

LIFECYCLE AND CUSTOMS

Food and Foodways

Saffron rice and slow cooked stews, flaky pastries and spiced coffee: how Sephardic and Mizrahi kitchens carry history, faith, and family memory.

WHAT IT IS

The cooking of Jewish communities from Spain and the Ottoman world to North Africa, Iraq, Syria, Iran, and Yemen.

SHARED ROOTS

Jews cooked with the same ingredients as their Muslim and Christian neighbors, adapted to Jewish law and the rhythm of Shabbat.

MEMORY

Recipes were usually passed down by watching, not writing. Each dish holds a family's story of home and migration.

TODAY

These foods shape tables in Israel, the United States, and beyond, and cookbooks now preserve what families once kept by heart.

Ask a Sephardic or Mizrahi family about their heritage, and the conversation will soon turn to food: a grandmother's kubbeh, the crispy rice at the bottom of the pot, the Friday night salads, the tray of sweets set out for guests. For centuries Jews lived across the Mediterranean, the Middle East, North Africa, and Central Asia, cooking with the grains, spices, and vegetables of each region. Jewish dietary laws and the weekly Shabbat shaped those dishes in distinctive ways. When families left their homelands, often suddenly, recipes were among the few treasures they could carry everywhere.

A shared kitchen, shaped by Jewish law

Regional ingredients. Olive oil, eggplant, garlic, chickpeas, Swiss chard, and spices like cumin, cinnamon, and saffron run through Sephardic and Mizrahi cooking. These were the foods of the whole region, shared by Jews and their neighbors.

Kashrut. The Jewish dietary laws, *kashrut*, forbid pork and do not allow meat and milk to be mixed. Olive oil took the place of pork fat. It is also *pareve*, neither meat nor dairy, so it can be used with any meal. Historian Hélène Jawhara Piñer notes that a thirteenth century Arabic cookbook from southern Spain already included recipes labeled as Jewish, and that Inquisition records later treated eating eggplant as a sign of hidden Jewish practice.

Shabbat. Because cooking stops on Shabbat, communities developed dishes that cook slowly overnight or taste good at room temperature, from Moroccan *dafina* to Iraqi *tbit* and *jachnun* from Aden. JIMENA's Shabbat explainer tells their story.

Welcome and sweetness. Hospitality is at the heart of these foodways. In Ladino speaking Sephardic homes, women traditionally offered guests a spoonful of fruit preserves and a glass of water, served from a silver bowl. Syrian families set out *maza*, small savory bites. At Mimouna, Moroccan families open their homes with *mufleta*, honey, and mint tea, and Yemenite cooks spice coffee with *hawaij*.

Recipes as oral history

In most homes, recipes lived in memory. Claudia Roden, whose family left Egypt after 1956, began collecting recipes from exiled families who gathered at her parents' Friday night table in London. Until then, she found, these recipes were passed down orally through daughters and rarely written.

When Rachel Shemarya, born on the island of Rhodes in 1898, wrote down her potato boreka recipe in Ladino, she measured with "half a kiddush cup," trusting the reader to know the rest. Her recipe is now preserved by the University of Washington.

Groups like the Jewish Food Society record elders cooking, so that skills learned by hand are not lost.

Community by community

Morocco

Friday tables fill with colorful salads made ahead for Shabbat, like *matbuch*, slow cooked tomatoes and peppers, also called *salade cuite*, "cooked salad." Spiced stews are served over couscous, sometimes with fiery harissa. One family from Fez has marked Fridays with the same chickpea dish for five generations.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; Jewish Food Society; The Nosh

Tunisia and Libya

Meals center on vegetables or fish with couscous, spiced with caraway, cumin, paprika, and hot pepper. Tunisian Jewish cooking blends Spanish, Italian, French, and Turkish influences, and Libyan Jewish cuisine reflects close ties with Italy. Two weeks before Passover, many families mark the new month with *bsisa*, a sweet mixture of grains, dates, and spices, stirred with olive oil as the household shares wishes for the year.

Sources: The Nosh; My Jewish Learning

Egypt

Claudia Roden, born in Cairo in 1936, grew up in a family with roots in Aleppo and Istanbul. Her family's seder featured a *haroset* of dates and raisins said to look like the silt of the Nile, and artichokes with fava beans. Recipes were family secrets, rarely printed, until exile made writing them down urgent.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive; Jewish Food Society

Iraq and Kurdistan

Kubbeh, dumplings of semolina or bulgur wrapped around meat, are fried or simmered in sour soups of beets, greens, or lemon. Miriam Persi, from a Kurdish Jewish family from Duhok, makes her grandmother's green *hamusta*, which takes four days. Iraqi Jewish families traditionally ate fried eggplant and hard boiled eggs for Shabbat breakfast, today often with *amba*, a tangy mango pickle.

