existence of three great areas of culinary innovation: Iran (a continuing influence upon Iraq); Moorish Spain, where there was a great cross-fertilization of Muslim, Christian, and Jew, of Arab, Berber, and Spaniard; and the Ottoman Empire, where, by Sultan Mehmet II’s design, there was an even greater cultural fusion in the metropolis of Istanbul (see TURKEY). But these are at bottom local colourings of a cuisine that had taken its basic shape in the 9th century. CP Reading Perry (1998, 2000), Zubaida and Tapper (1994).

Arabian food — a term used to indicate the food of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and the Sultanate of Oman, which constitute the Gulf Co-operation Council countries of Arabia. They cover some 2.5 million square km (965,000 square miles) and have a population of about 25 million, of whom a substantial proportion are expatriates. This results in the availability of a very wide range of foods. (There is a separate entry for Yemen.)

The terrain is varied with extensive desert areas, a long coastline, and mountains in the eastern and western fringes. The monsoon reaches the southern coast but the majority of the land receives only occasional rainfall. The agriculture does, however, achieve a wide range of produce although it is only well developed over limited areas of the peninsula.

The indigenous Bedouin tribes have a strong but basic food culture (see BEDOUIN FOOD). Historically the region’s food has been influenced by the surrounding cultures, Ottoman to the north, the Horn of Africa to the west, and Iran and India to the east. This has resulted in a diverse and well-developed cuisine in the main population centres.

The presentation of food and the format of meals is similar to what one finds to the north, in Lebanon and Syria.

Lamb is the most popular meat and khousi, baked whole lamb, could be considered to be the national dish of several of these countries. The lamb is stuffed with a chicken, eggs and rice spiced with the baharat spice mixture (see below), saffron, and onions. The baked lamb is served on the bed of rice liberally garnished with almonds and ghee. Lamb is also frequently cooked on skewers either as pieces or as ground meat, kebab mastih. Chicken is the second favourite and is also available freshly roasted from shawarma stalls. These stalls sell the Gulf version of donor kebab (see KEBAB); vertical spit-roasted lamb pieces are sliced and served in some form of flatbread such as masfouda or hollowed-out roll with tomato, parsley, and YAHAVA dressing.

The baharat spice mix is prepared from black pepper, coriander, cassia, cloves, cumin, cardamom, nutmeg, and paprika. Another important flavouring ingredient specific to this region (and for which there is no real substitute) is loomi, dried Omari limes. They are used in meat dishes and also for a refreshing sweet tea.

Fish and prawns feature significantly in the region’s food as all the countries are coastal. Hamouri (groupers) and zabadi (silver pomfret) are particularly esteemed. Maqbool is a dish of prawns cooked with rice, fresh herbs, and vegetables.

Savoury dishes are eaten with rice or flatbread. Yoghurt, laban, and strained yoghurt, labneh, are the most important milk products and are used in a number of dishes. Fresh salt pickles are prepared as an accompaniment to snacks and meat.

Vegetables and pulses are available in wide variety as accompaniments for the meat and fish. Large quantities of fresh herbs are sold in the markets in bunches, mainly parsley, spinach, mint, and coriander but including Ceylon spinach (see BASIL), basil, dill, purslane, rocket, spinach beet, melokhiah, radish tops, spring onions, fenugreek, mallow, and dandelion.

Dates were the most important fruit and continue to be consumed in large quantities, particularly during the fresh date season and Ramadan, the month of fasting. Other fruits which are now available and popular include mango, melon, watermelon, orange, and banana.

Sweet dishes are often based on dates. Balkava is a popular import from Turkish cuisine and the small stuffed pancakes called latiaf (see QATAYEF) are a RAMADAN speciality adopted from northern neighbours.

Dibis, date molasses (see DIBIS), is extracted from dates as they dry and is used in many sweet dishes. There is also a large consumption of honey which particularly appeals to the sweet tooth of the populace.

Coffee, the main drink, has strong associations with the renowned hospitality of the people. It is prepared from finely ground, well-roasted beans and is usually flavoured with cardamom. Tea, the second drink of the region, is usually taken black and very sweet.


archaeology of food — Although previously ignored, the field of food studies is gradually expanding as archaeologists become more interested in ancient daily life and in social and economic networks. We are becoming more able to trace and appreciate the roles of food in the past.

As well as raw ingredients, methods of preparation and prepared dishes, archaeologists also need to investigate by-products, leftovers, and the disposal of food-related materials. A great deal of the archaeological record is composed of rubbish and discards. Although this material may be of little relevance or interest for the study of modern food, it forms the bulk of information available about the past. The inevitable bias this creates, together with the fragmentary nature of archaeological remains, lead to an incomplete and perhaps somewhat inaccurate view of ancient food practices.

Most archaeologists studying food have concentrated on raw ingredients. There are many sources of evidence. Animals used as food can be identified through hard body parts such as bones, teeth, scales, and shell. These usually survive for long periods, often in good condition. Diagnostic marks made by blades on bone and other hard parts show how people butchered animals and the types of tools they used. Plant remains are much more liable to decay, but can be preserved by special circumstances. Plant tissues survive most often by charring through contact with fire, commonly during cooking, but also during rubbish disposal or catastrophic fires. Charred organic remains are inert and can persist for very long periods, although they may be abraded, crushed, or otherwise damaged. More unusually, anaerobic waterlogged environments or mineralization may preserve plant material. In very arid conditions, plant remains (and other organic material) become desiccated.

