MISCELLANEOUS

IBN JAzhLAH: THE FORGOTTEN ʿABBĀSID GASTRONOME

It appears likely that the last time anyone noticed Ibn Jazlah as a compiler of a collection of ʿAbbāsid recipes was Dāود Chelebī in the first half of this century. Even then the importance and significance of Ibn Jazlah’s collection remained obscure to him. Chelebī had discovered the important ʿAbbāsid food manual of Muḥammad al-Baghḍādi Kitāb al-Ṭabikh at the library of Aya Sofia mosque in Istanbul which he edited and subsequently published in 1934. In his introduction to al-Baghḍādi’s book Chelebī stressed the importance of his find and reiterated its uniqueness by saying: “…yes, there had been short fragments on food [ʿAbbāsid] in some books such as Minhāj al-Bayān fi ma Yastaʾmiluhu al-Insān by the Damasceni Ibn Jazlah…”.” Chelebī added that this latter book was a medical lexicon in which its compiler had included the titles of some dishes among the medical entries.

However, one thing is certain: Ibn Jazlah’s collection of recipes in his Minhāj are definitely not ‘fragments’, far from it.

Ibn Jazlah, whose full name was Yahya Ibn ʿIsa (d. 1100) was born and reared in Bagdad to a Christian family. He was a well known physician who had embraced Islam in 1074 A.D. and changed his original name Yūḥanā to Yahyā. His major works were two medical books which he dedicated to the Caliph al-Muqtadī (reigned 1075-1094). The one which is of interest to us, referred to by Chelebī is: Minhāj al-Bayān fi ma Yastaʾmiluhu al-Insān (A systematic exposition of what is used by man).

The book is an alphabetically arranged lexicon which includes edibles both as foods and drugs. It was compiled primarily to serve a medical and not a culinary purpose, a fact which probably accounts for the recipes being overlooked.

In his long and detailed introduction, Ibn Jazlah demonstrates his thorough knowledge of the medical learning of his time. He mentions the names of earlier physicians: Greek, Christian Arabs or Muslims, men of learning such as Hippocrates, Dioscurides, Galen, Ishāq and Rāzī whose works and knowledge he clearly had applied in his lexicon. He adds that he has included in his book all medicaments, drinks and nutriments both compound and simple. He discusses the power of drugs; the qualities of nutriments whether hot or cold and the degree of their temperature.

He also discusses the following aspects of nutriments: their taste; smell; colour; tempera-

ment; substance and those that mix well with other material or not.

The size of the manuscript is considerable (our copy is 220 folios with 19 lines to the page) which may be another reason for overlooking the work because the recipes are interspersed alphabetically between the non-culinary entries. The first definition of a recipe is that of ʿIrāḥiāmīya (a meat dish in a sweet and sour sauce thickened with flour) and the last is Hulām (a strained meat stock jelly).

The significance of the collection

As a culinary text, the manuscript represents an important bridge between the two well known ʿAbbāsid cookery manuals to which it can probably be compared in importance: that of Abū Muḥammad al-Muẓaffar ibn Naṣir ibn Sāyyār al-Warrāq, his encyclopaedic manuscript Kitāb al-Ṭabikh waʾislāh al-Aḫbāriyya al-Maʿkulāt wa ṣayyibāt al-Asīma al-Maṣnūʿaṭ (probably written in the first half of the 10th century) and that of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Karīm al-Kātib al-Baghḍādi, whose Kitāb al-Ṭabikh was written in 1226 A.D., 33 years before the sack of Bagdad by the Mongols.

One very important aspect of Ibn Jazlah’s collection is its period, 1075-1094 A.D., which falls between the two known culinary writers mentioned above. This means the collection

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may be used to note culinary changes which took place between the early and the later ʿAbbāsid period.

For example, al-Warrāq who had the opportunity to include in his manuscript many preparations taken from culinary manuscripts of the previous century to his, the ninth. He thus used sources that were available to him, but regrettably lost to us, which makes it possible for us today to view some of the luxurious preparations which the Caliphs’ court feasted on and which al-Warrāq saw fit to reproduce for the people of his own generation.

One dish, sīkbāji⁵, demonstrates the changes which took place between the various ʿAbbāsid periods. In al-Warrāq, it is served as a monumental feast to the Caliph al-Aimin. In the sīkbāji of Ibn Jazlah and al-Baghdādi it is far less grand.

Another preparation which points to the changes in culinary methods is tannūriya, from tannūr (clay oven). Al-Warrāq gives two recipes. The first is a splendid example of the culinary sophistication reached in those days and which is basically chicken or small birds En Croute. The second recipe is a cereal dish of rice and some kind of dried beans (lubya) which could be placed to cook under a fat kid or lamb⁶ suspended over the cereal pot and the contents to be left to cook in a sealed tannūr.

Ibn Jazlah’s tannūriya on the other hand is a straightforward lamb or calf’s meat prepared to include chickpeas with the addition of walnut sauce.

Al-Baghdādi’s recipe is different again. He uses the same choice of meat as his predecessor, that is ẖamal (lamb) or ʿijil (calf) but prepares his with wheat and serves it when it is ready as tharid (over bread). Some recipes demonstrate great similarities. Al-Baghdādi’s khashkhashiyā (made with poppy seeds, khashkhāsh), uses similar quantities and even similar wording as the same dish as Ibn Jazlah although with some variations.

Ibn Jazlah’s recipes also help to shed light on vital culinary methods missed out in the other two manuscripts. Al-Baghdādi leaves out banana tart (jūdhabat mouz) while al-Warrāq includes it and instructs his reader to fill the pastry with the cut up bananas before baking. But what about discolouring? Ibn Jazlah has the answer together with a guide for the choice of bananas: choose bananas that are not too ripe, fry them in sesame oil first, dip them in syrup and then use them to fill the pastry.

The fact that Ibn Jazlah’s manuscript is written as a dictionary is helpful. For instance, certain ingredients mentioned by, say, al-Warrāq can be a matter of guesswork to the contemporary researcher. Ibn Jazlah names and identifies many such materials: zait infaq, he says is the best olive oil and is extracted from green olives; ʿuyin al-Baqar (literally, cows eyes) is a round variety of black grape that is not too sweet, Qunbit (cauliflower, called qur-nabiṭ today) is firmly defined.

Some scholars⁷ have questioned whether, for example, Qunbit really meant cauliflower as we know it today or broccoli and whether saljam, shaljam or lift (turnip) is the same vegetable. Ibn Jazlah removes any ambiguity in identifying qunbit when he says that the best is the fresh white qunbit and he gives a title of a dish, qunbitiya which does not appear in either al-Warrāq or al-Baghdādi. He also states clearly that saljam, shaljam or lift is one vegetable.

Other important definitions of more than one name given to one plant in Ibn Jazlah’s text include for example saffron which he says is also known as rabhaqān by some Arabs; qaṭf (a green leaf probably like mallows) is also known as sarmaq.

Some of Ibn Jazlah’s curious directions, which seem likely to have been taken from a source, Greek in origin, is to time a hard boiled egg by counting to three hundred and to one hundred for a poached egg.

The recipes, though written by a physician⁸ demonstrate thorough knowledge and understanding of the arts of the kitchen of his time. Because they are written from the point of view of a physician, the recipes have the added bonus that they conclude with a description of their merits. Ibn Brahimiya, for example, Ibn Jazlah says, is temperate and is like zirbāj in its effect, it suits the stomach and the liver, cheers up the heart and strengthens the body.