

THE LEVANTINE LEGACY OF CYPRIOT CULINARY CULTURE

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Abstract

Cyprus, being located in the heart of the Middle East, was always exposed to cultural and religious influences stemming from migrations, invasions and trade. This paper analyses the Arabic influences on Cypriot traditional culinary culture from the rise of Islam to the present day. The paper shows that many dishes today which are considered to be typically Turkish, Greek or Cypriot such as mulihiya, kolokasi, and moussakka, are actually of Semitic, Persian or Arabic origin. The paper also examines when and how these dishes were introduced on the island.

“Gastronomy is not irrelevant or peripheral to political representation ... commensality and dietary practices are ways of inscribing community and feature forms of communication between parties in communion. In other words, gastronomy’s importance lies, on the one hand, in its position as an investigating site of how community is produced in different historical and cultural spaces and, on the other, in the way it figures as a nonlogocentric form of communication” (Constantinou, 1996, p. 126).

Introduction

Following the opening of the border gates on 23 April 2003, the two communities from either side of the barbed wire had a chance for the first time in three decades to meet and mix. Shortly afterwards, some of my Turkish-Cypriot friends invited me and a Greek-Cypriot family to a dinner party at their house. The dishes to be served during the dinner were intended to be traditionally Cypriot. The “Cypriot” surprise chosen by our hosts for this special gathering was the pride of Turkish-Cypriot cuisine: mulihiya [a stew made with Jew’s mallow leaves], a dish which has been utilised by Turkish Cypriots as an “iconic” symbol of their Cypriotness against the insidious influences emanating from Turkey. However, immediately following the proud presentation of this dish my friends were to face a huge shock, because our Greek-Cypriot guests were not at all familiar with mulihiya. In fact, they did not even know that it existed in Cyprus. At this point, I intervened to explain to a surprised group that mulihiya is a typical Levantine or Arabic dish consumed in almost all the

Arabic countries. For reasons unclear to food historians, this particular dish is eaten solely by Turkish Cypriots and is unknown to the majority of Greek Cypriots (apart from those Greeks who settled on the island after living in Egypt). Fortunately, the rest of the food on the table could be regarded as non-Turkish or non-Greek dishes of Cyprus, such as mujendra [rice with lentils], kolokasi [a kind of taro], halloumi [a cheese], bulgur köftesi/koubes [stuffed cracked wheat balls] and herse/resi [mashed chicken and wheat]. These dishes were indeed commonly “Cypriot” and regularly consumed by both communities of the island.

Dishes like the above-mentioned are generally thought to be traditionally and exclusively Cypriot. Not surprisingly, they have become significant symbols in an “identity” construction process that has been evolving north of the green line for the past two decades. Throughout this process, in addition to the Turkish-Cypriot dialect – customs, traditions and dishes which are not found in Turkey have been adopted and presented as cultural elements that distinguish Turkish Cypriots from the Turks of Turkey. Such differences are usually exaggerated in order to serve as a boundary maintaining mechanism and as a manifestation of their Cypriotness. Indeed, this has been part of a movement invented and promoted in recent decades by some pro-unification, anti-nationalist groups on both sides of the island as a reaction to the wide-spread nationalisms (Turkish or Greek) within both Cypriot communities, and particularly to culinary nationalists who have been “nationalising” traditional dishes on the island by labelling them as “true Greek” or “true Turkish” (e.g. coffee, lokoumi/lokum [Turkish delight]). The “anti-nationalist” movement places more emphasis on the notion of Cyprus being a “common homeland” and on a common “Cypriot identity”. Incidentally, this movement has become more vigorous during the most recent efforts to unify the island and during the process of accession to the European Union (EU). Particularly in the case of Turkish Cypriots, the symbols connected with Cypriotness, not least the culinary ones have been celebrated as cultural elements differentiating them from what was regarded as belonging to the “orient”.

Of course, the fact that such dishes as those mentioned above do not exist in the respective “motherlands” definitely makes them relatively indigenous and Cypriot. For the origins of these common dishes, however, any researcher quickly discovers that the answers lie mainly outside of Cyprus and particularly far beyond EU borders in the wider Levant. Ironically what connects the people gastronomically as one community, from both sides of the barbed wire, are the many commonly consumed dishes of Arabic/Persian origin.

