

LUQMAT AL-QĀDĪ: THE MORSEL THAT WENT TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

by Randy K. Schwartz

The “judge’s morsel”, *luqmat al-qādī*, is one of the most famous sweets bestowed to us by the Muslim, Jewish, and Christian peoples of the Middle East. From its origins in medieval Baghdad as a deep-fried cake, or fritter, it made its way in the world, adapting a bewildering variety of ingredients, shapes, and names in the regions where it found a home.

Before Columbus set sail in 1492, this sweet fritter had been integrated into local foodways from one end of the hemisphere to the other— from Spain in the far west to Indonesia in the far east. In later times it was brought to the New World, where its wafer version was folded onto itself to create the modern American ice-cream cone.

When we trace the evolution of this sweet, we are surveying not just one item, but a whole complex of items from the Middle Eastern confectionery. The metamorphoses undergone by the “judge’s morsel”, and the lands and peoples that it reached over the centuries, are truly impressive.

The Ur-Morsel in Baghdad

As far as we know, the earliest mention of “judge’s morsels” by that name occurs in a cookery manuscript copied by a scribe named Muhammad of Baghdad in 1226, when that city was the wealthy seat of the ‘Abbasid dynasty. The tenth and final chapter, “On Making *Kushkanānaj*, *Mutbaq*, Crêpes, and Things Mixed with Flour That are Analogous with Those”, included a recipe for *luqam al-qadi* (“the judge’s morsels”, *luqam* being a plural form of *luqmat*). It was to be made with dough that has been kneaded and then left for a while to ferment and rise:

There should be strength in the dough of this variety. When it ferments, take pieces the size of hazelnuts and fry them in sesame oil. Then dip them in syrup and sprinkle finely pounded sugar on them.¹

The name “judge’s morsel” suggests a delectable worthy of a judge, a highly esteemed official in traditional Muslim societies. In ‘Abbasid palace

kitchens, the dough used for this and other pastries would have been made with *samīd*, the finest wheat flour available, high in starch, low in gluten, and free of bran. The fat used to fry these little balls of dough was not olive oil but sesame oil, ideal for deep frying since it imparts a golden-brown color and nutty taste. The oil would have been flame-heated in a copper vessel, either a *tājin* (frying pan, the source of the word *tagine*) or a *dist* (a flat-bottomed cauldron several inches high with inward-sloping sides).

Some of the paths that would later be taken by this sweet can be seen from an interesting variant called *barad* (“hail”), which appeared in Chapter Nine (“Mentioning Sweetmeats and Their Varieties of That Sort”) of the same Baghdad cookery book. Here, a thinner version of the same kneaded and fermented dough was used, and the same vessel of boiling oil:

When it boils, scoop some of the dough in a plaited [i.e., reticulated] ladle and move it with a tremor over the oil, so that whenever a drop of the dough drips into the sesame oil, it hardens.²

These puffed, crispy morsels would then be tossed, like hailstones, into another *dist* filled with honey that had previously been boiled with rosewater and beaten to a milky white. The hailstones were removed from this sweet bath to a greased tile. There they were mounded together into any desired shape, which was then sliced for serving. Iraqi-born Nawal Nasrallah points out that these are reminiscent of modern Rice Crispy Treats.³

As I interpret it, these two ancient relatives represent what became “high” and “low” traditions of Islamic confectionery, one found in palaces, the other in shops, street-stalls, and fairgrounds. The original *luqmat al-qādī*, made with a thicker batter, evolved into types of fritters that were yet more extravagant, filled with ground almond, Oriental spices, and other expensive ingredients. These versions are much harder to find today. On the other hand, *barad* (“hail”), which was prepared using a thinner drip-fried batter, became part of a custom in which very plain ingredients went into the fritters themselves, but the latter were given interesting, sometimes garish, shapes and colors, and usually a sticky sweet syrup. If not for a confusing overlap in the various names applied to them, the kinship of these two traditions would be hard to recognize today.

