

A Baghdad Cookery Book

Petits Propos Culinaires 79

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THE BOOK OF DISHES (*Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*)

Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Karīm,
the scribe of Baghdad

Newly Translated by Charles Perry



Prospect Books September 2005

THE COVER ILLUSTRATION is from the manuscript of *The Book of Dishes* (The Baghdad Cookery Book) held at the Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul (and here reproduced with their permission). It is the first page of chapter II, showing the recipe for *Isfānākhiyya* with all the material from *Minhāj al-Bayān* splayed around the margins.

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INTRODUCTION

Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh, composed by a thirteenth-century scribe we usually call al-Baghdādī, was long the only medieval Arabic cookery book known to the English-speaking world, thanks to A.J. Arberry's path-breaking 1939 translation as 'A Baghdad Cookery Book' (reissued by Prospect Books in 2001 in *Medieval Arab Cookery*).

For centuries, it had been the favourite Arabic cookery book of the Turks. The original manuscript, formerly held in the library of the Aya Sofya Mosque, is still in Istanbul; it is now MS Ayasofya 3710 in the Süleymaniye Library. At some point a Turkish sultan commissioned very a handsome copy, now MS Oriental 5099 in the British Library in London. At a still later time, a total of about 260 recipes were added to *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*'s original 160 and the expanded edition was retitled *Kitāb Waṣf al-Aṭ'ima al-Mu'tāda* (my translation of it also appears in *Medieval Arab Cookery*); three currently known copies of *K. Waṣf* survive, all in Turkey – two of them in the library of the Topkapi Palace, showing the Turks' high regard for this book. Finally, in the late fifteenth century Şirvāni made a Turkish translation of *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, to which he added some recipes current in his own day, thus creating the first Turkish cookery book.

As the pioneer translator of medieval Arabic recipes, young Arberry – later to be one of the twentieth century's most illustrious Middle East scholars – solved a number of problems presented by this text, but inevitably he got things wrong, and in *Medieval*

Arab Cookery I ventured to correct his translation on a few points. On closer examination, I have found many more mistakes, some of them rather shocking. They simply show that Arberry – like most academics, past and present – was interested in literature (his essay on food in medieval Arabic literature is an enduring classic), but not in cookery.

When I examined the original manuscript of *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* at the Süleymaniye Library last year, I was struck by the degree to which all students of this book, Arberry included, have been at the mercy of the published Arabic text produced by the Iraqi scholar Daoud Chelebi in 1934. As the first to study this book, Chelebi had solved a number of its problems (including, as he noted in his introduction, correcting al-Baghdadi’s grammar at many points). But he had also made omissions and questionable readings. In Chelebi’s defence, he was working at a time when Turkish libraries did not conveniently provide photocopies on computer disks. He’d been obliged to copy the text the medieval way, by hand, with all the opportunities for error which hand copying has always provided (there is a peculiar example in the **Samak wa-Aqrāṣ** recipe).

Far more seriously, Chelebi selected among the many marginal notes in the book purely on the basis of his own estimate of their value. Though he parenthesized nearly all the notes he chose that had been inserted from ibn Jazla’s *Minhāj al-Bayān*, he also parenthesized some of al-Baghdādī’s own marginal additions, while omitting others. As a result, the text Chelebi published was not really al-Baghdādī’s, and Arberry made matters worse by leaving out the parentheses. Arberry’s introductory note does not even acknowledge that there is marginal material.

I should say that the 1934 edition of *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* has been very rare for over half a century. I have only been able to inspect the reprint edited by Fakhri al-Barudi (Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, Damascus, 1964), which evidently differs in some particulars.

Since 1934 other manuscripts derived from al-Baghdādī's original have come to light, and in general much more has been learned about medieval Arab cookery. Altogether, I feel it is time for a fresh translation of this important book from the original manuscript, explaining when it differs from the Arberry/Chelebi version.

