

Egyptian Culinary Culture: From Ancient Egypt to the Present¹

Dilek Çiftci²

Abstract

Egyptian culinary culture reflects a long-standing cultural heritage shaped by agricultural production along the Nile River and its influence on social life. In Ancient Egypt, dietary practices were mainly based on bread and beer made from emmer wheat and barley. These foods were not only part of the daily diet but also played an important role in the economic system, social hierarchy, and religious rituals. Tomb scenes and written sources show that food carried symbolic meanings, especially in relation to offerings to the gods and beliefs about the afterlife (Samuel, 1996; Ikram, 2010). Dietary practices in Ancient Egypt differed according to social class. While the elite and those connected to temples had access to a wider variety of foods, most of the population followed a simple diet based on grains, legumes, and vegetables (Ebied, 2016; Hussein & Mehdawy, 2016). Contemporary Egyptian cuisine continues this historical tradition while adapting to regional and geographical conditions. Fish and seafood are common along the Mediterranean coast, rice and poultry are widely consumed in the Nile Delta, and diets in desert regions rely more on small livestock and legumes. National dishes such as *ful*, *tameya*, *koshari*, and *molokhiya* reflect the continuity of grain- and legume-based food traditions from ancient times to the present (Özkan, 2002; McWilliams, 2011). This chapter presents the main characteristics and food practices of Ancient Egyptian cuisine and examines the regional structure, daily eating habits, and key national dishes of modern Egyptian cuisine.

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2 Öğr. Gör. Dr, Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli University, dilek.ciftci@hbv.edu.tr , 0000-0002-2773-8676

1. Ancient Egyptian Culinary Culture

Ancient Egyptian culinary culture was closely connected to the agricultural system that developed along the Nile River. The fertile lands created by the Nile's regular floods ensured the continuity of grain cultivation. This allowed dietary practices in Ancient Egypt to develop in an organized and stable manner from early periods. In this context, culinary culture was not only a part of daily life but also became a fundamental element of the economic structure and social organization (Ikram, 2010). From the Predynastic Period onward, grain production-particularly the cultivation of emmer wheat and barley-formed the basis of Ancient Egyptian cuisine. Bread and beer produced from these grains played an important role not only in nutrition but also in labor organization and systems of food distribution. Temples and palaces functioned as central institutions for food production and distribution, and culinary activities were shaped under the control of these structures (Samuel, 1996).



Figure 1. Wall relief depicting farmers in Ancient Egypt (photograph by the author, 2025)

Archaeological findings, tomb reliefs, and written records indicate that Ancient Egyptian cuisine was closely intertwined with social and religious life. Food was an essential component of offerings to the gods and beliefs related to the afterlife, giving culinary practices a strong symbolic meaning. This demonstrates that Ancient Egyptian cuisine was not limited to dietary practices alone but represented a multi-layered cultural system (Collier, 1998; Hussein & Mehdawy, 2016).

1.1. Social Life in Ancient Egypt

In Ancient Egyptian society, dietary habits were closely linked to individuals' social status. Although basic foodstuffs were accessible to large segments of the population due to the agriculture-based production system, the variety and frequency of consumed foods differed significantly among social classes. Archaeological evidence and tomb depictions indicate that food practices were not merely a biological necessity but also a marker of social identity (Brier, 2008).

The majority of the population, consisting mainly of peasants and agricultural workers, relied primarily on bread and beer in their daily diet, supplemented with onions, leeks, garlic, and legumes. Meat consumption among this group was very limited and was generally associated with religious festivals or special occasions. Kemp (2006) notes that this simple dietary pattern was well adapted to the agricultural cycles dependent on the Nile floods and functioned effectively in terms of sustainability.

Groups employed in state service, such as craftsmen, construction workers, and shipbuilders, benefited from a ration distribution system that provided a more regular and relatively diverse diet. Payments in the form of bread, beer, and occasionally meat demonstrate that food was an integral part of the economic organization in Ancient Egypt. Excavations around Giza reveal that the food supplied to workers involved in large construction projects was sufficient in terms of energy requirements (Lehner, 2002).