Definitely to be avoided is any confusion with *lokum* (known widely as “Turkish delight”), which is not actually related to *luqmat al-qādī* at all. *Lokum*, a more recent invention by Ottoman confectioners, is a gummy sweet made with fruit or other syrups that are simmered and then poured into a tray to gel. The jelly is sliced into cubes and rolled in sugar. The gelling agent was traditionally mastic resin, and now usually cornstarch.

Lokum is short for *rahat lokum* (originally *rahat-i hulkum*), a Turkish phrase meaning “comfort to the throat”.

The High Tradition

To see what became of the more luxurious version of *luqmat al-qādī*, we turn to a later Arabic cookery manuscript, *The Description of Familiar Foods*, the oldest surviving copy of which was written out in Cairo in 1373. It contains most of the 100 or so recipes of the earlier Baghdad book, along with over 300 recipes collected from various other sources, mostly unknown today.

In this 14th-Century recipe for *luqmat*, the batter is used to lightly coat a filling consisting of a 2:1 mixture of finely pounded sugar and nuts (almonds or pistachios) kneaded with rosewater, musk, and/or syrup. These coated morsels are then deep-fried in sesame oil, dipped in more syrup, and finally sprinkled with “spiced sugar”.⁴

The book also includes a ring-shaped variant called *qāhirriya*, named, like Cairo itself, for al-Qāhir bil-lāh, a caliph who ruled over the Fatimid dynasty in North Africa in 932-4. For this ring version, the filling is stiffened with a little flour and formed into good-sized rings that are dried overnight; an additional optional ingredient in the filling is camphor, an expensive aromatic from East Asia. The rings are then dipped in a batter made from fermented dough (further lightened with the addition of saltpeter and eggwhite), fried in sesame oil, glazed with hot syrup and/or honey, and sprinkled with spiced sugar and, optionally, more pounded nuts, rosewater, and musk.⁵

The Low Tradition

The same *Description of Familiar Foods* that had such luxurious versions of *luqmat al-qādī* also included three recipes for fritters that were plainer, made of batter that was thinned with water and then dripped into the hot oil.

One of the three recipes, *barad* (“hail”), was copied faithfully from that in the Baghdad cookbook noted earlier, except that the drops of batter were to be drizzled from a bare hand rather than from a reticulated ladle.⁶

The second recipe, *zulābiyā*, called for a more highly leavened dough that could optionally be colored yellow with saffron or red with wine lees. These *zulābiyā* fritters were gobbets eaten individually; in contrast to *barad*, they were not mounded together like Rice Crispy Treats.⁷



Zalābiyya in a latticed form. Image used with permission from Nawal Nasrallah, *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and a History of the Iraqi Cuisine*.

Cooks who preferred their *zulābiyā* in a more lattice-like form were advised to use a third recipe, *mushabbak*, which made creative use of a coconut shell:

Take some of this mentioned batter and put it in a coconut pierced at the bottom. Then you put your finger on the hole and you fill it with batter. You put sesame oil in the cauldron, and when it boils, you take your finger from the hole and move your hand around. Rings of latticework are created from it. So take them up and throw them in syrup and it comes out excellently.⁸

Using the coconut shell produces a lengthy, swirled tube of dough on the hot oil’s surface, as with modern American funnel cakes. The resulting *mushabbak* were plaited, pretzel-size fritters that could take any of a variety of forms, such as circular spirals crossed by a few spokes, window-like squares, etc.

Zulābiyā and *mushabbak*, which go back centuries earlier, would be strongly influenced by *luqmat al-qādī* and elevated by their association with it. They were already being widely sold in Baghdad markets in the Ninth Century, where they seem to reflect Persian influences. In these early decades of the ‘Abbasid dynasty the Arabs of Baghdad admired the more highly refined culture and cuisine of Persia, which they officially ruled.