In order to understand the influences that play a role in forming or shaping the traditional culinary cultures and cooking habits of any country or region, it is prudent to delve into that region’s social history. In the case of Cyprus, history tells us that migrations, exiles, invasions, religions, trade activities, and economic hardship have

had a major impact on this island and clearly on its present culinary culture. Although cooking, as with any other human activity, is subject to change, it also represents continuity: it is transmitted from one generation to the next or from one geography to another. People may change their religion, become assimilated by another ethnic group, or be forced to emigrate but culinary habits tend to survive. Eventually a whole way of life may change, but the dishes on the dinner table usually either remain the same or survive with only minor changes. Claudia Roden explains that, “[D]ishes are important because they are a link with the past, a celebration of roots, a symbol of continuity” (Roden, 1997, p. 11). Hence by examining these dishes, we are often able to trace the cultural and geographical origin of the people who prepared them. On the other hand, interaction between different groups is also an important influence on culinary traditions. Neighbours learn from each other and integrate, perhaps with adaptations, such influences into their cooking habits.

In this paper, I try to go beyond the common beliefs in Cyprus as regards the nationalised origins of the island’s culinary habits, and investigate the links between Cypriot cooking and the diverse influential cuisines of the neighbouring region throughout history. In this context, I shall look particularly at the influence of medieval Arabic cooking, which undoubtedly constitutes the most important component in most traditional Cypriot cooking common to both communities. In doing so, I intend to illustrate a wider gastronomic togetherness or a communion which transcends the locally constructed political and imagined borders.

On the basis of when the Arabian community arrived on the island, the Arabic influences on Cypriot culinary culture can be studied within three main contents of time:

- Between Arabs and Byzantines
- Crusader and Latin periods
- From the Ottomans Onwards

Between Arabs and Byzantines

According to Clifford Wright, the so-called Dark ages after the fall of the Roman Empire were “dark” only on the European side of the Mediterranean. He also claims that, “the Islamic Mediterranean could hardly be called dark” (Wright, 1999, p. 6). During this period (632-1100 A.D.), the new Arab/Muslim civilisation demonstrated a vast ability for “receiving and absorbing anything new from other cultures and integrating this knowledge to expand the influence of its own civilisation” (ibid.). They introduced new methods and crops in agriculture. At the same time as the production augmented, famines were prevented and poverty was reduced. Many

new crops were discovered and/or diffused by the Arabs. The Arabs also established higher yielding crops and better varieties of older ones. From the new food crops pioneered the most important were sorghum, rice, hard wheat, sugarcane, various citrus fruits such as the sour orange, lemon and lime, bananas and plantains, palm, watermelon, spinach, artichoke, kolokasi, and aubergines (*ibid.*, p. 7).

While the above developments were taking place only seventy miles away from Cyprus, the first Muslim invaders appeared on the island in 632 under the leadership of Abu-Bekr, the father-in-law of the Prophet. The Arab incursions continued, sometimes in large waves, and often in smaller ripples, until the treaty between Abd-al-Malik and Justinian established joint Arab-Byzantine rule over Cyprus from 688-965 (Hill, 1972 [1940], pp. 285-286). The first Muslims to settle on the island comprised a garrison of 12,000 men who had been left behind by Abu 'l-Awar in 653-654 in "a city specially built for them" (*ibid.*, p. 285). Mosques were also erected during this period. Sir George Hill states that, "Cyprus from the seventh to the tenth century was for long periods at the mercy of the Moslem invaders, and could not be reckoned as definitely part of the Byzantine Empire" (*ibid.*, p. 259). On the other hand he also believes that in order to banish monks and nuns to Cyprus in 770, the Byzantines must have had a "sort of control" of the island (*ibid.*, p. 292). The tenth century traveller Muqaddasi, for instance, commented that Qubrus (Cyprus) "is full of populous cities, and offers the Muslims many advantages in their trade thither, by reason of the great quantities of merchandise, stuffs and goods, which are produced there. The island is in the power of whichever nation is overlord in these seas" (Cobham [translation], 1908, p. 5). R.J.H. Jenkins disputes this, however:

