

What to Order in Ninth-Century Baghdad

Our narrator, Isâ ibn Hishâm, is in the market quarter of Baghdad, penniless and hungry. He spies a peasant who has obviously just sold some livestock – he is looking around nervously and keeping a hand on his purse. Isa steps up smartly and, addressing him as his old friend Abû Zaid, persuades the confused rustic to lunch with him in the souks:

‘We went to an oven master whose meat was dripping with fat, whose *jûdhâbas* were running with juices. And I told him, ‘Cut some meat for my friend Abû Zaid, and weigh him out some of that sweet, and choose him a tray and place on it thin flatbreads, and sprinkle them with your best sumac water, so that Abû Zaid may eat salubriously’. And the meat roaster leaned on his cleaver and minced the ‘butter of his oven’ as fine as kohl or milled flour.

‘Then we sat, and neither paused until we had made work of the food. And I said to the confectioner: ‘Weigh out for Abû Zaid two pounds of throat-easing *lauzînaj*, for it slips into the veins. And let it be but one night old, on sale just this morning, the crust paper-thin, generously filled, pearled with almond oil, starry in color, melting before it meets the teeth, that Abu Zaid may eat salubriously’. And he weighed it, and we kneeled and fell to like locusts’.

The next thing it is absolutely necessary to order, Isâ now tells ‘Abû Zaid’, is ice water. He goes off ostensibly in search of it, leaving ‘Abu Zaid’ to pay for the food.

The medieval reader of this cynical tale by Badî‘ al-Zamân al-Hamadhâni¹ would know exactly where all this took place. Isâ has complained of not having enough money to buy so much as a date; clearly he has just passed the fruit stalls in the Sharqiyya quarter of the al-Karkh market. The peasant who has just sold his animals to the butchers has been making his way warily between the Canal of the Fryers and the Canal of the Chickens – perilously close to the food market.

There were plenty of choices in the food market: fryers of sausage and fryers of fish, sellers of roast liver and of roast sheep’s heads and roasters of sliced meat, to say nothing of the purveyors of hot stews, cold vegetable dishes and a sort of porridge flavored with meat and spices called *harîsa*. For dessert, Isâ could have steered the peasant to the makers of a sort of fritter called *zulâbiyâ* (better known in its Indian form, *jelebi*) or he could have chosen any of over 50 options at the confectioners’.

But he didn’t. He wanted the most highly regarded dishes of Baghdad: *jûdhâba* (also called *jûdhâb*) and *lauzînaj*.

They sound familiar enough. *Jûdhâba* was basically roast meat; one thinks of shishkebab. *Lauzînaj* was an almond pastry, perhaps something like baklava. It sounds as if Isâ is in a restaurant, ordering main course and dessert.

If we think this, we are deceived. It is reported that some *harîsa* sellers had upstairs seating, but clearly our protagonists are merely ordering from food stalls and eating on the ground. And the food bears little resemblance to the basically Turkish cuisine of today's Near East.

In the case of *jûdhâba*, the first thing to note is that the meat in question is not a skewer of kebab grilled over coals but something sliced off a large cut of meat roasted in a clay oven – a *tannûr* (tandoor) – and then, as we have seen, minced fine. The sweet that accompanies it was actually the essence of the dish, the *jûdhâba* proper. It was a sort of sweetened Yorkshire pudding, stuck under the meat as it roasted to catch running fat and meat juices.²

So the dish consisted of meat, sugar, starch and plenty of fat (often fat was part of the pudding recipe itself) – a nutritionist's nightmare; no wonder it was so popular. The only surviving 10th century cookbook, *Kitâb al-Tabîkh*,³ the contents of which date mostly from the 9th century, gives no fewer than 19 recipes.

