Introduction

Cookbooks are commonplace today, but they are a late development in world literature. In antiquity we find only three Babylonian clay tablets and a single Roman cookbook compiled in the second century; after that, nothing more for the next 800 years. Then there was a sudden explosion of cookbooks in Arabic. From the tenth through the thirteenth centuries, Arabic speakers were, so far as we know, the only people in the world who were writing cookbooks.

They had elaborated the idea from the personal recipe collections that had been fashionable for gentlemen of the pre-Islamic Persian court to keep. The Abbasid caliphs adopted this along with many other Persian practices, such as cooking contests among the ruler’s boon companions. In the tenth century, a scribe named Abū Muḥammad al-Muẓaffar ibn Naṣr ibn Sayyār compiled a large collection of Baghdad court recipes for an unnamed patron who wanted to know what “kings and caliphs and lords and leaders” ate—this probably established the idea of the cookbook for the Arab reading public. To judge from the fact that most surviving manuscripts show evidence of dozens of generations of copying, cookbooks formed a regular part of a commercial scribe’s business.

These books were intended for practical household use and more or less cheaply copied (in fact, it is a bit surprising that so many have survived to our day). Moreover, it is clear that scribes were uniformly ignorant of cooking. As a result, cookery manuscripts tend to be marred by a remarkable number of errors. We can be grateful for one thing—only one of them, the Cairo manuscript Lām 5076, shows the wear and staining that indicates that it was actually handled in the kitchen. The fact that recipes vacillate between second-person instructions and third-person descriptions of the cooking process suggests that recipes were typically read out to the cook and the book was then replaced in the household library.

The golden age of cookbooks was the thirteenth century, which produced five major volumes of several hundred recipes each, two of them from Spain and North Africa and the rest from the eastern Arab world, as well as several smaller
collections. *Scents and Flavors the Banqueter Favors* (*Kitāb al-Wuṣlah ilā l-Ḥabīb fi Wasf al-Ṭayyibāt wal-Ṭīb*) contains 635 recipes (nearly 700 in some versions of the text) and was the bestseller of the age, to judge from the fact that more copies of it have survived than of all the other medieval cookbooks combined. It primarily represents the cuisine of the Ayyubid rulers of thirteenth-century Syria—the author often mentions visiting various Ayyubid noble households.

One reason for its popularity was its systematic organization. In most chapters the recipes are carefully numbered and variations are numbered as sub-recipes. The clarity is a little spoiled by the fact that a few recipes disappeared during the long generations of copying and many more were added without being numbered. This is very noticeable in Chapter 7, which scrupulously announces that the following fifty-five recipes “do not belong to the book.” Nevertheless, readers doubtless appreciated the sense that they had before them a well-organized volume.

Another reason for the book’s popularity can be seen from its title, literally “the link to the friend, concerning good things to eat and perfumes.” Medieval Arab cuisine was highly scented, not only with herbs, nuts, and spices but sometimes also ingredients we would consider to be perfumes, such as rose water, musk or ambergris, occasionally even incense. (That tradition is not entirely dead: in modern Syria the pudding mamoul may still be perfumed with sandalwood.)

The medieval banquet was a feast for the nose, and the diners were expected to make their own contribution. Before the meal, they would have bathed at the hammam and then perfumed themselves. There were specific perfumes for the hands, the face, the hair and even clothing, which was often aromatized by holding it over burning incense. One recipe in the book refers to a pocket incense burner made of filigreed silver which could scent one’s clothes continuously. As a result, medieval Arab readers were not surprised to find recipes for perfumes and even breath fresheners and antiperspirants in cookbooks.

A handful of recipes (for perfumes as well as foods) reference medieval medical ideas, such as the need to balance the humors or to match foods to the humoral nature of an individual. Another individual matter was how much store a given diner actually set by medical theory. Doctors may have warned that eggplant caused cancer and madness, but the poet Kushājim, for one, defiantly said, “The doctor makes ignorant fun of me for loving eggplant, but I will not give it up.”
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No book addressed the subject in as much detail as *Scents and Flavors*, which is organized roughly in parallel with the stages of a banquet. The first chapter is on incense and perfumes. Following a few short chapters on beverages and miscellaneous necessities come the chapters on main dishes, followed by chapters on pickles, snacks and sweets, which did not have regular place in the banquet, then a chapter on perfumed preparations for cleaning the hands after eating. The final chapter is on the fragrant distilled waters which diners would splash on themselves at the end of the banquet.

