

Shawarma, Muhummara and the Osh Guys

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I grew up in a multicultural part of Melbourne in the 1970s and 80s, so many of my school friends were non-English speaking migrants – ‘New Australians’ or ‘wogs’, as they were sometimes called. The differences in culture and religious practice did not matter too much to us, and we played football and cricket together, rode our bikes around the streets, poked fun at the local grump, ‘Mr Froggy’, and made a small contribution to the benign delinquency in our neighbourhood. I shared everything with my friends, especially food: white paper bags of mixed lollies, steaming butcher-paper packages of hot chips, cans of RC Cola, and other treats we bought after school from the numerous corner shops we used to call milk bars. But we never shared a homemade lunch, and I never visited a migrant friend’s home for dinner. It was fine to play cricket and footy or go for long bike-rides with the Antons, Tonys and Spiros of my adolescent world, but that world had no place for their salami and smelly cheese. Migrant food was a cultural demarcation line that I instinctively would not cross.

Fast forward a few decades and I was an Italian food and sushi lover contemplating a new job and a new life in the Middle East. My Anglo-Celtic diet had been dormant if not extinct for some time, and I now faced a new culinary challenge. It is true that Middle Eastern food has been in Australia for a relatively long time but it is not a regular component of many Australian diets. But after my first few weeks in the Middle East, I felt like I was in the culinary equivalent of the fifty-first American state. The usual fast food chains were everywhere, plus a few new ones, and my American colleague and I ate a lot of meals in shopping malls that, apart from the *abayas* and *dishdashers*, didn’t seem much different from those back home.

The supermarkets were also difficult to negotiate. They seemed to stock mostly Arabic food that I had never seen before, or canned, frozen or processed American food. The reasonably-priced meat did not look appetising, and the cost of some Australian beef was often prohibitive – over \$100 per kg in one case. Occasionally, I saw a jar of Vegemite or Capilano honey, and I could always find ‘Australian carrots’, but I had to seriously re-evaluate my food purchasing regimen. For the first few months, my meals at home consisted mostly of broad beans and rice, and although I was pleased at my weight loss, it was clear that the highly toxic home environment resulting from my broad bean consumption had to be remedied.

As my circle of friends grew, my culinary experiences became more diverse. Eating out is a major activity in Kuwait (there is little else to do when it is 55 degrees) and my new friends began to invite me to restaurants, most of which were Middle-Eastern or Lebanese or Arabic, depending on who you asked.

‘This food is Syrian,’ one would say.

‘No, it’s Lebanese,’ another would argue.

‘Syria and Lebanon are the same’.

‘Tell that to ISIS.’

‘They would agree.’

I had eaten hummus in Australia, but that was the extent of my Middle-Eastern culinary adventuring, apart from the occasional 2 a.m. kebab – and I now know that no self-respecting Turk, Arab or Iranian would call the pita stuffed with meat sold outside nightclubs in Australia a ‘kebab’. But I’ll get to meat nomenclature later.

‘Shawarma Muhumarra and the Osh Guys.’ Michael Armstrong.

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Of all the Middle Eastern dips, I knew only hummus. There are many varieties of hummus (is the plural hummi?), but I must confess that I cannot tell the difference. For example, to make 'Hummus Beiruty' it seems all you do is dice some tomatoes and arrange them on top. Of the non-hummus dips, I am almost as impressed by their names as I am by their taste: *foul* (pronounced 'fool'), *Baba Ganoush*, *moutabal*, *mousaka 'a*. But for me, the king of the dips is *muhummara*, made from roasted red capsicum and walnuts, often spiced with chilli. I truly believe that a bad day can be resurrected with some *muhummara*. 'Very delicious', is a phrase heard often here, and *muhummara* certainly is.

The Arab bread usually served with dips is close to, but not the same as, pita. It is brought to the table hot, the heat making the bread expand so that when you break it apart the escaping steam often burns your hands. This is the Middle East and you should expect some collateral damage. Iranian bread is by far the best. It is cooked in wood-fired ovens, the dough thrown against a wall inside an open oven. Iranian bread is so cheap I don't know how much it costs. The first time I bought some (about four loaves, each the size of a large pizza) I just held out a hand that contained a one-dinar note (about AU\$4.50) and some coins. The guy brushed the note aside and took two 100 fil coins (about 90 cents) and then gave me some change.

