

Conference Report

**A Moveable Feast:
“Food as a Cultural Signifier”
(American University of Beirut, 12-14 May 2016)**

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The American University of Beirut and its entire community were treated to an extraordinary feast on the occasion of the recent interdisciplinary conference “Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier” held at AUB on May 12-14, 2016. The conference was a project of the Arab German Young Academy (AGYA) working group "Common Heritage and Common Challenges" in cooperation with the AUB and German Orient Institut. It was organized by Kirill Dmitriev (University of St Andrews), Julia Hauser (University of Kassel), and Bilal Orfali (American University of Beirut). The conference brought together researchers from several countries working in a variety of fields, such as Literature, Sociology, Psychology, History, Philosophy and Religious studies. They came to discuss the cultural traditions of food in the Mediterranean region, and to enjoy the celebrated delicious Lebanese cuisine, but they were also offered a dinner of specially prepared authentic dishes from the

Abbasid period in Baghdad. Furthermore, they were treated to a day long *riḥla* to the Beqaa and a boat-trip on Qaraoun lake.

In all the presentations, a fine balance was achieved between historical and contemporary traditions, just as between theoretical aspects of the theme and its practical manifestations. A good measure of humor enlivened the discussions, although the scholarship itself was indeed serious and proved that the topic of food deserves a place of honor at the academic table. The conference demonstrated to what extent traditions surrounding food permit the exchange of enduring human values across national, religious, ethnic as well as class boundaries. An aspect of existence that is renewed each day, the cultural significance of food is often underestimated, unless it is lacking, when suddenly it is recognized as essential to both physical and social life.

The conference opened with a session entitled, “Food and Social Status” where Brigitte Caland (American University of

Beirut) presented a panoramic view of the significance of food among the rich and powerful from Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman times to that of the Abbasid period and beyond. Ms. Caland explained that abundant food was offered to the Gods and food was often featured in stories about them, as in the Gilgamesh epic. The Gods drank wine and used food the way humans do, as a means to achieve a desired goal. The Gods were served roast meats to keep them “happy” and favorable to mankind. Even the staples of bread and beer helped in the planning of projects.

As Ms. Caland noted, food and lavish festivities were used by monarchs and sundry elites as a means to celebrate important events such as weddings, military victories, architectural projects or the visits of dignitaries. But they were also used to project their own importance and guarantee their hegemony, at least among the upper classes. She cited examples of Sargon and other Akkadian rulers whose extravagant banquets were able to feed thousands for several days. But she also explained that the ceremony of serving and consuming food became an essential social and political occasion for holding high-level commercial exchanges. And such occasions also favored the exchange of ideas and nourished various intellectual movements. Through these culinary occasions, food became instrumental in defining and demarcating civilized society. Indeed, it seems that the culture of food was a powerful source of spectacle and symbolism for royalty that rivaled that of other signs of wealth, perhaps because it also involved the virtues of hospitality and generosity.

In a talk entitled “The Ritualization of Food and Table-Talk in Arabic Traditions,”

Nuha Al-Shaar (American University of Sharjah) described the protocol surrounding banquet culture in the pre-Islamic and medieval Arabic periods. She affirmed that the rituals relating to meals were expressions of wealth and social standing, but the banquet table was also a space of literary expression. Descriptions of rituals relating to food have appeared in many Arabic literary sources, notably in the work of al-Jāhīz, but also al-Tawḥīdī, Ibn Qutayba and Abu Nuwas. The *adāb al-māʿida* turned the banquet table into a transformative social event, a means to strengthen social and political bonds, but also a way to develop individual intellectual and ethical refinement through the lively exchange of ideas and concrete examples of such values as hospitality.

The question of abundance and scarcity as well as that of excess and restraint were at the center of banquet protocol, which can be seen in the frequent criticism of greed in relation to eating, a trait seemingly tied to a host of moral attributes that have social and political implications. Describing the ancient Persian kings, Ms. Al-Shaar explained that they excluded greedy persons from their gatherings, and believed that overeating lowered intelligence, hardened the heart, and made one vulnerable to disease. By contrast, hospitality included the laudable virtue of generosity, expressed succinctly by al-Jāhīz in the phrase, “Put others before yourself.”

