World Cuisine

Saudi Arabian Cuisine and Culture

By Shallah Kaufman
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As a younger, Saudi Arabia conjured up images of a mysterious sprawling desert, oasis, the home of nomads and camels, caravans with wondrous goods, Ali Baba, and later, Saudi Arabia became a place I identified with Lawrence of Arabia. My friend Amy Riolo changed all of that for me. Now, Saudi Arabia is a place I feel familiar with—loving the rich, unique food, and the warm hospitality of the Saudis I have met. This informative article was written for me by my friend, Amy Riolo, a specialist in Egyptian, Saudi, and many other ethnic cuisines (Amy Riolo www.amyriolo.com).

Saudi Arabian cuisine is a combination of healthful ingredients and time-honored techniques enhanced with exotic herbs, flowers, spices, and sometimes even incense. Traditional Saudi kitchens blend spice-infused aromas, intriguing visual presentations, fragrant flavors, and velvety textures with the sizzling sounds of clarified butter being heated on the stove. There are three distinct periods in Saudi culinary history: antiquity, the 7th century through the middle ages, and modernity.

Saudi Cuisine in Antiquity

Five thousand years ago crops grew in lush oases which were the agricultural centers of the Arabian Peninsula. Many ancient aqueducts still provide water to crops in these areas today. At the time, the inhabitants of Saudi Arabia were comprised of nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. As they wandered through the desert, tribes relied upon staples such as rice, dates, mutton, and lamb which they would take with them when they traveled. These staples made up the original recipes for one of Saudi Arabia's most beloved diseases to date, Kabsah. During ancient times, Kabsah was a one pot mélange of fragrant rice and meat simmered in clarified butter and stock. As trade and outside influences in Saudi Arabia grew, the dish became much more elaborate. Nowadays, Kabsah includes a variety of spices, rice, and chicken, beef, or seafood. It is the predecessor to Spanish Paellas and Indian Biryanis, which were created under Muslim rule in the respective countries.

Incense-Infused Cuisine

In ancient times, Saudi Arabsians traded with India, Africa, Central Asia, and the Levantine. Over the years, Saudi Arabian cuisine consistently benefited from the steady supply of international products due to its ports along both the Gold Route and Incense Trail. Goods from the Gold Route which originated in China made their way into Mecca and Medina (formerly called Yathrib) from the seaport entries of modern day Muscat, Oman, and Aden, Yemen before traveling on to Ctesiphon (which was 20 miles Southeast of modern day Baghdad), Cairo, and Jerusalem.

The Incense Trail extended from Southern Oman into Yemen and Saudi Arabia all the way to Petra, Jordan, intersecting the Silk Route, which carried goods through Europe and Asia by land. Incense became as valued in the kitchen as it was in the international...
3. Sawm, or fasting, meaning that all adult Muslims who are physically able must abstain from food and drink (as well as other regulations), during the holy month of Ramadan. As a result, special dishes were created for the breaking of the fast, or iftaar, meals.

4. Zakat, meaning charity, mandates that all Muslims who are financially able must donate a portion of their earnings to charity. Food also became an important means of alms giving.

5. Hajj, is the annual pilgrimage to Mecca that must be completed once in a lifetime by Muslims who are physically and financially able to do so. Hajj is one of the most direct ways that Islam affected Saudi cuisine. Many people paid for their pilgrimage with commerce and used the trade routes and wares of traders to assist them on their journey. As a result, the people situated on pilgrim routes learned to become very hospitable towards pilgrims because it is required religiously, but economically beneficial as well. One of the ways the pilgrims were made to feel more welcome was for the locals to prepare dishes for them from their own homelands.

Because of the trade routes, Saudi cities like Mecca and Medina were high traffic areas prior to Islam. Islam was introduced to Saudi Arabia in the 7th century by the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH).*

**Saudi Cuisine in the Middle Ages**

New Islamic religious regulations towards eating, increased trade, wealthy caliphs, and Prophetic traditions caused changes in Arabian lifestyle which are still practiced on the Peninsula today. The Five Pillars of Islam which changed not only the way people worship, but the way they conduct themselves in their daily life are:

1. Shahada, meaning the declaration that there is only one God, and that the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH)* is his last and final messenger. As converts to Islam took this oath, they also began to change their diet to adhere to Islamic eating etiquette.

