

The Evolution of Assyrian Traditional Culinary Practices

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Foreword

It is well-known that many branches of food processing originated in Mesopotamia, the cradle of civilization and the original homeland of the Assyrians. Archaeological research over nearly two centuries indicates a considerable contribution from this part of the world to the science of food technology.¹

While many of the technologies extant in ancient Mesopotamia have long since been forgotten, others have survived to this day but in improved form. One can readily see in our highly industrialized societies a revival movement towards the old methods of food processing, and a more natural food diet (e.g., wholemeal bread, natural pigments, unclarified juice). The return to herbal treatment corresponds to this trend. Moreover, in recent years we have seen a greater effort to inform the public on the threats associated with frequent use of synthetic compounds.

Manufacturers, importers and trading companies recognize the importance attached by consumers to the historical authenticity of food products. On occasion, the return to old recipes arouses enthusiasm and attracts consumer attention. Where it is more than just a sales gimmick, it can often contribute to a product's popularity. Of course, a product's success is always determined by the customer's taste; in this, some products can be universal.

Throughout their millenia history, Assyrians preserved certain technologies inherited from their ancestors. The best evidence for this may be their current mastery of gastronomic skills. Using ordinary materials, often in extremely homely and simple conditions, today's Assyrians are capable of preparing very good dishes. Frequently, their neighbors have adopted some of these Assyrian technologies, products and dishes and, as has been done in other cases, they have portrayed themselves as their originator.

Bulgur

A unique technology rooted in ancient times and practiced by modern Assyrians is parboiling of the wheat grain, today called *bulgur*.² Along with

¹ Examples of food technologies would include production of alcoholic beverages, particularly beer, together with their clarification; baking bread and construction of bread ovens; shadow drying of herbs and spices, fish preservation through drying; vegetable pickles, wheat grain parboiling, i.e., the celebrated bulgur; and production of butter and cheese. It is important also to recall the laws of Babylonia (featured in the 18th century BC Hammurabi Code) protecting agricultural products. For additional information on the history of food in Mesopotamia, see Jean Bottero, *Cuisine et Gastronomie en Mesopotamie Ancienne*, La Fondation Assyriologique Georges Dossin, no.2, Musee royaux d'art et d'histoire, Bruxelles 1982.

² For many centuries, the preparation of bulgur was known only to the Assyrians and their neighbors, the Armenians. It is a definite part of their tradition. See, M. Abdalla,

barley, Mesopotamia considered this cereal one of the basic raw materials. The wheat grain is boiled until it is soft. It is then sundried, peeled, ground and sieved into two or three fractions. The applied treatment does not remove the germ, which is the most valuable part of the grain.

The enduring popularity of this technology over the ages is a signal achievement in food preservation and rational usage of wheat for culinary purposes. It provides a family with constant and imperishable supplies which can be used to prepare various dishes for any occasion and at any time of the year.³ Bulgur can be boiled in 5-10 minutes, and this relatively short cooking time was no doubt an important issue for the originators of the technique

Bulgur has turned out to be a universal dish. For the most part, most of today's bulgur in the Middle East is produced in Turkey, in an area which until recently featured a considerable population of Assyrians and Armenians. Turkey is the leading exporter of bulgur to Western Europe, where it is dubbed a "health food". The biggest importer of bulgur is Germany, where there are nearly 60 thousand Assyrians among the 2 million Turkish 'gastarbeiters' (foreign workers). DAVERT MUHLE, a German company located in Senden, annually imports some 30 tons of the highest quality bulgur. RAPUNZEL, another German company, imports even more of the product. Bulgur is customarily available in shops owned by Turkish people. It was only in this century that western countries took note of bulgur. Through the 1960's and 1970's, in the United States, this product led to laboratory investigations, numerous patents, treatises, and publications. All stages of bulgur production have been automated in accordance with modern technologies. Today, bulgur is one of the important wheat products in the U.S., and it is included in the special list of food rations in nuclear fallout shelters.⁴

Bulgur - An Important Wheat Product in the Cuisine of Contemporary Assyrians in the Middle East, Staple Foods, Proceedings, 27-37, Prospect Books Ltd., London 1990; M. Abdalla, *Bulgur - a Key to Contemporary Assyrian Cuisine*, Journal of Assyrian Academic Society, vol. VI, No. 1 (1992), 3-17, Des Plaines, IL, USA.