THE TEXT

The book consists of 54 pages measuring 20×14 centimetres, with 15 lines of *naskhī* script to the page. Most vowels are written, but in some cases al-Baghdādī omits the vowel marks, or even the dots that distinguish certain consonants from others, apparently acknowledging that he is not sure how the passage should be read. With distressing frequency, he writes the dots that distinguish 'z' from 'r' and 'sh' from 's' where they don't belong. Where the London MS or *K. Wasf* makes the meaning clear, I pass over most errors and ambiguities in silence.

After completing his manuscript, al-Baghdādī went over it and discovered that he had omitted words or even sentences, so he wrote them in the margins. I restore these omissions between brackets [] to indicate that they appear in the margin, but I do not bracket words that he merely wrote above a line or part way into the margin. (Any words that appear between parentheses () are my own, and to emphasize this I sometimes precede them by 'i.e.' or 'sc.')

At a much later time (after page 9b-10a had been damaged and replaced by a copy in different hand), an unknown scribe added a great deal of material from the eleventh-century medical encyclopaedia *Minhāj al-Bayān* in the margins. Most of these additions concern the purported medical properties of the dishes, and I omit them. But others are of interest from a culinary standpoint.

The additions from *Minhāj* were evidently made after *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* had been copied and begun to circulate, because they don't appear in the London manuscript or the three manuscripts of *Kitāb Waṣf*. Strictly speaking, they are irrelevant to this book. Nevertheless I have translated them after the individual recipes where they appear: between quote marks, if the unknown scribe or Chelebi indicated that the material belonged within the recipe, or between brackets, if they seemed to consider it separate. In every case I indicate where it is material from *Minhāj*.

The book gives two recipes for *buqūliyya*. Al-Baghdādī wrote the word *mukarrara* ('repeated') in the margin next to the second one, and all subsequent copies of this manuscript, including the Arabic text published by Chelebi, have concluded that it merely repeats the first recipe. In fact, the two recipes are somewhat different, and al-Baghdādī intended *buqūliyya mukarrara* to be in the book, because he added a marginal note to it. I reproduce this second recipe here, apparently for the first time in history.

There are a few curious interlinear glosses in the first recipe, **Al-Sikbāj**. Persian glosses: *kurrāth* 'leek' as *gandaneh*, *jazar* 'carrot' as *gazar* and *kusfara khadrā* 'green coriander' as *gashniz-e ?yās* (second word obscure). Turkish glosses: *mighrafa* 'ladle' as *kepçeler* (ladles), *badhinj* 'eggplant' (wrongly) as *kuzu* 'lamb', *yuqashshar* 'is peeled' as *soyar*, *lauz muqashshar* 'peeled almonds' as *soyulmuş badem*, *dāfa fihi* 'it was mixed in it' as *isladi* 'it was wetted', *yuslaq* 'is boiled' as *kaynadılar* 'they boiled it' and *raghwatuhu* 'its scum' as *köpüğü*; the puzzling gloss of *yasīr unnaḥ* 'a few jujubes' might be read *az min ünnabi*, an odd mixture of Turkish and Arabic. In Arabic, *tahda* 'alā ḥummā al-nār' 'it grows quiet on the heat of the fire' is explained as *ay taskun ḥarāratuhu* 'that is, its heat abates' and *ghamruhu mā*³ 'enough water to cover it' as *al-mā*³ 'alāhu' 'the water is higher than it'. Perhaps some scribe planned to gloss the whole book but then gave up, or perhaps he wanted to make the nature of this

famous dish clear to any casual reader, with particular regard to a Turkish reader.

RECIPE TERMINOLOGY

Most stew recipes say to leave the pot on the fire ‘until it becomes quiet’. It’s often hard to tell whether this means ‘until the pot becomes quiet’ (that is, until the food has stopped boiling) or ‘until the fire becomes quiet’ (until it no longer flames and is reduced to embers). Both meanings of ‘quiet’ are expressed in the text. **Mudaqqaqāt Sādhija** (page 65) has: ‘When it is done, cut the fire from it and leave it on a quiet fire awhile until it (the pot) becomes quiet’; and **Samak Mashwī** (page 81) has: ‘a quiet fire, not flaming’.