"All these statements and assumptions seem to me to be based on a false hypothesis, namely, that Cyprus was during these years the territorial possession of whoever was strong enough to occupy her. It appears, on the contrary, that the island was a demilitarized and neutral no-man's land, in which Christians and Moslem settlers lived side by side, under pledges of mutual toleration and protection; that the taxes were collected by the representatives of each empire, and allotted in equal shares to each" (Jenkins, 1953, p. 1007).

Whatever the case concerning ultimate political control, we can safely assume that there was considerable interaction between the Muslim Arabs and the inhabitants of the island of Cyprus (Christians, Muslims and Jews) during those years of Arab-Byzantine rule. There are unfortunately few available sources concerning what foodstuff dominated the culinary habits of the time. However, we know that, for example, mujendra, herse (*resi*), and kolokasi were among the most popular dishes in contemporary Arab cuisine and it seems likely that they were introduced to the

island either during this period or with the Christian Arab's migration to Cyprus, that according to Guita G. Hourani, took place in the eighth or tenth centuries (Hourani, 1998).

Moujendra (Greek or Turkish Cypriot) or mujaddara (Levantine Arabic) is a classic dish on the family tables of Cyprus, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon. Mujaddara literally means, "having smallpox" (Arberry, 1939, p. 45), which, as Clifford Wright suggests, probably refers to the impression of a pockmarked visage that lentils mixed with the white rice creates (Wright, 1999). Mujendra is mentioned and described by al-Baghdadi in his thirteenth century cookbook as a dish of the poor.

Herse (Cypriot Turkish) or resi (Cypriot Greek) are names derived from the Arabic verb *harasa* meaning to pound or to crush. This traditional Cypriot dish, which is served at weddings, was a very prominent dish around the whole of the Levant in the seventh century. During the reign of the Ummayyad caliph Mu'awiya (A.D. 661-680) a delegation of Arabian Jews visited him in Damascus. The first question he asked them was whether they knew how to prepare the delightful *harissa*, which he himself had enjoyed on a visit to Arabia (Wright, 1999, p. 100). On the other hand Claudia Roden portrays this dish as an ancestral soup representing the diet of the mountain Kurds (Roden, 1985, p. 181). She also claims that it is traditionally served on Assumption Day (*Id es Saidi*) in Syria and Lebanon. Anissa Helou adds that in the same regions *harissa* is treated as an alms dish and distributed from churchyards to the poor (Davidson, 1999, p. 365).

Cypriot *Kolokasi* or *kolokas* (*Colocasia esculenta*) is native to the "Old World". The cultivation of *kolokasi* spread westward, arriving in Egypt around 100 B.C. There it came to the notice of the Latin writer, Pliny, who called it "the arum of the Egyptians"; and allocated the Greek name *kolokasi* to it (Davidson, 1999, pp. 783-784). Even though this root crop was known in the West, it did not attract in western cuisine the same degree of prominence that it enjoyed within Egyptian, Cypriot, or Syrian culinary traditions. It is also notable that *kolokasi* does not exist in the cuisines of Greece and Turkey, the two "motherlands" of Cyprus. Although we have not been able to establish the exact arrival date of *kolokasi* to Cyprus, it was claimed by Geo Jeffrey that it was used in the wedding feast of Richard the Lion Heart in 1191:

"Preparation for a great feast had of course been made in such a way as to provide for the entertainment of the whole body of the Crusaders, and for a great many invited guests as well. A large number of ovens and kitchens had been constructed in the town, and all who could be pressed into service as cooks were busy with the supplies of food, which had been brought into Amathus from all parts of the island. Goatskins filled with wine were being unloaded off donkey[s] back[s], sheep and lambs were being slaughtered,

bread was being baked and huge quantities of wild turnips, (calocass) and other more or less wild roots ... seem to have constituted a great part of the medieval cuisine were being collected into heaps” (Jeffrey, 1973, pp. 107-108).