2. Salat, which means prayer, and refers to the five obligatory prayers that Muslims are required to pray at specific times each day. Over the years, meal times began to revolve around prayer times.

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Even today, as the hospitality industry prepares for its international guests during the Hajj season when millions flock to Mecca simultaneously, the Saudis provide large buffets which cater specifically to the tastes of guests from all around the globe. While gourmet food is often the last thing on pilgrims’ minds, Saudis insist on catering to their guests’ every epicurean desire. If you are traveling with a Turkish or Moroccan group, for example, who is staying at a well known hotel chain, the staff will make sure that you have Turkish and Moroccan buffets for dinner so that you can be comfortable while you travel.

Many of the dishes which were originally created to satisfy hunger pains of foreign pilgrims eventually made their way into the local cuisine. In addition, it is important to remember that transportation was not always as convenient as it is today. Up until the twentieth century it could take pilgrims months, or even years, to reach Mecca. Many of the Muslims who came to Saudi Arabia for the purpose of attending the Hajj ended up staying there, and their favorite foods became integrated into local cuisine.

**Islam and the Culture of Eating**

The medicinal and nutritional advice given by the Prophet Mohamed (PBUH)* also influenced cuisine and entertaining in Saudi Arabia. His mandates were later studied by Islamic hakims (physicians) who in turn created a new type of natural medicine for Muslims to follow. Islamic medicine created guidelines for eating and drinking based upon the body’s heat elements. The methodology is similar to the Chinese Yin and Yang or the Persian hot/cold combinations. Certain ingredients like honey, dates, water, the nigella, known as “Blessed Seed,” fenugreek, and other spices were found to be useful for treating a wide variety of ailments.

The Prophet (PBUH) himself promoted eating and drinking while sitting upright to aid digestion. He forbade people to eat while lying on their stomachs, and discouraged reclining while eating because it obstructs the digestive tract. He avoided mixing multiple hot foods together in the same meal, and promoted eating one hot and one cold dish together. He recommended that dinner should never be skipped, reminding followers that eating even a few dates is better than nothing, and commented on the benefits of a wide range of herbs, spices, and foods, many of which have been scientifically proven to be true in modern times. These etiquette rules are still practiced in Saudi Arabia, and many Muslim societies today.

As the Islamic empire grew dramatically, trade boomed at an extraordinary rate. In addition to providing wealth, the years of trade also spread cultural ideas, knowledge, and recipes throughout the region. Trade elevates Arabian cuisine and living standards from the humble Bedouin origins to a new elegant status with the addition of spices and knowledge from faraway lands.

**The Abbasid Influence on Saudi Cuisine**

After the 7th century, trading expanded westward to Morocco and East Africa, as well as North to the Baltic Sea where Arabic inscribed gold coins from the Abbasid era were found. During the 8th century the Islamic Empire was driven eastward under Abbasid rule. The mid-
The Abbasids controlled the entire Islamic empire which included Saudi Arabia. From Morocco, the Arabian Peninsula adopted couscous and tajines. Although they are made very similar to their Moroccan counterparts, Saudi cooks have adapted the recipes, incorporating typical Saudi spices. Local spice mixtures, known as bahrat, were enriched by spices found on the East African island of Zanzibar off the coast of Tanzania. It was there where the Saudis obtained the cloves, nutmeg, cinnamon, and pepper that are now essential to their spice mixes, with separate spice mixes prepared for fish, poultry, beef, lamb, and vegetables. Spices were seen as highly personal and were essential traditional medicines, and spice shop vendors would “prescribe” spice mixtures to cure physical and spiritual maladies the way modern doctors prescribe pharmaceuticals.

During the Abbasid caliphate, a noteworthy amount of education and scientific knowledge was spread throughout Islamic society. The average thinkers of the time were not only successful physicians and philosophers, but astronomers, alchemists, and writers as well. The “father of modern medicine” Ibn Sina, known as Avicenna in English, is one of the most famous figures from this time period.

The Abbasids also placed great importance on cooking and the philosopher Al-Kindi began to write about it as an art form. The Abbasid kitchen, which was based largely on Persian cuisine, was adapted to native Arabian ingredients and eventually influenced Saudi cuisine a great deal. Common Persian ingredients like basmati rice, dried lemons and limes, baklava pastry, flower waters, and dried rosebuds became common in the Arabian kitchen. As a result, Saudi Kabsah recipes were enhanced with fragrant basmati rice and dried lemons and limes added their deep citrus flavor to the dish. As urban dwelling became more popular, lamb and chicken became popular additions to Kabsah recipes.