Probably this is just a conventional instruction meaning ‘simmer it until it is ready to serve’. (The recipe **Maṣūṣ** says to leave the dish on the fire ‘until it grows quiet and its cooking is finished’.) Likewise, the recipes vacillate between ‘the pot is left on the fire awhile until it grows quiet’ and ‘the pot is left on the fire until it grows quiet awhile’, without any discernible difference in meaning. Nevertheless, I have translated such phrases literally.

Most chapters list dishes that are cooked or seasoned in one particular way. From this point of view, Chapter V reads like a hodgepodge. I suspect that what the dishes in Chapter V have in common is not a cooking method but the fact that they were eaten as snacks, like today’s *meze*.

The verb *rabbā* (generally followed by the words *bil-mā*, ‘with water’) literally means ‘to develop’, but the real sense seems to be what we see in the modern Arabic verb *rabb*, ‘to beat to liquid consistency’ and I translate it with those words. It is applied only to pounding or grinding nuts and thinning them with a liquid.

When ‘fingers’ are used as a measurement, the meaning is the

width of a finger. Measurement by finger-widths is used when cutting certain vegetables. It is also used to specify how high ingredients should stand the pot. In *maghmūma*, for instance, solid ingredients are layered ‘until they remain four or five finger-widths from (the bottom of) the pot’ (*ḥattā yabqā arba^c khams aṣābi^c min al-qidr*), which I translate ‘until they stand four or five finger-widths deep’.

The other possible interpretation – that four or five finger-widths of space remain between the surface of the ingredients and the rim of the pot – is implausible for two reasons. First, this sort of instruction is used when water is added to grain dishes such as *tannūriyya*, where the quantity of water is crucial and the amount of unused space in the pot is irrelevant. Second, stew pots were carved from soapstone and, to judge from the soapstone cookware of modern Yemen, would rarely have been deep enough to indulge in a lot of empty space.

The instruction to ‘refine’ (*yukhla^c*) sesame oil seems to mean frying spices such as cumin and coriander in it. Chelebi proposed that ‘refining’ was done by boiling the oil in water and skimming. Sometimes oil was treated in this way, but that process was known as ‘washing’.

The names of some ingredients, such as *bādhinjān*, ‘eggplant’, are collective nouns, and to indicate a single example the ‘singulative’ suffix *-a* is added. However, colloquial Arabic sometimes omits the suffix. To render this ambiguity I translate such words as collectives – that is, in the singular without an article – but when there are instructions to cut off the leaves and stem I use plural pronouns. (In recipes such as **Madfūna** and **Bādhinjān Mukhallal**, the sense of *bādhinjān* is definitely plural.)

When a number of spices are listed in a recipe, generally only the last one in the list is modified by the expression *madqūq* (*mashūq*) *nā^ciman*, ‘finely pounded (ground)’. Sometimes the adjective is plural in form or contains a modifier such as *jamī^can*

‘all’ to emphasize that the description actually applies to all the spices, but usually the adjective is singular. I have rendered all such passages literally. Nevertheless, recipes such as **Nārsūn** make it clear that, as we should expect, all spices were ground unless the recipe explicitly says that they are added whole: coriander as seeds, cinnamon or ginger root as sticks.

Often the measurement ‘one *dirham*’ appears before a list of spices, leaving it uncertain whether it refers to a *dirham* of each spice separately or a *dirham* in total. **Ruṭabiyya** says to add ‘about two and a half *dirhams* in all’ of spices, which suggests the usual total quantity of spice in a recipe. Guided by this, I have suggested parenthetically how *dirham* should be read.

In **Ruṭabiyya**, dates are described as *gharīq*, ‘drowned’. Elsewhere in Arab culinary literature, the sweetmeats *lauzīnaj* and *fālūdhaj* are said to be ‘drowned’ when they are stored in syrup. Possibly these dates were immersed in syrup to keep them from drying out and losing the luxurious texture of ultra-ripe dates (*ruṭab*), as dates are covered with honey in **Ruṭab Mu^cassal**. But since the dates called for in **Ruṭab Mu^cassal** are themselves described as *gharīq*, the exact sense may be ‘suitable for drowning’.