Crusaders and Latins

In 1191, the Crusader army of Richard Lion Heart landed in Cyprus marking the beginning of Latin rule. A year later the island was sold to Guy de Lusignan. The Crusaders were mostly mercenaries, off to fight a religious war against the infidels. They had no practical experience in farming and cooking and when they settled in the Holy Land and in Cyprus; they tended to adopt the local food habits rather than maintaining their own. Their journeys to the Holy Land “were military in nature, not alimentary”. As a result, the Crusaders suffered a constant lack of food, and were preoccupied with raiding the surrounding lands for grain and vegetables (Wright, 1999, p. 21).

Upon the initiation of his reign over Cyprus in 1192 A.D., Guy de Lusignan announced that those cavaliers, warriors or members of the bourgeoisie who wished to have fiefs or land should come to him (Hourani, 1998). As a result, besides some adventurous noblemen from the west and European merchants, many communities belonging to the Eastern rite of the Christian church from nearby locations started to arrive en masse in Cyprus. Amongst them were Greek Orthodox Syrian Melkites, Maronites, Nestorians, Armenians and Copts who brought their culinary habits and cultures with them. The final Muslim conquest of the Holy Land in 1291 also caused a massive exodus of Latins and Syrians to Cyprus. The presence on Cyprus of a large contingent of families originating from the Holy Land was remarkable. As is clear from Genoese documentation, Syrians from all social levels came to the island (Balletto, 1995). Arabic became one of the everyday languages on Cyprus and many new Arabic and Syrian dishes found their way into medieval Cypriot cuisine (ibid.). Benjamin Arbel also claims that the influx of immigrants continued under the Venetian period (1490-1570) as well. He reveals that:

“The security and relative prosperity which developed on Cyprus under Venice transformed the island into a haven for Christian Syrians, who were hard pressed on various occasions under the Mamluks and Ottomans. The spectacular rise in Cyprus’s population under Venetian rule can only be explained in the light of these waves of immigration” (Arbel, 1995, p. 178).

He also explains that regarding the neighbouring countries, “beside the tension and the occasional incidents”, the sources which he studied disclose, “a much richer and nuanced relationship, characterised by strong economic interdependence and intensive human contacts, which were no doubt influenced by the confluence of the

long-lasting experience of Frankish Cyprus and the even longer tradition of the Venetian presence in the East” (Arbel, 1995, p. 178).

Making paluze [a pudding made from grape juice] (paludeh in Arabic and Persian), muhallebia [a pudding made with rice flour and milk], halloumi cheese (hellim in Cypriot Turkish), usage of rosewater, moussakka [a layered dish made with aubergine, potato and minced meat] etc. were common in those neighbouring countries where the refugees and immigrants came from. The usage of rosewater, a more primitive version of qada’if [pastry with nuts cooked in syrup], moussakka and muhallebia has been previously mentioned in Al-Baghdadi’s thirteenth century cook-book (Arberry, 1939). The Arabic names of these dishes still survive with only minor changes in the Cypriot dialects.

Halloumi most likely came to Cyprus with the Egyptian Copts, who settled in Cyprus in the twelfth century. The name Halloumi, hellim (in Turkish) or hallum (in Arabic) is one of the few words from ancient Egypt to have survived in Coptic. It was written ialom; the modern pronunciation is hallum (Davidson, 1999, p. 367). The origin of moussakka appears to be unknown. Real Tannahill proposes that the ancestor of moussakka can be found in this recipe for Maghmüma (which in Arabic means covered) or Muqatta’a (which in Arabic means chopped up) from the Baghdad cookery book (Tannahill, 1973, p. 147):

“Cut fat meat small. Slice the tail thin and chop up small. Take onions and egg-plant, peel, half-boil, and also cut up small: these may, however, be peeled and cut up into the meat-pot, and not to be boiled separately. Make a layer of the tail at the bottom of the pan, then put on top of it a layer of meat: drop in fine-ground seasonings, dry coriander, cumin, caraway, pepper, cinnamon, ginger, and salt. On top of the meat put a layer of egg-plant and onion: repeat, until only about four or five fingers space remains in the pot. Sprinkle over each layer the ground seasonings as required. Mix best vinegar with a little water and [a] trifle of saffron, and add to the pan so as to lie to a depth of two or three fingers on top of the meat and other ingredients. Leave to settle over the fire: then remove” (Arberry, 1939, pp. 39-40).

