



a culinary crossroad

Like many of the great cuisines of the world, Moroccan food is the product of a vast array of influences. In most of the dishes, one can trace the country's long history of colonisers and immigrants who made their mark, leaving behind new ingredients, flavours and techniques. Situated at the western extremity of North Africa, Morocco was described as the 'land of the setting sun' by the Arabs who made it the westernmost outpost of their vast empire.

However it was the Berbers, whose bloodline filters into the majority of Moroccans today, who were the first people to settle in large numbers since prehistoric times. They were a race of people Indo-European in origin who were primarily sedentary farmers, though some were also pastoral nomads. Their cuisine was rustic and simple, including many of the Mediterranean fruits like dates and figs, and meats from their herds such as goat, lamb, beef, as well as their milk by-products. Ancient Berber recipes are still alive today in the form of mechoui – roast meat on a spit; tangia – slow-cooked meat in earthenware pots; lben – soured milk that's now a national drink; and importantly, couscous, still hailed as the most famous of Moroccan food today. The technique of steaming grains over a flavoured broth is indisputably Berber in origin and a great culinary gift to the world.

The first major wave of visitors to Morocco was by the ancient Phoenicians, or modern-day Lebanese, around 1100 BC. Their influence was profound. They were the first great naval traders of the Mediterranean and contributed widely to the distribution of foods around the Mediterranean basin. They also brought with them techniques of drying and curing meat (khlea) – a method to preserve food on their sea voyages. It is also believed that viticulture, and the production and harvest of grapes for wine, was first developed by the Phoenicians, later established in the era of ancient Rome.

The Phoenicians were Semites, like the Jews, and indeed the Jews travelled with the Phoenicians to settle in Morocco in large numbers. Unlike the Phoenicians, who remained on the coast, the Jews moved inland to mix with the Berbers. It's thought that these first Jewish settlers in Morocco brought saffron bulbs with them and were the first in Morocco to cultivate the treasured purple crocus flower – where saffron threads sprout as the flower's stigmas. The Jews were also the first great spice traders of antiquity and brought with them the seasonings of coriander, cumin and garlic among others. These early Jews integrated so completely with the Berbers that key historical dishes resulted from the confluence of cultures, such as dafina meaning 'buried treasure' – the dish of the Sabbath, made with barley, wheat or chickpeas and mixed with ground meat to form a loaf. The Jews can even take credit for introducing pickling techniques to Morocco, leading to the preservation of lemons, onions and turnips – key features in Moroccan cookery today.

The influence of the Persians and Greeks was also felt, and it was the Greeks who were the first to take bread from the Egyptians and spread it around the Mediterranean. The Egyptians developed leavened bread around 1000 BC. Prior to this breads were simple pastes of water and flour cooked over hot stones – a technique that still remains in the deserts of Morocco. The Persians and Greeks were also the source for key produce such as lemons, olives, coriander and walnuts.

The Carthaginians of Tunisia were the first large-scale cultivators of wheat in North Africa. In the hands of the Arabs, wheat and semolina were magicked into couscous – the forerunner to all dried pasta. The Romans then displaced the Carthaginians in 146 BC, and North Africa – but Morocco in particular – became the breadbasket of the Roman Empire. It's estimated that as much as 60 per cent of the wheat consumed in the Roman Empire came from North Africa, and the emergence of bread in its many shapes and forms is a gift from the Romans.

Along with the Arab conquest in the late 7th century came many more ingredients, and a radical transformation of Moroccan cuisine. First was the introduction of new and exotic spices such as ginger, nutmeg, cinnamon, black pepper and clove. The Arabs weren't just traders, but also conquerors, and this facilitated the volume of trade from one end of their empire to the other, making spices more affordable and available than they'd been before. Second, the arrival of the Arabs ushered in an era of cultural florescence and wealth. The presence of royalty and affluence has always been a great incentive for chefs to innovate with food and it was during this time that Moroccan cuisine began to really define itself, with a national cuisine emerging, complex with spices and distinct flavours. Under the Arabs we see the development of dishes that are now famed as the classics of Moroccan cookery with sweet and sour pairings such as tagines of chicken with olives and lemons, beef with walnuts and lamb with apricots.

At the time of the Christian Reconquest of the Islamic states in the Iberian Peninsula – that is Spain and Portugal – in the 13th century, the Muslims and Jews who fled to Morocco brought with them further culinary refinements to the cuisine. The magical dish of b'stilla (pastilla in Spanish), with its crisp outer shell of warka pastry and layers of meat and eggs, is one such dish.

The Ottoman Turks never successfully captured any part of modern-day Morocco, but they did reach its borders in the 16th century, and their culinary craft filtered down to the Northern ports. In the city of Tétouan we see the dish tagine t'afia – chicken tagine perfumed with ginger and saffron with hard-boiled eggs and almonds, and seffa couscous – made from semolina or broken vermicelli doused in butter, sweetened with sugar and raisins and topped with fried almonds. The Ottoman Turks also introduced yoghurt-based marinades for meats as well as the dessert mahalabiya, which in modern hands is flavoured with fragrant waters of rose or orange blossom and mixed with various fruit compotes.

Closer to our modern era, some important new changes were brought in through trade. The Portuguese and Spanish brought back tomatoes, sweet peppers and hot peppers from the Americas in the 16th century to become staple ingredients for dishes such as the ubiquitous taktouka – a spiced green capsicum salad – confit of tomatoes, but also more elaborate dishes such as capsicums stuffed with meats, grains and fruits.

It was the English who brought tea to Morocco in the 18th century, mainly out of a desire to find a new export market for the sale of excess supply. Tea then grew to become an integral part of Moroccan culture, predominantly green tea with mint rather than black tea, served in delicate glassware and almost always accompanied by sweets.

It was in the early 20th century that the French made their mark and occupation began in 1907. Although short-lived compared to the reign of some of these other empires, they left behind a culture of cafes, pastries, baguettes and introduced large-scale production and distribution of wine. These days, urban chefs embrace a 'Nouveau Marocain' style in which French techniques and flavours meld with traditional recipes.

To this day, Morocco continues to integrate influences in the kitchen while maintaining its unique culinary identity. Every Moroccan dish tells a story about its origins with the country's long history reflected in each mouthful.

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