The expression *ḥalqat shibitt*, ‘ring of dill’, refers to a bunch of dill; perhaps the stalks were tied in a ring or knot to make it easier to remove them when cooking was done. Dill is always removed before serving except in *mā³ wa-himmaṣ* and *kabīs*. (**Isfidḥabāj** of chicken does not call for removing the dill, but it is a mere sketch of a recipe.) There does not seem to be any significant difference between *ḥalqat shibitt*, *ṭāqāt shibitt* (‘bunches of dill’) and *‘idān shibitt* (‘stalks of dill’).

Sometimes spices are pounded (*madqūq*) in a mortar; at other times they are ground (*mashūq*, *maṭḥūn*) on a flat stone. One recipe says that spices are ‘ground’ in a mortar, but the London MS corrects ‘mortar’ to ‘stone’.

Dry mint is regularly rubbed between the hands over the pot as a final step. I translate this as ‘crumble into the pot’, rather than ‘rub into the pot’.

In this manuscript, the word *dirham* (plural *darāhim*) is often abbreviated to *ham* (*him*) after numerals and the word *niṣf* (half).

Arberry rendered the term *afāwīh ṭayyiba*, literally ‘good mouths’, as ‘aromatic herbs’. I suggest that the herbs may be fresh, because the ‘mouths’ are never ground.

The word *tawābil* generally means ‘spices’ in Arabic, but **Sikbāj Tannūrī** and **Qannabīṭiyya** make it clear that it could refer to vegetables. Like *tawābil*, *ḥawāyij* (‘things, necessities’) often means spices, but it might best be translated as ‘flavourings’, because sometimes, as in **Maghmūma**, it seems to refer to vegetables. *Aṭrāf al-ṭib* was the term for mixed spices; the general word for spices was *abāzīr*.

In this translation have left the word *dist* untranslated. It was a tinned copper tray with relatively high sides which could be set up over a fire (for making puddings or sweetmeats) or inserted under the roasting chicken in a tandoor oven (for holding *jūdhāb*).

The recipe *shīrāz bi-buqūl* makes it clear that *shīrāz* was different from yogurt thickened by draining it in a cloth overnight. In Ibn al-Sayyār’s *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* (tenth century) and *Kitāb Zahr al-Ḥadīqa* (thirteenth or fourteenth century), the difference is that *shīrāz* is not only soured but thickened with rennet before draining it. In the tenth-century book, *laban māst* (*māst* being the Persian word for yogurt) was similar, except that the milk was simply left out until it soured, rather than being cultured with a starter, before rennet was added, and it was not drained.

The name of the dish **Muṭajjan** might suggest that it was fried in the copper pan *tājīn*, but these recipes mention only the iron or soapstone frying pan *miqlā*. **Muṭajjan** is just the conventional name of a dish of meat (or eggs) fried and then flavoured with

vinegar and soy sauce.

‘Dainty’ (*laṭīf*) meatballs appear in **Būrāniyya**, **Raiḥāniyya** and **Khuḍairiyya**. The intention seems to be to distinguish them from meatballs the size of oranges.

The dish *jūdhāb* consisted of chicken roasted in the tandoor oven, with a pudding (the *jūdhāb* proper) placed under it when its juices start to run. This was the most famous dish of the age, so recipes for *jūdhāb* do not always bother to mention inserting it in the tandoor.

In my earlier writings on this book and *K. Wasf*, I have used Arberry’s spelling of the word ‘chicken’ (*dujāj*), which approximates the modern colloquial pronunciation. However, this manuscript explicitly spells this word in the classical way (*dajāj*). At the risk of pointlessly confusing and irritating everybody, I have reverted to *dajāj*.

INGREDIENTS AND BATTERIE DE CUISINE

‘Tail fat’ refers to the Middle Eastern fat-tailed sheep, which have been bred to concentrate their body fat in their tails and rumps. The type of orange known in the Middle Ages was the sour Seville orange, also known as the bitter orange.