The ancestor of kadeyif (qada’if) is also identified in the following thirteenth century recipe by Al-Baghdadi:

“This is of various kinds. Stuffed qada’if are baked into long shapes, stuffed with almonds and fine-ground sugar, rolled round, and laid out: then sesame-oil, syrup rosewater, and fine-ground pistachios [are] thrown on. Fried qada’if are baked into loaves, stuffed with almonds and fine-ground sugar kneaded with rose-water, rolled, and fried in sesame-oil [in] a dish and immersed in sesame-oil, then syrup is added, rosewater, and fine ground pistachios” (Arberry, 1939, p. 213).

In addition to the new spices, vegetables and dishes that the Christian Arab settlers and Latins from the crusader kingdoms in the Middle East brought to Cyprus, they also introduced sugarcane cultivation. From the Holy Land the most important food product transported to the West was sugar, which the Crusaders found being cultivated already when they occupied these territories. They learned how to produce it from the locals and continued its cultivation, with the main centre of the industry housed in Tyre in Lebanon. After the fall of Tyre and Acre, cultivation was relocated to Cyprus (Wright, 1999, pp. 20-22). Sugar soon became synonymous with prosperity on the island; Cyprus exported several thousand “light weight quintals (50 kilos) of sugar in the fifteenth century”. Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat notes that, “the last queen of Cyprus, beautiful Catherine, wife of the last Lusignan king, was also an heiress of the patrician Cornaro family of Venice; the Cornaros were the sugar kings of their time, and much richer than any king who ruled merely by divine right” (Toussaint-Samat, 1992, pp. 552-555).

From the Ottomans Onwards

After the conquest in 1571 the Ottomans established themselves on the island, and started to practice their multiethnic culinary habits. The Arabic influences on Cypriot culinary culture during the Ottoman period can be divided into two categories: direct influences and indirect influences.

Direct Influences:

According to Turkish Cypriot historian Ahmet Gazioğlu, Cyprus had always been the centre of the trade route between East and West. Its natural resources and agricultural products such as corn, oil, honey, silk, wool, barley, wheat, cotton, and salt were a great attraction for merchants trading with the Middle East (Gazioğlu, 1990). Merchants from Cyprus, Christians as well as Muslims, travelled regularly in Anatolia, to Aleppo and to Egypt. According to Ronald Jennings, disputes over trade were settled at the court in Nicosia (Jennings, 1993, p. 334). As Ottoman subjects, the people of Cyprus thus continued their interaction with those who were now their Ottoman neighbours, the Arabs of the Middle East. In addition to trade, pilgrimages, of both Muslims and Christians, and official emissaries helped to maintain the links between Cyprus and the Arab countries. Among the Arabic culinary influences from this time we have shammali [baked semolina cake with syrup], shamishi [fried pastry with semolina filling], bumar [sausage stuffed with minced meat and rice], bulgur köftesi (koubes), houmous [chick pea paste mixed with tahini], and mulihiya.

After the conquest, the Ottoman authorities transported a lot of people from Anatolia for re-settlement in Cyprus. In addition, two hundred Muslim families of various professions and occupations arrived from Aleppo in Syria (Gazioğlu, 1990, p. 78). The exact arrival date of Syrian sweets such as shammali and shamishi to

Cyprus is uncertain but it is possible that the sweets came to Cyprus with these families. Sham is the Arabic name for Syria and Damascus. On the other hand, these two sweet dishes are commercially produced and are not particular to home cooking. They might, therefore, have arrived at a later date, brought by professional Syrian pastry makers who regularly visited and sometimes settled on the island during the latter part of the nineteenth century, when transport was much improved.

