

Middle Eastern and North African Jewish Cuisine

Students taste and trace the dishes of Jewish communities from Morocco to Iran, discover how geography, religious practice, and migration shaped them, and see how family recipes became part of the food of Israel and the world

GRADE AND SETTING

Grades 6 to 8: public, independent, and Jewish schools

TIME

Two 45 minute class periods (cooking optional)

APPENDICES

A: A Taste of Home
B: Food Journey Worksheet
C: Classroom Recipes

Overview

For more than two thousand years, Jewish communities lived across the Middle East and North Africa, from Morocco and Tunisia to Iraq, Yemen, and Iran. Their kitchens shared ingredients and techniques with their Muslim and Christian neighbors, and were shaped by Jewish practice: the dietary laws of kashrut, Shabbat stews that cook overnight, and special foods for every holiday. In the twentieth century, most of these Jews left or were forced from their home countries, and they carried their recipes to Israel, France, the Americas, and beyond. Today dishes such as shakshuka, sabich, jachnun, and couscous are everyday foods in Israel and favorites around the world. In this lesson, students explore what shapes the food people eat, read about the Jewish kitchens of six regions, learn from real families' food stories, and prepare or taste a dish together.

Essential Questions

1. What shapes the foods a community eats?
2. How did Jews of the Middle East and North Africa shape the food of Israel and the world?
3. How do recipes carry family memory from one place and generation to the next?

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

1. Identify factors that shape a community's food, including geography, climate, trade, religious practice, and migration.
2. Describe characteristic dishes and flavors of at least three Jewish communities of the Middle East and North Africa.
3. Explain how migration carried these dishes to Israel and around the world.
4. Prepare or taste a dish and evaluate it.
5. Connect their own family food traditions to the theme of memory and migration.

Curriculum Connections

- **Social Studies (C3 Framework):** D2.Geo.6.6-8 (how culture and environment shape places); D2.Geo.8.6-8 (how migration spreads cultural traits).
- **English Language Arts (Common Core):** RI.6.1 (citing evidence from informational text); SL.6.1 (collaborative discussion).
- **Health and Family and Consumer Sciences:** food safety, following a recipe, and cultural influences on food choices.
- **Jewish Studies (Jewish settings):** kashrut, Shabbat, holiday foods, and Sephardic and Mizrahi heritage.

Key Vocabulary

- **Cuisine:** the characteristic foods and cooking style of a people or place.
- **Mizrahi** and **Sephardic:** terms for Jews of the Middle East and North Africa, and for Jews descended from those expelled from Spain and Portugal; the two communities overlap.
- **Kashrut** (kosher): Jewish dietary laws, for example no pork or shellfish and no mixing of meat and dairy.
- **Shabbat stew:** a dish placed on a low fire before the Sabbath begins and eaten the next day, since cooking is not done on Shabbat; examples include Moroccan *dafina*, Iraqi *tbit*, and Yemenite *jachnun*.
- **Migration:** the movement of people from one place to another, often carrying their culture with them.
- **Flavor profile:** the typical combination of ingredients, herbs, and spices in a cuisine.

Teacher Background

Jewish food across the Middle East and North Africa was local food made Jewish. Moroccan Jews rolled couscous like their neighbors but made it the centerpiece of holiday meals; Iraqi Jews ate rice and pickled mango *amba*, a taste that came to Baghdad through trade with India; Yemenite Jews seasoned food with the spice blend *hawajj* and the hot herb sauce *zhug*; Persian Jews made *gondi*, chickpea and meat dumplings, for Shabbat. Jewish practice shaped these kitchens everywhere. Because kashrut separates meat and dairy, many meat dishes are cooked in olive oil. Because cooking is not done on Shabbat, each community developed a stew or bread that cooks slowly overnight: Moroccan *dafina*, Iraqi *tbit*, Yemenite *jachnun*.