In his presentation entitled “Social Dining, Banqueting and the Cultivation of a Coherent Social Identity: Damascene ‘Ulamā in the Late Mamluk/Early Ottoman Period,” Tarek Abu Hussein (Harvard University) explained that social dining



Conference participants at the American University of Beirut, May 2016.
(Photo courtesy of Bilal Orfali)

and banquets were forums for the scholarly elite to shape for itself a privileged identity, one that set it apart from other social classes. Despite the general paucity of sources on the period, Ibn Ṭūlūn wrote numerous works across several fields of scholarship, some of which speak of food, notably figs and fava beans, and which also tell us about the codes of etiquette of social dining in that era. The intellectual elite disdained the ostentatious gatherings of the merely wealthy, and used their own banquets as occasions for gaining political favor.

A second source, Badr al-Dīn al-Ghazzī, wrote primarily about what *not* to do at banquets, such as to offer food to servants, be over-eager, spit, scratch, grab bread and hoard it, stare at others' food, remain silent, or speak of vulgar subjects. The guests were obliged to yield to the host's desire to please them even if they were fasting. The host's obligations included

doing whatever necessary to satisfy guests, maintaining a cheerful disposition, not being miserly with food, and not distracting guests with conversation that prevents them from eating. The manuals make clear that dining was not a simple, nor even 'natural' affair, but an elaborate, highly coded event in which no less than one's entire social reputation was at stake.

In his paper entitled "Food and Politics: Political Banquet Culture in Berlin in the 1920s and 30s," Norman Domeier (University of Stuttgart) described how the consumption of food functioned as an integral part of political culture, especially during the rise of Fascism. Recently opened archives have revealed the elaborate banquets of the German Press Club, which hosted international journalists for the "protection of common interests." The ultimate event was the Foreign Press Ball, which was attended by politicians, religious authorities, and "fat

cats,” and served as a forum for political propaganda. As Mr. Domeier explained, the Ball featured a French menu, and encouraged the lavish consumption of luxury goods such as alcohol and cigarettes, as well as dancing as a kind of remedy for excess. The Ball was mediatized in photos where famous people could be observed, and often satirized as well. When Brüning stepped down in 1932, Goebbels expressed relief and excoriated the decadence of the Ball at a time of economic hardship. As Mr. Domeier clearly demonstrated, the culture of food must be examined as an integral part of social and political history.

In a paper entitled, “Peeling Onions, Layer by Layer,” Yasmin Amin (University of Exeter) discussed the diverse functions and often contradictory meanings associated with onions and garlic since ancient times. In Egypt, garlic was believed to stimulate breathing in mummies, cure toothaches, and was found in Tutankhamun’s tomb. The Israelites remembered it fondly after the exodus, and soldiers and pyramid builders were thought to be strengthened by it. Egyptians believed onions and garlic were gifts of God, and they were placed in infants’ rooms to ward off the evil spirits. The Prophet is said to have eaten onions at his last meal, and to have advised people to eat onions when arriving in a new country to fend off its diseases. Garlic and onions were supposed to reduce phlegm and fever and increase sperm count, and in both Indian and Arabic treatises, were used in recipes for sexual potency.

But if garlic and onions were reputed to have remarkable benefits, they also inspired harsh criticism and even disgust for the effects of eating them raw, for they were associated with flatulence

and bad breath. After Galen’s *Kitāb* was translated in the 8th century, the science of “dietetics” examined their positive and negative benefits, and found that they had anti-bacterial properties and could be used to induce fever, cure ear and eye infections, aid in contraception, and even protect against epidemics. But according to codes of the *zurafā*², they were socially inadmissible. Nonetheless, their positive attributes seem to have outnumbered the negative ones, as we see from the Egyptian proverb, “An onion offered out of love is worth a sheep.”