Direct evidence of diet from human remains can be traced through study of elements such as carbon, oxygen, and nitrogen, which have different molecular weights, known as isotopes. The metabolic pathways of specific plant and animal species may process isotopes differently, or the environment of the food species may contain diagnostic isotope ratios. Thus, most tropical grasses, including maize, have a different ratio of carbon isotopes compared to temperate species. Isotope analysis of the bones of people who are maize detects this typical differential ratio, and is one way that the spread of maize through North America has been tracked.

Favourable circumstances preserve remains of consumed meals in the form of gut contents. Bog bodies from northern Europe contain such remains, but there is debate about whether the people whose bodies were preserved in this way were criminals or ritual sacrifices, and therefore whether their last meals were typical. Desiccated bodies sometimes retain gut contents, but these may be meals of the sick or invalid. Coprolites are sometimes recovered from sites in SW United States, giving a snapshot view of the meals of past inhabitants.

Occasionally, sites yield recognizable finished food products. For example, desiccated bread loaves have been retrieved from ancient Egyptian tombs.
Unintentionally charred bread loaves have been discovered in bakeries at Pompeii entombed by volcanic ash, and deliberately burnt bread offerings have been excavated from Viking graves in Scandinavia.

Until recently, archaeologists have hardly addressed questions about food preparation and consumption. This is largely due to the challenges presented by ancient remains. When preparation transforms raw ingredients, foodstuffs can be very difficult to recognize. The physical and chemical changes which occur during processing make food more digestible, but also make it more vulnerable to decay. In addition, most prepared food was eaten, and scavengers likely consumed any leftovers.

Archaeologists have begun to overcome these challenges of recovery and recognition through new applications of established analytical techniques. Microscopic examinations of tiny traces of residue have revealed clues such as starch granules—which can be diagnostic of specific plants—on stone tools. Edible tuber remains rarely survive in tropical areas but archaeologists have identified cultivated tuber starch granules from ancient Panamanian grinding stones.

Extraction and analysis of invisible chemical residues adhering to pots or potsherds show what those containers once held. This type of work has begun to shed new light on ancient dining, a practice detectable by ageing and selecting large deposits of bone from milk-bearing animal species, but otherwise little understood. The identification of foodstuffs contained in pots, though, is not a simple matter of identifying chemical signatures and matching them with modern ingredients. Biochemicals alter and break down over time and archaeological chemists need to take this into account.

Two other approaches assist the study of ancient food. Ethnography, the study of modern traditional practices, provides invaluable insights into the actions, as well as tools and ingredients, which combine to create food. Archaeologists must carefully choose their examples, however, to ensure that they are relevant to ancient cultures. Experiments with food processing, using accurate replicas or actual examples of ancient equipment, and authentic raw ingredients, can lead to breakthrough understandings of ancient procedures.

Archestratus was a Sicilian Greek of the 4th century BC who ‘circumnavigated the world to satisfy his hunger’ (Athenaeus), or, more accurately, who travelled widely and gathered his knowledge of the Mediterranean into a poem, Hephaestia, thus becoming the world’s first known food writer. For a while his work was well known; in the century after it first appeared Archestratus, unfairly, was a byword among moralists for having encouraged gluttony. The complete poem is now lost, and it would be quite unknown today had not Athenaeus in the Deipnosophistai cited it extensively. These surviving extracts are collected and translated by Douglas Olson and Alexander Sens (2000).

From what remains of his work we can learn much of Archestratus’ gastronomic opinions and even something about himself. His views were set down as practical instructions to one or two named friends, in rough but lively and highly quotable hexameter verse. His chief concern, repeated over and over again in different words, was that the true flavour of fresh produce, chosen in the right place at the right time of year, should be allowed to come through and not be covered up with layers of spices and strong seasonings. ‘Let no Syracusan and no Greek of Italy come near you when you make this dish,’ he says of sea bass, ‘they do not know how to prepare good fish, but wickedly spoil it by chewing everything and dousing it with watery vinegar and pickled herring. He deals mainly with the seafood of Greek coastal cities, from Sicily in the west to Byzantium (Istanbul) in the east. Over fifty place names occur, and a similar number of fish species. These local specialities, as named by Archestratus, often agree with what other ancient sources have to say: this applies, for example, to the fine bread, the anchovies, and the Hymettan honey to be looked for on the Athenian market. Of the produce of many smaller cities, however, we would know little or nothing if it were not for a mention by Archestratus.

He had strong views on the food that should accompany wine at a supper. ‘As you imbibe, have served some such relish as this: tripe or boiled sow’s womb marinated in cumin and sharp vinegar and sulphur, and the tender tribe of birds, such as are in season. Have nothing to do with those Syracusan who simply drink, like frogs, without eating anything.’ In another fragment he recommends hare, cooked rare, for a similar occasion. But Archestratus had no time for fancy dinner parties or complicated menus. ‘All to dine at one hospitable table,’ he wrote; ‘there shall be three or four friends altogether or at most five, or you would have a tentful of plundering mercenaries.’ Sicilian cities were prey to bands of mercenary soldiers in Archestratus’ time: this is the one sly political reference in his poem. Its publication can be dated fairly closely, between about 390 and 386 BC, because it is only during this short period that a reader could have been recommended to visit all the cities named.

Reading: Dalby (1996); Archestratus (1994).