

# Recipes From Baghdad

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Cooking and Shopping  
in  
Baghdad

While food may be regarded by some as simple an essential of life, to others it is a subject of moment, either because of the pleasure derived from the eating of good food, or the misery sustained from ill treatment of a weak digestion; or, to those more studiously inclined, because of the interest to be found in the study of the customs and traditions of the food of the country. This book lays no claim to be a comprehensive manual of oriental and occidental recipes. It is simply a collection of recipes obtained from Baghdad residents of many nationalities. They are those which the donors regard as the most tasty preparations of their household, and the ingredients, under normal conditions, may all be obtained locally. Many of the oriental dishes are time consuming in preparation, as is natural in a land long blessed with much domestic help, and where there are few modern appliances. No attempt has been made to include the more elaborate recipes such as that for young stuffed roast camel, in which according to tradition the camel is stuffed with sheep, the sheep with turkeys, the turkeys with quail and the quail with larks.

The actual preparation of the food of east and west, while basically the same is traditionally different, which explains much of the friction between an occidental mistress and an oriental cook. In oriental cookery time, providing the dish once cooked, does not matter much, and no harm is done if the pot simmers for another hour or so. In occidental cookery the dietician and modern appliances have influenced the methods of cooking and the demands of the family, and it is well known that overcooking destroys vitamins. Furthermore those who like rare meat must have it brought to the table piping hot yet not completely cooked, and a soufflé which is a culinary triumph after twenty minutes in the oven is probably a tragedy if left thirty. Such demands on the cook are regarded as reasonable but precision of method and measure are required to ensure success. They are unnecessary in much oriental cookery and are quite incomprehensible to all but the exceptional oriental cook.

"Recipes from Baghdad" does not pretend to be a book of instruction in cookery and household management. It does not recommend that "the store cupboard should be dry and cool". The inhabitants of Baghdad know only too well that while a larder may be dry, and in winter bitterly cold, the housewife who keeps the indoor temperature of her home as low as 86°F on a summer's day is both skilful and fortunate. There may still be seen in old houses intercommunicating air shafts sunk into ground below the "serdab" or underground room, which in former times were often used for the storage of perishable foodstuffs. Modern Baghdad, however,

has taken to the ice chest and refrigerator with zest, since that which is a convenience and luxury in a temperate climate is a household necessity in the subtropics.

The equipment of a Baghdad kitchen is simple but is somewhat unusual to the newcomer from the west. Pans have no handles and anyone venturing to cook with them will find many a burn is suffered before she is skilled in their use. Tinned copper is still in common use and enormous pots and trays of this metal are to be seen. Large and small mortars are essential items in a country which from time immemorial has crushed its grains, meat and spices at home. Similarly the custom of years is seen in the baking board which is a round wooden table only a few inches high, accompanied by a low stool and a roiling pin over a yard in length and about three quarters of an inch in diameter. Until recent years cooking was done largely on charcoal and a shewer of "Kababs" was lifted sizzling hot from the glowing embers at one's side. Now however most food is prepared on kerosene stove, since Iraq's greatest wealth is in her oil deposits and kerosene is plentiful and cheap. An oven goes with the stove and although these are now to be found in white enamel with glass doors and thermometer many a feather weight sponge cake has come out of what is little better than a large tin can.

In Baghdad as in any modern city, one may order household groceries by telephone and they will be delivered at the door, but reputable books on household management always recommend "personal shopping" as the most desirable means of obtaining the best quality of food. Undoubtedly the principle is wise, and many an occidental would give much for the chance of doing the household shopping in the bazaars of Baghdad, but the enjoyment of such an outing, depends largely on temperament, since unpleasant as well as pleasant sights and smells are to be found.

