

The Eastern Mediterranean Kitchen:

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The history and culinary traditions of Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Greece and Cyprus are so intertwined that for thousands of years dishes and recipes have tended to cross international boundaries with only slight changes in ingredients or spellings. It is thus often impossible to actually pinpoint which country deserves the titular claim to any particular dish. Despite this, each nation in the region has several characteristics that make its cuisine stand out on its own. Far more important, however, is that the cuisine of the region is basically a simple one, allowing for a great deal of interpretation and experimentation on the part of individual cooks. The people who live in the nations of the Eastern Mediterranean love nothing better than arguing about what dishes originated in what country. Turks, Greeks, Lebanese and Egyptians, for example all claim that they invented the pastry known as *Baklava*; Cypriots love to boast that in the 6th century they invented vodka; and the people of every major city in the region, from Jerusalem to Cairo and from Istanbul to Athens all swear that it was their ancestors who first made the sweet known as Halvah.

DINING

From the dawn of history, dining, and especially dining well, has played an important role in the history of the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean. The ancient Pharaohs of Egypt considered *honey* so godlike that common people were not allowed to eat it; the heroes of ancient Greece were as devoted to their feasts of roast meat as they were to their wives and children; and food was so important during Biblical days that there are more than sixteen thousand references to dining in the Old Testament. Even today, on absolutely every occasion, dining and drinking are indispensable to the life styles of the peoples of the region. *Coffee* is as critical to the success of baptisms, weddings and funerals as it is to the simples of social gatherings; the concept of "breaking bread" is considered as crucial to maintaining friendships as it is to signing peace treaties; and in many parts of the region, sharing a meal still places the guest under the protection of his host, at least for a limited period of time.

SIMILARITIES

Most Eastern Mediterranean cuisines have certain similarities. Throughout the region the chief starch staple is wheat (including Burghul), followed by *rice*, *lentils*, *chickpeas* and *fava beans*. The leading vegetable is *eggplant*; *spices* and *herbs* are used lavishly, as are the various members of the onion family, especially *garlic*; the principle cooking oil is *olive oil*, with sesame oil a distant second. *Yogurt* is widely used, as the hot climate and general lack of refrigeration in many places, hampers the storage of milk and butter.

SWEETS

Sweets are much appreciated but are eaten as between-meal treats. Classic Eastern Mediterranean sweets include the sugar-frosted jelly like Rahat Lokum (*Turkish Delight*), the flaky honey-and-nut *Baklava*, the shredded-wheat looking *Kadaif*, and the various kinds of Halvah, sweet pastes of fruits and nuts. Fresh *fruits* are the preferred desserts.

DRINKS

Coffee and, to a lesser extent, *tea* are essential to Eastern Mediterranean socializing. Cold drinks,

made of very sweet fruit syrups, diluted with water, are popular. *Yogurt*, used by itself as a sauce, a soup and thickened into cheese may also be served as a beverage with the addition of water and a little lemon juice. Although wine is growing in popularity in Greece, Turkey and Israel, the most traditional drink of the region remains the anise-flavored white spirit called *Arak*, Raki or Ouzo, depending on where you happen to get thirsty. Beer is also popular.

HISTORY

The cuisine of the Eastern Mediterranean has been greatly affected by a number of historical forces. Over the centuries, conquerors have imposed change and introduced foods that suited their tastes, habits and diets. The acquisition of territory, the development of new technologies and shifting economic patterns have all equally impacted the dining habits of the region. Sociological factors also come into play by introducing foods that may be forbidden by religion or deplored by custom. Psychologically, the people of the Eastern Mediterranean may have developed an aversion to the foods of their enemies. And geography, geology and climate, along with these other factors, come together to determine which raw materials are available to the cook and which foods are considered palatable and which not. The development of a distinct cuisine is fickle, however, for even when one locates an area that boasts a unique history, geography, demography and sociology there is still no assurance that a unique cuisine will develop.