. These changes include frequent snacking, replacement of traditional ethnic foods with energy-dense fats foods, the replacement of water with soft drink consumption, and lower fruit and vegetable consumption. A Middle Eastern dietary pattern as such is yet to be established as typical food selection and consumption practices present great variation from country to country.

Ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine tends to include traditional foods characterized by the inclusion of both whole and refined grains, fruits and vegetables, legumes, eggs, red and processed meat, composite meat and vegetable dishes (casseroles), full-fat dairy products, olives, Middle Eastern pastry snacks and tea. Due to its central location, the dietary patterns of the Middle Eastern region have adopted culinary practices and food selection from Europe, Asia and the rest of the African continent. This influence can be observed strongest in the use of spices and staple foods and in the predominant cooking techniques including skewer cooking over charcoal or long, slow simmering in unglazed covered pots, characteristic of the entire Middle Eastern region. Middle Eastern flavors and spices may be identified as lime, ginger, turmeric, cumin, cardamom, black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, paprika and *zaatar* (dried thyme and oregano mixed with sesame seeds, and salt). Many Middle Eastern dishes are made with a paste called *tahini*, a sesame paste made with hulled seeds. It is used to make such popular *meze*, or appetizers, as *baba ghanoush* (an Arab dish of eggplant mashed and mixed with various seasonings) and *hummus*

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(food dip or spread made from cooked, mashed chickpeas blended with tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, salt and garlic) along with pungent dipping sauces served with *falafel* (deep fried patty made from ground chickpeas, fava beans, or both), *kofta* (patties of minced or ground meat-usually beef or lamb-mixed with spices and/or onions) or vegetables.

Food products in Middle Eastern ethnic cuisine are becoming increasingly processed with grains tending to lose their fiber content due to a refinement process. Sorghum and millet, previously predominant in the diets of poor Middle Eastern countries, are becoming less important and replaced by refined wheat flour. Flat bread, *couscous* (traditional Berber dish made from steamed semolina) and rice are staples in Middle Eastern ethnic cuisine along with their variations such as *asmanakeesh* (round bread sprinkled with either cheese, ground meat or herbs served for breakfast or lunch). Olives, as well as dates, figs, and pomegranates are also widely used. Dates are a particularly important staple, often eaten with coffee and to break fasting periods such as during the holy month of Ramadan. Although fruits and vegetables tend to be present regularly in ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine, data from the World Health Organization survey of Middle Eastern countries found that these foods tend to be consumed in insufficient amounts at below 5 servings per day. Fruits tend to be consumed in their juice presentation contributing to a high sugar intake and a further reduction of dietary fiber sources. Vegetables tend to be present in the diets of most Middle Eastern countries as part of traditional dishes including *tabouleh* (Arab salad traditionally made of bulgur or cuscus, tomatoes, finely chopped parsley, mint, onion and garlic, and seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice and salt), *fattoush* (salad made from toasted or fried pieces of pita bread combined with mixed greens, diced tomatoes, cucumbers and onion, garlic, lemon, olive oil and mint), *baba ghanoush* and *mahashi* (stuffed vegetables, usually bell peppers, eggplant or zucchini filled with meat, pine nuts or rice). People in the Middle East are frequent consumers of dairy products, the most popular presentations including *ingleben*, *halloumi* (goat and sheep cheese made without acid or bacteria) and yogurt. *Hummus*, *falafel* and *foul* (fava beans cooked with chickpeas, olive oil, parsley, onion, garlic and lemon) are popular legume-based dishes while many traditional Middle Eastern ethnic dishes are meat-based including *kofta*, *shawarma* (tender bits of skewered chicken, garlic puree and salad wrapped in pita bread), *shish tawook* (skewered chicken dish served with pure garlic paste), *meat tagine* (boiled vegetables with meat cooked in a traditional clay pot), *machboos* (cooked mutton, chicken, or fish served over fragrant rice that has been cooked in chicken/mutton spiced broth), *mansaf* (tender mutton, covered in yogurt sauce and sprinkled with almond and pine nuts) and *warak dawali* (stuffed grape leaves with a filling generally consisting of rice, minced meat or grain, onion, parsley, herbs and spices. Meatless fillings are cooked with olive oil and include raisins, nuts or pulses). However, meat consumption is declining partially due to financial hardship and increased food (meat) prices in some Middle Eastern countries. To close a meal, ethnic Middle Eastern cuisine requires sweets and tea or coffee. Traditional sweets may include *umm ali* (Egyptian bread pudding prepared from a pastry which may include raisins, pistachios, vanilla and condensed milk), *baklava* (buttery filo pastry, chopped nuts, sweet syrup and honey dressing) and *kanafeh* (cheese pastry soaked in sweet sugar-based syrup and a few drops of rose water or orange blossom water and sprinkled with crushed pistachios). Middle Eastern tea is usually black, served strong with sugar and mint (chai nanna); while coffee may be either of the strong, concentrated, black variety or the Arab-styled aromatic type spiced with cardamom and rose water.

One of the difficulties in comparing ethnic cuisine across such a diverse region as is the Middle East is the presence of shaping factors for the development of unique dietary patterns among populations that would otherwise are likely to have remained much more similar. Food in the Middle East is different in every country; nevertheless there are several general characteristics which all these foods, and all the countries, share. All Middle Eastern countries have rice and wheat dishes, stuffed vegetables, meatballs, vegetables cooked in oil, scented rice puddings, nut-filled paper-thin pastries, fritters soaked in syrup and many other common elements including the frequent use of raisins with pine nuts and garnishes of chopped pistachios and almonds. Great value is attached to cooking in the Middle East. In a region of strong family ties, large clans and women at home, hospitality is deeply rooted and offering food is the central act in the highly developed art of pleasing.

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