

Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) Food Practices and Cultural Considerations

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Disclosures

- “No conflicts of interest”

MENA (Middle East & North Africa)

- Similarities between the people, geography, food, culture, and language
 - Diverse cultures, languages, dialects, economies, political landscapes
 - Food: serving, preparation methods, names of foods, ingredients, variations of making the same dish
- No specific census box to check in the US
 - 1915: "White" → 2010: "our own box"
 - Estimated 3.5 million Arab Americans
 - Amazigh, Kurdish, Assyrians, Persians
- Migration to the US: forced and by-choice
 - Food is identity and connection to the "homeland"



■ Usually included ■ Often included ■ Usually not included

Source: US Department Of State, The Story of Arab American's Beginning in America- and the Quest for Fair Representation. Rita Stephan. April 30, 2021.

Living in the US

- May be eating a Standard American Diet
 - Preference, convenience, on-the-go, busy schedules
 - Cultural meals are more complex
- Cultural foods consumed during holidays and special occasions
 - Can we make them fit?
- Grocery shopping
 - Overwhelming, reading labels, language
 - Ethnic stores (Asian, Latino, Middle Eastern, Persian), local butchers, overseas



MENA: Culture vs Religion?

- Majority are Muslims, many people from MENA are Christians or Jews
 - Muslim: no pork, alcohol, birds of prey, or meat of carnivores. Halal certified.
 - Jewish: no pork, certain cuts of beef, birds of prey, shellfish. Meat and dairy can't be mixed. Kosher certified.
 - Christian: no food restriction.
- Not everyone associating with a religion will abide by its food rules
 - Some assumptions are good and establish rapport
- Not every person from MENA is Muslim, and not every Muslim is from MENA/Arab
 - Muslims around the world eat VERY different foods but abide by the same Islamic food laws (no pork, alcohol, etc)



Month of Ramadan

- Fasting from dawn to dusk for 29-30 days
 - No food, water, supplements, medications, gum, and smoking during the day
- Lunar calendar: shifts by 10 days every year
- Focus on protein, vegetables, hydration, portion control for desserts and fried pastries
- Diabetes, pre-diabetes, insulin resistance:
 - Benefits to fasting
 - Check with doctor, adjust medication

Typical Foods

- Olive oil and olives
- Bread often served in all meals:
 - Pita (varieties), kaek (Levant), sammoon (Iraq), taboon (Palestine, pocketless pita, cooked on a hot stone), Saj (Saudi Arabia, thin pocketless pita cooked on a hot stone), aish (Egypt, means life), mlewi (Tunisia, flat bread)
- Grains: rice, couscous, bulgur, freekeh, jareesh (harees, cracked wheat), barley
- Legumes: lentils, chickpeas, fava beans. Added to stews and grains, made into dips hummus, falafel
- Dairy: plain yogurt, cheeses (halloumi, akkawi), yogurt drinks (Ayran)



Typical Foods

- Meats: chicken, lamb, beef, goat (some place
- Fish in areas near the water
- Vegetables
 - Salads: tabouleh, fattoush, arugula, parsley, radish, grilled vegetable cold salad
 - Stews: tomatoes, onion, garlic, okra, green beans, eggplant, zucchini, parsley, leafy greens like spinach and molokhieh
- Fruit: dates, figs, raisins, prunes and others
- Nuts: pine nuts, walnuts, cashews, sesame, almonds
- Tea (with mint, spiced karak tea) and coffee (instant coffee, Turkish coffee, Saudi coffee with cardamom, Yemeni coffee)
- Spices and herbs: allspice, sumac, cinnamon, clove, cardamom, cumin, coriander, nutmeg, bay leaves, parsley, cilantro, mint, fennel, sage, thyme, caraway, saffron



Breakfast – Savory Spread “Sufrah”

- Bread – different types
- Olives and olive oil
- Eggs – different ways for cooking, Tunisian shakshuka
- Fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, radishes, mint, pickled vegetables
- Cheese (different types), labaneh
- Jam and honey





Breakfast - Savory Spread "Sufrah"

- Zatar (thyme, sesame, sumac mix)
- Manaeesh: dough topped with olive oil and Zatar mix, cheese, and/or eggs
- Beans: falafel, hummus, fool (fava bean dip)
- Tea, often with mint