Sources: Jewish Food Society; NPR; The Nosh

Syria

Syrian Jewish cooking is known for stuffed vegetables, *kibbeh*, and sweet and sour flavors from tamarind. Claudia Roden has praised this cooking as the "pearl of the Arab kitchen." Twelve loaves of bread on the Shabbat table recall the showbread of the ancient Temple. Poopa Dweck wrote her cookbook because she feared these recipes would be lost.

Sources: Jewish Action (2015); Jewish Food Society

Iran

Rice is an art. The prize is *tahdig*, the crispy, saffron scented crust at the bottom of the pot. Herb and fruit stews called *khores* are served over rice; in Jewish homes the walnut and pomegranate *fesenjan* is often sweetened with dates. Jeweled rice graces weddings, and the herb omelet *kuku sabzi* appears at Nowruz.

Source: The Nosh (Tannaz Sassooni, 2020)

Yemen and Aden

Breads are the stars. Rolled *jachnun*, from Aden, and buttery *kubaneh* bake overnight for Shabbat morning, served with grated tomato and the hot sauce *zhug*. Flaky *malawach* became an Israeli favorite after Yemenite Jews arrived in 1949 and 1950. The spice blend *hawaj* comes in one version for soup and one for coffee.

Sources: The Nosh (Vered Guttman; Shannon Sarna; Rachel Myerson; Doreet Jehassi)

Ottoman Sephardic lands

In Turkey, Greece, Rhodes, and the Balkans, Jews made *borekas*, turnovers filled with cheese, potato, or spinach, along with *bulemas*. Savory pastries were often eaten for breakfast with brown hard boiled eggs. In Seattle, borekas have long been baked for bazaars held by the city's Sephardic congregations.

Sources: University of Washington (Ty Alhadeff, 2016); Asif

Bukharan Jews of Central Asia cook *osavo*, beef and rice with prunes, overnight for Shabbat, and every community in this explainer has many more dishes than one card can hold. Family memory is often the best record of all.

From family tables to Israel and the world

In Israel. Jews from the Middle East and North Africa brought their kitchens with them, and many of their dishes became everyday Israeli foods. The Iraqi Shabbat breakfast of eggplant and eggs became the pita sandwich *sabich*. Balkan and Turkish immigrants made bourekas a staple, Yemenite families popularized malawach, and Jerusalem restaurants served kubbeh to new audiences. These dishes belong to a wider regional kitchen: the Ottoman *börek*, the *kibbeh* found across the Middle East, and the griddle breads of the Arab world are close relatives.

Around the world. Syrian Jews in Brooklyn and New Jersey, Persian Jews on Long Island, Sephardic Jews in Seattle, and North African Jews in France and Canada keep these recipes alive.

Cookbooks as heritage records. Claudia Roden's *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* (1968) and *The Book of Jewish Food* (1996), Poopa Dweck's *Aromas of Aleppo*, and Gil Marks's *Encyclopedia of Jewish Food* turned family knowledge into lasting records. So do handwritten notebooks copied by mothers and aunts.

Common misconceptions

- **"Jewish food means bagels and matzah ball soup."** Those are Ashkenazi favorites. Jewish food also means couscous, kubbeh, tahdig, and jachnun.
- **"Sephardic and Mizrahi food is one cuisine."** Moroccan, Iraqi, Persian, Yemenite, and Ottoman Jewish cooking differ greatly, much as their languages do.
- **"Kosher is a style of cooking."** Kashrut is a set of laws, not a cuisine. Each community followed the same laws with its own local flavors.
- **"These dishes were invented in Israel," or "Jews borrowed them."** Most grew from a regional kitchen Jews shared with their neighbors for centuries, then traveled with families to new homes.

Words to know

Kashrut *Hebrew*

The Jewish dietary laws; food that follows them is kosher.

Pareve *Yiddish*

Neither meat nor dairy, like olive oil, vegetables, and fish.

Borekas *From Turkish börek*

Filled pastry turnovers of the Ottoman Sephardic kitchen.

Kubbeh (kibbeh) *Arabic*

Dumplings of grain wrapped around a filling, fried or cooked in soup.

Tahdig *Persian*

"Bottom of the pot," the crispy crust of Persian rice.

Jachnun *Yemenite Jewish*

Rolled dough baked overnight for Shabbat morning.

Hawaij *Yemenite Arabic*

A spice blend made in versions for soup and for coffee.

Matbucha *Moroccan Arabic*

A slow cooked salad of tomatoes and peppers.

Maza *Syrian Arabic*

Small savory bites served to start a meal or welcome guests.

Tabla de dulce *Ladino*

A festive spread of sweets and pastries for a celebration.