In the session “Prohibitions and Prescriptions I,” Karen Moukheiber (American University of Beirut) presented a paper entitled, “Beyond Halal: The Do’s and Don’ts of Islamic Cookery in Urban Medieval Syria.” In it she described the careful oversight and detailed attention paid to the preparation and sale of food, according to a 12th century *ḥisba* manual by Shayrazī, which introduced elaborate rules for the urban marketplace. Besides basic religious prescriptions and proscriptions, it provides a number of other instructions to guarantee hygiene and convenience that reflect a sophisticated sense of urban culture and its sensitivities. It stipulates the spatial organization of the different merchants, the ways in which they could display their produce, and asks that the daily delivery of materials such as flour be sufficient to provide bread for the community. It also says that food should be available on the roads outside the city for travelers. Their regulations for cleanliness were demanding, as were the rules for the use of utensils, but Ms. Moukheiber showed clearly that the purpose of the manual went far “beyond Halal,” to contribute to the building of a society of

mutual respect and civility.

In the session entitled "Prohibitions and Prescriptions II," Mariam al-Attar (American University of Sharjah) presented a paper on "Food Ethics: The Debate over the Permissibility of Genetically Modified Food (GMO) in Contemporary Muslim Juridical Ethics." As she explained, the issue is controversial, but particularly challenging for Muslim cultures because the topic has not yet had the open public debate that it has in Europe and the U.S. Many believe that modified food is Halal, assuming that the modification does not incur any deleterious effects. Ms. Attar raised the question of whether political power may simply hand the matter over to religious authorities to decide. She also explained that certain profit-seeking corporations such as Monsanto exert undue pressure on the debate, and on the market as well, and that their farming practices may even contribute to food scarcity as well as unhealthy produce. But she emphasized that Muslims need to become more informed about the advantages and disadvantages of GMO food in order to make rational rather than purely law-based decisions about it.

The conditions of certification of Halal food was the subject of Shaheed Tayob's (Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen) presentation, "Theoretical Reflections on Halal Food," which described how globalization and modern technology have complicated the process of certification. He mentioned the fact that the traditional trust that prevailed between communities and known individual authorities has become increasingly decentered, so that methods of certification may vary considerably between regions, just as between religious

and ethnic groups. Intermediary factors such as transportation and storage may also affect Halal food. He also raised questions about the commercialization of the process and asked whether extra conditions of certification were always reasonable or based on selfish motives. And he raised local issues such as Lebanon's food crisis and the problem of corruption which naturally affects the conditions of certification. He made it clear that certification of Halal food has become so complex and diversified that its conditions are no longer governed by religious criteria alone.

In a session entitled "The Body," Christian Junge (University of Marburg) presented a paper entitled, "Food, Body, Society: Al-Shidyāq's 'Somatic Critique' of 19th Century Modernities." He analyzed Shidyāq's complex critique of European modernity and those aspects of Arabic modernity which sought to adopt 'distasteful' features of European culture. Mr. Junge explained that Shidyāq targets the reformists who would reduce Arabic to a language of utility, denying its extraordinary poetic and emotional power. Shidyāq celebrates the sensual pleasure of the Arabic language as he also celebrates the feminine in Arabic culture against the hegemony of masculine Islamic authorities. Mr. Junge described the way Shidyāq identifies the consumption of food with the physical and imaginative pleasures of using language, which were enjoyed as he moved from culture to culture and meal to meal around the Mediterranean, where he also critiqued the speech and table manners of foreigners. Mr. Junge presented the often paradoxical aspects of the text, suggesting that the reader must tread carefully, because Shidyāq

is a great ironist.

In her presentation, “Trapped in Eternal Servitude? Chocolate as a Racial Signifier and the Case of the German ‘Sarotti Mohr’,” Silke Hackenesch (University of Kassel) described the marketing of chocolate, a lucrative colonial product like coffee, in commercials featuring young black and brown-skinned men figured as signs of luxury and cosmopolitanism. As Ms. Hackenesch explained, racism as well as orientalism were common in German art of the 18th and 19th centuries, but Germany’s humiliating defeat in World War I caused her to turn toward her African colonies. Ms. Hackenesch emphasized the paradox of the men who labored under punishing conditions in the tropics to produce the commodity of chocolate, and then were used as commodities to be consumed in advertisements that evoked a life of luxury they never knew. Ms. Hackenesch explained that these images were marketed especially to women and children, as if sweets, like illusions, were for the weak, when in fact it seems clear that Germany’s need for illusions of purity and grandeur under Fascism was a sign of her own dependency which caused her to insist on an exaggerated distinction between herself and her “dark-skinned Others.”

