

Title: **Gulf Cuisine: Regional, Levantine, Egyptian**

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## Gulf cuisine - Regional, Levantine, Egyptian

**G**ULF cuisine includes regional cuisines of Gulf countries as well as Levantine and Egyptian traditions.

Gulf communities rely on grain-based foods, mainly rice, as the main food in addition to wheat. Apart from this, people of the Gulf countries rely on a diet of dates, barley, and meat, with little variety and heavy emphasis on yogurt products, such as labneh (yogurt without butterfat).

Lamb and chicken are the most used meat products, while beef, goat and camel are used to a lesser extent. Poultry is used in some regions while fish is an essential source of protein in the coastal areas.

With Islam being the prominent religion of the inhabitants of Gulf countries, pork is strictly prohibited. However, pork products have a niche market in Lebanon, where cold cuts of ham are frequently consumed in Christian neighbourhoods.

Dairy products are widely used, especially yogurt and white cheese. Butter and cream are also used extensively. Mint and thyme (often in a mix called za'atar) are widely and almost universally used; use of spice is much less when compared to Indian cuisine, but the amount and type generally varies from region to region. Herbs and spices include sesame, saffron, turmeric, garlic, cumin, cinnamon, and sumac.

While rice is a staple diet and is used for most dishes, wheat is mostly used to make bread. Lentils are also an essential part of the cuisine and are widely used.

Gulf cuisine also favours vegetables such as cucumbers, eggplant (aubergine), zucchini (courgette), okra, onions, and fruits (primarily citrus), which are often used as seasonings for entrees. Olives as well as dates, figs, and pomegranates are widely used. Dates are an important staple in the Gulf diet, often eaten with coffee. Nuts like almonds, peanuts, pine nuts, pistachios and walnuts are often included. Parsley and mint are popular as seasonings in many dishes, while spinach and mulukhiyah (leaves of plants of the *Corchorus* genus) are used in cooked dishes. Dressings include various combinations of olive oil, lemon juice, parsley, garlic, and tahini (sesame paste).

### Large meals

In Gulf countries, meals are generally large affairs with much sharing and a great deal of warmth over the dinner table. Formal dinners

and celebrations generally involve large quantities of lamb, and every occasion entails large quantities of Gulf coffee.

On an average, a visitor might expect a dinner consisting of a very large platter, shared commonly, with a vast amount of rice, incorporating lamb or chicken, or both, as separate dishes, with various stewed vegetables, heavily spiced, sometimes with a tomato-based sauce. Most likely there would be several other less hearty items on the side.

Tea would certainly accompany the meal, as it is almost constantly consumed. Coffee would be included as well. However, many regional differences exist in the cuisines of different regions. For instance, Mujadara in Syria and Lebanon is different from Mujadara in Jordan or Palestine. Some dishes, such as Mansaf (the national dish of Jordan), are native to certain countries and rarely, make an appearance in other countries. Cinnamon is used in meat dishes, as well as in sweets such as baklava. Other desserts include variations of rice pudding and fried dough. Groundnuts are a common filling for such treats. Saffron is used in everything, including sweets, rice, and beverages. Fruit juice is quite popular due to the climate.

### Combination of cuisines

The cuisine of eastern Gulf is a combination of richly diverse cuisines, incorporating Persian, Levantine, Yemeni, and Indian cuisine, and many items not indigenous to the Persian Gulf region, which were imported in dhows and caravans. The cuisine of Yemen is rather distinct from other Gulf cuisines. Like most other Gulf cuisines, chicken and lamb are eaten more often than beef. Fish is eaten mostly in coastal areas. However, unlike most Gulf countries, cheese, butter, and other dairy products are less common, especially in the cities and other urban areas.

As with other Gulf cuisines, the most widespread beverages are tea and coffee; tea is usually flavoured with cardamom, clove, or mint, and coffee with cardamom. Karakaden, Naq'e Al Zabib, and Diba'a are the most widespread cold beverages. Saltahis is considered the national dish of Yemen. The base is a brown meat stew believed to be of Turkish origin called Maraqa, a dollop of fenugreek froth, and Sahawiq or Sahowqa (a mixture of chili peppers, tomatoes, garlic, and herbs ground into a salsa). Rice, potatoes, scrambled eggs, and vegetables are common additions to Saltah. It is

eaten with flat bread, which serves as a utensil to scoop up the food. Other dishes widely known in Yemen include Aseed, Fahsa, Thareed, Samak Mofa, Lahm Mandi, Fattah, Shakshouka, Shafut, Bint Al-Sahn, Kabsa, and Jachnun.