The term *zulābiyā* (and later variants like *zalābiyya*) had entered Arabic from the Persian *zalibīya*, meaning latticework. Over time, perhaps the meaning of the Persian word receded from memory, for a corresponding Arabic word, *mushabbak* or *shabbakiyya* (from a verb meaning to form a tangle, mesh, plait, or lattice, the

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same root found in the Arabic word for “window”), came to refer to this fritter when it had a distinctly latticed form, while a *zalābiyya* fritter might be made in any shape, such as a ball or whorl.

This distinction can be seen in a Baghdad cookbook copied down by the scribe Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq, written in the late 900’s but reflecting the palace cuisine of the 800’s. Chapter 100 of this manuscript is devoted to *zalābiyya* and includes six recipes. Five are versions of *zalābiyya* designated as “plain” and “unlatticed”. In these five recipes, the little cakes take many forms: they can be “fingers”, “rings”, or “disks” of dough that are fried in fat; they can be slices of oven-baked sponge cake moistened with milk; the cakes can be dipped in honey and sprinkled with sugar, or else eaten in savory form as an accompaniment to porridge.

But one of the six recipes is designated *zalābiyya mushabbaka* (“latticed *zalābiyya*”). It is made with a thin, yeasty *samīd* batter poured through a coconut shell into hot oil. Each latticed cake, as soon as it is fried, is dipped in a thickened honey made aromatic with rosewater, musk, and/or camphor. The reader is instructed not to serve the resulting fritters if they are soft, dense, or leathery:

If your batter was done right, the moment the batter falls into the hot oil, it will puff and look like a bracelet with a hollow interior... The well-made ones should feel brittle and dry to the bite, and crumble and fall apart in the mouth.⁹

The manuscript goes on for two more paragraphs describing how to counteract factors that can ruin *zalābiyya mushabbaka*: under-leavened dough, watery honey, or an unlucky daily temperature or humidity.

The chapter closes with the words of an unnamed poet extolling this latticed sweet. A few lines:

Like cornelian arranged in rows, as if of hollow tubes
of pure gold woven.
Laced into each other, as if with embroidered silken
fabric made.
Buried in white sugar, cloistered from the prying eyes.¹⁰

Regional preferences seem to have emerged for either latticed or unlatticed varieties of *zalābiyya*. This is reflected in a comment made by traveler Muhammad al-Muqaddasi in his geographical treatise (c. 946). Comparing the customs of the Levant (including his native Jerusalem) with other regions, he wrote: “They make *zalābiyya* in the Winter, but they do not plait the dough.” He likened this and other Levantine customs to those of Egypt.¹¹ It appears, then, that latticed *zalābiyya* hadn’t gained a foothold in the Eastern Mediterranean in early medieval times. Other geographic variation is mentioned below.

To the Far West and East

Fairly rapidly, the custom of making these morsels spread, with Islam, to the Atlantic and the Indian Oceans.

In Morocco and southern Spain, an anonymous 13th-Century cookbook from the Almohad dynasty included a few versions of *qāhirriya*, the elegant sugar-almond ring fritter noted above in the 1373 Cairo cookbook, *The Description of Familiar Foods*. These ones feature unusual spices and aromatics inside (nutmeg, cloves, cinnamon, lavender, spikenard, pepper, galingale, camphor, etc.) and can be batter-fried in almond oil or even baked in an oven.¹²

The same cookbook described how to make *zalābiyya* fritters using a runny, fermented batter that could be tinted with purple, red, yellow, or green plant dye. A punctured vessel was advised for dripping this batter into the oil. “The batter will run out through the holes into the frying-pan, while you are turning your hand in circles, forming rings, lattices and so on, according to the custom of making it.” These fritters were dipped in spiced honey and then drained so that only what had been absorbed remained, one of the ways to ensure a result that is juicy inside but still slightly crunchy outside.¹³

Clifford Wright has found that a different form of *zalābiyya* was one of the types of pastry that wealthy families in medieval Tunisia would prepare for special occasions. Here, the fritter was a puffy, slightly crunchy ball of deep-fried batter, glazed with honey and almonds.¹⁴