For a “true” Cypriot dish, *bumbar*, has too many sisters and brothers in Arabic countries. For example, the Iraqi *mumbar* is stuffed intestine with minced meat, chopped liver and rice, flavoured with powdered cloves, cardamom, cinnamon and peppers (Roden, 1997, pp. 364-365). Syrian Jews stuffed intestine castings with a minced shoulder of lamb and rice filling, flavoured with allspice and cinnamon (ibid.) A well known food writer, Alan Davidson, has the following to say about bulgur *köftesi* or (*koubes* in Cypriot Greek), the honour of the contemporary Cypriot Cuisine, also known as *kibbeh* in the Levant:

“Kibbeh a versatile paste of grain, onions, and meat that forms the basis of many dishes in Lebanon and Syria, Egypt (*kobebia*), Israel (*cubbeh*), Iraq and extreme SW Iran (*kubba*), the Persian Gulf (*chabab*), and southern Turkey (*bulgur köftesi*). It is known among the western Armenians as *kuefta*” (Davidson, 1999, p. 431).

Kibbeh is the most characteristic dish of the eastern Arab world, but there is no evidence of it in medieval cookery writings. The Iraqi community claim *kubba* was invented in Mosul, and this may be the case. *Uruq* is another Iraqi speciality which is made in a similar fashion by combining roughly equal quantities of grain, meat and onion mixture, but in the latter case bread dough is used rather than bulgur (Davidson, 1999, p. 431).

Houmous, meaning chickpeas in Arabic, is the most famous dish of the Middle East. In the Arab world, every family has its own *houmous* recipe. In Cyprus it is not very common on the family tables and is mostly used as *meze* in the restaurants or taverns. This indicates that its history in Cyprus is not very old. Some Greek Cypriots claim that *houmous* came to Cyprus almost 150 years ago (around the 1840s) when many Greek Cypriots, who had sought safety in Lebanon from the persecution of Küçük Mehmet in 1821 (Ottoman governor of the island in 1820s), returned to Cyprus (Davies, 1990, p. 15).

Mulhiya or *melokhiya* is one of Egypt’s national dishes with its roots anchored in ancient Egypt. It is portrayed in Pharaonic tomb paintings and described in Coptic legends. “In his present lies the past,” Claudia Roden writes, and continues “*fellah* gives himself entirely to the soil, in return, the soil yields to him his food; *melokhiya*” (Roden, 1985, pp. 161-162). *Mulhiya* is a dark green leaf (*corchorus olitorius* or

Jew's mallow in English), which can be cooked fresh or dried and stored for the winter. It is much appreciated by the Turkish Cypriots, especially in the villages and towns of the Mesaoria plain, but for some reason it is not popular among the Greek-Cypriot community.

Even though mulihiya has a very old history in the neighbouring countries, its presence in Cyprus is a recent phenomenon. Some, for example Mahmut İslamoğlu, have argued that it arrived on the island in the early twentieth century with the visits or return to the island of women who had been married off to Arabs (İslamoğlu, 1981). However, conversations with elderly Cypriots lead me to believe that the introduction of mulihiya took place at an earlier date. One possibility is that mulihiya was introduced at the time when contacts between Cyprus and the Arabs were at their most intense; for instance after 1821 when due to the perceived threat to their rule in Cyprus the Ottomans brought four thousand soldiers from Syria (mostly Arabs and Levantines), to garrison the island. We know that a large number of the Egyptian soldiers of Mehmet Ali Pasha might also have brought this military food to the island (which may explain why it was not adopted by the Greek Cypriots). We know too that many Egyptians migrated to Cyprus after the British took control of the island in 1878. As explained in the introduction, mulihiya has recently acquired a symbolic and patriotic importance for Turkish Cypriots in order to authenticate their distinctiveness from mainland Turks. Ironically, Egyptians also use mulihiya as a symbol to manifest their national, popular taste as opposed to the more 'snobbish' taste of the old regime (Roden, 1985, pp. 161-162).