For a few years, I thought the most 'very delicious' cheap food in Kuwait was falafel. A Jordanian friend first took me to buy some, the ordering procedure as follows: park as close as you can to the falafel store, which is, of course, located on a busy road; honk the horn until someone comes out or the guy standing outside acknowledges you; lower your window and place your order; wait in the car, blocking traffic and those parked alongside; receive your order; pay a trifling amount; depart. I get a bag of twenty falafel for less than two dollars. You also receive some packaged Arabic bread and pickles for free. Aside from the 'very deliciousness' of the falafel, I like ordering it because I can. Having memorised all the phrases and made all the mistakes (both listening and speaking) that one can make, ordering falafel is about the only transaction I can complete entirely in Arabic. But falafel is no longer my number one Middle Eastern food on the very cheap, very delicious scale. For that we have to cross the Gulf.

Because they are at odds religiously, and therefore politically, I was amazed that so many Iranians live in Kuwait – and they have made a distinct culinary impact. Perhaps the most recognisable Iranian cuisines are kebab and *khoroشت* (stew), both usually eaten with rice. While I concede the relative merits of these dishes, neither compares to the Iranian dish called *ash* (pronounced 'osh') for ridiculously cheap deliciousness. I first tasted *ash* when I went to my British/Iranian friend's apartment. A Kuwaiti/Iranian friend was also there and he had brought some plastic containers of *ash*. *Ash* is hard to describe. I don't think *ash* even knows what it is. It's like a soup, but thicker, so like a stew, but not ... I don't know how it gets its consistency, and neither does my British/Iranian friend. I am sure it is some type of grain that is bashed together. You get a few chickpeas in there, too, and herbs and some spices, and the guy asks if you want crispy fried onions, lemon juice and ground black pepper on top. Of course you do.

In Kuwait, like other Middle Eastern countries, many districts in the city have a 'co-op', a community-owned shopping area with a supermarket (the co-op), stores selling phone cases, clothes, perfume, and electronics, maybe a pharmacy, a shoe-repairer, hairdresser (called saloons), often a post office (even though mail is never delivered), and sometimes fast food chains and a café or two. Most co-ops have a hole-in-the-wall with a wood-fired oven where you get your Iranian bread, and many also have an *ash* store. The ones I have seen look like a fish and chip shop, with the same long narrow area furnished only with a counter that separates the customers from the cook (always male) and his cooking area. But instead of deep fryers, *ash*

stores have massive stainless steel pots recessed into the bench, the pots heated, I presume, with gas burners underneath. Each pot contains *ash* or something similar. And here is the lesson: always try the something similar. The first time I visited my local *ash* store, I went with my British/Iranian friend because the *ash* guy (a wonderful old Afghani) speaks three or four languages but not English. There was a picture of Sydney Harbour on the wall in the shop so I immediately warmed to him even though I could not communicate, and my friend did the ordering. I nodded and politely rejected the *ash* guy's exhortations to try something other than *ash*. I loved *ash* and didn't see the need to try anything else. Now, I often go to the *ash* store myself and take it to my British/Iranian friend's place, often on Wednesdays, so we have begun to call our weekly *ash* fix 'Ash Wednesday'.

My friend sometimes orders *halim* (a gluey white pudding with chicken that is eaten for breakfast in Iran) and the *ash* guy sometimes talks to him about me. He says, 'Your friend only gets *ash*.' 'But I just like *ash*,' I'd say to my friend, and that's all I would buy until the day I tried the lentil soup – so 'very delicious' in this part of the world. The *ash* guy's lentil soup is different from all the others I have tried in Kuwait, a little spicier and a little thinner. I started to order one or two lentil soup pots with my four or five buckets of *ash*.

I am a little nervous when I go the *ash* store alone because I have to fumble through the ordering process. I know how to count in Arabic so all I have to say is, '*ash khamsa, halim wahid*' (*ash* five, *halim* one'), but the nerves come nonetheless. One day, I ordered *ash* and then prepared myself to order lentil soup. I knew 'lentil' in Farsi was '*adas*', so all I had to say was 'soup *adas thalatha*' (three) – which is three words in three languages – and I was home. Of course, I stuffed it up. Perhaps thinking that his rueful statements about my only ordering *ash* had worked, the *ash* guy pre-empted my additional order. He lifted the lid on a massive bowl, pointed, and said something that I didn't hear clearly and probably wouldn't have understood if I had. '*Na'am. Thalatha,*' I said. (Yes, three.) The lid he had lifted was from a big pot of orangey-brown coloured stuff not dissimilar to his lentil soup – but it was *not* lentil soup. I knew by its texture as soon as he spooned it into the plastic pots.