For the keynote lecture at the Orient-Institut, Eric Dursteier (Brigham Young University) presented a paper entitled “The ‘Abominable Pig’ and the ‘Mother of All Vices’: Pork, Wine, and Culinary Encounters in the Early Modern Mediterranean.” He cautioned against the tendency to exaggerate differences in food consumption among different religious groups throughout in the Mediterranean, but spoke primarily about the Iberian Peninsula. He focused on the example

of pork and wine among Moriscos in the 16th century, explaining that although the Spanish Inquisition had a vested interest in establishing firm distinctions between groups, in fact, the realities were much more complex, and many Muslims sincerely embraced the Christian faith and Christian habits. Some refrained from consuming pork simply out of distaste for it or because they were raised otherwise. In any case, consumption of meat decreased among all groups in that period, and Christians ate less pork and shifted from using pork lard to olive oil. And some Christians refrained from pork out of sympathy for Muslims, as did Copts and Melkites elsewhere. The Iberian Peninsula was the intersection of many cultures, a mingling of Christian, Arabic, Berber, African and New World traditions, and the various groups shared many of the same eating habits. Mr. Domeier’s paper proved that while political or religious authorities often seek to emphasize differences between people, the culture of food serves to connect them.

In the session on “Intoxication,” Bilal Orfali (American University of Beirut) presented a paper entitled “Wine and Humanism in Early Islam.” He began by alluding to the ambiguous status of wine in Islam, which precludes any simple answer to the question of whether or not it is prohibited. It is often assumed to be so, but wine flows in the rivers of paradise, and references in the Qur’ān and Arabic poetry are often ambiguous. Mr. Orfali introduced the perspective of Islamic humanists such as the Moroccan Mohammed Arkoun and the Iranian ‘Abd al-Karim Soroush, who have encouraged the consideration of historical and contextual factors in understanding religious questions.

As Mr. Orfali explained, wine's status in Islam ranges from being an object of scorn to being seen as the agent of mystical epiphanies. How we understand the status of wine depends on how it is defined in relation to the varied contexts of Islamic cultural history. The Arabic word for wine, *khamr*, was derived from the Aramaic, and is both masculine and feminine. The verb means to cover, but also to ferment. Like the noun *sakar*, it causes intoxication, which can be seen also as a 'covering' of the mind or obscuring of clear vision. While in the Qur'ān it appears at moments 'good' and at others 'dangerous,' in the prophetic texts its consumption is generally condemned, as are activities related to it, such as pressing, mixing, selling and serving it. It must be shunned in relation to prayer or religious rites, and it may be counted among the serious sins (*kabā'ir*), probably because it was believed that wine clouds the mind and lowers resistance to temptation. As Mr. Orfali explained, there are rules which apply to the *Ahl al-kitāb*, and others to the *Dhimmi*, as well as special conditions of necessity, such as extreme thirst or medical need.

References to wine abound in historical texts and the *Sīra* where it may be perceived negatively, but is rarely condemned outright. In *Ayyām al-ʿArab*, wine was often served to celebrate success in battle, and Arabs were exposed to the habits of many non-Muslim kings of surrounding states who drank wine. In pre-Islamic poetry, wine was common, but it also continued to figure prominently afterwards. It appeared in classical *qaṣīdas* with themes of *madīḥ*, *hijā'* and *ḥikma*, and then developed into a genre of its own, *al-khamriyya*, made famous by such poets as Abū Nuwās who extended the topic to

include the tavern, the beauty of the wine-pourer, the senuous properties of the wine and its symbolism.

Finally, Mr. Orfali described what might be termed the positive functions of wine in relation to eroticism, love, and spirituality. In hedonistic poets of the *ghazal*, such as ʿUmar b. Abī Rabīʿa, wine was equated with women and the mesmerizing effect of their charms, but it was also part of a new urban culture that celebrated pleasure. In mystical poetry, wine has a long tradition, especially in the work of Sufi poets such as Ibn al-ʿArabī and Ibn al-Fāriḍ, where the intoxication of wine is associated with becoming free of the self to embrace divine love and wisdom. In relation to both love poetry and mysticism, wine offers access to ecstatic states of being, providing a marked contrast to the notion of wine as *miftaḥ kull sharr*, and confirming Mr. Orfali's opening assertion that it is impossible to define precisely the status of wine in Islam.

