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## Customs and Cuisine of Afghanistan

By Linda McElroy, curator

Tucked into the mountains between Iran and a whole host of “-stans” (Pakistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), just one small country away from India and China, Afghanistan is not quite the Middle East, not quite Asia. Its cuisine has elements of each but is distinctively its own.

From India came chilis, saffron, garam masala and pepper. Persia contributed coriander and mint, while Mongolian influences take shape in dumplings and noodles. Fatty dishes are an important fuel in this nation of freezing winters, with oil used liberally and mutton fat traditionally added to many dishes. Afghans like their food neither too spicy nor too hot, with yogurt used as a dressing, topping or accompaniment.

Lamb and chicken are widely enjoyed, with the Afghan lamb kebab a very popular street food. *Korma* is a type of stew with a base of fried onion and garlic, and can include meat, vegetables, chickpeas, tomato, fruit, yogurt and spices. Rice is a specialty and considered the best part of any meal. The treasured national dish called *Kabuli (or Qabli) Pulao* consists of slow-cooked meat in a dome of gently seasoned rice with lentils, raisins, carrots, ground cardamom and nuts. And of course bread (*naan*) is eaten with just about everything.

Not at all unusual, women do all of the cooking and food preparation for the entire family and their guests. Their daughters start at the age of twelve, helping their mother with the housework and taking part in the cooking. That way the tradition and the recipes pass from one generation to the next.

### Dining Etiquette

An important expression of food culture in Afghanistan is the “*dastarkhan*,” a spread of dishes arranged on a tablecloth that might be laid on the floor. You will be provided a cushion to sit cross-legged upon, (having removed your shoes at the door). Guests are usually given an individual bowl or plate, but utensils are not used; meals are eaten with the right hand, using bread as a scoop.

Tea defines hospitality in Afghanistan. Excellent tea is served after a meal along with dessert, which is likely *Baklava*, or *Gosh-e-feel* (fried pastry in the shape of an elephant’s ear!).

No matter how hard-pressed, the Afghans treat their guests with immense respect and will go to great lengths to serve them the best food possible. If you are a guest at an Afghani person’s home, you would be expected to enjoy huge quantities of everything. For this reason make sure to leave some food on your plate, otherwise it will soon be filled up again!



## Recipes



### Yogurt-Marinated Chicken Kebab

Serves 6

Kebabs are mostly sold on the streets of Kabul, and served on Afghan flat bread called *lawausha* or *naan*. The kebab sellers, known as the *kebab*, wrap the bread around the meat and pull it off the skewer. A few simple condiments such as salt, pepper, sumac and red pepper flakes are all that's needed to bring this dish to tasty perfection!

#### Ingredients

3 cups plain, whole milk Greek yogurt  
5 cloves garlic, chopped  
1 ½ teaspoons ground coriander  
1 ½ teaspoons ground cumin  
1 tablespoon salt  
¼ teaspoon black pepper  
3 lbs. boneless, skinless chicken thighs

#### Directions

Put all the ingredients except the chicken in a large bowl and mix well. Cut the chicken into chunks, about 3 pieces per thigh. Add the chicken and mix until all pieces are covered with yogurt. Cover the bowl and marinate for at least 24 hours.

Pull the chicken out of the fridge 30 minutes before you are going to grill. Get the barbecue good and hot. If you are using a gas grill, let it heat up for a good 10 minutes. In the meantime, pour the chicken into a colander and let excess marinade drip off.

Thread the chicken pieces onto skewers and grill over a medium-high flame about 5-7 minutes per side until cooked through. You can also broil skewers in the oven, or grill on a stove top grill. Serve warm with *naan*.

Tested by Linda McElroy, DFW Recipe Curator  
Recipe Source: [www.AfghanCooking.net](http://www.AfghanCooking.net)



## Dining for Women



### **Creamy Cilantro Chutney**

#### **Ingredients**

2 small bunches fresh cilantro, thick stems removed, lightly chopped  
1 medium jalapeno pepper, sliced, with seeds  
3 tablespoons plain Greek yogurt  
¼ cup white vinegar or lemon juice  
½ teaspoon Kosher salt

#### **Directions**

Combine all of the ingredients in the bowl of a food processor fitted with a metal blade. Blend until smooth.

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## Dining for Women



### Afghan Eggplant Dip (*Laghataq*)

#### Ingredients

- 1 eggplant cut in ¼" slices
- 1 red bell pepper cut in thin strips
- 2 medium tomatoes, sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled and sliced
- 1 15 oz. can tomato sauce
- ½ cup olive oil
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon Kosher salt
- ½ cup Greek yogurt
- pinch of garlic powder

#### Directions

Pre-heat the oven to 300 degrees.

Pour two tablespoons of the olive oil on a cookie sheet and spread around with fingers. Arrange the eggplant disks on the greased cookie sheet. Place the tomatoes, red pepper and garlic on top of the eggplant.

Whisk together the tomato sauce, tomato paste, remaining olive oil, cumin, coriander, paprika and salt. Spread the sauce with a spoon over the eggplant to insure it is distributed evenly.

Bake for 1½ hours. It is important to slow cook this dish in order for all the flavors of the ingredients to be absorbed by the eggplant. To test for doneness, press the eggplant and the peppers with the back of a fork, the eggplant must be completely soft.

Let the eggplant cool for ½ hour before throwing all the ingredients in a food processor. Pulse three or four times but don't over blend, make sure that you can see small chunks of the eggplant. Remove contents and place in a deep serving dish.

**Sauce:** In a bowl mix the yogurt and garlic powder until creamy, add salt to taste. Pour the yogurt sauce on top of the dip.

The dip can be served cold or at room temperature. Serve with pita slices or pita chips.

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## Dining for Women



### **Afghan Potato Salad with Cilantro Dressing (*Shornakhod*)**

**Serves 4-6**

¾ pound Russet potatoes (about 1 large), cut in half  
½ cup roughly chopped scallions, white and light green parts  
1 cup roughly chopped cilantro (1 small bunch)  
1/3 cup plus 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar  
1 teaspoon salt  
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper  
1 ½ cans chickpeas (15 oz. cans)

Boil the potatoes in water until tender all the way through to the center when pierced with a knife. Drain. When cool enough to handle, slip the skins off the potatoes and cut into bite-size pieces. Drizzle 1 tablespoon vinegar on the warm potatoes and let them cool.

While the potatoes are cooking, combine the scallions, cilantro, 1/3 cup vinegar, salt and pepper in a blender or food processor and puree until smooth.

Empty the beans into a colander, rinse and drain. Put the beans and the potatoes into a bowl, pour on the dressing and mix well. Serve warm or cold. The Afghani name for this dish is

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## Dining for Women



### Tomato, Cucumber and Red Onion Salad (Salata)

#### Ingredients

- 3 medium-size tomatoes, diced
- 3 Persian cucumbers, peeled and diced (about 1 cup)\*
- 1 small red onion, diced
- 1 cup roughly chopped cilantro (1 small bunch)
- 3 tbsp. fresh lemon juice
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. ground black pepper

#### Directions

Combine all of the ingredients and toss well.

\*you can substitute other varieties of cucumbers; European cucumbers (long, thin) work well!