### Levantine cuisine

It is the traditional cuisine of the Levant, Mashriq, or Greater Syria area. Although now divided into Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Palestine and Israel, the region has historically been more united, and shares most of the same culinary traditions. Although almost identical, there is some regional variation within the Levantine area. Levantine foods have much in common with other eastern Mediterranean cuisines, such as Greek and Turkish cuisine, as well as Armenian cuisine. Some of the basic similarities are the extensive use of olive oil, and garlic, and common dishes include a wide array of mezze or bread dips, stuffings, and side dishes such as Hummus, Falafel, Ful, Tabouleh, Labaneh, and Baba Ghanoush. It also includes copious amounts of garlic and olive oil, often seasoned with lemon juice—almost no meal goes by without including these ingredients.

Most often foods are either grilled, baked, fried, or sautéed in olive oil; butter and cream are rarely used, other than in a few desserts. Vegetables are often eaten raw or pickled, as well as cooked. While the cuisine does not boast a multitude of sauces, it focusses on herbs, spices, and the freshness of ingredients. Iraqi cuisine is rich in spices. Main food crops include wheat, barley, rice, vegetables, and dates. Vegetables include eggplant, okra, potatoes, and tomatoes. Pulses such as chickpeas and lentils are also quite common. Common meats in Iraqi cooking are lamb and beef; fish and poultry are also used. Soups and stews are often prepared and served with rice and vegetables. Mansaf is a popular dish. Biryani, although influenced by Indian cuisine, is milder with a different mixture of spices, and a wider variety of vegetables including potatoes, peas, carrots, and onions. Dolma is also one of the most popular dishes. The population of Gaza strip and Jordan has a cooking style of its own. The cuisine is characterised by roasting of various meats, baking of flat breads, and cooking of thick yogurt-like pastes from goat's milk.

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### **Egyptian cuisine**

Meanwhile, Egyptian cuisine is a very rich cuisine that has many unique customs. In the Coast of the Mediterranean Sea and Canal, the diet of the people relies heavily on fish. In the more agricultural areas, the reliance on farm products is much heavier. Duck, geese, chicken, and river fish are the main animal protein sources. Unlike the surrounding Arab cuisines, which place heavy emphasis on meat, Egyptian cuisine is rich in vegetarian dishes; Ful medames, Ta'amia (also known in other countries as falafel), and Kushari, are generally vegetarian. Fruits are also greatly appreciated in Egypt; mango, grapes, bananas, apples, sycamore, guava, and peach are very popular, especially because they are all domestically produced and are therefore available in relatively low prices.

### **Somali food**

Somali dishes include xalwo (halva), a sweet hardened jelly; soor, a soft cornmeal mashed with fresh milk, butter, and sugar, and served with maraq (stew); and sambuusa, a small fried pastry

with meat and vegetable filling. The cuisine of Sudan, the neighbour of North Africa and Levantine, is rich in spices. The Sudanese cuisine has a rich variety in ingredients and creativity. Simple everyday vegetables are used to create stews and omelettes that are healthy yet nutritious, and full of energy and flair. In general, these stews are called "mullah." Popular dishes include Shahan ful, Ful medames, Hummus, Bamyra (a stew made from ground, sun dried okra), and Gurasa (pancake), and different types of salads and sweets.

### **Traditional with modern twist**

Traditional food constitutes an essential aspect of people's cultural heritage in Gulf countries. However, modern influence is bearing a significant impact on Gulf cuisine. The modern diet is cosmopolitan, featuring dishes from around the world. During the last two decades, high rate of urbanisation and increase in income has affected the lifestyle of the population of these countries. This has resulted in extensive food import. So there has been a reduction in the intake of traditional food. People now demand traditional

food with a modern twist. A lot of people confuse Levantine food as being Emirati, but Shawarma, Hummous, Tabbouleh, and mixed grill are all recent additions. Nowadays, Gulf countries are making substantial efforts to increase their food production and promote health and nutritional well-being of the community. Nevertheless, traditional food still holds a significant place in the diet of the people.

The Persian Gulf is emerging as a major new frontier for foreign restaurant chains targeting its growing populations, recovering economies, modern infrastructure and low corporate tax rates. Dozens of restaurants from the US have maiden forays into the energy-rich region over the past few years, and more are set to come. While the list of global chains already present in the market is nearly exhaustive, many companies still see opportunity as consumers become more sophisticated, health-conscious and want more variety. There is a growing awareness about leading a balanced lifestyle in the region and an increasing demand for healthier, nutritive food and beverage options. ○

*(The article is contributed by Netscribes, a global market intelligence firm)*