

## **Spotting Egyptian Food on UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List**

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Arabian coffee, central Asian flatbread, Napolitano pizza, Azerbaijan dolma, Korean kimchi, bistecca in Florence, among others, have been inscribed on UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity, in recognition of their distinction and communal impact as cultural references for nations. Could traditional Egyptian food and food practices find their way to the ICH list? What are the candidate elements? And what are the consequences of inscribing the Egyptian cuisine?

The seismic impact of globalization on local cultures has forced the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to take measures to safeguard cultural diversity and ICH. Under the 2003 Convention, ICH refers to local culinary traditions, national dress, oral literature and history, local games, folk music, rituals and beliefs that characterise societies and are transmitted from generation to generation. ICH elements which are under threat are inscribed on the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Need of Urgent Safeguarding. Other cultural elements branding a given society are added to the Representative List of ICH. The inscription allows for the use of international interest and fund to protect and maintain elements in collaboration with the locals.

The two lists currently have 470 elements from 117 countries. On top of which are Altahteeb (stick) dance and Alhilalia Tale, falconry, yoga, tango, among others. Unesco committee will decide on 40 proposals, including Egypt's traditional hand-made puppetry from Nov. 26 to Dec. 1 in Mauritius. The cultural elements to be inscribed on the UNESCO list should be so unique to a given community. They also have to boost social bonds, respect ecology and represent a sort of sustainable development.

Diversity of food cultures has also been hailed. Food lovers, professionals and governments try hard to get their favourite dishes included in the UNESCO list, demonstrating the culinary art of ingredients, customs of preparation and serving, and the festive spirit.

Towards a national inventory of Egyptian culinary heritage

Egypt is a land of unique, diverse and plentiful heritage : tangible and intangible. So it is terribly surprising that Egypt's culinary heritage has not been as internationally renowned as its monuments. The following dishes are an expression of Egyptian culture and a symbol of the harmonic and green bonds between Egyptians and the environment.

Egyptian Fatta

Fatta is a festive meal and a customary social practice. It brings people together to celebrate many occasions, especially Eids, and enjoy the company, the yummy taste and the captivating garlic smell. What is special about Fatta is the simple recipe and ingredients: cooked Egyptian rice, toasted bread, soup, meat (lamb, chicken, kawaree, etc.). The traditional dietary culture for Al Adha Eid is not confined to Fatta, rather it's a festival of meat-based recipes that brings together members of extended families to share food making, eating and ambience.

#### Fiseekh

Another old festive food is fiseekh, dating back to the pharaohs. The art of preserving and salting fish, along with the rituals of serving and eating that bring together families and friends, young and old, are worthy of international recognition.

#### Green Egyptians

The beans dynasty, kushari and molokhia

Beans, are iconic of Egypt's culinary systems, and reflect their creativity in using natural resources. The Egyptians' artistic variants of fuul such as fuul midamis, falafel, bisara, fulliyya and fuul nabit are ideal for vegetarians and a staple of Egyptians' diet. They are part of the majority of Egyptians' traditions and lives. Kushari is another nutritious and vegetarian diet. It is also the typical Egyptian alternative to fast food. Molokhia is a low calorie, yummy food. The Egyptian traditions of finely chopping its leaves and the rituals of cooking make Molokhia another iconic dish. The world would definitely be better off without much meat eating.

#### Egyptian cheese

The Egyptian Arish gebna, which is preserved in mish (salted, heated liquid resulting from turning the milk cream into butter), is the oldest cheese in the world. The non-salted kind of Arish gebna has a strong hold on rural Egyptians' stomachs. The list of picks would go on to include hamam mahshi (stuffed pigeons), fiteer mishaltit (multi layered pies) as well as various kinds of pickles. One cannot forget the endangered homemade kahk (chookies), biscuits, and ghorayeba (butter cookies) in feasts and weddings, where women and kids of the neighbourhood participate in the making and baking stages.

The list would go on and on to include dozens. Consequently, a national inventory of Egyptian culinary heritage must be compiled to represent the foodways of all the Egyptian regions. Locals can pick their iconic food treasures and campaign for them along with the governmental agencies concerned.

#### Impact of inscription on ICH

The inscription would raise the profile of the nation and increase the global interest in Egyptian food culture. It would surprise everyone that most of the Egyptian food is vegetarian.

The iconic dishes, their colors, textures as well as the amazing hospitable ambience would be on top of attractions to anyone making it to Egypt. They would rediscover the marvelous green food culture and its global impact. Moreover, national awareness of the distinction and excellence of our food would positively impact the way we view our culture and food practices. The UNESCO recognition would trigger the launch of annual national food festivals that promote the healthy, delicious national food in a bid to combat the impact of fast-food culture on public health as well as the environment.

Finally, nominations must be strongly supported by enthusiasts from the public, private sector and academia and accompanied by a successful PR campaign. This would create the due fanfare before and during the nomination process nationally and internationally.

Let's hope that Egypt's application will be submitted as early as possible. From now on and till the dream of inscription comes true, the next time you eat Fatta, kushari, falafel, fiteer mishaltit , molikhia, bilila, rice kufta, tagin bamia, hamam mahshi, or drink liquorice and the fading away sharbat, proudly feel how magnificent, fascinating and eco-friendly is our Egyptian food culture