The upper classes, including priests and members of the royal court, had access to a richer and more varied culinary culture. Meat, fish, game, and wine appeared more frequently on their tables, and banquets served as visible expressions of social status and power. Wilkinson (2003) emphasizes that such feasts were not solely for consumption but also carried religious and symbolic meanings.

1.2. Special Occasions and Ritual in Ancient Egypt

In Ancient Egypt, special occasions and religious rituals represented one of the most prominent areas where culinary culture extended beyond everyday life. In this context, food and beverages were not viewed merely as elements of physical nourishment but as part of a symbolic relationship between humans and the gods. Offering rituals performed in temples and religious festivals were the primary settings in which culinary practices acquired sacred meaning (Assmann, 2001).

Festivals linked to the agricultural cycle formed the basis of special-occasion foods in Ancient Egypt. Harvest periods were associated with themes of fertility and rebirth, during which foods such as bread, beer, fruits, and meat were offered to the gods. In rituals particularly connected to the cult of Osiris, food emerged as a symbol of the cycle of death and rebirth. The foods used in these ceremonies symbolized the continuity of agricultural production and the maintenance of cosmic order (Wilkinson, 2003).

Funerary rituals also held a distinctive place within Ancient Egyptian culinary culture. Food offerings prepared for the deceased reflected the belief in the continuation of life after death. Tomb inscriptions and archaeological evidence show that bread, beer, meat, and fruits were presented together with the deceased. Brewer and Teeter (2007) note that these practices transformed food from a consumable substance into an item of spiritual and symbolic value.

Feasts organized on special occasions served both religious and social functions. These events were seen as means of strengthening social cohesion while simultaneously making social hierarchy visible. The variety of foods presented at banquet tables functioned as an important indicator of the host's status and power (Brier, 2008).

1.3. Food and Beverages in Ancient Egypt

Grain products formed the foundation of the dietary system in Ancient Egypt. Wheat and barley, in particular, were essential components of the daily diet, and bread and beer produced from these grains were consumed by all segments of society. Archaeological evidence and written sources indicate that these two products fulfilled not only nutritional functions but also economic and social roles. Bread and beer were widely used in payments to workers and within temple-based food distribution systems (Samuel, 1996; Ikram, 2010).

Bread stands out as the most fundamental food item in Ancient Egyptian cuisine. While the number of bread types was limited during the Old Kingdom, a significant increase in bread diversity is observed by the New Kingdom period. Differing in shape, ingredients, and baking methods, these breads were consumed daily and also used in religious offerings and funerary practices. Bread was regarded as one of the essential foods to accompany the deceased into the afterlife (Ikram, 2010; Hussein & Mehdawy, 2016).



Figure II. Offering Table (photograph by the author, 2025)

Beer was considered both a common beverage and a nourishing food in Ancient Egypt. Due to its low alcohol content, it was consumed by all social groups and played a particularly important role in the daily diet of the working population. Beer production was widespread in domestic settings and around temple complexes, and the brewing process was closely linked to bread making (Samuel, 1996; Samuel, 1999).

In addition to grain products, onions, leeks, garlic, and legumes were among the most commonly consumed plant-based foods in Ancient Egyptian cuisine. The consumption of meat and fish was more limited and was mainly associated with special occasions, religious ceremonies, and feasts. This pattern indicates that dietary practices were closely connected to social structure and the ritual calendar (Collier, 1998).

1.4. Kitchen Tools in Ancient Egypt

The kitchen tools and utensils used in Ancient Egyptian culinary culture were closely related to the agricultural production system and dietary practices of the period. Archaeological findings and depictions on tomb walls indicate that culinary activities were carried out with a certain level of technical knowledge and organization. The tools in use were mainly focused on grain processing, cooking, and food storage (Nicholson & Shaw, 2000).

