

## An Introduction to the Arabic Sweets

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**Abstract:** Introduction: Arab sweets and desserts are essential in Arab culture, hospitality, and traditions. Many sweets like baklava, kunafa, and basbousa have origins dating back centuries and have been developed in the Middle East, including Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

**Aims:** This essay explores the history and development of Arab sweets, their cultural significance, traditional preparation methods, their role in celebrations, and their influence on global cuisine. The author used a quantitative research method to obtain the aims (AbuHamda et al., 2021)

**Results:** Research shows Arab sweets evolved from medieval-era techniques and ingredients. They represent cultural identity, community, and nostalgia. Traditional hand methods can be seen in making phyllo dough and baked sweets. Sweets are displayed in Arab hospitality, holidays like Ramadan, and milestone events. Iconic Arab pastries have spread globally while retaining cultural meaning.

**Recommendations:** Further research could examine sweets' role in maintaining cultural heritage amongst the diaspora and how traditions withstand globalization and modernization. More study of historical origins and specific regional sweets is also warranted.

### THE ROOTS OF ARAB SWEET TRADITIONS

Sweets and desserts play an important role in Arab culture and hospitality. Many of the most famous Arab sweets have their origins centuries ago. Baklava (see Appendix Three), one of the most well-known Middle Eastern pastries, was likely invented during the Ottoman Empire. It consists of flaky phyllo dough layered with chopped nuts and soaked in sweet syrup. The oldest versions of baklava were made with an almond or walnut filling. Baklava became popular throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Another sweet pastry, ma'amoul (see Appendix One), is also rooted in the medieval era. These cookies are filled with dates, nuts, or pistachios. They are popular today for Eid al-Fitr and Easter celebrations. Kunafeh is a sweet cheese pastry originating in the Levant region hundreds of years ago. The cheese filling is covered with a shredded phyllo pastry and soaked in sweet syrup. Arabic coffee typically concludes a Middle Eastern meal (see Appendix Three). Coffee brewed from dark roasted beans is served with dates or sweets like mamool cookies. Sweets in Arab cuisine evolved over centuries from the region's diverse

culinary influences and local ingredients, then became famous in the Middle East, including Palestine and Jordan. Their popularity endures today as part of cultural traditions and gatherings ( see Marcus, 2010).

### How Arab sweets reflect diversity and tradition

According to Salloum et al. (2013), the array of sweets and desserts in Arab cuisine provides a window into the region's diverse cultures and long culinary history. Many iconic treats evolved centuries ago, shaped by unique ingredients, foreign influences, and cultural traditions that endure today. Baklava and basbousa trace back to the medieval Middle East, where honey and nuts were treasured ingredients. Baklava's flaky layers reflect Turkish cuisine, while basbousa's semolina base reveals a North African influence. Simple cookies like ghraybeh and mamool became staples for holiday celebrations and gatherings across the Arab world. The strong coffee tradition evolved alongside sweets, as bitter brews, dates, or pastries were served together after meals. Arab sweets emerged in different regions, from Lebanon's rosewater puddings to Iraq's date-filled kleicha cookies. While techniques and recipes

varied, hospitality and community were central to Arab food culture. Today, classic sweets are still prepared to welcome guests, celebrate festivals like Eid, and bring families together, reflecting diversity and upholding tradition across generations. The origins of Arab desserts are as rich as their flavors.

### **Traditional Methods in Arab Sweet Making**

Many iconic Arab sweets are made today using traditional techniques passed down through generations. Phyllo dough remains central to pastries like baklava and kunafa (see Appendix Two). Phyllo is laboriously stretched and folded by hand to create the paper-thin sheets used in layered pastries. Baklava makers carefully stack the phyllo dough with chopped nuts like walnuts, pistachios, or almonds before cutting the pastry and drenching it in rosewater -some do not add rosewater- or orange blossom syrup. Kunafa similarly features shredded phyllo over a mild cheese filling. Other sweets showcase the skill of Arabic bakers. Nabulsi Kunafa from the Palestine region is shaped by hand before baking. Ghraybeh cookies are shaped into rings that emerge from the oven perfectly round. Arabic ice cream displays a stretchy, chewy texture from mastic gum and orchid root—unique ingredients that stabilize the ice cream using century-old techniques. While recipes vary across regions, the common thread is the careful technique involved in hand-shaping pastries, preparing homemade syrups, and using specialized ingredients for the ideal texture and flavor. The storied tradition of Arab sweets is passed down through mastery of these time-honored methods (Gaul, 2022).