When one turns aside from the glare and rush of Baghdad's main street to enter what might be called the "grocery and hardware" bazaar, one is met with a strong aromatic smell, a mixture of odours from piles of soap, from seeds and spices, sweet smelling oils and perfumes, from fruits and vegetables, from human beings, animals and machinery. On the left bunches of scarlet, blue and yellow catch the eye in the bead shop, on the right vendors sit offering fruits of the season, grapes perhaps, or baskets piled high with oranges or deep red pomegranates. The bazaar is shaded and cool from gaps in the high vaulted roof occasional shafts of brilliant sunlight cut diagonally across the gloom. These shafts are alive with particles of dust thrown up by the stream of passers — merchants, pedlars, small boys with baskets, ready, for a consideration to carry one's purchases, donkeys heavily laden with vegetables, an occasional car hooting noisily as it noses its way along, pressing the pedestrians to the side. The booths which line the way and in which one can buy almost anything from a razor to a lemon are for the most part small but occasionally one comes to the large vaulted stores of the more prosperous merchants. Sacks stand folded open with the

contents heaped neatly for display — lentils, salt, rice of different qualities, dried beans and peas — all there for examination by the prospective buyer. Spices are piled in rich shades of brown, orange and yellow green, and in baskets are fresh roasted almonds, hazelnuts and melon seeds. There are apricots packed in boxes or pressed into sheets like orange-brown oil cloth which is used for making a sweet refreshing drink; dried pomegranate seeds which give a sharp astringency to certain meat dishes, and large blue green bowls filled with red "ma'jun", the tomato paste used for flavouring savoury dishes, and made by drying tomato juice in the glare of the summer sun. At certain seasons of the year one may even come upon huge piles of pink rose petals or orange blossom, their perfume pervading for yards around. From these the famous rose and orange blossom water is distilled to be used in flavouring confections and in perfuming the linen cupboard.

Fruits and vegetables are found according to their season. In the case of the habitual bazaar shopper who knows the prices bargaining is brief and the purchase is quickly made. Cheese, thick sour milk, honey and fat are also there, and commodities are sometimes stored in handsome tinned copper vessels finely engraved in former days, and which money will not tempt from the owners who have inherited them from their forefathers.

There is meat—mutton and beef—but from that one must invariably brush aside the ubiquitous fly to point out the piece one fancies, which the shop keeper will cheerfully slice off irrespective of whether it damages what in the west would be regarded as a good "cut". One can see the dyer bending over his vats, his arms bright stained from fingers to elbow and the repairer of grindstones systematically chipping. Candles may be had made of bees wax, five feet long if one wants them, and fresh carded white cotton for stuffing quilts and mattresses. Finally one reaches an ancient minaret, restored in recent years. At its base offered for sale are pigeons and chickens, and turkeys from the north, and the sound of the beating of copper goes on continuously in the nearby shops of the ancient craft.

All this is to be seen and much more, and for those who are always on the watch for the unfamiliar, be it in foods, in costumes or in customs, the charm of the bazaar is as endless as its study is informative.

#### THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS.

The quantities in the majority of the recipes are sufficient for 4 persons.

In compiling recipes there has been much difficulty in obtaining measured quantities of ingredients. In the preparation of the food of one's own country this is not so serious, as one estimates by the taste what is lacking what has been overdone; but when an unheard of vegetable is flavoured with a spice never before used and one is quite unfamiliar with the dish, it is impossible without reasonably accurate measurements to get anything like the correct result. Should success not be achieved one is none the wiser unless the food

is offered to someone familiar with it. For these reasons it was essential to use measurements which would make it possible for an occidental to reproduce an oriental dish with some hope of success and vice versa. It is difficult in Baghdad to obtain the standard measuring cup and measuring spoons which are so generally used in the occident, but it was found that a Players or Gold Flake round "50" cigarette tin, filled level, corresponded to the standard American measuring cup. The recipes have therefore been reduced to such a standard from handfuls, grams, okes, rotls, pints, pounds, hoogias, pigeons' walnuts, bits, pieces and pinches. If one does not like using a pigeons eggs walnuts, bits, pieces and pinches. If one dose not like using a cigarette tin for measuring food it should at least be used to standardise a more attractive vessel. The large spoon used for measuring and referred to throughout as a "tablespoon" is not the very large European tablespoon, but is the American tablespoon which is the same as the European dessert or pudding spoon. Spoonfuls and tinfuls are always measured level, never heaped. The following table will assist in standardising one's utensils.

The measures are illustrated inside the covers.

3 teaspoons (tsp.)	=	1 tablespoon (thsp.)
16 tablespoons	=	1 standard American measuring cup, or
		1 cigarette tin (Players or Gold Flake, round "50")
2 measuring cups or tins	=	1 pint (American)
2 pints (American)	=	1 quart (American) or
		1 litre (approx.)