I paid about ten dollars for seven pots of deliciousness and went to my friend's apartment. When I arrived, I apologised to his wife, who had asked for lentil soup. 'I think I ordered something else,' I said, as I tentatively opened my pots. It was *jereesh*, a Saudi Arabian concoction made from some type of grain with spices and bits of chicken. Even my British/Iranian friend didn't know what it was and had to ask the *ash* guy on his next visit. We ate it and, of course, it was delicious and now makes an appearance every Ash Wednesday. My friend now says he likes *jereesh* more than *ash* – proof Saudi Arabia and Iran can find common ground.

Driving around, you can be forgiven for thinking that Kuwait is swamped by fast food chains. They seem to be everywhere, especially at night. You cannot pass any sizeable group of shops without seeing a swag of American takeaway joints, and on the roads you see hundreds of motorcycle delivery drivers with fast food logos on their rear-mounted food boxes. But there are probably as many traditional takeaway joints; it is just that they are not as brightly lit as the American ones and are often hidden away or located in non-descript shopfronts and advertised only in Arabic. There are falafel stores, *ash* stores, kebab joints, and roast chicken takeaways. But for the best fast food, you cannot go past *shawarma*. It's not as cheap as falafel or *ash*, but the taste of a *sarj* bread chicken *shawarma* with a little salad and some tahina is amazing – as long as you know what to ask for.

For a long time I was confused about meat nomenclature in the Middle East. Meat is *lahem*, but also *tikka*, *shawarma*, kebab ... *shonoo*? I think the Arabs mostly agree on what's what, but it

did not help me that two of my good friends were a Turk and a Greek. As I tried to comprehend enough Arabic to at least order a meal, they spent most of their time arguing about which of their respective nations invented the various foods and beverages I would try to order. They would argue about Turkish/Greek coffee, *raki*/ouzo, yogurt, baklava, vine leaves/cabbage rolls, and whether a *shawarma* is a *doner* or a *yirros*; then they would argue about who stole it from whom, which ancient ancestor first ate the said dish on the steps of which ancient monument, and whose version was better. I knew a lot of Greeks in Australia so I know about *souvlaki* (meat wrapped in pita) or *yirros* (if it comes from a vertical rotisserie). I probably once called all the variations a ‘kebab’, and I’m sure many Australians make ‘kebabs’ on the barbecue by sliding meat along a skewer as I used to do. But in the Middle East, kebabs, whether Arabic, Turkish, or Iranian, are made from minced meat and spices and are wrapped by hand around large skewers that are actually long knives. The kebabs are then cooked on coals and usually eaten with rice, although some eat them wrapped in bread. The meat taken from a vertical rotisserie is called *shawarma*, available in beef, chicken or, sometimes, lamb. Turks call the same thing *doner*. *Tikka* is cubed lamb, chicken or beef that is grilled or cooked on coals. I am not a big fan of the cubed meat or the kebabs, but the *shawarma* is so good, so very delicious. At the risk of starting an argument with any Kuwaiti reading this, the best *shawarma* you can buy in Kuwait is from a store in a little side street near my apartment. On the way home from work, I only have to make a slight detour, park alongside, give my order, and a few minutes later I’m on my way with some delicious chicken wrapped in very thin *sarj* bread.

This discourse on Middle Eastern cuisine has not come close to scratching the surface, and I have not even mentioned tea and coffee culture, or the Kuwaiti friend who invited me and two friends for a brunch at his home that we then washed down with coffee, two fruit flans and a two-tiered red velvet wedding cake. (‘You wanted red velvet but my baker said that the only red velvet he had was a wedding cake.’) Desserts, sweets, ornate boxes of chocolates and everything else from macaroons and cupcakes to French pastries, *kanafah* specialists, and cake shops abound. It is not a surprise that there is little difference between Kuwait and the West when it comes to diabetes and obesity.

