

Food for sub-continental Muslims

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recipes and anecdotes on cooking contests organised by the caliph.

The taste for special food and sweet things appeared during this period. Before that, spices had been only aromatic, and were used in tiny quantities, but in great number and varieties of combinations. Baghdadi cuisine was rich with many herbs and complex stews. Some had Persian names, such as *Sikbaaj* (flavoured with vinegar) and *Naarbaaj* (flavoured with pomegranate juice). The dishes with Arabic names, presumably developed in Baghdad, were often named after the main ingredient; for example, *Adastyyah* (lentils with meat) and *Shaljamiyyah* (lentils with turnips), whereas some were named for aristocrats.

The royal banquets of the caliphs of Baghdad are legendary for their opulence. They merged the local peasant dishes and Bedouin foods of Syria. Lavish dishes were invented, poems praising food were recited and diners ate to the sound of music and singing.

The cuisine of the caliphs was transformed; new culinary techniques were acquired from the conquered people, and via trade routes beyond the empire. There came olive oil from Syria, dates from Iraq, coffee from Arabia, chefs came from Egypt, spices from India, Africa and China, but the strongest influence was of Persia.

PERSIAN CULINARY INFLUENCE

Persians have looked at food through three different lenses for centuries: as medicinal, philosophical, and cultural. Physicians and philosophers considered food and beverages the main factors in reviving the human body. Consuming food was seen as a way of

weakening or strengthening human character. Culturally, food was considered to be an art, providing enjoyment to both body and mind. All of these were strengthened by the advent of Islam. The 7th century Arab conquest of Persia, was followed by invasions from Seljuk Turks and the Mongols. In Persia, Arabs found a sophisticated court with a rich cuisine, and eagerly adopted the local ways. Though no accurate record of classical Persian cooking is available, it is clear that the ancient Persians cherished food. For instance, Emperor Darius paid special attention to agriculture, and elaborate banquets were held in Persepolis. Walnuts, pistachios, pomegranates, cucumbers, broad beans and peas (known in China as the "Iranian bean"), basil, coriander, and sesames were introduced by Parthian and Sassanian traders.

Contemporary Persian cooking wears its heritage on its sleeve. Arabs gave Iran the art of making bread, which is still baked in traditional tandoors. However, rice has the place of honour, sometimes containing almonds, pistachios, glazed carrots or orange peels, and raisins, other times finished with vegetables and spices, and occasionally, with meat. It is often perfected and finished by the use of specially prepared saffron from Iran, and cooked slowly after boiling to have a hard crust at the bottom (tah dig). Rice dishes are considered special by Persians, partly because rice has been rare, grown only in the northern Caspian provinces. Persia's delicious aromatic rice has won many admirers. Jewelled rice (morasa polow) was described as "the King of Persian dishes" by James Morier, the shrewd English diplomat who knew Qajar Persia well, and wrote Haji

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Baba of Isfahan, the best comic novel on Iran.

Every meal is accompanied by refreshing drinks called sherbets made from diluted fruit and herb syrups. It is not known when exactly the sherbet came into being, but the earliest records date from 200 BC to the Shiraz school of cooking in Persia. The first sherbet is said to have been of almonds topped with lukewarm water. This mixture was strained and chilled before serving in porous earthen containers, which kept it cool. Today, all over the Middle East and Indian subcontinent, the popular sherbets are loved for their cooling, energy giving, and healing properties. Fruits, flowers, roots and vegetables can be used to make them. A samovar (traditional tea jar) is an essential part of every household as tea ranks with *abdugh* (buttermilk) as Persia's principal beverage, served in small slender glasses with lumps of sugar.

Lamb and chicken are marinated and grilled as kebabs, or mixed into stews called khoreshes with fruit and sour ingredients such as lime juice. Cinnamon, cardamom, and other spices are used in great abundance, along with a multitude of fresh herbs. They blend opposing flavours, such

as sour grape juice with fresh herbs. They blend opposing flavours, such as sour grape juice with the sweet fresh herbs, which make Persian cooking quite exquisite.

Ice cream has been known for centuries to Persians, through a remarkable system that stored mountain ice underground through the hot months to provide cool drinks. Ice was not even a luxury.

MUGHAL CULINARY INFLUENCE

In 1526, Babur established the Mughals in India, who ruled for 300 years. The dynasty's legacy of food placed rich sauces and pilafs, nuts and dried fruit as the foundation of the Mughal cuisine of northern India. They brought with them the exotic heritage of Persian and Turkish cuisine, and influenced native cuisine with nuts, raisins, cream and butter. They added to the melting pot paththar kabab, haleem, aash, various kinds of polaos and much more.

The emperors' patronage took culinary art to the utmost heights. With their fall, the cooks found refuge with other courts across the sub-continent, accounting, to some extent, for the similarity of food across Pakistan, Bangladesh and India even today.

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