As cookery books differ widely in their units of measurement the table of approximate weights and measures may also be useful for reference.

#### SPICES AND HERBS

Arabia has for centuries been known as a land of spices. That the actual source of these was uncertain in early times is evident from the records of Herodotus. Frankincense trees, according to the belief of his time, were guarded by small, coloured winged serpents; and cinnamon, it was conjectured, came from Ethiopia. The sticks of cinnamon, were brought by large birds for making their nests, which were attached by mud to the face of inaccessible cliffs. The people of the country used dead animals as bait, cutting off large pieces of the flesh and leaving them near the base of the cliffs. The enthusiasm of the birds then apparently outweighed their judgment and they carried so much up to the nests that the weight became too great, the mud gave way and the nests fell to the ground, where the expectant inhabitants were able to pick up the cinnamon sticks.

Although Herodotus goes on to say concerning spices "The whole country scented with them, and exhales an odour marvellously sweet." Arabia was in actual fact important rather because of the transport if

spices through the country than because of their production there. Many of the spices were brought from the East Indies by way of Ceylon and southern India to the Persian Gulf, whence they were trans-shipped and taken by caravan across country by the most peaceful route of the moment.

Herbs and spices have long been valued for medicinal and culinary purposes and Fracastor, an Italian physician of the 16th century, describes an exotic decoction of "odoriferous cassia, cinnamon with two perfumes, cardamom, mace and aloes wood". In modern days the use of the crude products has been superseded in the occident by concentrated extracts or synthetized forms of the active principles. The European housewife is so dried refined state, neatly put up in sealed packages or bottles, that she is at a loss when they are not available in such forms. Almost every spice and herb commonly used in Europe be found in its crude form in the Baghdad bazaar, and Iraqis are astonished that Europeans find a whole nutmeg, a stick of vanilla or a piece of cinnamon back something unusual. In Iraqi kitchens of to-day if not convenient to use a large piece, the substance is grated or crushed to a powder in a mortar and then sifted through a fine sieve, as was done in the days of the great spice traders centuries ago.

Many herbs such as parsley, fennel, marjoram, thyme, sage and mint grow well in Baghdad and it is worth devoting a corner of the garden to their cultivation. It has been found however, that even those who speak Arabic or English with considerable fluency as a foreign language, do not know the names of many of these substances. For reference a list of those mentioned in this book has been compiled in English and Arabic.

Aniseed	يانسون	Fenugreek	حلبة
Bay leaf	ورق الغار	Garlic	ثوم
Capers	كبار	Ginger	عرق حار - زنجبيل
Carraway	كراويا	Mace	قشر جوز الطيب
Cardamom	هيل	Marjoram	بره قوش
Cassia	قرفة صينية	Mastic	المستكي
Cayenne	فلفل احمر حلو	Mint	نعناع
Celery	كرفس	Mixed spice	بهارات مخلوطة
Cinnamon	دارجين	Mustard	خردل
Cloves	قرنفل	Nutmeg	لب جوز الطيب
Coriander	كزبرة	Paprika	فلفل احمر حلو
Cubebs	كبابة	Parsley	بقدنوس
Cumin	كمون	Pepper—	
Curry	كاري	black	فلفل اسود
Dill*	شبتت او حبة حلوة	red	فلفل احمر
Fennel*	شبتت	long	فلفل دراز

\*There is considerable confusion between dill and fennel. These are closely related plants, and probably of this the same name "sbint" is applied locally to them both. The seed of dill is known as "habat helwa" and another member of the fennel family grown in the north and used in flavouring is "raznāij".

	sweet	فلفل حلو	Salt	ملح
	white	فلفل اسمر	Sesame	سمسم
Pimento		نوع من الفلفل الاحمر الخلو	Sugar	سكر
Purslane		بربين	Summac	سماق
Rue		سداب	Turmeric	كركم
Saffron		زعفران	Thyme	زعتر
Sage		سمسم برى	Vanilla	فانيليا

#### HOSPITALITY.

Hospitality all over the world involves the offering of food and drink to guests, and while it is appreciated in the present age it has not quit as much entertainment value as it had in the time of our ancestors, when but few amusements were available to the public. Stepcock, Leacock, drawing his facts from "Antiquitates Culinariae", describes a feast held by Edward IV in 1647, which must have taken considerable preparation. "The menu included roast mutton (1000 sheep), a veal entrée (304 calves), a side dish of 304 hogs, an 'entremet' of 2000 geese and 1000 capons, along a trifle of 13,500 birds. For anybody who wanted 'another helping' there were 1500 hot vension parties and 13,000 fancy tarts and jellies".