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 from Tunisia and Libya, sabich (a pita with fried eggplant, egg, and amba) from Iraqi Jews' Shabbat breakfast, and jachnun and malawach from Yemen. Others brought their recipes to France, Britain, and the Americas.

Claudia Roden helped bring this cuisine to the wider world. Born in Cairo in 1936 to a Syrian Jewish family with roots in Aleppo, she moved to London to study, and her parents joined her after Egypt expelled many Jews following the 1956 Suez War. At her parents' Friday night dinners, other Egyptian Jewish exiles shared the recipes they missed, and she began writing them down, publishing *A Book of Middle Eastern Food* in 1968. She has said that when she cooks, she thinks of the person who gave her each recipe and their story.

Sources: Jewish Women's Archive, "Claudia Roden"; Jewish Food Society; JIMENA Cultural Heritage pages.

Food safety and inclusion: Check for allergies and dietary needs (sesame, eggs, wheat, dairy, nuts; kosher, halal, and vegetarian diets) and get family permission before students taste anything. Tasting is always optional. Follow your school's food handling rules, use gloves, and cook eggs until firm. A store bought tasting plate works well if cooking is not possible.

Materials

- Whiteboard and markers; projector or printed copies of the Jewish Food Society stories below
- Food, using one of three options: **no cook** (hummus, Appendix C); **hot** (shakshuka or bourekas, Appendix C, with a hot plate or oven); or **store bought** (a tasting plate of pita, hummus, tahini, olives, dates, feta, pickled vegetables, falafel, or bourekas)
- Gloves, plates, napkins, and serving utensils
- Optional: Sephardic or Middle Eastern Jewish music (see JIMENA's [Sephardic and Middle Eastern Jewish Music](#) lesson)
- Handouts:
 - [Appendix A: A Taste of Home](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix B: Food Journey Worksheet](#) (one per student)
 - [Appendix C: Classroom Recipes](#) (for the teacher and cooking groups)

Procedures

Session 1, Introduction: Why Do We Eat What We Eat? (10 minutes)

- 1 **Main questions.** Write the essential questions on the board.
- 2 **Quick write.** Students list what they ate for dinner the last two nights, then compare with a partner. Ask: Why did you eat those foods? Gather answers on the board (taste, cost, time, what grows nearby, family tradition, religion, where your family comes from).
- 3 **Sort.** Group the answers into categories: geography and climate, trade, religion, family and migration. Explain that today students will see all of these at work in the kitchens of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa.

Session 1, Body: A Taste of Home (35 minutes)

- 4 **Jigsaw reading (20 min).** Hand out Appendix A. Assign each small group one region (Morocco; Tunisia and Libya; Egypt and Syria; Iraq; Yemen; Iran). Groups read their card and the "Common Threads" section, fill in their row of the Flavor Map on Appendix B, then teach the class. Everyone completes the full Flavor Map.
- 5 **Food stories (15 min).** Each group reads one family's story from the Jewish Food Society (listed below and on Appendix A) and completes the Food Story notes on Appendix B: Who is the family? Where did they come from? What dish do they cook, and what does it mean to them?
 - [A Moroccan Grandmother's Love Is Rolled Into Her Couscous](#) (Moroccan couscous)
 - [Writer Samantha Ellis Cooks Her Way Back to the Iraqi Jewish Kitchen](#) (Iraqi kichree and saluna)
 - [How One Yemenite Granddaughter Is Embracing Her Heritage with Film and Jachnun](#) (Yemenite jachnun)
 - [A Persian Shabbat Tradition Simmers on Long Island](#) (Persian gondi)
 - [How Claudia Roden Preserved Her Passover Table From a Lost Jewish Egypt](#) (Egyptian Passover table)

Session 2, Body: Cook and Taste (30 minutes)

- 6 **Prepare.** Divide the class into two groups. One group prepares a recipe from Appendix C, or sets out the tasting plate, while the other finishes Appendix B. Then switch, so that everyone helps prepare food.
- 7 **Taste.** Eat together while playing Sephardic or Middle Eastern Jewish music. Students complete the Tasting Journal on Appendix B.