Due to the widespread reliance on grain-based foods, grinding stones were among the most essential tools in Ancient Egyptian kitchens. Made from hard stones such as granite and basalt, these implements were used to grind wheat and barley into flour. Grinding was generally performed in domestic settings and represented one of the most labor-intensive daily kitchen activities. This

practice highlights the central role of bread production in Ancient Egyptian cuisine (Samuel, 1999).



Figure III. Grinding Wheat (photograph by the author, 2025)

Cooking was commonly carried out using earthen ovens and clay vessels. Ovens made of clay and mud were primarily designed for baking bread and were used both in households and in temple-associated production areas. Clay pots were preferred for cooking, storing, and serving food. Variations in the shape and size of these vessels reflect their different functions (Nicholson & Shaw, 2000).

For food storage, lidded jars and amphorae demonstrate that storage and distribution systems in Ancient Egypt were well developed. Grains, legumes, oils, and liquid foods were stored in these containers, indicating the development of preservation methods adapted to hot climatic conditions. In addition, baskets and woven containers were used particularly during harvest periods for transporting and short-term storage of food products (Brewer & Teeter, 2007).

Kitchen tools and utensils in Ancient Egypt functioned as reflections of dietary habits and the agricultural production system, and culinary activities constituted an important technical and cultural dimension of daily life.

2.1. Contemporary Egyptian Culinary Culture

Contemporary Egyptian culinary culture displays a multi-layered structure shaped by historical heritage as well as geographical conditions, climate, and patterns of social life. Located at the crossroads of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, and African cuisines, Egypt has blended these influences with local ingredients and traditional cooking practices. A diet based on grains, legumes, and vegetables constitutes the core character of modern Egyptian cuisine (Özkan, 2002).

Daily eating habits in Egypt are closely related to climate conditions, working life, and social routines. Due to the hot climate, foods consumed in the early hours of the day are generally light, while more substantial meals are preferred later in the day. This pattern demonstrates that dietary habits have developed in harmony with both physiological needs and environmental conditions (Wassef, 2004).

Breakfast typically consists of bread, cheese, butter, honey, jam, and tea. In some regions, boiled eggs, legume-based *ful*, and *tameya* made from fava beans are also consumed at breakfast. This meal is based on practical and traditional foods intended to meet the body's initial energy needs. Lunch is regarded as the main meal of the day and usually includes soup, a legume- or meat-based main dish, vegetables, and rice or pasta. Dinner is generally lighter and often consists of leftovers from lunch or soup (McWilliams, 2011).



Figure IV. Contemporary Egyptian breakfast plate (photograph by the author, 2025)

In addition to daily meals, religious and cultural occasions hold an important place in Egyptian cuisine. During Ramadan, eating patterns are organized around iftar and suhoor. Iftar meals commonly include dates, soup, legume-based dishes, and desserts, along with traditional beverages such as tamarind and hibiscus. During Ramadan Bayram and Eid al-Adha, syrup-based desserts, semolina sweets, and meat dishes become more prominent. These foods are shared with family members and guests, contributing to the strengthening of social bonds (Brittin, 2011).

2.2. Local and Regional Culinary Cultures

Contemporary Egyptian cuisine exhibits distinct regional differences shaped by the country's geographical structure and historical settlement patterns. These regions commonly classified as the Mediterranean coast, the Nile Delta, and the Nile Valley desert belt differ from one another in terms of basic ingredients and cooking practices. This diversity indicates that Egyptian cuisine represents a multi-layered culinary culture adapted to local conditions rather than a homogeneous structure (McWilliams, 2011).

In the northern Mediterranean coastal regions, fish and seafood constitute an important component of the local cuisine. Fish dishes prepared using grilling and frying techniques are commonly accompanied by fresh vegetables and olive oil. The influence of Mediterranean cuisine is evident in this region, where lightness and seasonality are emphasized in cooking practices (Davidson, 2014).

The Nile Delta and the Cairo region are among the areas where the most representative dishes of contemporary Egyptian cuisine have emerged. Meals based on rice, legumes, and vegetables are widespread in this region. Nationally recognized dishes such as *koshari*, *ful*, and *tameya* play a significant role in daily consumption. These foods are widely preferred by large segments of the population due to their affordability and high satiety value (Hussein & Mehdawy, 2016).