Danilo Marino (INALCO, Paris) presented a paper entitled, "Food and Hashish in Mamlūk Literature" in which he described the ambiguous status of hashish which was seen as a dangerous social indulgence but also a substance that inspires extraordinary visions.

Referring to Ibn Sūdūn's *Nuzhat al-nufūs*, Mr. Marino explained that most literary accounts of food tended to be humorous, and often expressed joy in times of scarcity, which he affirmed can also be found in European literature of the early Renaissance. He observed that this sort of paradox was especially evident when associated with the consumption of hashish. In his discussion of al-Badrī's 9th century anthology, *Kitāb rāḥat al-arwāḥ fī al-ḥashīsh wa-al-rāḥ*, he recounted an anecdote about a man addicted to hashish,



The dessert table at the conference banquet.
(Photo courtesy of Bilal Orfali)

who, on hearing a voice telling him to do so, offers hashish to his brother, and than has elaborate dreams of an edible paradise, with a castle made entirely of confectionary delights, a sort of parody of the Islamic *janna*. When he asked for the owner of the castle, a voice told him that it was a reward for his generosity to his brother, whereupon he composed a poem. For most cultures, dreams express hidden desires, and are highly charged symbolically as is the food in them. As Mr. Marino explained, dreams of sweets connote joy and good luck and they are craved by those addicted to drugs like hashish. And the desire for food and sweets

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(as well as sex) are the most powerful. But dreaming of a castle connotes anxiety and death, and is but a corrupted image of the pleasures of paradise.

Food was often figured in popular European literature after the 14th century. Mr. Marino described a text entitled “The Land of Cockaine” in which a vision of a paradise on earth is characterized as a realm where no effort was needed to satisfy desire, food left into mouths, wealth was communally shared, sex was free, work forbidden and life eternal. It had fountains of gold, rivers of milk, houses made of pancakes, pies growing on trees, and roasted chickens running around with forks in them. As parodic as this exorbitant vision may seem, Mr. Marino explained that such images expressed a fear of death in times of extreme scarcity. Hence he concluded that hashish is closely associated with dreaming, and the discourse on hashish is divided between those who believe that it enhances creativity and imagination, and those like Ibn Taymiyya who see it as a dangerous substance that leads to an escape from reality and the loss of rational control.

In the session on “Abstention,” Pedro Martins (University of Göttingen) presented a paper entitled “An Ontological Dispute in the Writings of Porphyry of Tyre: Discussions on Meat-Eating as a Battlefield for Different World-Views in Antiquity.” Using a comparative study of ancient cultures, Porphyry builds an

ontological as well as ethical argument for becoming vegetarian. Mr. Martins affirmed that Porphyry's comparative study of cultures reflected his desire to interpolate between cultures of East and West. Raising the complex question of justice, he differentiates between two groups of traditions, notably those emphasizing hierarchy and clear distinctions in the tradition of Aristotle and the Stoics on the one hand, and those in the tradition of Pythagoras and the Neo-Platonists on the other. He gave examples from ancient cultures which ask us to question the idealized vision of classical Greek culture, where communal consumption may have been linked to an ethical decline. He explained that in Egyptian, Jewish, Minoan, Phoenician and Persian cultures, varying degrees of vegetarianism were intimately linked with their theories of the soul and often with non-violence. Some Eastern cultures sacrificed animals but refrained from eating them. If one considers all living things as having a similar soul, then one presumably cannot condone violence against animals, for they participate, albeit to a lesser degree than humans, in the sacred unity of being. If, on the other hand, one believes that the intelligent human soul is wholly distinct from that of other beings, then arguably animals may be used to nourish it. Interestingly, a certain paradox emerged relating to the question of justice and boundaries: the vegetarian traditions extend ontological boundaries to embrace all beings, but at the same time set ethical boundaries in advocating abstentionism.