With the present day emancipation of woman, the housewife does not wish to spend her entire life in the organisation of her home. She wants time for the hundred and one activities now open to her but which were never dreamed of by her grandmothers. Her aim is to have attractive, tasty and above all, if she has little or no domestic help, quickly prepared dishes. The habit of offering large, formal meals to friends, except in the case of the wealthy, is dying out. In America where servants are few and expensive it is customary and easier in one's own home to entertain to tea or in the evening after the last meal of the day. Sandwiches, cakes and coffee or tea are offered about ten o'clock. Even this involves the housewife in much extra work and while a lack of food would never be condoned, a display of food quite obviously beyond the capacity of the guests is considered ostentatious and wasteful.

In the orient, however, servants are still plentiful and luncheon and dinner parties with elaborate and numerous dishes are frequent. In Iraq, particularly among the tribes, the amount of food offered is a compliment to the guest and an indication of his importance. For a highly honoured or royal guest there is an enormous tinned copper tray, carried by as many as twelve men. This is heaped with a hundred kilos or more of rice, boiled in such a way that every grain remains separate, and on it are seven or eight "Kuzi" or roast sheep, stuffed with rice, almonds and raisins, and flavoured and tinted with saffron. A few chickens and turkeys are scattered between the sheep and around the tray are dishes of dolma and other dainties with piles of round Arab bread for use as plates. Occasionally a whole young camel is served. In some places while one or more camels may be killed in honour of guest the animal is not necessarily eaten.

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When the guests and their hosts have eaten, the men of the tribe take their places round the tray, pulling off pieces of meat and forming the rice into little balls which are skilfully flicked into the month by means of the thumb. The old men come first, followed by the young men and boys, the women and children and finally the dogs, until no grain of rice remains.

In less elaborate Arab hospitality guests are offered fresh khubz, butter or cheese and date syrup. The butter is made by shaking sour milk in a "shishwa" or sheep skin churn, and a man of importance does not sell such a product, but retains it for use in the tribe.

Hospitality takes a high place in the Arab world, and in the absence of the host, his son, his servant or his wife must offer food and drink to a guest. Failure to do so indicates a dislike of visitors and brings the man into disrepute with his neighbours. In the event of no food being available, if this is stated frankly, there can be no criticism, and the unfortunate host is excused from his obligations. Should a guest partake of food and then criticise adversely what has been offered him, he is insulting his host and sowing the seeds of future trouble.

A stranger may remain for three days without presence being questioned, but after that time an explanation is expected. Such passing guests bring news to isolated parts of the desert and the rate at which information is spread from one place to another is quite remarkable.

Among the residents of modern Baghdad the tribal customs of the Arabs have left their influence. There is still to be seen the traditionally lavish display of food, but such a cosmopolitan city has drawn its customs from the west as well as the east in recent years. Kuzi remains the main dish of any large meal but if the number of sheep offered is reduced this is offset by the increase in the variety of other dishes. A purdah pilau may be seen side by side with a potato salad garnished with mayonnaise, and a plate of cocktail sausages pierced with toothpicks may prove as popular as a dish of dolma. Indeed it is impossible to spend an evening in an Iraqi house without seeing the influence of west as well as east on the refreshments offered.

#### **BREAKFAST.**

The amount and variety of food, and the hours at which meals are eaten, vary with the inclinations and demands of every family. In former times the breakfast of the well-to-do Iraqi was often as it is to-day, preceded by tea or coffee in bed or on rising. The meal was taken before work and consisted of tea, savoury dishes, khubz, cream and date syrup or honey. Recently the European breakfast has invaded the east and eggs, butter, meat dishes, cream, jam and other delicacies are now enjoyed. Among the poorer classes tea and khubz are the staple fare. In Syria and the Lebanon olive oil, drained leban and summac or thyme with salt are offered. The bread is dipped in the oil and then in the herbs. Tea or milk is drunk.