

# **Pita: The Renowned Flatbread of the Lebanese**

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## **Author's Biography**

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## Background Essay

### Pita: The Renowned Flatbread of Lebanese

#### Introduction

Cultural and ritualistic significance of flatbreads is prevalent in numerous Middle Eastern and North African countries, therefore suggesting that bread holds a deeper meaning to many cultures and more value than just a meal accompaniment. For example, in Azerbaijan and Iran, flatbread is commonly placed onto the bride's shoulders or head to show wishes of prosperity to the couple. In Kazakhstan, flatbread is prepared for funerals to "protect the deceased while a decision is made from God," and in Kyrgyzstan, sharing flatbread at funerals is done to provide a better afterlife for the deceased (*UNESCO*).

The popularization of flatbread throughout the Middle East came due to the benefits of its' composition. Flatbread is extremely versatile in that it can be constructed from varying legumes and wheat varieties (thus can be made in varying ecosystems) and they can be dehydrated with a second baking process, allowing extended shelf lives and transportation without spoilage. It can be baked for a shorter time to result in a softer product, and thus can be used as a soft bread to sop up stews and juices, or it can be cooked longer and be used as the literal plate or be used to scoop up food the same manner as a utensil. The versatility allowed for the survival of this bread throughout time (Pasqualone).

For this research project, pita is the flatbread that will be expanded upon, as it is the most widespread in the Middle East and is additionally well-known around the United States today. Although pita is significant to many cultures, the role of pita within Lebanese culture and cuisine will be the focal point as well as the immigration of the Lebanese to the United States.

#### History and Properties of Pita

In 2018, archaeologists found remains of the oldest-known bread in the world in the Black Desert located in northeastern Jordan. This bread, consisting of cereals and tubers, was concluded to represent ancient pita-like flatbread, dating back 14,500 years ago. It was discovered alongside a stone fireplace which was used as the heat source. The excavation site had belonged to hunter-gatherers in the Stone-Age known as the Natufians. The makings of bread were lengthy, having to grind the flours by hand, thus suggesting that bread played a special role in their lives (Pruitt). Additionally, this finding was significant because this bread was dated to 4,000 years before the dawn of agriculture (Powell).

Today, there are vast varieties of flatbreads throughout the Middle East and the rest of the world. They all have one extremely simple relation: they are thin, fluctuating in thickness between a few millimeters to a few centimeters. Interestingly, Western countries mistakenly categorize flatbreads as unleavened, whereas there are actually both leavened and unleavened categories of flatbread. The way the dough is formed and baked is used to determine the difference between types of voluminous breads and flatbreads. All flatbreads are cooked for little time, resulting in pale color and almost no crust. Voluminous breads need to be baked longer

since it will take more time for the dough to stabilize, resulting in a darker color and thicker crust (Pasqualone).

Leavened flatbreads, such as pita, were traditionally made by using fermented dough from the previous processing. Nowadays, yeast is the most common leavening agent used in leavened flatbreads. Other examples of leavened flatbreads include Italian *pitta* (pizza), Indian and Pakistani *naan*, and Indian and Pakistani *khameeri roti* (ibid).

Unleavened flatbreads usually do not have a leavening phase, resulting in a thinner final product. Bread is easier to chew if the dough is unleavened and spread into a single, thin layer. Examples of unleavened flatbreads are Armenian, Iranian, Turkish, and Irian *lavash* and Italian *piadina* (ibid).

### **Lebanese Immigration to the United States**

The first recorded immigrant of Lebanon to the United States was a missionary named Antonio Bishallaney. He arrived in the Boston Harbor in hopes to preach the gospel, gain education, and reconnect with American citizens he met throughout his prior years (Whitehead, 71). The first wave of Lebanese immigration started in the late 1800's when primarily Arab Christians from Lebanon and other Christians from the Ottoman empire fled war (Cumoletti). This resulted in 89,871 Lebanese immigrants arriving in the U.S. throughout the years of 1899-1919. Upon arrival, the Lebanese mainly lived in New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Of that population, 62% were male and 38% were female. The occupations of these early immigrants varied drastically. Approximately 10,901 of them were farm laborers, and 7,744 being miscellaneous laborers; other common jobs being carpenters, shoemakers, tailors, and masons (Khater).