Speaking on "Veganism and the Ethics of Medieval Authorship in Ma'arri's Personal Correspondance," Kevin Blankinship (University of Chicago) began

by citing Wallace Stevens' poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" to introduce the ways in which judgment is affected by differences in perception. Mr. Blankinship analyzed the correspondance between the blind poet al-Ma'arri, living in Northern Syria, and al-Shirazi, an official state missionary in Fatimid Cairo, where Shiism (Ismailism) prevailed. Their exchange addressed questions of ethics and even theology, but Mr. Blankinship also saw in them implications for good governance. The document was already at least one or two removes from the actual exchange, but understanding the debate depends to some degree on a philological or literary interpretation. Al-Ma'arri seems to argue for vegetarianism (and later veganism) based on his vision of the cyclical process of life and death, whereby the soul may be reborn in another species. Similar to that of certain Hindu precepts, al-Ma'arri's is a rational argument based on respect for the continuity of being and argues against sharp hierarchical distinctions. His description of a mother sheep weeping at the loss of her lamb is an anthropomorphical and poetic image that invests animals with feelings similar to humans. As Mr. Blankinship explained, while it is very likely that al-Ma'arri believed that veganism was part of an ethical commitment that had ontological and perhaps political implications, we do not know precisely how this vision affected his notion of personal identity, except that we may presume that it differed from one that places man at the pinnacle of God's creation.

Julia Hauser (University of Kassel) presented a paper entitled, "Between Universalism and Exclusion: German and British advocates of Vegetarianism in

the Ottoman Empire and Egypt.” In it she addressed the issue of Western narratives of modernity which tended to attribute positive aspects of modernity observed in the East to the influence of European culture, and to characterize the Oriental as an emotional being in contrast to the rational European. These narratives emphasize differences and boundaries between Europe and its others. A vegetarian organization in Prussia reported on eating habits in Ottoman Cairo, finding that meat was rare, but the report looked only at lower classes. The report was interested in the effects of meat abstention on health and physical strength, to find evidence that would suggest that Europeans could benefit from such a diet.

As Ms. Hauser explained, the report romanticized the constraints on food, on the one hand, but on the other, focused exclusively on health reasons and ignored the possibility of a different cosmology as a reason for abstention. Such ideas must have been widely known, however, because Britain had been familiar with Hinduism and the French with Sufism through their colonial experience. Yet in contrast to those beliefs, for whom non-violence and abstention were related to their vision of the cosmos and the continuity of being, as Ms. Hauser explained, the Germans’ choice to abstain from eating meat was not inspired by a special affection for animals. An acknowledgement of the “the animal within” us might prompt a recognition of the many traits we share with animals and thus stimulate compassion, although the European’s need to perceive himself as a supremely “rational being” might well hinder it.

In the session on “Scarcity and Humanitarianism,” Lola Wilhem (The

Graduate Institute, Geneva) spoke about “Local Histories of International Food Aid,” emphasizing the contradictory effects of aid programs. She explained that we can look at the realities of hunger and starvation as in some ways natural phenomena, whereas humanitarian aid introduces an ‘abnormal’ or artificial situation which itself has consequences that are not always propitious. Ms. Willhelm affirmed that food aid has both a colonial and postcolonial history. In the 19th century positivist theories claimed that science could solve most of the world’s social problems, and these ideas engendered experiments in social engineering. In the 20th century industrialized nations have sought to project their influence by means of humanitarian assistance such as food aid and this has included corporate as well as philanthropic donors. After WWII, Europe was rapidly rebuilt, but most of the “third world” lagged behind in development, even after decolonization. The FAO was founded in 1943 and the World Food Program started in 1963, intending to use the surplus markets of the U.S., Canada and Argentina to feed countries in need. But as Ms. Willhelm explained, the priorities and the development pathways of different nations varied, some supporting industrial development, as in the Maghreb and the Middle East, while others favored agriculture, as in some of the French African colonies, which seem to have been more successful. In addition, food aid programs, as all aid programs, are often subject to corruption, partly because they operate in countries where there is not always respect for the rule of law, but also because corporations in donor countries want to market their own products abroad even if they are not the most appropriate

for the situation at hand.

In her paper entitled, "Displacement, Food and Mealtimes: Syrian Refugees and Changing Food Regimes," Reem Maghribi (Sharq for Citizen Development) explained that bottom-up accounts of history, such as those based on oral history, are more accurate than other official accounts. Speaking of her work with Syrian refugees in urban and rural camps in Lebanon, she described the challenges they face as displaced people. Besides the difficulties for those who seek to obtain residency in Lebanon, they are constrained by the security in place to identify extremists, and fear harassment. When they can find work, they often work long hours in fields harvesting crops they cannot afford, and frequently are mistreated as well.

