

Brazilian Food with an Arab touch

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In the world of culinary art, Brazil is to Portugal what Mexico is to Spain. These two colonies in the New World were the crown jewels of their respective motherland. However, in their cuisines, both carrying deep Arab influences, there is a difference.

Even though many of the original colonists in both countries were Moors newly converted to Christianity, in Brazil, a huge number of African slaves were imported to work on the plantations. A good number were Muslims and their food was saturated with North African influences. The 20th century Arab immigrants to the country added another dimension to Brazilian food. Hence, the Moorish heritage of the Portuguese kitchen was further re-enforced by the dishes of West Africa and the Middle East.

This ethnic mixture and the diversified climate of Brazil have been responsible for the creation of one of the most varied kitchens in South America. Peppering this cuisine were many other influences. Aboriginal Indian, German, Italian, Japanese and others dishes have entered into the food of that vast country. For centuries Brazilian cooks have been borrowing from the foods of other people, then combining them with their own to produce an interesting and fascinating wide-ranging culinary world.

Above all, it was the Portuguese influence, itself greatly influenced by the Arabs, which was the main influence in the creation of Brazilian cooking. When the Arabs conquered Portugal, they brought with them numerous new dishes: they needed ingredients to create these foods, and introduced a considerable number of vegetables, fruits and spices, unheard of in the Iberian Peninsula at that time. Many have still retained their Arab names in Portugal.

Orchards, first planted by the descendants of the Arab soldiers, cover the land. The perfume ▶



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defusing flowers of the apricot Portuguese albricoguo from the Arabic al-barquq; carob (alfarroba: al-kharubah); orange (laranja; naranj); and pomegranate (romá: rumman) were Moorish gifts to the future Portuguese. Besides the fruit trees, other plants brought to the Iberian Peninsula are, perhaps, more important. Rice (Portuguese arroz: from the Arabic al-ruzz), forming the basic part of the Portuguese diet, and sugar cane (açúcar: sukkar), now cultivated in Algarve, the last province wrestled from the Moors, were introduced and grown extensively by the Arabs. Over and above the new plants they introduced into Spain and Portugal, the Arabs expanded the almond, olive and fig orchards that they found in these countries. The blossoming almond trees initially planted by the Arabs on a large scale, transform Algarve's springtime countryside which looks like a snow-covered field.

However, even more than the introduction of plants, the water mill (Portuguese azenha: from the Arabic al-saniyah) and its extensive use in irrigation was the greatest gift the Arabs bestowed on Portugal and the other countries of Western Europe. The rich fields of fruits and vegetables found in the Iberian Peninsula since the 9th century bears witness to the Moorish-introduced plants and farming techniques. This is attested to by the 12th century Arab writer Abu 'Abdallah al-Idrisi who described Algarve as a land of beautiful cities surrounded by irrigated orchards and gardens.

The Arab introduced plants made possible a series of new culinary delights, expanding greatly the kitchen of the Iberian Peninsula. In Portuguese, Arabic derived names for foods are an undeniable testimony to the influence the Moors had on the cuisine in this part of Europe. Acepape (hors d'oeuvres: from the Arabic al-Zebib); aletria (vermicelli: itriyah); almôndega (meat balls: al-bunduqah); escabeche (pickles: al-skabaj); azeite (olive oil: al-zayt); sorvete (sherbet: sharbat); and xarope (syrup: sharab) are a number of these foods.

More than all their dishes, the Moors had a fondness for sweets and passed on this sweet tooth to the Portuguese. Candied fruits and pastries employing almonds, egg yolks, honey and rosewater, found today in all parts of Portugal, are all of pure Moorish origin.

Perhaps the credit for their preservation should go to the nuns in the many religious institutions,

found in every town and city. No one knows the reason why the nuns, in the numerous medieval convents, kept the Arab recipes for sweets alive.

In the days of the Arabs, lamb and goat, along with some beef, were the basic meats on the everyday menu. However, when the Muslims were defeated, pork became the main meat. To escape persecution and prove they had left their former religion behind, the Christianized Moors substituted pork for other meats, especially in the public eating-places.

All these culinary contributions the Arabs gave Portugal were later to be brought to Brazil. This historical base of Brazilian cuisine with its Arab connection was further buttressed in the last hundred years by the large immigration from the area of Greater Syria to all parts of that land of the Amazon. Today, in every large Brazilian town, the eastern Arab delights of sfeehah (open meat pies), taboulah (parsley salad) and, above all, kubbah (burghul and meat patties known in Brazil as kibe), are offered in many homes and public eating-places.

The first time I entered a restaurant in Recife, Brazil's major north-eastern resort, I was astonished to see featured on the menu kibe - a delicious dish whose original home is the Middle East. In the ensuing days I discovered that this famous Middle Eastern dish had become a Brazilian food. Served in a great number eating-places throughout the country, it was prepared in a much tastier fashion than its land of origin. The Arab inherited portion of the Brazilian cuisine is considerable. Both through the Moors, by way of the Iberian Peninsula, and the Arab immigrants of the 20th century, the kitchen of Brazil has been greatly enriched. Travellers from the Arab world need not pine for their foods. In this land of the Amazon, they will find a kindred cuisine. ■



Brazilian dishes

أطباق برازيلية



Sao Luis of Maranhao

ساو لويس في مارانهو



Brazilian beans and nuts

بقليات وجوز برازيلي