As the Islamic empire grew eastward, trade and relations with India increased significantly. So many new goods from India were being introduced to the Arabian Peninsula that the Arabic term al hind or “Indian” was used to represent anything coming from faraway lands, regardless of their exact origins. Coconuts, for example are Jowz al Hind, or “Indian Walnuts”, and tamarinds are Tamr Hind, or “Indian Dates.” In the case of tamarinds, the Arabic name accurately states the source of origin. Cardamom, a spice integral to Saudi coffee mixes as well as sweet and savory dishes, was obtained from India. As they traded with Northern Europeans, Arabsians introduced cardamom to the Scandinavians, where it still plays an important role in many Swedish baked goods.

Although coffee grew prior to the 13th century in Ethiopia and Yemen, it is believed to have been roasted for the first time in 13th century Yemen. Coffee culture spread to Saudi Arabia with the help of imams, (Muslim clerics), who learned about its stimulant properties. Relying upon coffee as an aid to stay awake during long hours of devotion, coffee soon became known as “the wine of the Muslims.” The cultural connotations of drinking coffee in Saudi Arabia are synonymous to the western associations with the drinking of alcohol. The intoxicating aroma of Saudi coffee—lightly roasted grounds mixed with cool, crisp cardamom exudes from homes, shops, cafes, restaurants, and supermarkets throughout the Kingdom.

More than just a drink, coffee is used to lift spirits, to talk over problems, and is a reason to get together and celebrate.

Modern Saudi Cuisine

Modern trade introduced ingredients like corn, tomatoes, and potatoes from the Americas to Saudi Arabia, and Saudis also began growing their own produce for export. Beginning in the 20th century, opportunities for both work and entrepreneurship in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia increased immigration to the country. Many of these immigrants now work in, and own, ethnic food restaurants. Their signature dishes—Lebanese, Pakistani, Indian, Senegalese, Egyptian, Chinese, Japanese, and Moroccan—can be found in Saudi Arabia today.

Increased wealth and modern transportation have made it possible for people of the Arabian Peninsula to travel abroad and try different cuisines. When they return home, many are eager to introduce the “new” foods they tasted into Saudi society. As a result, cities like Jeddah, Riyadh, Medina, and even Mecca are filled with international chain restaurants. American, European, Indian, and Middle Eastern restaurants are everywhere. A trip to the supermarket in any of these cities reveals famous American and French brands offered side by side with traditional Arabian ones. Typical wedding buffets may offer varieties of Moroccan couscous and tajine along with Arabian kabsah (which now contains more than a dozen spices, tomatoes, and can be made with beef, chicken, and lamb), Pakistani roti, Indian biryanis and tikkas, and American and Egyptian desserts.

With such a wide variety to choose from, and a rapidly changing culinary scene, one might assume that Saudi Arabian would be concerned about keeping their food identity intact. As one Saudi airline pilot claimed, however, “In essence…Saudi cuisine is a melting pot…just like American cuisine is…we adopt food from everywhere and make it our own.” So far, it’s an arrangement that’s worked out beautifully.

* Islamic tradition requires the words “may peace be upon him” to be uttered after the recitation of the prophet’s name.
Chicken Kabsah (Kabsah Dajaj)
This famous Saudi dish tastes as great the next day as it does the day it’s cooked. Be sure to use an attractive frying pan and serve kabsah directly from it to the table.

Ingredients:
- 1 tablespoon clarified butter (ghee)
- 1 small chicken, cut up or 2 1/2 pounds chicken thighs
- 1 onion, diced
- 4 garlic cloves, diced
- 3/4 cup tomato puree
- 1 tablespoon Saudi Spice Mix (following recipe)
- Salt, to taste
- 3 cups chicken stock
- 1 cup basmati rice, soaked for 15 minutes and rinsed
- 1 tablespoon corn oil
- 1/4 cup raisins
- 1/4 cup blanched almonds, slivered

Preparation:
Melt clarified butter in a large, nonstick frying pan over medium heat. Add chicken pieces and brown on all sides. Add onion and sauté until translucent. Add garlic and stir. Add tomato puree, Saudi Spice Mix, and salt. Cook together for 1 minute and add stock. Increase heat to high and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and cover. Simmer for 45 minutes. Stir rice in between chicken pieces and cover. Continue to simmer for 20 to 30 minutes, or until rice is tender and liquid is absorbed. Heat corn oil in a small frying pan over low heat. Fry raisins and almonds until almonds turn light golden and begin to release their aroma. Spoon raisins and nuts over chicken and rice and serve hot. Serves 4 to 6.