In the East, Muslim rule was established in northern India in 1206 with the founding of the Delhi Sultanate. In 1334, in an incident described by Tim Mackintosh-Smith in his article in this issue, traveler Ibn Battutah of Morocco presented the Sultan of Delhi with trays of *luqmat al-qādī* and other sweets made by his Yemeni confectioner. I conjecture that this *luqmat* was probably one of the opulent varieties found in the 1373 Cairo cookbook, which we noted had a filling of sugar and pistachio/almond inside a ball (‘Abbasid) or ring (Fatimid) of batter. The Fatimids, who were based in Egypt and held power until 1171, had maintained connections of faith and commerce with communities in Yemen, Syria, Iran, and western India.

Soon, less-refined fritters also appeared in India. They were very close to the squiggly, latticed version of Arab *zalābiyya*, but made with local ingredients. For example, different mixes of flour (wheat, rice, and pulses) were used in different regions, and they were

often fried not in sesame oil but in Indian *ghee* (preserved butter) or other fats, until the fritters were golden, or a deep orange if the dough was colored with saffron.

The name given to this Indian fritter is not *zalābiyya* but *jalebī* (otherwise transliterated as *jilābi* or the Anglo-Indian *jelaubee*). A well-known 1886 Anglo-Indian historical dictionary¹⁵ hazarded that *jalebī* is a corruption of the Arabic term *zalābiyya*. But now it appears far more likely to be rooted in the Persian word for rosewater, *julāb*. In the West, *julāb* gave us the name for a beverage, “julep”, while in India and elsewhere it became a general word for “syrup”. This etymology makes sense because *jalebīs* are finished by, and derive all of their sweetness from, a bath of syrup made with cane sugar and rosewater.

The late K. T. Achaya listed *jalebī* as one of the refined and festive foods that Muslims brought to India after the year 1000, enriching its cuisine. He gave a number of historical references to the fritters, beginning with a Jain work by Jināsura (c. 1450) that mentions *jalebīs* served at a feast.¹⁶ Today, the *jalebī* is also known, by that name, as far west as Afghanistan and as far east as Indonesia, regions that have felt strong Muslim influences historically.

In Modern Times

It’s not surprising that these morsels, already so well traveled in medieval times, left modern descendants in many countries. To bring some order to the variety of names, shapes, and techniques, I find it convenient to classify them as either whorls, lattices, puffballs, rolled strips, or wafers.

I was able to taste a homemade “whorl” variety when I lived with the Aytounas, an Arabic-speaking family of Berber origin, during Summer 2001 in Chefchaouen, a mountain town in northern Morocco. We ate these little fritters, which had been made in the kitchen by Mrs. Aytouna and her eldest daughter, during a humble dinner on the evening of Mawlid, the Prophet’s Birthday. As is traditional, the sweets were served as an accompaniment to *harīra*, a savory soup with symbolic religious undertones. Isolation, religion, and many other forces have made Moroccan mountain towns more traditional, if not backward, compared to some other Arab lands, and even these fritters seemed like preserved relics of the foodways of yore. Although the Moroccans refer to them as *shabbakiyya* (literally “latticework”), these are not the long spirals or convolutions of dough normally given such a name, but short arcs, stubby and gnarled. They were a bit crunchy on the surface and a bit chewy inside, dark golden brown in color, glazed with honey and sprinkled with white sesame seeds.



Greek *loukoumathes*, “puffball” pastries fried in oil and glazed in syrup, are one of the derivative forms of Arab *luqmat*. Image courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

Later, on a trip to Tunisia in 2004, I was surprised to see that the honey-soaked fritters are made there in the swirling “lattice” style. They are called *zalābiyya* and are a garish, translucent orange, 3-4 inches in diameter, piled up on platters for sale at shop counters and street stalls. In neighboring Algeria they have the same name and appearance.¹⁷