Indirect influences:

In addition to the Arabic dishes which were introduced in pre-Ottoman times as a result of direct contacts between Cyprus and the Arab world, Arabic influences continued to have an effect on cuisine during the Ottoman period. It was itself, a product of early Persian-Arab synthesis blended with Turkish steppe and local Anatolian cuisines. As Wright reminds us:

“Culinary influence in the Mediterranean is a two way street, complicated by transferences that occurred in different historical epochs. For example, it is not the whole story to say that the Spanish influence the cooking of Naples, that the Turks influenced Arab cooking, or the Greek is indebted to the Turks. One must also keep in mind that in these cases, respectively, Spanish cuisine was mostly Arab-influenced during the 700-year era of Islamic Spain, that Arab dynasties in Baghdad and Damascus of the early Islamic period influenced Turkish cooking hundreds of years before the Ottoman Turks began conquering the Arab world” (Wright, 1999, pp. 34-35).

Many famous sweets such as helva, baklava [sticky and sweet pastry layered with nuts and syrup], lokummi or lokma [little donuts], sahlep [hot milk drink made with sahlep powder and served with ground cinnamon or ginger] and dishes like pilavs

and kebabs were brought to Cyprus by the Ottomans. Some of these dishes clearly have Arabic or Persian roots. For example köfte or kofta is derived from the Persian *koofteh*, meaning pounded meat. According to Alan Davidson, the first evidence of Persian meatballs is found in early Arabic cookery books (Davidson, 1999, p. 434).

The word kebab has an interesting history as well. The Arabic word kebab meant fried meat in the Middle Ages. According to a fourteenth century dictionary, *Lisdan al-Arab*, kabab, is a dish of fried pieces of meat, usually finished with some liquid in the cooking (*ibid.*, p. 429).

Helva or halva is a word derived from the Arabic root *hulw*, sweet. In seventh century Arabia, the word meant a paste of dates kneaded with milk. By the ninth century, possibly by assimilating the ancient Persian sweetmeat *afroshag*, it had acquired the meaning of wheat flour or semolina, cooked by frying or toasting and worked into a more or less stiff paste with a sweetening agent such as sugar syrup, date syrup, or honey, by stirring the mass together over a gentle heat. Usually flavouring was added such as nuts, rosewater, or pureed cooked carrots. The finished sweetmeat could be cut into bars or moulded into fanciful shapes (Davidson, 1999, p. 367).

Another important Arabic/Semitic culinary tradition that was brought to the island by the Ottomans was coffee. Originating in Abyssinia, it had appeared in Mecca by 1511, and was introduced to Istanbul in 1517 from the Yemen after the Ottoman conquest of Egypt and Hicaz (Wright, 1999, p. 330). After the introduction of coffee to Istanbul, it became very popular among the common people of the Empire. Coffee houses not only spread all over Istanbul but also in provinces such as Cyprus, often in the possession of pious foundations (*vakıf*) (Jennings, 1993, pp. 331-332). According to Jennings, the earlier references to coffee in the Nicosia sicils (court documents) concern trade in coffee; first “between Mehmed bn Ahmed and Hüseyin bn Abdullah, and then, for 10 *vakiye* [a measure] coffee, between Hasan and Usta Piri of (?) [sic] village” in the year 1610 (Jennings, 1993). The existence of several coffee houses called *kahvehane* in Turkish is also mentioned in the *vakıf* documents concerning the establishment of pious foundations:

“A coffee house in the walled town of Magosa [Famagusta] was among property dedicated as *vakıf* by Ca’fer Pasha in 1601 ... Coffee houses were among the property in Lefkosha [Nicosia] made *vakıf* by that same Ca’fer Pasha ... A coffee house of the *vakıf* of Suleyman Beg rented for four *akce/day* or 120 *akce/month*, the revenues going to the Mevlevi Tekke” (Jennings, 1993, pp. 331-332).

The demand for coffee and coffee houses had increased considerably by the eighteenth century, and for Cypriots, it became an inescapable ingredient of daily life.