In settlement areas along the Nile Valley, as well as in the Sinai Peninsula and desert regions, a diet based on small livestock and legumes is more prominent. Lamb and mutton are prepared together with vegetables and grains in stew-like dishes, with long cooking times used to enhance flavor intensity. Culinary practices in these regions tend to be more conservative, reflecting a stronger preservation of traditional methods. These regional differences in culinary culture represent key elements that reflect both the historical continuity and geographical diversity of contemporary Egyptian cuisine (McWilliams, 2011).

Special-occasion foods in Egypt are not limited to religious festivals. During Sham el-Nessim, a celebration marking the arrival of spring with roots in Ancient Egypt, salted fish, fresh onions, and boiled eggs are traditionally consumed. This practice represents one of the rare examples in which historical continuity can be clearly observed in contemporary Egyptian food culture (McWilliams, 2011). Within this framework, daily eating habits, meal structure, and special-occasion foods demonstrate that food in contemporary Egypt is not merely a biological necessity but a practice closely intertwined with cultural identity, sharing, and social cohesion.

2.3. Traditional Foods and Beverages

In contemporary Egyptian cuisine, foods and beverages representing national identity are largely based on grains and legumes and are characterized by being economical, filling, and suitable for daily consumption. These foods are widely consumed both in home cooking and as street food, and they are shared across different social classes within a common culinary culture. Most national dishes are closely connected to Egypt's agricultural production system and geographical conditions (Wassef, 2004).

One of the most well-known national dishes in Egyptian cuisine is *koshari*, which is prepared using a combination of rice, pasta, green lentils, and chickpeas. Served with caramelized onions and tomato sauce, this dish is widely consumed as a main meal in urban life due to its high plant-based protein content and low cost. *Koshari* represents one of the clearest examples of a grain- and legume-based dietary tradition in contemporary Egyptian cuisine (Davidson, 2014).

Another fundamental legume-based dish is *ful medames*. Prepared from boiled fava beans seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice, and spices, this dish is especially common at breakfast. *Ful* is among the dishes with strong historical continuity and reflects a legume-based dietary tradition extending from antiquity to the present day. *Tameya*, also made from fava beans and served fried, is a distinctive Egyptian type of fritter that differs from chickpea-based falafel (Hussein & Mehdawy, 2016).

Molokhiya is among the traditional dishes of Egyptian cuisine and is consumed both as a soup and as a main dish. Prepared from spinach-like leafy greens and cooked with chicken or lamb, it is particularly favored at family meals. *Molokhiya* is considered an important indicator of cultural continuity, as its cooking methods are passed down through generations within home kitchens (Abdenour, 2015).



Figure V. Molokhiya Soup (photograph by the author, 2025)

Grains constitute a central component of national dishes in Egyptian cuisine. Rice, widely produced in the Nile Delta region, is used both in national dishes such as *koshari* and as a complementary element alongside meat and vegetable dishes. The traditional bread known as *aish baladi*, made from wheat, is an indispensable element of Egyptian cuisine and appears at almost every meal. Bread functions not merely as a side item but as a primary carrier used in the consumption of food (Davidson, 2014).

Traditional desserts, which complement national dishes, hold an important place in Egyptian cuisine. Dessert culture is largely shaped around syrup-based and semolina-based sweets and reflects historical interactions with Middle Eastern and Ottoman cuisines. Syrup-soaked desserts such as baklava, kadayif, and lokma are commonly consumed during festivals and special occasions. In addition, desserts prepared with semolina and dairy products, such as *basbousa*, are frequently made in home kitchens. Vegetable-based desserts are also found in Egyptian cuisine, with pumpkin desserts prepared by cooking or baking with sugar among traditional examples (Özkan, 2002; Abdennour, 2015).