### **Arab Celebrations and the Role of Sweets**

Sweets are important in Arab culture, especially for celebrations and special occasions. Many iconic pastries and cookies are closely linked with festive traditions. For holidays like Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, kunafa, baklava, and basbousa are often prepared. Trays of pastries are served to visitors who come to wish loved ones well for the holiday. Sweets also play a major role during the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from dawn to sunset. Eating small sweets is common to break the fast or enjoy late-night gatherings. Classic cookies like ghraybeh and kaak, an anise-flavored ring, are served with coffee and tea. Sweets are also featured in milestone events like weddings, graduations, and birthdays. Baklava and other pastries may be presented to guests in decorative boxes. Even during regular Arab hospitality, visitors are often welcomed with tea, coffee, plates of ma'amoul (see Appendix One), and other cookies. The long, rich history of sweets mirrors their significance in Arab culture. The offerings of baked goods form meaningful traditions and memories associated with cherished celebrations (Abdulrahman et al., 2000)

### **Arab Sweets and Their Influence on International Cuisine**

From baklava to Kunafa, many iconic sweets originated in the Arab world and have become beloved globally. Phyllo dough, introduced by the Turks centuries ago, revolutionized Middle Eastern pastries and spread from Jordan to Syria, then developed the Arab world to Europe and beyond. Both baklava and kunafa showcase the versatility of phyllo in layered pastries. Versions of baklava now exist across the Mediterranean, Balkans, and South Asia. Basbousa and Haresa, the semolina cake soaked in syrup, has been embraced as a delicacy in Eastern Europe and Turkey. Simple cookies like ma'amoul (see appendix one) and ghraybeh can be found internationally, sometimes with new flavor twists. Arab ice cream traditions also influenced sweets worldwide, as techniques for making stretchy ice cream spread to Europe and Asia. One of the Arab world's most famous exports is loukoum - also called Turkish delight - tracing back to medieval Turkey and now enjoyed worldwide. Today, Arab pastries and sweets are recreated globally, influencing cross-cultural desserts and pastry techniques. Generations of passing these iconic sweets along ancient trade routes allowed for adaptation while retaining their origins. For centuries, Arab sweets have maintained their popularity and secured their place internationally as treasured food traditions (Moretti, 2023).

### **Exploring the Emotional Connection to Arab Sweets**

Previous work carried out in 2016 stated that across the Arab world, sweets are more than just desserts - they represent cherished traditions, emotions, and memories. Certain sweets can immediately conjure nostalgia and connections to family and celebrations. Kunafa prepared by a grandmother may elicit deep feelings of comfort and home. Baklava sampled on a trip becomes forever linked to that wondrous destination. Even the scent of Arabic coffee and cardamom evokes tranquillity, hospitality, and affection. Preparing sweets for holidays elicits excitement and joyful anticipation. During Ramadan, the first sip of tea and a bite of ghraybeh cookies stir satisfaction after a long day of fasting. Sweet traditions also build community and bring people together. Friends and relatives bond over trays of ma'amoul (see Appendix One) cookies and cups of tea. New generations of children learn recipes and carry on legacies. The history and care put into Arab desserts are tasted in each bite. Beyond flavors, the sweets represent culture, nostalgia, community, love, and connection. They symbolize cherished relationships and memories as

enduring as their complex recipes. For many, Arab sweets will always taste like home and family Pilska (2016).

## CONCLUSION

The enduring traditions of Arab sweets provide a delicious window into the region's diverse cultures, complex histories, and emotional connections to food. Classic pastries like baklava and kunafa evolved from medieval techniques into icons of hospitality shared at celebrations for centuries. Unique

ingredients, foreign influences, and painstaking methods reflect both innovation and preservation of tradition. Simple cookies and sweet beverages are just as central for daily enjoyment and special occasions. More than sustenance, these sweets represent cherished bonds, memories, and nostalgia passed down through generations. Their flavors continue to be savored globally while maintaining cultural significance. Whether as part of a holiday feast or a sweet ending to an ordinary day, Arab desserts will always be infused with tradition, community, and love as rich as any sugary syrup.

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## Appendix One

### Ma'amoul



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## Appendix Two

### Kunafa

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**Appendix Three**

**Coffee with Ma'moul**



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## Appendix Four

### Baklava



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## About the Author

*Mujahed Hasan Khadeer Alsafeen is the Head Chef at Gourmet Baklava in Hyderabad, India. He began his culinary career in Amman, Jordan, where he trained to become a chef specializing in Middle Eastern sweets. While in Jordan, he earned the title of Master Chef. After honing his skills, Mujahed moved to Saudi Arabia, where he was head chef of Al-Rasheed Sweets Factory in Riyadh and Jeddah. While in Saudi Arabia, he mastered the art of Arab sweets and baked goods. Mujahed then brought his expertise to India, first working as a Head Chef in Delhi. His baklava and kunafa were hugely popular and earned him the title of a private chef for ministers, consuls, VIP celebrities, and ambassadors at special events. Mujahed has served as Head Chef at Delhi Kunafa Shop for three years and seven years as Head Chef at Gourmet Baklava in Hyderabad. He enjoys introducing the flavors of his Jordanian heritage to India through his baking. Mujahed has participated in several food festivals and cooking competitions, winning awards for his contemporary takes on cherished Arab treats. He aims to share Middle Eastern desserts' history and cultural significance with his patrons while also looking to innovative twists on tradition.*