³ While in the Netherlands in 1992, this author had the opportunity to visit *Turks Grill Restaurant*, located in Hengelo, Drienerstraat 17. The establishment was run by an Assyrian family and its menu included several dishes prepared with bulgur according to home recipes, and these were said to be quite popular among Dutch people. See, M. Abdalla, *Asyryjskie restauracje w Holandii* (Assyrian restaurants in Holland), *Przegląd Gastronomiczny*, no.1, 1990, 27-8, Warszawa.

⁴ On mechanization and automation of bulgur production, see inter alia, W.L. Haley and J.W. Pence, *Bulgur - an Ancient Wheat Food*, *Cereal Science Today*, vol.5, no.7 (1960), 203-7; R.E.Ferrel and J.W. Pence, *Effect of Processing Conditions on Dry-Heat Expansion of Bulgur Wheat*, *Cereal Chemistry*, vol.40 (March 1963), 175-82; A.D.Shepherd, R.E.Ferrel, et.al, *Nutrient Composition of Bulgur and Lye-Peeled Bulgur*. *Cereal Science Today*, vol.10, no.11 (1965), 590-2; B.Singh and L.M.Dodda, *Studies on the Preparation and Nutrient Composition of Bulgur from Triticale*, *Journal of Food Science*, vol.44, No.2 (1979), 449-55; R.E. Ferrel, H.Majorie, J.W. Pence, *Canned Products from Bulgur and Wheat*. *Food Technology*, vol.17 (August 1963), 56-8; R.E. Ferrel, A.D. Shepherd, et.al., *Gun-Puffing Wheat and Bulgur*, *Cereal Chemistry*, vol.43

Among the many products made with bulgur, we call special attention to *terkhayno* (kishk). This entails mixing bulgur with yogurt, and leaving it to ferment. A resulting lactic acid gives the product its characteristic taste, while fermentation itself enriches it with many beneficial substances, including vitamin B2 and niacin.⁵ This is a novel product which became the subject of scientific research in Europe, the USA and Mexico.⁶ In a laboratory scale production, it turns out that yogurt can be replaced with whey, which is quite often a waste product in the dairy industry.⁷

The range of amino acids necessary to form proteins is often lacking in individual foodstuffs or food products, and this can be remedied by combining two substances, so that the amino acids in the first will supplement those in the second. One of the Assyrian traditional culinary procedures is to simply mix wheat with either milk or its derivatives or milk products. The aforementioned *terkhayno* is such an example. There are also milk and cereal hot dishes such as *labaniye* (wheat grain cooked with either buttermilk or diluted yogurt), *gabula* (boiled wheat grain mixed with cold buttermilk obtained by dissolving buttermilk which had been dried solid in summer), and *dokhwa* (similar to *gabula*, except that the wheat is replaced with barley boiled with meat and bones).⁸

Milk

The ancient people of Mesopotamia may be viewed as the pioneers of milk processing. As early as 2500 B.C., a detailed relief illustrates the stages of butter production. Milk management by modern Assyrians avoids any waste; it is environment-friendly. Proper condensation of buttermilk yields a soft cheese resembling French Roquefort. To accommodate a slow maturing process in a dry and warm climate, the amphora containing condensed buttermilk is buried inside the house. Whey is used in baking. Derived from yogurt butter, desiccated buttermilk or cottage cheese in brine are also stored in an unperishable form. The

(Sept. 1966), 529-37; R.E.Ferrel, J.W.Pence, et.al, *Food for Fallout Shelters, IV-A Special Shelter Ration Based on a Cereal Wafer*, Food Technology, vol.16 (Sept. 1962), 45-9; A.I.Morgan, E.J.Barta, et.al, *Peeling Grain*, Food Technology, vol.18 (August 1964), 40-3; J.W.Pence, R.E. Ferrel, et.al., *The Composition of Commercial Bulgur*, Cereal Science Today, vol.10, no.11 (December 1965), 587-96.

⁵ W.R.Aykroyd and J.Doughty, *Wheat in Human Nutrition*, FAO Nutritional Studies, no.23, 64-6, Rome, Italy (1970).

⁶ A.Y. Tamime and R.K. Robinson, *Yoghurt - Science and Technology*, 247-51, Pergamon Press, 1985.

⁷ A.M. Hamada and M.I. Fields, *Preliminary Evaluation of New Type of Kishk Made from Whey*, Journal of Food Science, vol. 49 (1982), 1140-2.