Apart from the visit or return of the Muslim Turkish women who had been married off to men from neighbouring Arab countries (İslamoğlu, 1981) the Arabic influences during the British period were few. Some of the women came back to settle on the island with their husbands who opened pastry shops or houmous soup kitchens. In these shops, they served all sorts of Arabic and Turkish sweets (keshkül [a milky pudding], ashure [a pudding made with wheat, forty different pulses, dried fruits and nuts], muhallebia, shammali, shamishi). In the soup kitchens, houmous salad or houmous soup were offered. The most famous pastry shop in Nicosia during the British period was called “Bedevi Pastahanesi”, meaning Bedouian pastry shop. Another Arabic dish of this time was felafel [fried minced vegetable balls], cooked and sold only on religious Muslim festivals and bayrams by some Turkish Cypriots who are, in fact, the descendants of Palestinian refugees who had escaped from the war in their country of origin following 1947.

After 1974, there was a considerable influx of people from Turkey to the northern part of the island. These immigrants and settlers, especially those from the south-eastern part of Turkey, brought additional Arabic/Persian specialities to the island: Dishes that are now among the most popular in restaurants, such as lahmacun, the “Turkish pizza”, or as it is called in its country of origin, Syria, lahm bi ajeen. It is important to note, however, that lahmacun was already popular among the Armenian community of Cyprus even before the division.

Conclusion

A somewhat genealogical attempt has been made in this paper to reveal some of the principal historical events that might be considered to have had an influence on the culinary culture of Cypriots. Contrary to commonly held beliefs, many of the dishes consumed by Cypriots either originate in entirety from the cuisines of territories in the vicinity of Cyprus, or else were heavily influenced by the medieval Arabic/Persian cuisine. This does not mean, however, that Cypriot cuisine possesses no authentic dishes of its own. From tsamarella (dried mutton or goat meat) to sheftalia (a kind of sausage), and from the wild asparagus to the herbs indigenous to Cyprus, there are several such examples still found to be employed in Cypriot cuisine. There are also many undeniable similarities between Cyprus’ cuisine and those that predominate in both Turkey and Greece. Unfortunately, though, it lies beyond the scope of this study to cover all such ties. I conclude, therefore, by proffering another anecdote regarding the same families mentioned at the outset who had met after the opening of the borders.

Following the referenda held in April 2004 to unify both sides of the island there was a marked spike in the polarisation between the two main communities of Cyprus. Owing to the clear refusal of the Greek-Cypriot population to accept the UN-proposed unification plan, there ensued a powerful sense of bitterness among

those Turkish Cypriots who had said “Yes” to the same plan. In order to “re-break” the ice, the same Turkish-Cypriot friends and I were invited to dinner by the same Greek-Cypriot family with whom we had dined a few months earlier. This time the rendezvous was to the south of the Green-line. When our Greek-Cypriot friends asked us what kind of restaurant we would like to go to for this reconciliatory dinner, my suggestion was Lebanese. Neither family was acquainted with Lebanese food but they accepted my proposal and we booked a table at a leading Lebanese restaurant in Nicosia. During the dinner our main topic was, of course, the outcome of the referenda and Cyprus’ accession to the EU, the Republic of Cyprus having acceded the very same day, albeit without reaching a settlement and leaving the northern part of the island outside the EU. Following the main meal and the sweets we ordered our coffees (not Turkish or Greek, but Arabic coffee). While we sipped from our cups, the restaurant owner switched on the radio to tune-in to a live broadcast from Brussels in which the president of the Republic of Cyprus, Mr. Papadopoulos, was delivering a speech concerning the accession of Cyprus. The Turkish-Cypriot family was still a little saddened by the fact that the Turkish Cypriots were in practice excluded from this momentous event, so I moved to change the subject and asked my Greek- and Turkish-Cypriot friends for their impressions of the Lebanese food they had just consumed. After a brief pause the Turkish-Cypriot lady, with a contented gleam in her eyes, said: “The food was very good, but it was especially interesting that most of the dishes were similar to our Cypriot dishes, just more spicy and tasty”. Meanwhile the voice on the radio grew louder, as Mr. Papadopoulos repeated his thanks to all the EU member states, “for offering Cyprus the possibility to accede where it belongs historically, geographically, politically and culturally”.

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