Arab and Muslim “food science” seems to have arisen in the latter part of the eight century A.D., as is reflected in the writings of medical men such as Ibn Mäsawah (d. 857), and reached a climax in the second half of the next century. The culinary tradition founded then has survived many onslaughs including that of the Mongols in the thirteenth century. The medieval Muslim and other scholars of “food science” were probably influenced, primarily, by the Greek but also by Persian and other traditions. Their studies resulted in essays and manuscript compilations on specific culinary items supporting health and diet such as fruit, milk, yoghurt, vinegar and so on. Beside these written sources which enriched the libraries of Caliphs and the cultured elite, there were culinary compilations which in today’s terms would be labeled cookery books. Early Middle Eastern culinary science also may be classified as literature in view of its richness and variety.

The Middle East is a complex geographical region whose boundaries are difficult to define. Culinary Culture of the Middle East reflects the diversity of the region it aspires to represent. The book developed from a conference of the same name held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London in 1992. The collection of papers, written primarily by academics, was originally not intended to develop a common theme but only to present new research. The papers deal with both modern and medieval periods and they constitute a valuable source of information in a field that is still in its infancy.

The introduction to the book, compiled by the two editors, provides references to writings on food and cuisine written by historians, sociologists and ethnographers, and a summary of the book’s contributions. However, the introduction contains some oversights. On page eight the topic of souring agents in the medieval Middle East is mentioned, and the text notes that the use of lemon was rare. This is incorrect. On this subject see al-Warrāq’s K. al-Tabīkh,1 (10th Century), the chapter on humādiyāt (sour dishes). Also see al-Baghdādī’s K. al-Tabīkh,2 (written in 1226). Al-Baghdādi’s work abounds with the use of lemon, for example see pages sixteen, nineteen, thirty one and fifty six. The two sources mentioned will be referred to frequently in this review and will be identified hence forth as Warrāq and Baghdādi.

Pages eight and ten refer to the transformation and changes in cooking techniques between the medieval period and today. The text adds that “The patterns of Middle Eastern food cultures we discern do not depend on historical continuity.” Such a statement may be open to question for it is true that some dishes or techniques have disappeared but many others have survived in the region as a whole, or, strangely, in some cases, only in some countries but not others. Many appear under different names but still others have kept their original names intact.

One important paper by T. Allan “Food Production in the Middle East,” draws attention to the mismanagement of water in the region nowadays, which has led to irrevocable environmental

© E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1997
damage. Allan argues in favour of an interesting but probably politically unworkable case for abandoning projects to grow food which can be imported from outside. Another, by S. Zubaida, “National, Communal and Global Dimensions in Middle Eastern Food Cultures,” explores the rise of national cuisines and the formation of regional homogeneity dictated by historical and political boundaries. Zubaida appears to believe that the colonial rule in Egypt led to the rise of a “popular staple” such as kushuri (a dish of rice and lentils). But historically, it is the politically dominant elite that adopts culinary practices from subject peoples. It is highly unlikely that the colonials’ culinary preferences reached the man in the street in Cairo in the last century.

The likely explanation for kushuri in popular areas is that it is an easy to prepare, cheap and satisfying dish and that it was already known in the region before colonialism.3

The origins of kushuri or any other documented dish in the polyglot Middle East region are virtually impossible to pinpoint. Similarly the name of a dish can never be an indicator of origin. This matter will always remain a most hazardous point to determine, in any culture. Even when historical documentation is available it can still be subject to question. This latter point can probably be illuminated by a reference in Warräq’s work in page 140 which appears in rhyming food poetry that the harîsa (a wheat and meat porridge) was invented “(ab’dâ)’a ha) by Sââân” (a reference to the Sassanids). This we know cannot be correct because it was already known in ancient Iraq before the Sassanid period (224 A.D.-622 A.D.).

In one paper, “From the Caucasus to the Roof of the World: a culinary adventure” B. Frager gives an enlightening account of the political aspects influencing the consumption of a particular food item, its name or its popularity. He gives suggestions for possible origins of Ottoman culinary tradition, an area which certainly can benefit from further study.

H. Chase in “The Meyhane or MacDonald’s? Changes in Eating Habits and the Evolution of Fast Food in Istanbul” explores modernisation and change in Turkish towns and their effect on local cuisine. The paper discusses the increasing awareness of the “others” food which in turn revives consciousness in one’s own traditions and the need to keep these traditions alive. Also the general improvement in economic standards is a great encouragement to set up a new more cosmopolitan culinary ethos where the new can exist side by side with the old.

In his zeal to locate the origins of dishes C. Perry in his paper “The Taste for Layered Bread among the Nomadic Turks and the Central Asian Origins of Baklava” argues that the ancient nomadic Turks were fascinated with layered bread, which led them to develop the sweet known as baklava. He adds “the likely place for the innovation would be the many kitchens of the Topkapi Palace.” But Baghdâdi gives a recipe for Jûdhâb khubz al-Qatâ’f (khubz was also used to imply pastry, as in some parts of the Arab Gulf it still does). This recipe bears a strong resemblance to the modern baklava with layers of ground almonds or pistachio nuts mixed with sugar spread out between two layers at a time of pastry. The sweet was, just as it is today, sprinkled with oil and syrup before baking. One extra step which may have evolved in previous centuries was to suspend a chicken over the sweet to bake in the oven (tannûr) thus receiving the drippings as both chicken and sweet cooked.

It may be correct that Baghdâdi’s Jûdhâb received refining touches in the Ottoman kitchens exactly as we believe, a whole range of existing dishes received the refining touches of another economic and political power, the Abbâsids, centuries earlier. This area demands further study.

F. Aubaile-Sallenva’s extensive paper “Al-Kishk: the past and present of a complex culinary practice” explores the evolution of the word Kishk (a variety of foods of multiple meaning prepared from yoghurt, soured-milk, or fermented barley) and documents how the term meant a different thing to different people at different times. The word kishk though Persian in origin appears to have been the choice word of Arab translators in the ninth century in translating the Greek Πσιαόν. The paper correctly notes that “kishk al-Sha’ir-barley gruel” was an influence of the Greek. In fact it was derived directly from Greek textual tradition.