Among Lebanese Christians, these colorful, latticed fritters are instead called *mushabbak*. In Iraq and Iran, they are *zalābiyya* and are sometimes given as alms to the poor during Ramadan. Those dipped in honey instead of sugar syrup are considered of higher quality. Take one step further east and they go by the name *jalebī*, starting in Afghanistan, where they are traditionally served with fish in the Winter and are even sold from fish stalls. Because it is fried in oil, the Indian *jalebī* has much symbolic importance during Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights in mid-Autumn. In southern India, the batter can include a mixture of wheat flour, *urad* flour (made from the black gram bean), vegetable oil, and yogurt. The batter is extruded into the hot oil using a coconut shell or pastry bag.¹⁸

The third form of *zalābiyya* is what I call a puffball, a hollow sphere of deep-fried batter the size of a Ping-Pong ball, glazed in honey or syrup. This is the kind popular in Egypt today. (We noted earlier how Clifford Wright has identified this as a type that was enjoyed in medieval Tunisia.) To make them, spoonfuls of soft, yeasty, well-fermented dough are dropped into the hot oil. A few years ago, I prepared some with pre-mixed ingredients from a *zalābiyya* packet that I bought at an Arab-owned grocery in Ann Arbor. This had been exported by an Egyptian firm, Holw El-Shām. Within Egypt, the balls are actually more often called *lu‘mat al-*

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'ādī, the local pronunciation of *luqmat al-qādī* ("judge's morsel"). Similarly in Greece (*loukoumathes*) and Turkey (*lokma*), where the puffball fritters are common at festivals, shops, and funerals, and are usually glazed with a honey syrup and sprinkled with cinnamon or other spices. In Oman (*loqemat*), rice flour is added to the batter, and cardomom, lime juice, saffron, and rosewater may be added to the sugar-syrup.¹⁹

A rolled-out form of *zalābiyya* fritter is made in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, particularly among Christians.

The dough, once risen, is flattened with a rolling pin and cut into ribbons or triangles.

These are fried in oil, then sprinkled with sugar or glazed with syrup. The dough might include spices such as nigella seeds (black cumin) or *mahlab* (an almondy-tasting powder made from the pits of wild black cherries).

Such fritters are sometimes served for breakfast with fruit preserves, and can also be eaten as a simple dessert anytime or following

evening mass during Epiphany. The fritters can also be made in the puffball form, which the Christian Arabs call *'awwamah*, literally "floating thing".²⁰

We must note two other types of *zalābiyya* that have been eaten in Syria in modern times. One, a puffball type that was fried in olive oil, was made by Jews there

during the eight feast days of Channukah.²¹ The symbolism is evident, as this holiday commemorates a miracle of olive oil following the successful Maccabean revolt against oppressive Syrian rule (165 BC).

The final Syrian type of *zalābiyya* was not fried at all, but cooked waffle-style between a large hinged pair of iron plates. This produces a thin, crisp, round wafer with a grid pattern on the surface, similar to the Italian *pizzelle*. The Syrians would sprinkle sugar on the surface, sometimes first rolling the wafer into a cone shape while it was still hot.

A little over a century ago, when it was noticed that the conical *zalābiyya* wafers cooked by Syrian-American immigrants would make an ideal, edible cup for a frozen treat, the "ice-cream cone" was born. Although the exact details are in dispute, the moment of creation might have occurred at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, a world's fair held in 1904 in St. Louis.²²

How remarkable that luscious, deep-fried morsels served in the rich palaces of medieval Baghdad would evolve—in the New World about 1,000 years later—into one of the most cheap and common forms of pastry ever known! ■



Albert Doumar, owner of Doumar's Cones and Barbecue in Norfolk, VA, shows how to turn wafer-style *zalābiyya* into an ice-cream cone. The disk-shaped pastry is cooked like a waffle between metal plates, then rolled around a wooden mold while still warm and pliable. It soon cools to a crisp. Doumar's uncle, Abe Doumar, was one of several Syrian-American vendors who recalled fashioning ice-cream cones in this way as an innovation at the 1904 world's fair in St. Louis.

