

Culinary Sisters - Jordan, Syria and Lebanon

One can undoubtedly dine very well in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, but all of them share so many culinary traits, that it can be difficult to distinguish the origins of many dishes. As the history of all these nations was so closely intertwined, and also subject to widespread *Bedouin* influences, none of them have developed a cuisine uniquely its own. One may even question the origins of the few dishes the inhabitants claim as truly indigenous.

Throughout the area, rice, cracked wheat, lentils, and chickpeas play an important role in regional cooking. Eggplant is by far the leading vegetable; herbs and spices are used lavishly, as are onions and garlic; and the principal cooking oil is olive oil. Yogurt is found everywhere; tahina is added to many dishes; any vegetable large enough to be stuffed will get a filling of meat, or vegetables and rice; and tough meat generally ends up as one form or another of kebab. Perhaps because of the quality of the meats that were historically available to them, Jordanians, Syrians and Lebanese are noted for their creative assortment of kebabs - plain and marinated lamb, spiced, pickled, and even preserved lamb often make their way onto skewers, as do a large number of variety meats.

Though Lebanon suffered through more than a decade of war, many gastronomes still consider this agriculturally rich, half-Moslem, half-Christian nation to have the most refined cuisine in the region. This superiority was partly due to the colonizing French influence prior to World War II. The Lebanese enjoy an abundance of fresh Mediterranean seafood, caught along the country's hundred mile coastline. These and other foods are seasoned with favored spices, such as cayenne pepper, paprika, and cinnamon. Favorite dishes are kibbeh, ground meat (usually lamb), or *fish*, pounded with cracked wheat and shaped into balls, cakes, or cylinders, served *raw*, *baked* or *fried*; and *tabbouleh*, a salad of cold cracked wheat, mint, parsley, onions, and sometimes tomatoes. In Lebanon, the two national dishes are *kofta fil sania*, lamb patties with pine nuts, tomato sauce, and tahina, and whole roast kid or lamb, stuffed with rice, saffron, almonds, pistachio nuts, walnuts, and raisins. The leading hard liquors are arak and wine. Lebanon is the only one of these three countries to produce *wine*, much of it of a very high quality.

Syria's cuisine is similar to Lebanon's but, for geographical reasons, relies less on the sea. Because Syria is a Moslem nation, pork is practically impossible to find, and seafood, especially crustaceans, is rarely featured. Alcohol is available in quarters inhabited by foreigners, but has never attained great social acceptance. When an alcoholic beverage is drunk, it is usually the anise flavored arak. Syrian specialties include *lamb's tongue stew*; *potato kibbeh* stuffed with spinach and walnuts; *samak bi tahini*, fish in tahina sauce; and *ataf*, sweet pancakes stuffed with ground nuts and cinnamon.

Jordan is noted especially for its creative assortment of stuffed vegetables, such as *meatless cabbage rolls*; *lahma bi ajeen*, a favorite Jordanian lamb pie baked in the tabboun or clay oven; and *labaneh*, a refreshing yogurt cheese meze. Among other favorites in Jordan are a variety of kebabs: plain lamb, marinated lamb, bits of miscellany meats or meatballs; vine leaves filled with lamb, and prunes stuffed with ground beef and walnuts.

A Jordanian, Syrian & Lebanese Evening

Throughout Jordan, Syria and Lebanon it is traditional to serve meals on low tables, the guests seated on piles of cushions that are spread generously about the room. It is also considered elegant to leave enough room so that guests can "spread out," that is to say, to lie down supporting themselves on an elbow as they dine or take a break during the meal. Whether seated at such a table or a more traditional Western dining table, explain to your guests that they are expected to eat so much that from time to time they either have to sprawl out or stroll around the room for a few minutes to give their stomachs a resting period.

Whatever table you choose, use colorful tablecloths and decorate the table lavishly with fresh and dried flowers (use low bouquets so your guests can see each other over them). Copper, bronze and silver serving plates are much appreciated at such meals, as is music quietly playing in the background. Keep in mind that at any family dinners, it is considered traditional in each of these countries to serve at least two main courses.

First Course

A mixed meze of:

Pita Bread

Tabbouleh

Labaneh or Labane Makbus

Meatless Cabbage Rolls

Main Course

Fish in Tahini Sauce

or

Meat Loaf with Tomato Sauce or Tahini

or

Lamb's Tongue Stew in Red Wine

Dessert
Ma'amoul

Ideal Beverages: In keeping with Moslem tradition, which forbids the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the two beverages that should be on the table at all times throughout the meal are iced tea and ice-cold water. Even if you do decide to serve beer or wine, both of which go well with this meal, the tea and water should be present in honor of those who maintain religious tradition. The wines most appropriate for the meal are whites such as Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Chablis or white Chianti.