THE CASE OF KASHK
By Gil Marks

Kashk is a Middle Eastern fermented grain and dairy product. The first record of the word was by the 5th century Armenian historian, Elise, being particularly in nomad and peasant food. Kashk, a word of Persian origin, was ignored in ancient Persian writings. However, the Talmudic equivalent of kashk was kuch, initially appearing in the Mishnah nearly four centuries earlier. Israeli Jews referred to it as kuch ha-Bavli (Babylonian kashk), denoting its origins and center of popularity to the east. The Talmudic accounts reveal that kuch was well established in the western end of the Fertile Crescent two millennia ago, but not then commonly made in the Levant. The Talmud claimed three things about kuch, in the process revealing the mixture's ingredients and nature, “It clogs the heart, on account of the whey; it blinds the eyes, on account of the salt; and it weakens the body, on account of the fermentation of the flour.”

Ancient food technology was devoted to preserving scarce resources for as long as possible and not necessarily creating the most sophisticated and flavorful fare. In the Middle East that primarily meant the two staples, a combination of basic pastoral and agricultural cultures—dairy products and grains (varieties of barley and wheat). Together, the pairing provides nutritional elements lacking in the other. Although whole kernels could be stored for many months, if fractured, a common occurrence during threshing of hulled grains, the oil inside became prone to spoilage. In the time before the advent of pasteurization, cooling systems, and hygienic conditions, raw milk was particularly unsafe. Among the predominant methods for preserving foods in ancient cultures was fermentation, such as beer. Almost all dairy products were consumed in a fermented form, notably cheese, butter, buttermilk, kefir, and yogurt. Fermentation could generally only extend the shelf life of dairy products for a few days or so; additional processing was necessary for long term storage.

Classic kashk was typically prepared during the summer after the grain harvests, but while there was still a surplus of milk as well as heat from the sun for aiding both fermentation and drying. Families set aside part of the harvest or purchased large amounts of wheat or barley to last for the year. First the grains or bulgur were cracked between two rotating stones, then slowly stirred into warmed, acidified whey from sheep or goat yogurt or into buttermilk (about 62% moisture). Salt was added to the doughy mixture (hamma), then it was transferred to porous clay vessels to ferment, kneaded occasionally, for at least three days and sometimes up to two weeks. During drying, the heat destroys most of the yeasts and lactobacilli. When properly fermented and liquid absorbed, the thick mixture was formed into small lumps and spread out on trays to dry in the sun, a slow, thorough drying of at least a week or more. The kashk balls were stored in clay vessels or sacks until needed.

During the fermentation, lactic and acetic acids and other compounds are produced and the pH significantly lowered (about 4.5), which decreases further during drying (3.5). The acid (about 1.8%) combined with the salt and the low-moisture content (9 to 13%) when effectively dried, all act to suppress pathogenic bacteria and...
food spoiling microorganisms, thereby preserving the milk proteins and grains for two or even three years. The acid and fermentation also give the kashk its distinctive sour, nutty, yeasty flavor and smell, varying according to the types of lactic acid bacteria used.

Kashk was easy to produce at home, relatively inexpensive, long-lasting, light-weight, portable, and quick to cook. The predominant use of kashk was reconstituted in water, then simmered into a thick, lumpy porridge or with available vegetables into a soup, both typically consumed with bread. It was also ground into a powder to sprinkle into soups as a thickener and flavoring. In liquid, the brownish lumps whiten somewhat and crumble easily, remaining relatively intact with minor cooking. Some people, unfamiliar with the process for making kashk, have mistaken the small kashk lumps for crusts of bread. Kashk was sometimes an everyday food in the Middle East, providing much needed nutrition and protein (a mean of 13% protein content), but in particular was an essential part of the cached winter food supply and a vital resource in times of famine. The porridge was principally breakfast food but, depending on necessity and preference, often served as part of or the entirety of any meal, especially during the winter. In addition, the porridge, considered by its proponents to be very healthy and nutritious (whey contains much of the calcium), was commonly served any time of the year to nursing mothers, infants, the sick, and the elderly. Kashk was also ideal for shepherds, nomads, soldiers, and travelers of all sorts, requiring just a small vessel, fire, and some water to produce a filling meal.

Although members of one culture become accustomed to or even grow to enjoy the flavor of a particular fermented item, that food is all too often offensive to other communities. While kutch was much beloved among Babylonians, it was typically met with scorn by Jews living on the other side of the Fertile Crescent in Israel. The Talmud noted that Rabbi Yochanan, from Tzippori (near Nazareth), “would spit every time he was reminded of Babylonian kutch.”