⁸ M. Abdalla, *Milk in the rural Culture of Contemporary Assyrians in the Middle East*, in *Milk and Milk Products from Medieval to Modern Times* (ed. Patricia Lysaght), 27-40, Canongate Press, Edinburgh, Scotland (1994).

marvelous smell and taste of yogurt obtained from lactic fermentation can be compared to the aroma of freshly baked bread. It was not until the 1950's that this Middle Eastern delicacy gained popularity in Europe.⁹

Bread

Georges Contenau's *Everyday Life in Babylonia and Assyria* describes the similarity of modern bread in Iraq to that which was baked in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁰ There is little doubt that among those now inhabiting the region, the Assyrians more than any other can lay claim to direct lineage from these ancient people. In due course, a number of them were forced to apostasy; in the process, they lost hold of their original identity along with many of their old customs.

The shape of Middle Eastern bread resembles a flat round cake. That was the original shape of bread everywhere. In Mesopotamia, in its most genuine form, it was baked at a very high temperature (about 500° C), creating in just a few seconds a balloon-like empty chamber inside the flat loaf (archaeologists have in fact discovered the remains of ovens which were used for that kind of bread). This empty space results from the high temperature applied over a layer of dough merely 2-3 mm. thick. All walls of the oven and its floor are heated up to the same temperature. The moment the dough is placed on the oven's stone floor, gases and steam are generated. Escaping the heat, these gather inside the dough and force its upper and lower layers outwards, thus creating the interior empty chamber. The name of this type of bread varies from one country to the next. It is an ideal sandwich bread which has aroused the interest of Europeans. They have carried out research on the product, and it is a popular bread in restaurants run by Middle East emigres.¹¹

Sweetener

It is probably that until the 1950's, the only sweetener used by Assyrians was grape syrup (and date syrup to a lesser extent). To produce it, juice extracted from grapes is thickened in the sun or through boiling. In the southern Turkey villages of Tur Abdin (close to Syria's eastern border), one can see stone constructions permanently installed to extract juice. The concentration of soluble substances in syrup is high enough to avoid spoilage even during long-term storage. The syrup contains valuable mineral salts and various forms of mono-

⁹ Tamime, *ibid*, p.234.

¹⁰ Georges Contenau, *La vie quotidienne a Babylone et en Assyrie*, Librairie Hachette, Polish edition: *Zycie codzienne w Babilonie I Asyrii*, PIW, Warszawa (1963) 62-3.

¹¹ On a Summer 1992 visit to a bakery owned by Assyrian people in Sodertalje, Sweden, this writer observed use of semi-automated technology for the production of true flat bread with a diameter slightly larger than that of the Middle Eastern version. In Warsaw, two restaurants (*Sheherazada* and *Ugarit*) are equipped with ovens baking bread with produces an empty interior chamber; and it is served with their meals.

and poly-saccharides.¹² Unripe grape juice was used as a sour flavoring in cooking until the advent of citric acid.

Grape Products

Assyrians also derive other products from grape syrup. When thickened, it is mixed with wheat flour of differing granulation. It is then dried in various shapes, such as flat cakes or 'plaits' of varying thickness, texture and size. Very often, these will be flavoured with nuts. With children in mind, wheat and syrup pulp are also used to produce edible animal figures for the New Year's celebrations.

The Assyrians produce raisins in a most unique manner. Grapes are dipped in a boiling solution containing dissolved ash of burnt maize stems or rock-salt. The solution contains ions of bivalent and trivalent metals, the most important being ions of calcium. These ions react with pectines in the fruit skin, making the latter stronger. Consequently, the fruit does not give off juice during heating and it drains easily during drying, thus producing the desired gloss. Such techniques are known in fruit and vegetable technology.¹³

Garden Vegetables

Assyrians traditionally use a lot of vegetables in their diet. This was characteristic of their cuisine in ancient times. Acceptance of Christianity, and the observance of fasting for more than half the year, simply reinforced this tendency (a lentil dish is a good example of an indispensable fast dish rich in iron).

