

*Literally, "blushed pink and turned red." Is the subsequent wiping with a sponge to remove traces of ash?*

top of the tannur until the dough becomes firm and begins to cook through. At this point, the attached handles should be used to lower the tray gradually into the tannur. This needs to be done slowly and patiently, allowing the pastry to become fully cooked. When it has changed color and browned nicely, remove the tray from the tannur, wipe the pie with a sponge then sprinkle it with musk-infused rosewater. It is now ready to serve.

This is a fitting dish for royalty and lovers of luxury, and may conveniently accompany them to their distant hunting-grounds and remote picnic-spots. It is a varied banquet in itself, easy to transport and hard to spoil, splendid in appearance and a pleasure to experience, and it keeps hot for long periods.

As for the common people of Egypt, they seldom know anything of such dishes.

A century earlier, high-end dining in the Syrian capital held a surprise for the Spanish judge and traveler Abu Bakr ibn

al-'Arabi. The later scholar of all things Andalusian, al-Maqqari, wrote that

his travel book includes several extraordinary anecdotes. In one of these, he tells how in Damascus he entered the house of a prominent citizen and saw a stream flowing into it, passing by the place where they were sitting, and then flowing out again in the other direction. "I only understood the reason for this," he says, "when tables loaded with food began to appear, floating toward us on the stream. The servants took them out of the water and placed them before us. When we had finished eating, they put the used crockery and other things in the outward-flowing part of the stream, and the water carried them away to the women's quarters without the servants having to go anywhere near them."

*This forerunner of the dumb-waiter might appeal to innovative sushi-bar proprietors. In India, I was equally impressed by the Maharaja of Gwalior's method of delivering dessert and cigars to his dinner guests—via a tabletop model train set made of silver.*

Staying in the 11th century and returning to Egypt—but at the hungry end of the culinary scale—here is the scholar Muhammad ibn

Tahir al-Muqaddasi, a native of Jerusalem, reminiscing about his days as a penniless student:

*Tinnis is on an island in a lake seven kilometers (4.3 mi) southwest of Port Said. Once a flourishing city, it was the object of Crusader incursions and was largely abandoned in the early 13th century. Muhammad ibn Tahir's travels focused on the collection and study of the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, and took him as far as eastern Iran.*

I stayed in Tinnis for a period, pursuing my studies... While I was there I fell on hard times, and the day came when I had nothing but a single dirham to my name. Now, that day I needed bread and I needed writing-paper, and I couldn't decide which to spend my dirham on: If I bought bread, I'd have no paper, and if I bought paper, I'd have no bread. I remained in this quandary for three days and nights, during which I ate nothing. On the morning of the fourth day, I said to myself, "Even if I did get hold of some paper today, I'm so weak from hunger that I wouldn't be able to write anything." So I went out to buy bread, putting the dirham in my mouth—and I swallowed it. When this happened, I got the giggles. Just then, a man came up to me and said, "What's so funny?" I said, "Oh, nothing." He insisted on knowing, but I wouldn't tell him. Finally he swore he'd divorce his wife if I didn't come clean. So I told him what had happened, and he took me by the hand, led me to his house and promised he'd see me fed.

*Integral pockets were not a feature of 11th-century clothing.*

*An extreme but—to this day—not infrequent way of putting pressure on someone.*

The disappearing dirham turned out to be a good investment, for at this point in the story the call to prayer sounds, the two men go to the mosque, bump into a philanthropic local magnate—and Muhammad ibn Tahir ends up with a stipend of 30 dirhams a day! As the later traveler Ibn Jubayr assured wandering scholars, "in

every village they will shower you with your daily bread." Back now to conspicuous consumption. Planning her pilgrimage to Makkah in the 1320's, Tughay Khatun, favorite wife of the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir, decided she couldn't do without her comfort food. So the official in charge of logistics