In the 9th century, the dish first appeared in Arabic, pronounced kishk, in a medical compendium of Abdul-Malik Ibn Habib of Andalusia. It was also commonplace in the Levant. Sir Richard Burton in Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Mecca (1855) provided a description of how kishk was prepared in 19th century Arabia, explaining, “This is the Kurut of Sind [one of the four provinces of Pakistan] and the Kashk of Persia.” Classic kishk also survives in the Turkish tarhanas (from the Persian tar “soaked” and khan “food”), a term which first appeared in the 14th century. Turkish versions frequently contain assorted seasonings and vegetables. During the subsequent Ottoman domination of the Balkans, the dish spread to that area as well, with the transposition of the letters r and a, pronounced trahanas and trachanás by the Greeks. Trahana soups are still widespread in the Balkans.

Throughout most of history, kashk was a home production run by women and children, although in the later twentieth century, commercial manufacturers, primarily in Turkey and Greece, emerged. Commercial kishk powder is sold in some Arab countries. Nevertheless, in some parts of the Middle East, this process continues at home annually to this very day. In particular, residents of rural areas of Turkey and Kurdistan still process their own tarhanas along with bulgur every year and consume an average of eight kilos tarhanas per person in contrast to the much more expensive rice at the rate of only three kilos.

During the course of its long history, kashk took on a variety of new forms. In Iran, kashk became dried whey or dried yogurt (without any grain), while in other areas it took on the meaning of cooked cracked grains without the dairy. When the latter type of kashk made its way to eastern Europe, it became kasha, used in Slavic languages for any type of cooked cereal, while in Yiddish it came to mean exclusively buckwheat groats. When stuffed into intestines, it became kishke.
Persian Eggplant with Dried Yogurt
(Kashk-e Bademjan)  (6 to 8 servings)

In Iran, kashk now refers to either dry whey, which has to be reconstituted by soaking in water and pureeing, or a liquid ready-to-use form with a consistency of sour cream. Yogurt is not a substitute.

- 8 small eggplants, peeled, or 2 large eggplants, peeled and cut into ½-inch thick slices
- About 2 tablespoons kosher salt for sprinkling
- About ¼ cup plus 1 tablespoon olive or vegetable oil
- 2 medium yellow onions, chopped
- 2 to 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- ¼ cup water
- Salt and ground black pepper to taste
- ½ to 1 cup liquid kashk (thick reconstituted dried yogurt)
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh mint or 1 tablespoon dried

1. Sprinkle the eggplants with kosher salt, place in a colander or on a wire rack, and let stand for at least 1 hour. Rinse the eggplant under cold water, then press between several layers of paper towels, repeating pressing several times until it feels firm.
2. In a large, heavy pot, heat ¼ cup oil over medium heat. Add the eggplants and cook, turning occasionally, until tender, about 10 minutes. Remove the eggplants.
3. Add the onions and sauté until golden, about 15 minutes. Remove half of the onions and reserve. Add the garlic and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the tomato paste and stir until slightly darkened, about 2 minutes. Add the water, salt, and pepper.
4. Return the eggplants and stir and mash until smooth. Or transfer to a food processor and process until smooth. Add the kashk and simmer until the flavors have melded, about 15 minutes.
5. In a small saucepan, heat the remaining 1 tablespoon oil over medium heat. Add the mint and sauté until fragrant, about 1 minute. Drizzle over the eggplant and sprinkle with the reserved onions. Serve warm with pita bread or lavash.

Kishk Soup
(Ash-e Kashk/Shurabat al Kishk)  (6 to 8 servings)

This basic soup is enriched with chopped carrots, potatoes, and other vegetables and lamb or goat.

- 1½ cups (9 ounces) kishk/trahana
- 7 to 9 cups water or vegetable, chicken, lamb, or beef broth
- ¼ cup vegetable oil, olive oil, or clarified butter
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- Salt and ground black pepper to taste
- ¼ cup chopped fresh parsley or 2 teaspoon dried mint (optional)

Soak the kishk in 1½ cups water for at least 30 minutes. In a large, heavy pot, heat the oil over medium-low heat. Add the onions and sauté until soft and translucent, about 10 minutes. Add the kishk and stir to coat. Add the remaining water, salt, and pepper and bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Simmer, stirring occasionally, until the kishk is tender and the soup slightly thickened, 10 to 15 minutes. If using, stir in the parsley. It is usually served with pita bread and can be garnished with crumbled feta or halloumi cheese.