Vegetables deserve special note, since they are hardly processed prior to consumption. Cucumbers are rarely peeled, carrots are seldom cooked, and no

¹² Purified sucrose adds only flavor to dishes, delivering 'empty calories' to the organism. However, its excessive consumption is conducive to dental caries, obesity, diabetes, and other modern-age diseases. One of the trends of 'health food' promotion in highly industrialized countries aims at decreasing sucrose consumption. The most successful country in this regard is the United States, where the use of enzymes had led to production of a wide-ranging number of fructose corn syrups. S. Kolodny, *Economic Factors Affecting Future Sweetener of Consumption*, paper presented at American Chemical Society's Symposium on U.S. Sweetener System, ACS Centennial Meeting, New York City, April 18, 1976; B.L. Zoumas, *Nutritive Sweeteners*, Food Drug Cosmetic Law Journal, March 1979, 162-70; I. Smith, *The Development of Natural Sweeteners as Alternatives to Cane and Beet Sugar*, Journal of Agricultural Economics, vol. XXIX, no.2 (1978), 155-63; Ph.E.Coleman and C.A.Z. Harbers, *High Fructose Corn Syrup: Replacement for Sucrose in Angel Cake*, Journal of Food Science, vol.48 (1983), 452-6; H. Saussele, H.F. Zeigler, et al., *High Fructose Corn Syrup for Bakery Applications*, The Bakers' Digest, February (1976), 32-4.

¹³ For example, when preparing the pickle for canned green peas, some calcium chloride can be added to the liquid. The insoluble calcium pectate which is produced in the skin diminishes the seed leaking, keeps the pickle clear, and prevents commercially unwanted sediment. In the USA, calcium chloroxide is commonly added to gherkins (about 700,000 tons), which stops them from turning soft.

one discards radish leaves. Even fresh grapevine leaves are a favorite of teenagers. The love for raw vegetables is reflected in the common practice of pickling, which is employed to preserve rutabagas, carrots, cabbage, peppers, beets, cauliflower, radish, garlic, grapevine leaves, semi-ripe tomatoes, and cucumbers. Pickling is the cheapest and healthiest way of preserving vegetables. Of equal importance, it enables the preservation of their nutritive value, while enriching them with lactic acid.

A lot of vegetables are sun-dried. Others are stuffed either directly (vine leaves, sorrel, cabbage and beets) or after hollowing out (potatoes, onion, tomatoes, summer squash, eggplant and peppers). The stuffing normally consists of rice mixed with minced meat, finely chopped parsley and garlic.

Another popular Assyrian method of preserving vegetables utilizes oil and spices rich in phytoncides. For example, eggplants are boiled in water, salted and laid under a press for a day to drain them. They are then filled with chopped peppers and left under a press again. The juice squeezed from the peppers probably replaces the remaining water, increasing the vegetable's resistance to microbiological infections. The eggplants are stuffed with crushed nuts, chopped peppers, garlic and sesame seeds, and they are poured over with oil. In another example, thickened yogurt is flavoured with mint, pepper and salt. It is then formed into small balls with oil poured over them. This milk dish is popular today throughout the Middle East, and it is commonly known by its Arabic name of *labne*.

Seeds

Assyrians are particularly fond of various roasted products. Those containing oil yield the pleasant nut flavour after roasting. Seeds are washed, sun-dried and boiled for a long time in salted water with some ash added. On occasion, they are roasted in heated sand. This writer does not have precise information on the amount of seed consumption (watermelon, pumpkin, or sunflower) in an average Assyrian family. Suffice it to say that it is substantial, and seeds provide a rich source of mineral substances, oil and protein.¹⁴

¹⁴ Villages sow their fields in May/June, following the harvest. Despite the dry climate, watermelon stems are sometimes several meters in length, and the size of the long round fruit may even reach half a meter. Crops can be so abundant that the fruit is only used for its seeds, leaving the rest as horse fodder. The act of peeling watermelon can be viewed as an artistic skill in itself. A thick slice of skin cut off from the side of the stalk is divided into four parts. It is then conspicuously thrown to the ground for fortune-telling purposes. The same activity may be repeated by several persons. Due to the absence of refrigeration, the cubed flesh of watermelon is left exposed to the sun for a while to cool down. Some varieties of watermelon are kept in chaff, and they are used to decorate the New Year's table as they gradually and slowly ripen (the same procedure is applied to tomatoes).