Tip: Packaged or canned chicken stock can be substituted for fresh stock in this recipe.

Cream Filled Phyllo Triangles (Sha’bayat)
The word sha’bayat is a derivative of the plural form of the Arabic word for “popular.” Once you make these delicious treats, you’ll understand that they truly merit their name. I’ve yet to meet someone who doesn’t love them. The tender, flaky phyllo triangles in this dessert are filled with a unique semolina cream that contains just the right amount of sweetness.

Ingredients:
For the filling:
- 2 cups whole milk
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 5 tablespoons cornstarch, dissolved in 1/4 cup milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 1/4 cup semolina
- 1 tablespoon orange blossom water
- 1 tablespoon rose water

For the syrup:
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 cup water
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice
- 1 teaspoon orange blossom water
- 1 teaspoon rose water

For the phyllo triangles:
- 1 (16-ounce) package phyllo dough, thawed according to package directions
- 3/4 cup clarified butter (ghee), melted
- 1/4 cup ground pistachios, for garnish

Preparation:
To make the filling, combine milk and sugar in a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Bring to a slow boil, stirring, and add the cornstarch-milk mixture. Whisk continuously until thickened. Reduce heat to low. Stir in cream, semolina, orange blossom water, and rose water. Continue to cook and stir for 2 more minutes. Set filling aside to cool. Preheat oven to 400°F. Grease 2 baking sheets with clarified butter.

To make the syrup, combine the sugar, water, and lemon juice in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Bring to a boil and stir until sugar dissolves. Once sugar is dissolved, stop stirring and reduce heat to low. Simmer for 10 to 15 minutes until thickened. Remove from heat and set aside to cool.

To make the phyllo triangles, remove the phyllo dough from the package. Set each piece on a work surface and brush with clarified butter. Continue stacking and brushing each sheet with butter until you have 10 sheets stacked. Cut the stacked phyllo into 4-inch squares with a sharp knife or pizza cutter. Put the cream on one side of each square. Brush the borders of each square with additional clarified butter. Fold the empty half of the phyllo over on the diagonal to cover the cream and form a triangle. Press down on the edges to seal in the cream.

Place 6 triangles on each baking sheet. Bake for 10 minutes, rotate pans, brush with more clarified butter, and bake for 15 to 20 more minutes, or until golden. Remove from oven and pour syrup evenly over the tops of each triangle. Allow phyllo triangles to cool, garnish with pistachios. Serve warm or at room temperature. The triangles may be stored in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 days. Reheat them for 10 to 20 seconds in the microwave before serving. Makes approximately 12 servings.

Tip: To save time, make the cream filling a day ahead of time and store it in the refrigerator.

Saudi Spice Mix (Baharat)
This spice mix is indispensable for preparing the recipes in this book. I like to prepare it in large quantities ahead of time. That way, when I’m cooking I don’t need to take the time to find the individual spices. Feel free to alter this recipe to your tastes, the way Arabian housewives do.

Ingredients:
- 1/4 cup ground black pepper
- 1/8 cup dried coriander, ground
- 1/8 cup ground cloves
- 2 tablespoons ground cumin
- 1/8 cup ground cardamom
- 1 teaspoon fresh nutmeg
- 1/4 cup paprika
- 1/8 cup ground ginger
- 2 dried limes*

Preparation:
Place the first 8 ingredients in a glass jar. Cover jar with lid and shake to combine. Grind the dried limes in a coffee or spice grinder until they reach a powder consistency. Add to the spice mixture, cover, and shake to mix well.

Ingredients: Store for up to 2 months in a tightly sealed jar, in a cool, dark place. Makes about 1 cup of spice mix.

* Also known as Persian limes, they can be found in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern markets. The dried limes can also be substituted with dried lemon peel.