Samīd, like semolina, was a wheat product finer than groats but coarser than flour. Because it might refer to a particular kind of wheat, I leave it untranslated. The term poppy seed meal (*samīd khashkhāshī*), which appears in the stew *khashkhāshiyya*, refers to poppy seed ground to the consistency of *samīd*, coarser than flour.

Balāṭa, a large tile used in paving floors, served the equivalent of a pastry marble.

A new utensil appears to emerge in this translation: *miqlā al-maqlūba*, the *maqlūba* pan, a thin iron or copper pan for frying

patties of meat or fish bound with eggs.

Approximate values of the weights and measures: 1 pound (*raṭl*): 400 grams; 1 ounce (*ūqiya*): 33 grams; 1 *dīnār*: 4.25 grams; 1 *dirham*: 3 grams; 1 *rub*^c (a quarter of a measure called *qadaḥ*): 23.5 decilitres, about 1 American measuring cup; 1 *dānaq*: 0.5 gram.

For a more complete discussion of the medieval Arab kitchen see *Medieval Arab Cookery*.

Charles Perry

The Book of Dishes

by

Muhammad b. al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. al-Karīm,
the scribe of Baghdad,

may God forgive him.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, in Whom is (our) trust and aid. Praised be God, the creator of days and appointer of times, the resurrector of mankind, the cause of foods, the creator of animals, Who with His manifest blessings causes the plants to grow which encompass the land. For them (i.e., mankind) He sends down water from heaven, and with it He causes (all) of the fruits to emerge. He has made good things lawful for them and permitted foods and drinks, except for the forbidden kinds. God bless His prophet and chosen one, Muhammad, and his family, and bring him to the highest degrees; indeed, He is the Hearer of prayers.

Now, God – exalted be He – made the good kinds of food lawful and permitted the enjoyment of them: those which a forbidden thing has not contaminated. For He said – may He be praised and exalted – ‘Eat that which is good (*tayyib*) and do that which is proper’ (Qurʾān, xxiii 53). Indeed, some commentators have held that what is meant by ‘good’ is ‘lawful’, but (the meaning of) the word ‘good’ is well known among men. He said – praised be He – ‘Eat of that which we have provided to you, lawful, good’ (Qurʾān, xvi 115, paraphrased), making a clear distinction between them, the lawful and the good.

Now, again; the pleasures of this world are divided into six classes. They are food, drink, clothing, sex, scent and sound. The most eminent and perfect of these is food; for food is the foundation of the body and the material of life. There is no way to enjoy anything else but with health, which it supports.

It is not forbidden to be meticulous about food, and to take

an interest in it and specialize in it. He said – praised be He – ‘Say: Who has made unlawful the adornment of God, which He brought forth for His servants, and the good things of sustenance?’ (Qurʾān, vii 30.) Whenever one of the companions of the prophet – God’s blessing on him and his family – made a dish and was meticulous in it according to his state at that time, then he invited him; he (the prophet) responded to that (i.e., he did not disdain it). A certain philosopher has said, ‘Four comprise the best things and complete (God’s) grace: strong faith, blameless endeavour, wholesome food and salutary drink’. Therefore it is shown that there is no blame in taking pleasure in food and specializing in it.

I have come across a number of books composed on the making of dishes, which mention strange and unfamiliar things and include disapproved ingredients. When they are brought together, the soul is not reassured by them. Men disagree in their choice among the pleasures we have mentioned, some of them preferring food over the rest and some preferring others, such as clothing, drink, sex and sound. I am one who prefers the pleasure of food over all the other pleasures, so I composed this book for myself, and for whoever may want to use it in the making of dishes. In it I mentioned what I preferred, perhaps leaving out some obvious and well-known dishes in the interests of brevity. I have followed those with relishes, condiments, pickles, fish, *jūdhābs* and sweets that I have also preferred. I have aimed at brevity and succinctness rather than prolixity and longwindedness, and I pray God to give me aid and grant me success.