Against this vision of privation and suffering, Ms. Maghribi described her project to bring together refugees and their traditions from various regions of Syria in order to alleviate their isolation through the preparation and sharing of meals. She explained that they are able to exchange both memories and recipes and invent new ones, when certain ingredients are unavailable. And the interest in Syrian food in Lebanon, sometimes called "Lebanese" at first, can be an opportunity for business as well. Even men cook at these gatherings. Her project has proven that food can indeed be a language of peace.

In his paper, "Some Eat to Remember, Some to Forget," Taylor Brand (American University of Sharjah) described the way food functioned symbolically during the hardships of WWI, when staples were frequently unavailable, and when there were also periods of famine. Despite the shift in the orientation of research to psychological effects of the deprivations of

war, Mr. Brand explained that information on details of daily experiences of war were scarce. Food choices were intimately linked to one's sense of identity and well-being, even one's social standing. The critical shortages of food caused a reconfiguring of priorities and values, not merely for physical survival, but also for moral and social survival. He described how the definition of "edible" evolved, becoming extended to include not only black bread, but pulverized bones and animal dung.

Mr. Brand explained that in such dire conditions, class differences naturally bred contention, in part because alterations in the social landscape caused upper and middle classes to experience a "fall from grace," although celebrations around food continued even among the lower classes. One imagines that sacrifices must have been great, but perhaps also a source of common purpose. When Syrian and Armenian relief began to come, and some sort of "normalcy" returned, the Ottomans were perceived as the villains, as if Europe and the U.S. had had no hand in the war's devastation.

In the session on "Food and Gender," Christan Sassmannshausen (Free University Berlin) presented a paper entitled, "Eating Up: Food and Status in Late Ottoman Greater Syria" in which he described the dramatic changes in lifestyle made possible by the speed of international transport and the appeal of modern European commodities, which were associated with a new refinement. He traced the changes in domestic life through examples of the diversification of domestic spaces in which rooms in the house acquired specific functions accommodating different furnishings and decor. The middle and upper classes were able to

purchase kitchenware and household accessories from Europe or beyond and the preparation and consumption of food was central to the family's modern identity. The new possessions were functional, but ultimately symbols of people's aspired social status. Although these changes in life-style affected primarily middle and upper classes, even lower-middle class families made partial conversions of their domestic space.

Mr. Sassmannshausen showed that the transformations of domestic life were keyed to an almost total revision of the family unit, involving all aspects of life, such as morality, education, manners and hygiene. It involved the decor of the house and the objects used in it, such as kitchenware and furniture, which was now heavier and permanent. The kitchen seems to have been the centerpiece of the household, and food and its preparation a critical part of the acquisition of a cosmopolitan modernity. The criteria and models of this social refinement were displayed in journals whose readership was at first primarily Christian, but which soon included Muslims as well and that reached an extremely diverse international audience. These journals showed what kinds of behavior and what household features were appropriate, and allowed readers to compare themselves to others. But they also presented agricultural innovations, advice about what to read, what to talk about at the table, and even how to sit. They contributed to the formation of an international community of refined tastes and social practices, in what might be called an age of incipient globalization.

In her presentation entitled, "Gender, Class and the Egyptian Kitchen," Anny Gaul

(Georgetown University) described the rapid and dramatic changes in Egyptian society during the 1920s, 30s, 40s and 50s, by comparing the evidence found in four Egyptian novels and Egyptian cookbooks written by women trained abroad. Each of these provided new models of domestic life and showed the evolution of the modern housewife, who was the repository of new cultural imperatives. Inspired in part by Qāsim Amīn's *The New Woman*, published in 1899, where he advocated the education of women, primarily to make them better housewives, Egyptian society had begun to offer them opportunities, and some women of the middle and upper classes were sent to England to study domestic science. They were subsequently sent to teach throughout the British Empire, or returned to Egypt to write cookbooks and adapt European recipes to local tastes. They included many local dishes as well. Written in formal Arabic, these books adhered to European standards of efficiency, including information on menus, nutrition, how to organize the kitchen, how to set a table, and how to keep a budget.