Bringing the foodways to life

In the public school classroom

- Treat recipes as primary sources. Read Rachel Shemarya's boreka recipe and ask: what did she assume the reader already knew?
- Map ingredients like rice, eggplant, saffron, and chickpeas, and compare how Jewish, Muslim, and Christian neighbors used them.
- Planning a tasting? Follow your school's food allergy policy and the CDC guidelines listed below: check with families first, avoid known allergens (sesame, nuts, wheat, and eggs are common in these foods), and offer a nonfood option.
- Focus on culture and history; skip blessings or ritual.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Pair a lesson on Shabbat with its overnight dishes, using JIMENA's Shabbat explainer and Mizrahi Shabbat supplement.
- Invite grandparents to cook with students and tell where each recipe came from.
- Create a class or community cookbook with each family's story beside its recipe.
- Explore the Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit for year round ideas.

At home and with family

- Cook with an elder and write down what they do, including the steps they never measure.
- Label family recipes with their original names and where they came from.
- Record the stories behind your family's dishes and share them with JIMENA's oral history project.
- Try a dish from a community that is not your own.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a recipe be one of the most important things a family carries when it moves to a new country?
- How do religious laws and weekly rhythms, like Shabbat, shape what people cook and eat?
- What can a single dish tell us about the neighbors, trade routes, and history of the people who made it?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Yemenite Cooking Class with Doreet Jehassi (JIMENA, 2021)
youtube.com/watch?v=yH_FXwWgAN0

Egyptian Jewish Cooking with Levana Zamir (JIMENA, 2010)
vimeo.com/16068109

Culture and Holidays video collection (JIMENA)
jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Read

The Book of Jewish Food, by Claudia Roden (Knopf, 1996)
penguinrandomhouse.com/books/156485/the-book-of-jewish-food-by-claudia-roden

Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, by Gil Marks (John Wiley and Sons, 2010)
nli.org.il/en/books/NNL_ALEPH002748660/NLI

Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews, by Poopa Dweck (HarperCollins, 2007)
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/the-aromas-of-aleppo

Persian Food from the Non-Persian Bride, by Reyna Simnegar (Feldheim, 2011)
jewishbookcouncil.org/book/persian-food-from-the-non-persian-bride-and-other-sephardic-kosher-recipes-you-will-love

Sephardic Flavors: Jewish Cooking of the Mediterranean, by Joyce Goldstein (Chronicle Books, 2000)
eatyourbooks.com/library/8702/sephardic-flavors

From JIMENA

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)
sepharditoolkit.org

Mizrahi Shabbat Supplement (PDF)
s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/tf-jimena-prd/pdfs/Mizrahi-Shabbat-Supplement-2.pdf

Mimouna and Passover guide (PDF)
s3-us-west-1.amazonaws.com/tf-jimena-prd/pdfs/Mimouna-compactado.pdf

Oral history project
jimena.org/oral-history

Share your family's story
jimena.org/share-your-story

Explore online

Sephardic Cuisine: How It Emerged, Evolved, and Persisted (My Jewish Learning)
myjewishlearning.com/article/sephardic-cuisine-how-it-emerged-evolved-and-persisted

The Jewish Cuisine of North Africa (The Noshers)
myjewishlearning.com/?p=106930

The 8 Jewish Persian Dishes You Need to Try (The Noshers)
myjewishlearning.com/the-noshers/the-8-jewish-persian-dishes-you-need-to-try

What Is Malawach? (The Noshers)
myjewishlearning.com/the-noshers/what-is-malawach-and-why-are-jews-obsessed-with-it

Preserving a Kurdish Recipe, One Kubbeh at a Time (Jewish Food Society)
jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/preserving-a-kurdish-recipe-one-kubbeh-at-a-time

Kubbeh, T'bit, and More Recipes from Iraqi Jewish Families (Jewish Food Society)
jewishfoodsociety.org/collections/iraqi-jewish-recipes

Claudia Roden Has Carefully Preserved a Lost Jewish Egypt (Jewish Food Society)
jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/claudia-roden-has-carefully-preserved-a-lost-jewish-egypt

Claudia Roden (Jewish Women's Archive)
jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/roden-claudia

Kucharera: serving sweets to guests (Jewish Women's Archive)
cdn.jwa.org/communitystories/seattle/artifacts/kucharera

Borekas and the Flavor of Rhodes: Recipe Saved (University of Washington)
jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/rhodes-boreka-recipe-saved

Sephardic recipes on Foodish (ANU Museum of the Jewish People)
foodish.anumuseum.org.il/community/sephardic

Voluntary Guidelines for Managing Food Allergies in Schools (CDC, 2013)
stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/20841



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include My Jewish Learning and The Noshers; the Jewish Food Society; the Jewish Women's Archive; the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; Jewish Action; NPR; Asif; the ANU Museum of the Jewish People; JTA; and the cookbooks listed above. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.