I have ordered it into ten chapters. This is their introduction:

Chapter One, *ḥawāmiḍ* (sour dishes) and their kinds

Chapter Two, *sawādhij* (simple dishes) according to their variety

Chapter Three, on *qalāyā* and *nawāshif* (fried and sauceless dishes) and their kinds

Chapter Four, *harāʿis* (porridges with shredded meat), *tannūriyyāt* (porridges with chopped meat) and dishes that resemble them

Chapter Five, *muṭajjanāt* (fries), *bawārid* (cold dishes), *maqlūba* (egg dishes), *sanbūsay* (samosa) and things that serve the same function

Chapter Six, fish, fresh and salted

Chapter Seven, *mukhallalāt* (pickles), *ṣibāgh* (relishes) and *muṭayyibāt* (condiments)

Chapter Eight, *jawādhīb* (puddings served with roast meat), *akhbisa* (puddings thickened with flour or crumbs) and their varieties

Chapter Nine, *ḥalāwā* (sweetmeats) and their varieties

Chapter Ten, *qaṭāyif* (crepes), *khushkanānaj* (cookies, sweet biscuits) and things that serve the same function.

INTRODUCTION WHICH NEEDS TO BE KNOWN

[Wise men have said,] the cook must be knowledgeable, well versed in the principles of the dishes and proficient in making them. Let him take care to trim his fingernails lest he injure them [and ulcerate them], and not to let them grow long, lest dirt collect under them. Of pots, he will prefer [choose] the soapstone, then the earthenware, and in case of necessity, tinned copper. The worst (of food) is what is cooked in a copper pot that has lost its tinning.

Of wood, he will choose the dry and whatever does not have obvious smoke [because of its dampness], such as olive, [dry] oak, [oleander¹ and the trees that are for sale], and the woods that resemble them. He will avoid fig wood, because it produces much smoke, and whatever has dampness in it. He will know how much wood (to use).

He will choose *al-darānī* salt². If none is available, then clean [white] salt free of dust and small rocks; [the best kind is that which has been dissolved and thickened (i.e. clarified)].

What is to be borne in mind about spices: Of coriander, that which is fresh, green in colour, dry. Of cumin and caraway and the like. Of cinnamon, that which is rough, thick, tightly coiled, with a penetrating aroma, burning to the tongue. Of mastic, that which has large, [white] lustrous grains, not pounded, free of dust

1. *Diflā* (oleander) may be an error for *dafnī*, Greek *daphnē*, bay laurel; oleander wood is poisonous.
2. That is, rock salt mined in Andarān, near Nishapur, rather than sea salt.

and dirt. Of pepper, what is fresh, not old. [Of ginger, that which is *maghrūs*, ‘implanted’.] He will clean all the spices extremely well and grind them fine.

Likewise he will wash the vessels and pots that have been used in cooking and beat them with brick dust, then with potash and pounded dry rose (petals). [He will perfume bowls with mastic and galangal, then scoop in them.] And he will wipe the pot, after washing it, with fresh citron [and orange] leaves.

He will choose a stone mortar for pounding meat; he will grind spices fine on a stone or pound in a copper mortar. In short, let him scrupulously pound the spices well and make them smooth, and wash the pots and utensils as much possible.

He will use much spice in *sawādhij* and even more in *qalāyā* and *nawāshif*, whether sweet or sour, and he will use little in *hawāmid* that have sauces.

The basic rule in all dishes is, when the pot is boiled, to be scrupulous in removing the scum and froth and dirt of the meat, and whatever might float on the surface of the pot along with the rising bubbles. Before that, wash the meat [in hot water and salt] to remove any blood and dirt that might remain in it, and clean it of any glands, [tendons and membranes].

The meat in *sawādhij* and *qalāyā* is stewed in grease [and a little sesame oil] before boiling. [It is the basic principle for eliminating the scum.] Dishes should be left until they settle on a quiet fire [one] good while (*sā^catan jayyidatan* [*wāḥidatan*]) before ladling. So know that.