Although there are obvious cultural similarities between countries in the Middle East, there are also substantial differences in everything from language, wealth, politics, religion and law to music, climate, clothing – and food. In a region often homogenised by Westerners, the differences highlight the complexity of the region’s political challenges. And I haven’t even mentioned Israel. Although I never get involved in political debates with work colleagues, I have unwittingly started arguments over the pronunciation of Arabic words, the caloric content of Middle Eastern foods, the fastest way to get from one end of town to the other, the best place to buy falafel, and the derivation of the delicious sweet *kanafah*. It may seem presumptuous of me to argue about such things, but my information comes mostly from Arab sources and when I seek clarification there is seldom a definitive or unanimous answer.

I am inquisitive more than provocative and, particularly when I discover new foods, I like to expand my knowledge by discussing my findings with Arabic colleagues and students. Whether real or imagined, I feel closer to understanding the culture even when I simply witness their differences of opinion. Food doesn’t get enough recognition as an intersection of cultural exchange. I am quite certain that the first time I interacted with an Asian person was at a Chinese takeaway with my parents in the early ‘70s. How many other Australians first met Asians in restaurants? How many older Australians first met Italians or Greeks at greengroceries or the markets? Most of the Arabic I understand relates to food, and I can’t count the number of times students have brought me food. Whether showing hospitality if you are the giver or openness if

you are the receiver, food is symbolic and universal, a sign of generosity and of humanity. One student's mother made me a feast at the end of a semester – enough to feed my family for days – just to thank me for teaching her daughter. A few weeks after having a class discussion about *ash* last semester, a student came to my office with a container filled with *nakhee*: chick peas in broth. The *ash* guy had occasionally offered me *nakhee*, but I hadn't tried it. 'Great! *Mashkora*. I'll have that for lunch,' I said to the student and she left. I didn't want to try it in front of her, fearing I would not like it, but when I did I thought it was delicious. Chick peas in broth. How do they do it? A few years ago, two other students gave me a box of cupcakes they had decorated with Australian designs, including the opera house, kangaroos, koalas, and the flag. I thought about the irony of those cupcakes bearing the flag that a few years earlier 'Australians' had draped around themselves when they fought 'people of middle eastern appearance' on Sydney's beaches.

Last summer, my daughter and I were walking along the Boulevard de Clichy on the edge of Montmartre, where the lines of sex clubs and sex shops are punctuated with bars, cafés and take-away joints, many of them Arabic. I watched the men standing inside or smoking on the pavement out front and thought about Parisian life for an Arab expat. My daughter mentioned for the third time that she wanted to try a banana crêpe so we stopped at one of the takeaway joints with a hotplate out front. It was mid-afternoon, the place was empty, and the lone attendant looked up, sullenly. I greeted him, enquired of his health, and his face broke into a smile. 'You speak Arabic?' he asked, and my daughter laughed. I confessed that I knew very little ('*shway, shway*),' and he laughed along with my daughter. We talked in English while he made the crêpe and I thought how simple it had been to change his expression.

A few weeks ago I went for *ash* and noticed that the *ash* guy seemed a little different, a little more reserved. He had often smiled and touched his heart when I walked into the store. I watched him closely as he put *ash*, soup *adas*, and *jereesh* into the plastic pots. He looked younger, his beard neater, his face a little less flabby. I paid and went to my British/Iranian friend's apartment; I asked him if the *ash* guy had a younger brother. He didn't know. The following week, we went to the store together. My friend placed our order and made enquiries. There were, indeed, two *ash* brothers, and each rotated to Kuwait every six months to operate the *ash* store – Afghan FIFO workers. This brother asked my nationality and my friend pointed to the picture of Sydney Harbour and told him that I was Australian. He seemed to like that, and they talked some more while our fifteen buckets were filled. My friend, still speaking Farsi, then became agitated, and I knew the reason even though I understood none of their words. 'He wants to give us the *ash* for free, right?' Indeed, he didn't want me to pay because 'Australia has accepted so many people from our country who had nowhere else to go'.

For more than one reason, I felt very sad. We paid, went to my friend's apartment, and ate the *ash*, *jereesh*, and *adas*. It was very delicious.

Michael Armstrong holds a PhD from Edith Cowan University and lives in the Middle East where he teaches English and writing. He has published short stories, poetry, articles and creative non-fiction in journals, writing magazines, anthologies and newspapers. He co-wrote and edited an independent Australian feature film in 2010 and has completed his first novel.