

The wonderfully rambling autobiography of a late Yemeni acquaintance of mine, Qadi Muhammad ibn 'Ali al-Akwa', gives three recipes for cooking locusts—boiled, grilled and roasted in

the *tannur*. In case of any doubt about the permissibility of eating them, he goes on to quote a *hadith*, or Tradition, of the Prophet Muhammad:

A large clay oven, usually barrel-shaped. Cf. Indian "tandoori" dishes.

“Two sorts of carrion have been made lawful for us to eat, and two things containing blood: fish and locusts, and liver and spleen.

"Carrion" here means creatures that have died without ritual Islamic slaughter. With these exceptions, the consumption of carrion and of blood is prohibited for Muslims.

He then tells an anecdote:

My teacher, 'Ali ibn Yahya 'Aqabat, told me that when he moved to Cairo in the early '30's he married an Egyptian woman. No sooner had the marriage taken place than a swarm of locusts, bigger than the sort they are used to in Yemen, appeared and began devastating the local farms. Shaykh 'Ali began catching locusts, then grilling and eating them. When his Egyptian wife saw him doing this, she called for her father to come, and told him that she'd "seen the Yemeni eating locusts." The experience so put her off her husband that she ran away from him, and it all ended in divorce.

Many verses have been composed about locusts, but all I can recall at the moment is this one:

A swarm of locusts came and landed on my crops—  
"Be off! You'll eat me out of house and home!" I said.  
Then one climbed up an ear of corn and lectured me:  
"We're on a journey, so we're due our daily bread!"

The locust is alluding to the principle in Islamic law that hungry (human) travelers are allowed to take produce from a field or orchard—enough to keep them going, but no more.

The 1330's AH began at the end of 1911 CE. The swarm in the story may well have been part of the great plague of locusts that invaded Egypt and the Levant in April 1915. A witness in Egypt said, "As far as we could see for miles ... there was nothing visible in the heavens above or the earth beneath but myriads of buzzing locusts." The Ottoman authorities in Palestine compelled every adult male to collect 20 kilograms of locust eggs, on pain of a hefty fine.

Staying in Egypt for our main course, but turning to more conventional food, here is a recipe for what may be the ultimate pie. It comes from an account of the country written in the late

12th century by the Iraqi physician 'Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi. Among their unusual dishes is the "tray pie." The recipe is as follows:

Raghif is usually a thickish round of bread, but "pie" makes more sense in view of the movable feast to come.

The weight of the pound has varied over time and place, but the standard Baghdadi measure is said to have been 340 grams (12 oz).

A Persian name for a kind of pastry, stuffed with sugar and nuts, then fried.

The spices are "hot" in the sense employed by Graeco-Arab dietetics, which classifies comestibles as hot or cold, dry or moist. Mastic is the gum of a shrub native to the eastern Mediterranean region.

A meter, say: about three feet.

Take thirty Baghdadi pounds of white flour and knead it with five and a half pints of sesame oil, using the same method you would use to knead the dough for *khashkunan*. Divide the dough in two, and use half of it to line a copper tray. The tray should be of the correct type, roughly four spans in diameter and provided with stout handles. Next, take three whole roast lambs stuffed with a mixture consisting of minced meat fried in sesame oil, pounded pistachios and aromatic hot spices (pepper, ginger, cinnamon, mastic, coriander seed, cumin, cardamom, nutmeg and other similar spices may be used). Arrange the lambs on the dough base, and sprinkle them with rosewater in which musk has been infused. Then take 20 chickens, 20 pullets and 50 small fowl, some of them roasted and stuffed with eggs, others stuffed with meat, and the rest stewed in the juice of sour grapes, lemons or similar. Place the birds on top of the lambs and in the spaces in between them. Next, scatter on top of the pile samosas and small round pasties, some filled with meat and others with sugar and sweetmeats. If at this stage you wish to add another lamb, carved into slices, and some fried cheese, feel free to do so.

When all these ingredients have been neatly piled up in the shape of a dome, sprinkle them with rosewater in which musk and aloes-wood have been infused. Now take the other half of the dough, stretch it out into the form of a disc, and use it to cover the piled-up ingredients. Seal the edges of the upper and lower halves of the dough casing, as one does with *khashkunan*, ensuring that the seal is absolutely airtight. The tray should then be placed on

In his description of Egypt, 'Abd al-Latif (1162-1231) has some interesting reflections on the esthetics of pharaonic sculpture and—ironically, given the contents of the passage translated here—one of the most harrowing accounts of famine ever written. There is an English version of his book—done, the translators assert, following an encounter with the author's spirit. Intrigued by their claim, the present translator has traced the admittedly curious history of 'Abd al-Latif's manuscript in an extended essay entitled "Ghost Writer."