Characteristics of the Cuisine

We may not expect to perfume ourselves so extravagantly at dinner, but reading about it gives a glimpse of the seductive splendor of a medieval banquet. The cuisine of this book is definitely banquet food, special-occasion food. Not only is it highly aromatic, it is thoroughly luxurious. Many simple stews are enriched with meatballs and garnished with pastries and tidbits of various kinds.

Since diners ate with their hands, many recipes concern themselves with achieving a suitable consistency. Dishes may be thickened by cooking them down or by adding a thickener such as ground nuts. Some foods were thickened to a suitable texture for picking up with a piece of bread, like modern-day Syrian snacks such as hummus with tahini. The book also refers to eating certain dishes with a utensil unattested elsewhere, a *jamjāʾ*, which must have resembled a soup spoon.

In our time, meat is aged for days, even weeks, by being hung in a cold locker or refrigerated in vacuum-pack in order to give the enzymes in the meat time to tenderize it. In the cuisine of this book, however, meat is cooked the day it is butchered, which means it is relatively tough. When a recipe describes the frying of meat, therefore, there is usually an additional step of boiling it, either before or after, to achieve the desired tenderness. This is also true of chicken. One recipe instructs cooks to tire chickens out by chasing them about before killing them, a practice inherited from the Persians. This may strike a modern cook as totally wrong, since we now know that when an animal is killed without stress, its cells continue to use up their fuel and since fresh oxygen is no longer available, the lactic acid produced by this process can’t be broken down and serves to tenderize the meat. But as the food science writer Harold McGee points out, stressing the chickens might have a point: it speeds the onset of rigor
mortis, which occurs when muscles run out of fuel and the contractile proteins lock into place, and thus also speeds the passing of the rigor.

Some now forgotten foods were created by microbial action. One is *murrī*, a salty liquid with a flavor closely resembling soy sauce which was produced by mold-culturing barley and adding spices such as fennel. It was very popular in Spain and Iraq but makes only a single appearance (§6.47) in this book, which gives no recipe for it. *Kāmakh baghdādī* (§8.66) was a semi-liquid cheese made by aging milk with yogurt and salt, which preserve it from spoilage while the microbes that produce the familiar cheese flavor do their work. One recipe for pickled capers minutely describes the process of making a semi-liquid blue cheese. Certain sorts of cheese were added to dishes as they cook, a practice that has disappeared from Arab cuisine.

The recipes reflect the culinary situation of the landlocked corridor that extends from Aleppo to Damascus. Fresh fish are completely absent and even salt fish play only a small part; there is even a condiment that counterfeits dried fish with walnuts and sesame. To give dishes a sour flavor, recipes may call for citrus fruits imported from the coast but, as in the cuisine of Aleppo today, very often local sour ingredients such as pomegranate or sumac berry are preferred. Somewhat less use is made of lamb fat and sesame oil for frying than in Iraqi cookbooks and greater use is made of olive oil, though it often appears as a flavoring rather than a frying medium. And sesame oil is sometimes toasted, as it commonly is in China, for use as a flavoring.

For baking, the recipes call for the clay oven that predominates in Iraq and points farther east and also the Roman-style brick oven widespread in Spain and North Africa. Together with the heritage of the Perso-Arab cuisine of the ninth-century Baghdad court, *Scents and Flavors* shows the beginnings of Turkish influence on Syria’s repertoire of breads and pastas, including one interesting pastry with a Turkish name, *qarni yārūq*, which resembles a deconstructed baklava or, more exactly, a baklava *avant la lettre*, since the first baklava recipes would not be recorded until the sixteenth century. Included also are some preparations learned from the Byzantines and the Crusaders, who still held territory in the region.

Among the many herbs and spices called for were some that play little part in Arab cuisine today, such as caraway and the bitter herb rue. Soap was mostly perfumed with spices and rose water, any of which might also appear in the dishes that followed—one reason for washing before the meal might have been to remove any perfume on the hand that might conflict with the flavors of the food.