Rubbing with the inside of watermelon skin is a cure for prickly heat. In the 1960's, a Bulgarian doctor who worked in Qamishli (in northeastern Syria) lectured his town patients that they suffered more illness than their counterparts in the country side because their watermelon consumption was not as great. In fact, this writer has personally

Attention must be paid to the technique and tempo of getting ‘flesh’ out of seeds with tongue only, but without use of hands. Even now that they are in diaspora, Assyrians cannot give up this delicacy. In places such as Sodertalje, some of the Swedish students, following the example of their Assyrian friends, bring seeds to school in their pockets, and eat them during breaks.¹⁵

Potato

The potato was introduced to Assyrians by Europeans about 150 years ago. It now plays an important part in Assyrian cuisine, and it is used to prepare some 20 dishes. It is not clear why Assyrian housewives boil potato tubers without peeling them. But it is scientifically established that the skin protects the nutritious substances located under it from being leached out. Tuber peeling also leads to decomposition of vitamin C, due to the oxygen present in cold water.¹⁶

Other

A considerable part of Assyrian cuisine includes vegetables which grow wild. One-pot dishes are prepared with mallow, endive, chicory, purslane and sorrel. Use is also made of stroksbill, wart cress, thistle, hawsbeard, hawweed, shepherd’s needle, wood sorrel, and others.¹⁷ No one has yet discovered how much fiber, minerals and vitamin A can be delivered to a living organism via such a dish.¹⁸

experienced the curative property of watermelon. In the summer of 1963, while helping his father plow in a remote village, this writer took seriously ill after eating a potato dish. Father stopped his work, and after much effort, managed to locate a vehicle to take his son to the doctor in Qamishli. The vehicle was a lorry loaded with sacks of wheat. At a stop en route, when this writer caught sight of appetizing watermelons in a nearby shop, he was overcome by a desperate urge to bite into one. Eating one *satfo* (a vertically cut slice) proved sufficient to effect a wondrous cure. Oddly enough, the Kurds living in that village did not grow watermelons at all.

¹⁵ It is said that when sunflower seeds packed in small plastic bags began to appear in Swedish shops in the 1970’s, Assyrian emigrants would buy up all the stock. Until that time, bird breeders had been the principal buyers of seeds. When Assyrians later discovered that the seeds they purchased also contained sand, they continued to buy the product and sifted the sand at home.

¹⁶ See M. Abdalla, *Role of the Potato in Assyrian Cuisine in the Middle East*, Paper presented at 10th International Ethnological Food Research Conference, Freising, Germany, June 6-10, 1994.

¹⁷ For the nutritious value of these and other plants, as applied to Lebanon, see J.W.Cowan, A.H.Sakr, et al., *Composition of Edible Wild Plants of Lebanon*, Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture, vol.14 (July 1963), 484-8.

¹⁸ On a 1992 visit to Sweden, this writer and a Polish professor of food technology had an opportunity to taste an Assyrian breakfast consisting of powdered hyssop and thyme,

There are considerably fewer Assyrians living in their traditional homeland than, say, a century ago. In some parts of the Middle East, their survival is threatened altogether. This is particularly so in Tur Abdin, which until recently had been the principal center of Western Assyrians. In Syria, the tendency is to migrate from the countryside to urban areas. The unstable situation in northern Iraq and Iranian Urmia does not present a favorable atmosphere for free and complete cultivation following old traditions. However, notwithstanding the misfortunes they have suffered through the ages, the culinary-minded among them have persisted in their craft. In diaspora communities in Western Europe, these Middle Eastern Christians continue to practice their culinary skills. Their dishes are commonly served during meetings, club and family celebrations.

This writer personally experienced this on June 5, 1994, at a meeting of the Assyrian club in Munich. Each family brought a home-made Assyrian dish; presumably by previous understanding, each pot offered something different.

The description of many technologies used to process various raw materials have been recorded on tapes in the form of folk songs. Such recordings can be found in almost every single Assyrian household. Recently, that repertoire has been amplified with cooking recipes. In Goteborg, Sweden, a music band of young people known as "*Assyrian Boys*" has released a cassette containing a song entitled "*Ahna tre kutlena*" ("*We are two dumplings*") --the *kutle*, a dumpling prepared with bulgur, meat and onion, is one of the most popular Assyrian dishes. This cassette has become quite a success.¹⁹

sesame and oil. The Polish professor found the dish so palatable that he commented: *I wonder if our research aims in the right direction.*

¹⁹ *Assyrian Boys*, produced by and recorded at Nineveh Studio, Box 55012, 400 53 Goteborg, Sweden, 1992.