Photo: David Alan Harvey/Saudi Aramco World/SAWDIA (see Endnote 22).

Endnotes

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5. Perry, "Description", pp. 422, 433-4, 438-9.
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9. Nawal Nasrallah, trans. and ed., *Annals of the Caliph's Kitchens: Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq's Tenth-Century Baghdadi Cookbook* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2007), pp. 414-5.
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14. Clifford A. Wright, *A Mediterranean Feast* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1999), p. 112.
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20. Helen Corey, *The Art of Syrian Cookery* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Co., 1962), p. 169; Farah, *Lebanese Cuisine*, p. 119; Christiane Dabdoub Nasser, *Classic Palestinian Cookery* (London: Saqi Books, 2001), pp. 183-4; Zetlaoui, "La Ronde des Beignets".
21. Poopa Dweck, *Aromas of Aleppo: The Legendary Cuisine of Syrian Jews* (New York: Ecco, 2007), p. 250.
22. Jack Marlowe, "Zalabia and the First Ice-Cream Cone", *Saudi Aramco World* 54:4 (July-August 2003), pp. 2-5; Zetlaoui, "La Ronde des Beignets".

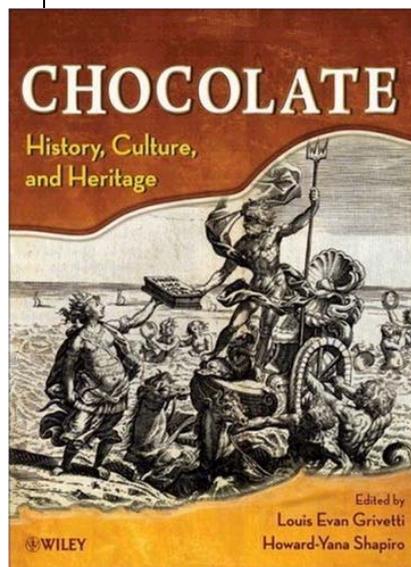
For the Chocoholics

In addition to "Chocolate: Food of the Gods", a talk presented to CHAA by chocolatier Nancy Biehn on March 15, we make note of three recent studies of chocolate.

Univ. of Texas anthropologist Meredith L. Dreiss and a collaborator, Sharon Edgar Greenhill, have completed a book, *Chocolate: Pathway to the Gods* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2008; 208 pp. + 60-min. DVD, \$30 cloth). The work, based on the authors' archaeological and ethnographic research in Mesoamerica, details the history of chocolate among the peoples of that region (Mayan, Aztec, Olmec, Mixtec, and Zapotec), focusing on the social, cultural, sacred, and medicinal contexts. The accompanying DVD includes their earlier documentary film of the same title, whose world premiere was on February 20, 2005 at a meeting of the Historic Foodways Group of Austin, TX.

Chocolate: History, Culture, and Heritage (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2009; 1000 pp., \$99.95 cloth) is a collection of

57 essays written by members of the Chocolate History Group, a scholarly network formed in 1998 by the Univ. of California-Davis and Mars, Incorporated. The work is co-edited by UC-Davis nutritional anthropologist Louis E. Grivetti and Howard-Yana Shapiro of Mars, Inc. Drawing from their backgrounds in such diverse fields as anthropology, archaeology, biochemistry,



culinary arts, gender studies, engineering, history, linguistics, and nutrition, the writers examine facets of the global history of chocolate, from ancient pre-Columbian times to the present.

The Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and Mars, Inc. teamed up to present a symposium, "Chocolate: The North American Experience", at the museum on March 7. Speakers included Grivetti and Shapiro, co-editors of the book just mentioned; Peter Liebhold, the museum's Curator of Work and Industry; food writer Marian Burros; pastry chef and author Steve Klac; Georgetown Univ. Prof. Susan Terrio, author of *Crafting the Culture and History of French Chocolate* (Berkeley, CA, 2000); and Mort Rosenblum, author of *Chocolate: A Bittersweet Saga of Dark and Light* (New York, 2005).