A movement to promote modern cookery was formed, supported by the Minister of Education. As Ms. Gaul explained, the science of modern cookery was considered an art as well as a technique that demanded professional training, and the kitchen became a microcosm of modernity and the center of life for the new housewife, who was responsible for generating a new kind of happiness for her family through her preparation of meals. An example of the shift from traditional to modern customs may be seen in the way fat and butterfat, once celebrated in food as in women, became regulated as new models of beauty emerged.



Muzawwara, a traditional Abbasid dish made with fava beans.
(Photo courtesy of Bilal Orfali)

In her presentation, “The Quince: A Blessed Fruit that Enhances the Male’s Sperm and Beautifies the Fetus in his Mother’s Womb,” Rania Alsayed (Aga Khan University) described the history and function of the quince, a fruit privileged by Ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as by the Prophet Muhammad, and mentioned frequently in both Shi’i and Sunni texts. Reputed to have originated in Northern Iran and then found in Mesopotamia, Crete, and ancient Greece, the quince figures in mythological, religious, and medical texts, sometimes under the name of “apple” or “pear,” although in the hadiths the apple and quince are treated separately. In classical Greek mythology, the quince played a role in the causes of the Trojan War, after Hera, Athena and Aphrodite claimed the quince (also called “apple” in some versions) thrown into Zeus’s celebration by Eris, Goddess of discord. Paris judged Aphrodite to be the fairest, because she promised him Helen of Sparta.

Plutarch speaks of Solon of Athens saying that brides and grooms should eat quince in a prison, for it sweetens the breath and lovers’ discourse and produces intelligent children.

In both Shi’i and Sunni texts the quince was reputed to increase sperm count and the fertility of both sexes, but also relieve heaviness of the chest and heart, and was considered a gift of Allah. Among the five heavenly fruits, the quince figures in descriptions of the garden of paradise. The Prophet is said to have enjoyed quince and advised lovers to exchange them, because of their power to increase the beauty and intelligence of children. In relation to some of the reputed medicinal properties ascribed to quinces, Ms. Alsayed raised the question of whether these were observations made by Muslims or whether they were based on the many translations of Greek scientific texts (such as those of Galen) by Arabic scholars during the 8th and 9th centuries. In any case, the quince

seems to have become firmly implanted in Islamic culture.

In addition to the conference's varied intellectual fare, the guests were treated to an Abbasid feast sponsored by Le Bristol Hotel Beirut and Chateau Kefraya entitled "Discovering Abbasid food – Encounters in Gastronomic History" where authentic medieval recipes were prepared with the expertise of Brigitte Caland and her team of volunteers. For Abbasid society, the art of cookery rivaled that of other arts, and was chronicled in the *Kitāb al Ṭabīkh* of al-Mahdī, the half-brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd, and that of al-Warrāq, whose text has come down to us, as well as many others. Unlike European cookbooks of the time, these contained related information on nutrition and even culinary esthetics. Many of the recipes had their origins in pre-Islamic Persia, but recipes from the Bedouin traditions were also included and adapted to medieval Arabic culture, and the combinations soon became known as Abbasid culinary accomplishments. In turn these were transmitted to al-Andalus by figures such as Ziriyāb. Ingredients such as certain spices and vegetables and fruits

were brought to Baghdad from as far as India and China, and the eggplant, initially from Asia, became the queen of vegetables at the Abbasid court.

The talented Ms. Caland prepared a veritable feast for the eye as well as taste and the guests were duly impressed even before sampling any of the 27 dishes. Ms. Caland does extensive research to prepare for such events, so that each stage of the preparation of the dishes conforms to the way they were produced in the medieval tradition. Combining meat and poultry with vegetables as well as nuts and fruits was common, as was the addition of small dishes to accompany the primary ones. Meats were often cooked inside pastry, and sauces often included fruits such as pomegranates, raisins or figs, and the *murrī* sauce has been compared to tamari or soy sauce. Even al-Hamadhānī's famous *al-Maḍīriyya* was among the riches offered, and as most of the dishes were naturally unknown to the guests, the evening proved to be full of delicious discoveries and a fine complement to the academic discussions about food as a cultural signifier.