Session 2, Conclusion: Recipes Carry Stories (15 minutes)

- 8 Read aloud.** Share Claudia Roden's story from the Teacher Background: how exiled Egyptian Jews gathered at her parents' table in London and shared the recipes they missed, and how she thinks of the person who gave her each recipe whenever she cooks.
- 9 Discuss.** Where do the recipes your family cooks come from? Which foods are passed down in your family, and who taught them? Which dishes did we learn about today, and what journeys did they travel? Why might a recipe matter so much to a family that had to leave its home?
- 10 Reflect.** Students complete "My Family's Table" on Appendix B.

Assessment

- **Formative:** the quick write sort, the jigsaw teaching, and the Food Story notes.
- **Summative:** the completed Appendix B. A strong worksheet accurately describes dishes and flavors from at least three regions, names at least two factors that shaped them, explains how one dish traveled through migration, and thoughtfully connects to the student's own family food traditions.

Differentiation

- **Students who need support:** pair readers for the jigsaw; provide a word bank of dishes and spices for the Flavor Map.
- **English learners:** show photos of each dish; invite students to share the names of dishes in their home languages.
- **Advanced learners:** research one dish in depth and trace its route from its home country to Israel or the United States, or compare three Shabbat stews.

Extension Activities

- **Classroom cookbook.** Students interview relatives about a recipe passed down in their family, write it up with its story, and compile a class cookbook.
- **Three Shabbat stews.** Compare Moroccan *dafina*, Iraqi *tbit*, and the Eastern European *cholent*. What do they share, and why? How does a religious practice shape a recipe?
- **Why did families leave?** Learn about the departure of Jews from Arab countries and Iran in JIMENA's [Forgotten Refugees: Jewish Refugees from Arab Lands](#) lesson.
- **Mimouna.** Explore the North African Jewish celebration at the end of Passover, with its sweet *mufleta* pancakes, in JIMENA's [Celebrating Middle Eastern Jewish Clothing](#) lesson.

Resources and External Links

- [Stories \(Jewish Food Society\)](http://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories)
www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories
- [A Moroccan Grandmother's Love Is Rolled Into Her Couscous \(Jewish Food Society\)](http://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/a-moroccan-grandmothers-love-is-rolled-into-her-couscous)
www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/a-moroccan-grandmothers-love-is-rolled-into-her-couscous
- [Writer Samantha Ellis Cooks Her Way Back to the Iraqi Jewish Kitchen \(Jewish Food Society\)](http://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/writer-samantha-ellis-cooks-her-way-back-to-the-iraqi-jewish-kitchen)
www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/writer-samantha-ellis-cooks-her-way-back-to-the-iraqi-jewish-kitchen
- [How One Yemenite Granddaughter Is Embracing Her Heritage with Film and Jachnun \(Jewish Food Society\)](http://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/i-think-being-jewish-in-here-in-america-was-a-stru)
www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/i-think-being-jewish-in-here-in-america-was-a-stru
- [A Persian Shabbat Tradition Simmers on Long Island \(Jewish Food Society\)](#)

www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/a-persian-shabbat-tradition-simmers-on-long-island

- [How Claudia Roden Preserved Her Passover Table From a Lost Jewish Egypt \(Jewish Food Society\)](http://www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/claudia-roden-has-carefully-preserved-a-lost-jewish-egypt)
www.jewishfoodsociety.org/stories/claudia-roden-has-carefully-preserved-a-lost-jewish-egypt
- [Claudia Roden \(Jewish Women's Archive\)](http://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/roden-claudia)
jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/roden-claudia
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Morocco](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/morocco
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Iraq](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/iraq)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/iraq
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Yemen](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/yemen)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/yemen
- [JIMENA Cultural Heritage: Iran](http://qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/iran)
qua.jimena.org/cultural-heritage/iran
- [Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit \(JIMENA\)](http://www.sepharditoolkit.org/)
www.sepharditoolkit.org/