Immigration waves due to World War I, Israeli raids during the Arab-Israeli War, and the Civil War brought thousands more Lebanese into the United States. Although difficult to be exact, around 1 million Lebanese Americans (Lebanese immigrants and Lebanese born in the U.S.) live in the United States now. The more recent immigration statistics show that more younger men and women are arriving to seek education and opportunities compared to the reasons for prior generations. The states of residency have spread to larger populations in California, Michigan, and Texas (Khater). Job opportunities for the Lebanese Americans have shifted to drive the clothing business in the northeast and the grocery business in cities such as Detroit (Truzzi, 4). In 2013, MENA immigrants can be seen as the most prominent immigrant group to work in management, business, science, and art occupations, showing the ever-increasing opportunities available to them. Due to the concentrated populations in the bigger cities throughout the United States, partly due to the diversity that cities bring, is where one can see the origins of Middle Eastern cuisine foods in the United States (Feldmeier).

### **Foodways of the Lebanese in America**

In comparison to other Middle Eastern countries that purchase their foods at markets, most Lebanese go to the corner store for their ingredients (Helou, 12). At the corner stores, one can purchase essentials such as spices, coffees, and nuts. Breads, such as pita, are found in

almost every Middle Eastern shop and is easily frozen to accompany dishes throughout the week. It is common for residents of Lebanon to have family living in the countryside, allowing for the family to share fresh produce from their land. Along with the seasonal local supply, friends from Syria or visitors of other countries traditionally bring local, staple ingredients known to their country of origin when they are visiting each other (ibid). It would be difficult to mimic the foodways of the Lebanese in America, but as populations increase, more food supply is becoming available (Nelson, 7).

In areas with concentrated Lebanese populations, there are often shops that provide Eastern Mediterranean's such as pomegranate molasses and olives, whilst providing reduced prices on the fresh staples such as lemons and herbs. The Lebanese communities surrounding would travel to these shops for their food, or shop at other specialty supermarkets such as an Italian supermarket that does provide similar ingredients. When the local Arab population in Detroit, Michigan had a demand for fresh pita, the Royal Pita opened in 1970 to satisfy this community of their needed staple food. The increasing demand for fresh pita in households that demanded purchasing flatbreads influenced other bakeries to open to meet the needs of the demand. Nelson writes, "the arrival of a more professional class of immigrant, and the increasing employment of women, led to that second development of food infrastructure: the restaurant," (Nelson, 7). When interviewing older generations of immigrants on why there were so few Arab restaurants, Nelson learned that few Arab restaurants existed in the early waves of immigration because there was no tradition of Middle Eastern populations to go to restaurants back home. Their other answer included, "Why would Arab immigrants pay to eat the very good prepared so well within the home?" (ibid). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, developments of Arab restaurants began, attracting both Arab locals as well as other populations, thus spreading the delicious flavors of Middle Eastern cuisine (Nelson, 8).

## **Lebanese Cuisine**

Lebanese cuisine is known for its bright, fresh flavors combined with its unique spice mixtures. Common spices used in Lebanese cuisine are anise, sumac, cinnamon, za'atar, allspice, and ground pepper. Lebanese households commonly are stocked with dried legumes, bulgur, tahini, pine nuts, olives, and rose water. Finally, the fresh produce one can commonly find in Lebanese cuisine consists of lemons, parsley, mint, garlic, yogurt, lamb, and beef (Helou, 13; Salloum, 13). Females are predominantly the cooks in Lebanon homes, and they may spend hours in the kitchen while adjusting their cooking to meet the preference of each family member (Salloum, 11).

Bread is the staple of nearly all meals in Lebanese cuisine and thus served with every dish. Pita bread is the most common bread to accompany the dishes. The two most common dips to serve with pita are *hommus* (ground chickpeas) and *baba ghannooge* (roasted eggplant dip). The Lebanese use the pita bread to scoop up their food, and there is even a practice prevalent among some Lebanese to wipe one's mouth with pita bread as you eat, to keep it clean. Throughout Lebanon, you can find pita in three different sizes depending on use. The large is 12 inches in diameter for home use and for dips, a medium size is perfect for sandwiches (every kebab is wrapped in pita), and the third, smallest size is the size baked and served as individual portions in restaurants (Hellou, 14-5).