Figure VI. Traditional Egyptian Desserts ((photograph by the author, 2025)

Beverages play an important role in daily life and social interaction in Egyptian cuisine. Tea is commonly consumed with mint, while coffee is prepared in a manner similar to Turkish coffee and often flavored with cardamom. Hibiscus tea (*karkade*) is widely preferred as a refreshing beverage in hot climatic conditions. These drinks reflect not only dietary habits but also traditions of hospitality and social conversation (McWilliams, 2011).



Figure VII. Traditional Egyptian mint tea ((photograph by the author, 2025)

Street food constitutes an important component of daily nutrition in Egypt, particularly in urban settings. Due to their affordability, quick preparation, and filling qualities, street foods are widely consumed by different social groups. These foods are considered practices that represent the transition between home cooking and public space (Abdennour, 2015). Among the most commonly encountered street foods are *ful medames*, *tameya*, and legume-based fritters similar to falafel. These items are typically served with bread and offer a quick meal option at different times of the day. The close similarity between street foods and national dishes in terms of ingredients demonstrates the relatively permeable boundary between home-cooked food and street food in Egyptian cuisine (Brittin, 2011).



Figure VIII. Street food vendor in Cairo (photograph by the author, 2025).

Street foods are valued not only for meeting nutritional needs but also as part of social interaction and the rhythm of everyday life. Their consumption provides practical solutions in busy urban environments while reflecting the living and dynamic nature of Egyptian culinary culture (Davidson, 2014).

2.4. Kitchen Utensils and Cooking Techniques

Kitchen utensils and cooking techniques used in contemporary Egyptian cuisine reflect a holistic structure in which traditional practices coexist with modern kitchen equipment. The tools used in home kitchens and small-scale food establishments are largely shaped by the preparation of grain- and legume-based dishes. This has led to the widespread use of durable, large-capacity, and multi-purpose utensils in everyday cooking practices (Abdennour, 2015).

Metal pots and thick-bottomed cooking vessels are particularly prominent in the preparation of legume- and meat-based dishes. Since foods such as *ful*, lentils, and chickpeas require long cooking times, pots that distribute heat evenly are preferred. Earthenware and casserole-type pots are also commonly used in traditional dishes combining vegetables and meat and hold an important place in both home kitchens and local restaurants (Hussein & Mehday, 2016)



Figure IX. Pot of ful medames (photograph by the author; 2025).

In terms of cooking techniques, boiling, slow cooking over low heat, and frying are widely used in contemporary Egyptian cuisine. Long-term boiling is preferred for legume-based dishes, while frying is prominent in street foods such as *tameya*. Grilling is used more limitedly but is applied particularly in coastal Mediterranean regions for the preparation of fish and meat dishes (Davidson, 2014).

Common preparation tools include knives, sieves, colanders, and wooden spoons. Sieves used for sorting and washing legumes, as well as mortars used for preparing spices, are among the essential elements of kitchen practice. These utensils demonstrate how traditional culinary habits continue to be maintained through adaptation to modern living conditions (Özkan, 2002).

Conclusion

Egyptian cuisine reflects a rich culinary tradition distinguished by its historical depth and cultural continuity. The dietary practices that took shape in Ancient Egypt developed in close connection with environmental conditions, agricultural production, and social structure. Over time, this accumulated knowledge was transformed through various interactions and has survived to the present day. Throughout this process, culinary culture has been sustained not only through everyday food practices but also through its strong associations with beliefs, rituals, and social life.

In contemporary Egyptian cuisine, this inherited legacy continues in a manner that is well adapted to the requirements of daily life and modern conditions. Daily eating habits, street foods, foods consumed on special occasions, and the kitchen utensils in use today all demonstrate that Egyptian cuisine represents both a traditional and a living cultural practice. The persistence of certain practices rooted in antiquity clearly illustrates the place of culinary culture within collective social memory.

Overall, Egyptian cuisine should be regarded not merely as a collection of dishes, but as a multi-layered structure shaped by historical accumulation, cultural identity, and social relationships. This culinary tradition, extending from Ancient Egypt to the present day, may be considered a significant example of cultural continuity and intergenerational transmission.

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