

## Pyramids and Pasta of Egyptian Kitchen

It is common knowledge that the ancient Egyptians were superb mathematicians and engineers. This, after all, was the land where geometry was invented, the land of the *pyramids* and the *sphinx*. But few are aware of their enormous culinary contributions.

About 5,000 years ago, Egyptian bakers discovered the secret of leavening bread. Soon after, other cooks, probably in the area of Alexandria, invented an oven small enough to fit into an average-size home. The Egyptians knew that tomatoes were edible (the English only discovered this in the late nineteenth century), and that by combining olive oil, lemon juice, and egg yolks, one could produce the wonderful sauce known today as "mayonnaise." And, much to the dismay of people who love Marco Polo, and all the myths surrounding his trip to the Orient, it was the Egyptians who invented pasta.

Today, Egyptians are probably the world's leading per capita consumers of bread. They eat more beans than any other national group, and thrive on garlic and coriander, both of them popular seasonings. While most peasants subsist on grains, fruits and vegetables, wealthier families can afford a regular portion of meat.

Though not particularly refined, Egyptian cuisine can be a subtle, country-style fare in which Mediterranean and Red Sea fish are extremely popular. Eggplant stuffed with meat, rice, fruit, or simply sliced, salted, and fried, is extremely popular, along with chickpeas, olives, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Besides coriander, the most commonly used spices are allspice, cumin, turmeric, and sumac. Parsley, mint, and basil predominate as fresh herbs. Moreover, many Egyptian dishes would not be complete without tahina, a paste made from ground sesame seeds and oil.

Popular specialties of the Egyptian palace include: *rishta*, noodles gently sauteed with lamb and tomatoes; *chicken stuffed with rice, fresh herbs, pistachios and prunes*; and *haman meshwi*, grilled pigeons marinated in sumac and lemon juice. Tent cooking favorites are *chakchouka*, a tomato and egg "stew;" *sanbusak*, cheese and spinach turnovers; and *ful medames*, broad beans with garlic, oil, and hard-boiled eggs, which is often heralded as the national dish of Egypt. Equally popular are *chicken awsat*, bread stuffed with chicken and vegetables; and *meluchia*, a soup made with dark-green, gummy meluchia leaves, meat or vegetable stock, and a garnish of garlic sauce. The most popular street food is *ta'amia*, spicy fritters of pounded fava beans, which resemble Israeli and Arabic *falafel*.

## An Egyptian Evening

Decorate tables with bougainvillea flowers, jasmine (or jasmine scented sachets), and grape leaves to establish a festive air for an Egyptian feast. To further put guests in the mood, explain that it is traditional to eat first course dishes by scooping them up with pita bread and not with knives and forks. Be sure to add that in all Arab societies only the right hand is used to eat.

At many formal Egyptian dinners it is considered important to have a short break between courses, and for this purpose a small group of musicians is generally on hand. Belly dancers are sometimes called on to perform between the first course and the soup and then again during dessert. If belly dancers and live musicians are not available, taped music will do.

To elevate this meal to the level of the sublime, serve not one but each of the suggested main courses in the Egyptian style by placing all of them on the table at once. Leftovers can be stored and reheated. Be sure to place pitchers of ice-cold water on the table, especially during dessert.

Keep in mind that at the end of such dinners it is traditional to offer guests a choice of coffee or tea, both of which should be served strong and sweet.

### First Course

A mixed meze of:

*Ta'amia*

*Humus and Tahina*

*Chakchouka*

*Hot Pita Bread*

### Main Course

*Noodles with Lamb and Tomatoes*

or

*Stuffed Breast of Lamb*

or

*Chicken Stuffed with Rice and Pistachio Nuts*

### Dessert

*Basbousa*

Ideal Beverages: A dry white wine with the first course; a light dry red wine with the main course; and a sweet dessert wine to finish the meal.