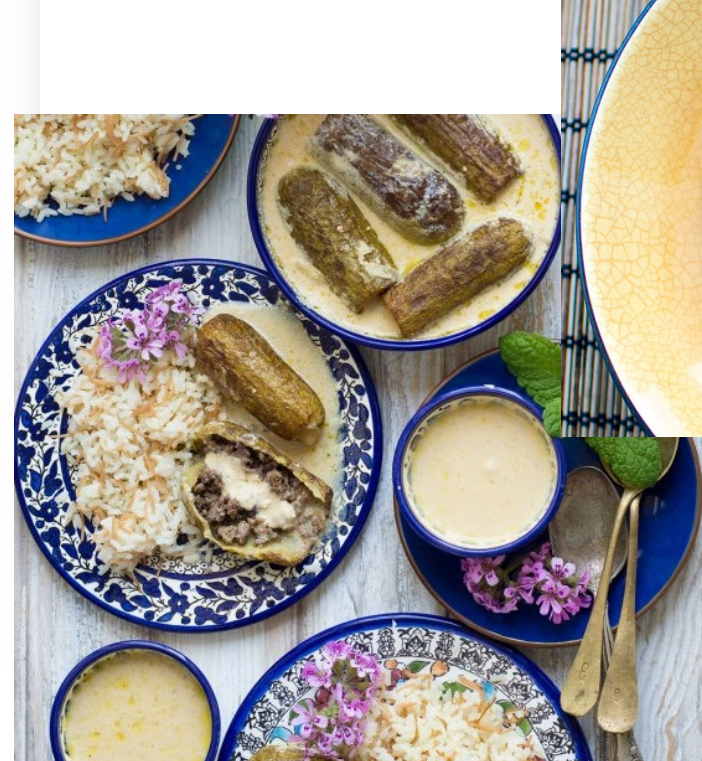
Typical Main Meals

- Rice and meat dishes (chicken, lamb, beef, goat, or fish)
 - Kabsah, maqloobah, mandi, biryani, machboos, tahdig (Persian crispy rice), sayadieh (fish)
 - Dried fruit and nuts sometimes added
- Other grains may be used:
 - Couscous in North Africa
 - Bulgur and freekeh in Levant area
 - Jareesh (cracked wheat) in Arabian Peninsula



Typical Main Meals (cont.)

- Stews made with meat and vegetables, served with rice, couscous, or bread
 - Tomato, okra, green beans, peas, spinach, molokhia (jute mallow), zucchini, eggplant, potatoes, chickpeas
 - Tagines in North Africa, sometimes with dried fruit
- Stews made with cooked plain yogurt
 - Mansaf, laban
- Grilled meats:
 - Shawarma, kebab (beef, lamb, chicken), shish tawook (chicken), kufta / koobideh (ground meat with spices)



Typical Main Meals (cont.)

- Lentil
 - Mujadarah: rice, lentils, fried onions - Iraq and Levant
 - Koshari: rice, lentils, fried onions, tomato sauce, pasta - Egypt
- Stuffed vegetables and leaves
 - Zucchini, eggplant, bell pepper, grape leaves (wara', dolma), cabbage leaves, cucumber, turnips
 - Stuffed with rice alone? Or rice and meat?



Typical Side Dishes

- Salad often served with meals
- Plain yogurt, sometimes with cucumber, mint, and olive oil
- Savory pastries/appetizers (special occasions)
 - Filled with cheese, meat, eggs (Tunisia/Algeria), potatoes
 - Some are thick, others are thin
 - Some are fried
 - Kibbeh (meat and bulger),



Typical Side Dishes (cont.)

- Dips, served with bread
 - Hummus (chickpeas), mutabal/baba ghanoush (eggplant), beets, carrot dip (Tunisian omek houriya)
- Soups:
 - Vegetable, chicken, barley, vermicelli, lentil (Levant), freekeh (Levant), shorba (Libya, lamb with tomato and chickpeas), harira (Morocco), lesan asfour (Tunisia/ Egypt, orzo with chicken)
- Fried vegetables like eggplants, cauliflower, onions, eaten with bread



Cultural Desserts

- Coffee or tea with dates, dried fruit, small cookie or biscuits
- Cookies/pastries: date or nut-filled cookies, (mamool), aniseed cookies, sesame cookies, baklava, basboosa
- Cakes: date cake, lemon cake, orange cake, coffee cake
- Dairy-based: rice pudding, milk with corn starch pudding, pastries filled with thick cream (ashta), Palestinian kunafa with cheese
- Cane sugar syrup often used
- Not always served or available
 - Donuts, candy, chocolate, cookies, ice cream are more accessible!



Family Style Meals and Family Gatherings

- Food is often served family style – “Sufrah”
- Culture centers around food hospitality and generosity
 - You show love by feeding people!
 - Generous amount offered
- At gatherings:
 - The host often insists on second helpings
 - Sometimes you’ll be sent home with more food



Benefits of the Current Diet

- Homemade meals with minimal processed ingredients
- Cooking is a highly valued skill, recipes passed down from one generation to the next
- Family meals promote connection
- The diet (including breakfast) is savory
- High fiber, plant-based ingredients
- Herbs, spices, and complex flavors
- Olive oil and nuts as the main sources of fat
- Cultural desserts on special occasions
- Alcohol not heavily consumed



Pitfalls and Challenges

- Bread served with most meals
- Rice and grains are the bulk of meals
- Grains, bread, lentils, and potatoes in the same dish or served at the same time
- Dishes are complex, estimating carbohydrate content is challenging
- Portion control
- Soda and juice consumption varies
- Preference for fatty cuts of meat varies



Adaptations for a Healthier Eating Pattern

- Educate on sources of carbohydrates
 - Carbs not only in desserts
 - Grains, potatoes, beans, lentils, breads, and yogurt
 - Choose your favorite one—not all!
- Encourage non-starchy vegetables
 - Increase ratio of non-starchy veggies to other ingredients in soups, stews, stuffed vegetables
 - Add a side salad
- How to estimate portions, calories, carb content of common meals (stews, stuffed foods and combo meals)



Adaptation for a Healthier Eating Pattern

- Adjust recipes and cooking methods
 - Bake, roast, broil vegetables and pastries instead of frying
 - Less oil and sugar
 - Not every dish can be modified - cauliflower rice can't be used in traditional dishes
- Portion control
 - During sufrah (spread) meals and family gatherings
 - Decide: how much bread are you going to eat?
 - Plan for second and third helpings at social gatherings



Adaptation for a Healthier Eating Pattern: Be Mindful

- Not every person is willing to modify the recipes they inherited
- Sleep pattern
- Mindless eating: watermelon, pumpkin, sunflower seeds
- Encourage movement
- Measure success with specific diabetes markers, not BMI and weight



Thank you

Recipes and images:

- Chef in Disguise:
<https://chefindisguise.com/>
- Inspired by Sherin:
<https://www.instagram.com/inspiredbysherin/>

Reach me:

<https://nourzibdeh.com/>