The medieval dictionaries define *jûdhâba* as a dish of sugar, rice and meat. An 8th century treatise listing 'counterfeit' dishes prepared for novelty's sake (equivalent to the sotleties of medieval European cuisine), such as 'a dish of marrow made without marrow' and a frittata made without eggs, includes '*jûdhâba* made without rice'. Curiously, though, of the 19 *jûdhâba* recipes in *Kitâb al-Tabîkh*, only one contains rice.⁴ Nearly all the rest include bread in some form, and fully six are simply bread puddings.⁵ At any rate, only one besides the rice recipe omits bread altogether: a pudding of melons, honey, eggs and fat. (Other recipes often consist of similar flavored mixtures 'sandwiched' between layers of thin bread, and it is possible that even this recipe may presume bread.)

For comparison, the same is true of the *jûdhâba* recipes in two 13th century books.⁶ This could be merely an artifact of their being book recipes; perhaps books only recorded unusual recipes. Perhaps the surviving cookbooks happened to record a minor, rice-less tradition. Or it may be the dictionaries that record a minority tradition.

At any rate, the connection with bread is extremely strong in the 10th century book. One recipe begins by calling for 'a thick *jûdhâb* of fine white flour' which is never called for again by that name, but the recipe continues by describing a flavored filling which is then stuffed into a thick round flat bread known as *jardaqaḥ*, much as other fillings are placed between thin breads. Evidently *jûdhâba* and *jardaqaḥ* could be equivalent.

As for *lauzînaj*,⁷ it was not much like baklava. There were two varieties of it. 'Dry' *lauzînaj* was essentially marzipan: a paste of ground almonds and sugar, optionally stiffened with eggwhite. The more famous *lauzînaj* was a pastry stuffed with this almond paste. The recipes say to store it in a jar with syrup and sesame or almond oil to cover – the reference to almond oil in the tale above was not poetic license – and it is sometimes called *lauzînaj mugharraq*, 'immersed' or 'drowned' *lauzînaj*.

The pastry that wraps the almond filling was known for its delicacy; the poet Ibn al-Rumi compared it to grasshoppers' wings. Recipes refer to 'the thin bread made for this purpose', 'the thin bread made for samosas (*sanbûsaj*), and preferably thinner' and *qatâ'if*. The latter word today refers to a crepe in Syria and Egypt, and the *lauzînaj* wrapper was a crepe, but one that followed an unusual recipe.

The recipes say to make a batter by kneading ‘starch’, which will get you nowhere – starch lacks gluten. I have tried making batter with starch and had little success, even with a recipe that called for adding one egg white per ounce of starch; the crepes cracked and smelled like a starched shirt fresh from the iron.

I have come to wonder whether ‘starch’ (*nishâ*, *malban*) had a different sense in this context. A medieval cook made starch from flour by kneading a dough stiff and then kneading it under water until the starch dissolved out. The technique for making crepe batter was similar, up to a point. Middle Eastern crepes often do not contain egg and are bound by the gluten in the flour. The batter is made by kneading a stiff dough and working water into it until it thins out to batter consistency. Perhaps ‘starch’ in this context was a technical term for batter made in this way.

However it was made, the batter was cooked slowly on a sheet of iron or steel variously called a tray or a mirror. Several recipes stress that the metal was not greased but waxed. The paper-thin pastry that resulted was so closely associated with *lauzînaj* that it was, confusingly, often called *lauzînaj* itself.

This cooking technique is still in use today, using a batter of thinned dough, and the result is no crepe. It is how one makes the Syrian and Egyptian pastry *kunâfah*, which Americans often call ‘shredded wheat pastry’ because of the resemblance of the finished product to a well-known breakfast cereal. For *kunâfah*, the batter is dribbled onto the warmed metal through perforations. The fine ‘pasta’ that results is dried, rather than cooked, on the sheet, just as the medieval *qatâ’if* were. To make a pastry, the *kunâfah* dough must be baked with clarified butter and perhaps a filling such as nuts.

