

Overheard in a pub in the north of Britain:

A: "What shall we eat tonight, a curry or Chinese?"

B: "Ah, I'm fed up with all that foreign food.

Let's go for a kebab!"

Arab, Turkish and Iranian friends all claim the origin of kebab as theirs.

In fact kebab is a common Middle East culinary item whose origin is difficult, maybe impossible, to ascertain. The long period of Ottoman hegemony led to the diffusion of a synthesis of culinary culture to many of the regions under Ottoman rule, or rather to the urban elites of these areas initially, and then later to other strata. Although most of Iran did not come under Ottoman domination, there was nevertheless extensive cultural exchange between the two areas.

In recent times, nationalist sentiments have led people to claim desirable items of this common Middle Eastern heritage

for themselves exclusively. These items may now be shared, runs the nationalist logic, but originally they were ours. The Persians argue that their ancient civilization fed into subsequent Muslim civilizations; the Arabs point to the Golden Age of the Caliphate; the Turks boast of their nomadic traditions and subsequent hegemony over the region; and the Greeks claim that Near Eastern civilization stems from Byzantium. However correct these claims, they do not take into account historical transformations, mutations, discontinuities and syntheses. No doubt all the peoples of the Middle East contributed to the common civilization, but these inputs have become so thoroughly mixed and transformed that it is impossible to disentangle them in terms of national criteria.

When it comes to kebab, it is pointless to ask about origins. Meat grilled over an open fire is common to all peoples who hunted animals and knew fire. Kebab requires additional skills: butchery, meat cutting and boning. Evidence of the butchering of meat appears in pictures on Assyrian clay tablets. Although these skills surely developed separately in many places, the style of different meats arranged on skewers and grilled on an open fire has long been identified with the Middle East. The diversity of local and regional types subsumed under the generic term "kebab" reflects this commonality of culture.

There is also the amusing, but misleading, game of seeking national identifications of dishes by tracing the etymology of their names. If the word for an item of food is derived from the Persian, for example, then people argue that the dish must be originally Persian. Kofta, for instance, derives from the Persian verb "to beat" or "to pound." Therefore, it is argued, the range of foods so designated must be originally Persian. The derivation of a word, however, has no necessary connection with the origin of the dish it currently describes.

Back to kebab. The 1968 edition of Redhouse's Turkish-English Dictionary indicates the origins of non-Turkish words. Here, kebab is considered an Arabic word. In the Persian dictionary, *Lughat Nameh*, kebab is defined as an Arabic noun meaning "meat treated over fire." Other Persian dictionaries, such as that in French by Desmaisons (1913) and Steingas'

Persian-English dictionary, confirm that the word is Arabic. In *Lisan al-Arab*, the classical dictionary for Arabic, kebab appears under the root *kaba/kababa*, "to turn over, to fall over." Kebab is defined as *tabbahija*, an Arabised Persian word in common use in medieval times, meaning slices of meat fried or grilled, a word now forgotten. The verbal-noun indicated for kebab in *Lisan al-Arab* is *al-takbib*, "shaping into balls." This is not very helpful, as it does not make any connection to meat or grilling.

Taj al-Arus, another classical dictionary, indicates that two authorities, al-Khafaji and Yaqut, thought that the word was derived from the Persian. It then proceeds to speculate on the associated verbs and suggests, again, the notion of *takbib*, of shaping. The dictionary then goes on to note that kebab is meat inverted over the embers, thrown over them. Thus, kebab here is derived from the verb *kaba*, to invert over, to throw over.

This sense is confirmed in the *Kitab al-Bukhala* of al-Jahiz. This ninth century work is an excellent source of information about food and food vocabularies in Abbasid Iraq of that period. It consists of anecdotes about different kinds of misers and their efforts at economy. Food, the main medium for these economies, features prominently in the tales. In one anecdote, a miser invites a party for a day out in an orchard. The only food he takes with him is quantities of rice flour which he has his servants process into rice-bread baked over an open fire. In the meantime fishing lines are set in the streams, and the hungry guests have to await the catch of small fish which are then grilled over the bread fire. The expression used is *ja'aluha kababan 'ala nari al-khubz*. Here, kebab is the act of "inverting" or "throwing" the fish over the fire.

Thus, on the basis of the foregoing, the Arabic derivation of the word kebab may seem the most convincing. But the etymological evidence throws no light whatsoever on the matter of the origin of the culinary dish called kebab. And although kebab is widespread throughout the Middle East and beyond, the real artistry and variety of the genre are associated in my mind with Turkey and Iran. I should note that my Arab, Iranian and Turkish friends to whom I put these arguments remain sceptical.

Whatever its origin, I find the following dish, known by Egyptians as kebab tart and Cypriots as sheftalia, to be the most delectable of all kebabs. It is made from minced or pounded meat and aromatics, shaped like a sausage, then encased in sheets of caul fat (fatty membrane enclosing the stomach of a sheep or a pig, called in French *crépine*).

Ingredients:

- 300 gms minced lamb or mutton
- 150 gms caul fat (one or two sheets, depending on size)
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1 cup of finely chopped parsley
- a mixture of ground aromatics including any or all of the following: allspice, coriander, cumin, paprika, black pepper.

Mix together the ingredients, except the fat, and work the mixture with your hands into a dough-like mass. Cut up the sheets of caul into 20x20cm squares. Divide up the meat mixture into a number of portions to match the number of squares you have. Shape each portion like a sausage and wrap in the caul sheet. Grill, preferably over charcoal. The idea is to crisp up the fat on the outside and have unctuous and aromatic meat inside.

This kebab made of pork or lamb, is readily available as *sheftalia* in Cypriot butchers and restaurants in London. The quality is variable. Not commonly known in Turkey or the Arab world, I had assumed that it was a Cypriot concoction. However, in 1991, I was taken by an Egyptian friend to a popular restaurant in the old centre of Cairo, behind the Sayyidna al-Hussain mosque. The kebab mixture we ordered included a caul-wrapped kofta (but with little or no aromatics) called kebab tarb. None of my other various Egyptian friends had ever heard of it. In 1993, I encountered it again, in another central popular quarter, al-Sayyida Zeynab. It is clearly an old popular kebab in Cairo, now largely forgotten and unknown to the cosmopolitan intelligentsia who, in any case, recoil in horror at the idea of so much cholesterol. I make it occasionally. It is delicious, excellent in a mixed meat barbecue.

London, 1993