## **Pita and Middle Eastern Cuisine in the United States**

Pita bread is served in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Restaurants around the United States. It is often served alongside hummus or stuffed with kebabs or falafel and veggies. Pita can be found in grocery stores either pre-packaged in the bread aisle or found fresh at a bakery. A new form of consuming pita— the renowned pita chip, was invented at a sandwich cart in Boston when the owner decided to cut and bake her leftover pita into chips and then add parmesan or cinnamon-sugar on top to season them. The popularity of her invention influenced her to launch Stacy's Pita Chips, the first baked pita chip on the market. Stacy's Pita Chips brand was sold to PepsiCo for \$250,000,000 in 2005, and since, has been made widely available in most chip aisles around the U.S. (NPR). This Americanized, crunchy version of pita bread is often used to accompany foods such as hummus and cheese, or mindlessly crunched on by themselves.

Thankfully, all around the United States, people of all races and ethnicities can eat and experience the flavors of Lebanon due to the popularization of ethnic foods and cuisine fusions as the U.S. becomes more diverse each day. Additionally, it is astounding to follow the journey of pita from the Natufians 14,500 years ago, to the cultural history of it around Lebanon and the Middle East, and ultimately to the popularity of pita within the past few decades around the U.S.

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## Primary Source Recipe

### Pita Bread/Arabic bread

Hadia Zebib

Hadia's Lebanese Cuisine Blog

February 26, 2018

Zebib Hi, Hadia. "Pita Bread / Arabic Bread." *Hadias Lebanese Cuisine*, 26 Feb. 2018, hadiaslebanesecuisine.com

**Ingredients:** Yield: 8 medium pitas

- 3 ½ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 ½ tablespoons active dry yeast
- 2 Tablespoons sugar
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 ½ cups warm water

### Directions:

1. In a bowl, sift the flour and add salt.
2. In a large bowl, mix the active dry yeast, sugar, and ¼ cup of lukewarm water (save the rest of water for kneading), let it sit for 5-8 minutes, or until yeast becomes frothy.
3. Add the flour to the dissolved yeast, and slowly add the remaining water.
4. Knead the dough with your hands or a stand mixer, (I prefer the hand method) until you have a malleable dough of one texture. Add a small amount of flour, as needed, to keep the dough from sticking to your hands. Knead and beat the dough for further 5 more minutes (the dough has to be kneaded and kneaded well; it has to be considerably wet but definitely dryer than a batter).
5. Transfer the dough to a clean bowl, cover with a kitchen towel and let it sit for 20-25 minutes to double in size.
6. Preheat oven to 230 °C / 450 °F.
7. When the dough has doubled in size, sprinkle some flour on a countertop and knock it back; divide it into 8 even-sized portions and gather each into a ball. Cover with a kitchen towel, and set aside to rest for 15 minutes.
8. On a floured countertop, stretch each ball, using a rolling pin, into a circle of about 8 inches / 20 cm in diameter and a bit less than ¼ inch thick. Make sure to roll it into a pretty circle with no incisions or torn dough to keep from creating a weak point that may prevent the pita from puffing up.
9. Preheat the sheet pan before lining it with parchment paper and delicately transfer one dough round at a time onto the parchment-lined sheet pan.
10. Bake about 6-8 minutes, until the dough is puffed up and baked to pale golden; they bake very fast. Happy Eating!

## **Background explanation**

The author of this recipe, Hadia Zebib, grew up in Beirut, Lebanon with a household of food-lovers. She published a blog and a cookbook about Lebanese cuisine where she shares some of her favorite dishes.

Hadia explains that people within Lebanon and the Middle East have access to neighborhood bakeries that specialize in pita bread and other flatbreads, so it is not that common for a Lebanese household to make their own pita. She provides this Arabic flatbread in conjunction with the suggestion that everyone should try to bake pita at least once in their lifetime, to watch the amazing circles of dough puff up in the oven.

This recipe is friendly for all ethnicities to try out, even those unfamiliar with pita. She does this by providing her audience with step-by-step pictures and additionally, a video of her preparing and baking the bread to limit mistakes in the kitchen and provide assistance. This recipe by Hadia is a suitable example of Lebanese foodways in the United States because it provides the Lebanese Americans with a simple recipe with limited ingredients that will allow them to recreate the pita that is available within the bakeries in Lebanon.