In the middle ages, this sort of vermicelli-like *kunâfa* was known, but the word could also mean a paper-thin crepe made on the ‘mirror’ – in fact, the sort of crepe *lauzînaj* was wrapped in is sometimes called *kunâfa*. Here we approach the solution to a mystery: why Persian, Turkish and Greek word for *kunâfah* is *qatâ’if* – respectively, *ghatâyef*, *kadayif* and *kataifi*. An alternative name in Farsi is *tel ghatâyef* or ‘string *qatâ’if*’, which is nicely descriptive.

So now we have a picture of *lauzînaj* – cylindrical slugs of almond paste rolled up in thin pastry wrappers, cut into convenient lengths and stored in jars, ‘drowned’ in almond oil and syrup.⁸ Perhaps the pastry really was as fine as grasshoppers’ wings, and perhaps it did melt before meeting the teeth.

¹ Al-Maqâmah al-Baghdâdiyyah, p.59, *Mâqamât al-Hamadhani*, Dar al-Mashriq, Beirut 1973.

² The pan that held the pudding was known as a *jûdhâbdân* and was preferably made of pottery. The 10th century book *Kitâb al-Tabîkh* expresses disapproval of the untinned copper *jûdhâbdâns* often used in the souks.

³ Al-Muzaffar ibn Nasr ibn Sayyâr al-Warrâq, *Kitâb al-Tabîkh*, ed. Kaj Öhrneberg and Sahban Mroueh, Societas Orientalis Fennica, Helsinki 1987.

⁴ It's a puzzling recipe that consists of sugar, honey, fat and (presumably uncooked) pulverized rice. This produces an unsatisfactory result when placed under roasting meat; I suspect the recipe has neglected to mention the water that would make this a rice pudding.

⁵ Of the remainder, four are combinations of thin bread and fruit or fruit juice, two are made with the crepe called *qatâ'if* (of which more later), two are sweetened egg mixtures on thin breads, one is a thickish flat loaf stuffed with stewed sweetened meat. One mysterious version apparently consists of pieces of raw leavened dough in hot kidney fat with honey inserted among them by the use of a hollow cane, and another takes the form of layers of meat and onions alternating with truffles and eggs – topped by a thin bread.

⁶ 'A Baghdad Cookery Book' (tr. A.J. Arberry), *Islamic Culture* (Hyderabad), April, 1939: p.208. The other book, known as *Kitâb al-Wuslah ila al-Habîb*, exists in many MSS. One of its *jûdhâba* recipes is to be found in the chapter on chicken, six more in an interpolated 'section on sweets not belonging to the book' found in all but one MS. The 13th century recipes fall into a small number of categories: bread puddings, panfuls of *qatâ'if* stuffed with nuts, and puddings – of poppyseed, almonds, dates, bananas or melons – arranged in the pan between layers of thin bread.

⁷ *Lauzînaj* was esteemed in the court cuisine of ancient Iran (unlike *jûdhâb*, which is apparently not attested in pre-Islamic literature at all). It is the only pastry described in the Middle Persian book *Khusrau i Kawâdân u Rêdak Ê* (King Khusrau and His Page) as suitable for both winter and summer. Curiously, however, the name is derived from *lûzâ*, the Aramaic word for almond, rather than from the native Persian word *bâdâm*.

⁸ The shape of the resulting pastry was cylindrical. (As was dry *lauzînaj*; one recipe for it describes making it 'in the shape of a cane, kneaded and twisted under the hand like a cucumber'). This deals a blow to Maxime Rodinson's theory (in 'On the Etymology of 'Losange'; *Petits Propos Culinaires* #23, July 1986) that the word 'lozenge' derives from *lauzînaj*. The weakest point in Rodinson's speculation was always the presumption that *lauzînaj* was baked in a pan and cut in rhomboidal shapes like baklava. Apart from the recipes' clear instructions 'roll up' (*yulaff*) the almond filling in a *qatâ'if*, the mere fact that the pieces were stored in jars makes a lozenge shape untenable.