

A Taste of Home

Jewish Kitchens of the Middle East and North Africa

Jews lived across the Middle East and North Africa for more than two thousand years. They cooked with the same local ingredients as their Muslim and Christian neighbors, and adapted every dish to Jewish practice and family tradition.

Morocco

Couscous, tiny grains of semolina rolled by hand and steamed, served with vegetables and meat for Shabbat and holidays. *Dafina* (also called *skhina*), a Shabbat stew of meat, chickpeas, potatoes, and whole eggs, cooks all night. At the Mimouna, at the end of Passover, families serve *mufleta*, thin pancakes with butter and honey.

Key flavors: Cumin, paprika, saffron, cinnamon, preserved lemons, olives

Tunisia and Libya

Shakshuka, eggs cooked in a spicy sauce of tomatoes and peppers. *Harissa*, a fiery red chili paste. Libyan Jews prepare *chraime*, fish in a spicy red sauce, for Shabbat and holidays.

Key flavors: Chili peppers, garlic, caraway, cumin, tomatoes

Egypt and Syria

Jews of Aleppo and Damascus are known for *kibbeh* (shells of bulgur filled with meat), stuffed vegetables called *mehshi*, and a sweet and sour taste from tamarind. Egyptian Jews ate *ful medames*, slow cooked fava beans, like their neighbors.

Key flavors: Allspice, cinnamon, tamarind, lemon, mint

Iraq

Tbit, chicken and rice cooked overnight for Shabbat. *Kubba*, dumplings served in soup. *Amba*, a tangy pickled mango sauce that came to Baghdad through trade with India. On Shabbat morning, families ate fried eggplant, eggs, and *amba*, the dish that became Israel's *sabich*.

Key flavors: Turmeric, cardamom, mango, dates, rice

Yemen

Jachnun, rolls of buttery dough baked slowly overnight and eaten on Shabbat morning with grated tomato and hard boiled eggs. *Malawach*, a flaky fried flatbread. *Zhug*, a hot sauce of cilantro and chili.

Key flavors: *Hawaij* (cumin, turmeric, black pepper, cardamom), fenugreek, cilantro

Iran

Gondi, dumplings of chickpea flour and ground meat served in broth for Shabbat. Rice cooked with a golden crispy crust called *tahdig*. Stews full of fresh herbs, such as *ghormeh sabzi*.

Key flavors: Saffron, dried limes, turmeric, fresh herbs, pomegranate

Common Threads

Kashrut. Jewish dietary laws forbid pork and shellfish and separate meat from dairy, so many meat dishes are cooked in olive oil rather than butter.

Shabbat. Because cooking is not done on the Sabbath, every community created a dish that cooks slowly overnight: Moroccan *dafina*, Iraqi *tbit*, Yemenite *jachnun*.

Holidays. Each festival has its foods, such as sweet couscous and pancakes at the Mimouna, or fried doughnuts called *sfenj* at Hanukkah in Morocco.

From Family Tables to the World

Between the late 1940s and the 1970s, nearly all the Jews of the Arab world and most Jews of Iran left their homes, many under pressure or expulsion. Most settled in Israel, where their dishes spread from family kitchens to markets and street stands. Shakshuka, sabich, jachnun, and malawach are now everyday Israeli foods. Families who settled in France, Britain, and the Americas kept cooking too, and writers such as Claudia Roden, born in Cairo to a family from Aleppo, introduced this cuisine to the world.

Read a real family's food story: Jewish Food Society, jewishfoodsociety.org/stories. Written by JIMENA. Sources: Jewish Food Society; Jewish Women's Archive; JIMENA Cultural Heritage pages.