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***TRAVELLING THROUGH TIME***

Essays in honour of Kaj Öhrnberg

EDITED BY

SYLVIA AKAR, JAAKKO HÄMEEN-ANTTILA  
& INKA NOKSO-KOIVISTO



Helsinki 2013

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**Edited by Sylvia Akar, Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila & Inka Nokso-Koivisto**  
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## MEDIAEVAL ARABS ATE SANDWICHES, TOO: BAZMĀWARD AND AWSĀṬ FOR THE RECORD

Nawal Nasrallah

*Independent Scholar*

I recently read a book on the global history of the sandwich,<sup>1</sup> and such books are to be savored for they are, to be sure, as scarce as hen's teeth. I must confess, however, that I was rather disappointed by the author's decision to dismiss the mediaeval Arab contribution as simply being culturally irrelevant to the "things we call a 'sandwich'" because the family of Middle Eastern wraps has "a lineage which is entirely separate from the European sandwich; and they lack a single name to unify them".<sup>2</sup> Such unfortunate misconceptions are no doubt largely based on the assumption that the sandwich originated exclusively in Europe and that the English sandwich – two slices of loaf enclosing some sort of filling – is essentially its prototype. The assumption further indicates that the Middle-Eastern sandwich-family is all about wraps.<sup>3</sup> In fact, what we know today of the documented mediaeval Arab cooks' refined practices in the art of making sandwiches, for which they had more than one category name, is undeniably significant and warrants it a place in any given account of the evolution of the sandwich. If the Arab lineage were irrelevant to the European sandwich, then how can we account for a sandwich like the *muffaletta* of New Orleans, said to originate in Sicily, and whose name and composition have Arabic origins?

Western history usually relegates the "official invention" of the sandwich to around mid-eighteenth-century England, when John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich (1718–1792) started asking for his meal to be served between two layers of bread. John Montagu was an avid gambler, or a workaholic, according to another account,<sup>4</sup> who did not want lengthy proper table-dinners interrupt whatever it was he was doing, and to keep a hand free he started asking for his roast meat to be served between two slices of loaf. The speculation goes that people around him took notice and imitated him, asking for that same

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1 Wilson 2010.

2 Wilson 2010: 29–30.

3 Wilson 2010: 26.

4 Wilson 2010: 21.

“thing” that Sandwich had, and within a short time food served that way was given the name “sandwich”. The first sandwich recipe showed up in the 1773 English cookbook *The Lady’s Assistant for Regulating and Supplying her Table* by Charlotte Mason. It directs that “some very thin slices of beef are put between two thin slices of bread and butter. The edges are to be trimmed off before arranging them on a platter.”<sup>5</sup>

### MEDIAEVAL ARAB VARIETIES OF THE SANDWICH

As far as naming goes, the Montagu story is of course all plausible, but Montagu was by no means the first to eat food this way. Consumption of sandwiches goes hand in hand with making bread, which must have happened thousands of years back in human history. It was all about convenience. All kinds of breads, flat and spongy, leavened and unleavened, large and small, malleable and cracker-like were at the disposal of the diners of the entire ancient Near East. In ancient Egypt, a filling was added between two layers of bread like a sandwich, and cylindrical breads were made that looked like Swiss rolls.<sup>6</sup> As for ancient Greece and Rome, it was to the Near East that they looked for assistance and inspiration. From them, we learn that the “Syrian and Phoenicians were especially prized as apprentices; the Romans knew that the people of the Orient had a refined sense of taste and more delicate hands for the work of baking”.<sup>7</sup> In his “Life of Luxury”, Sicilian-Greek gourmet Archestratus (fourth century BCE) recommended that for best results, Phoenician or Lydian bakers were to be hired as they knew how to make daily every kind of bread, no matter what one ordered.<sup>8</sup> Pliny in his *Natural History* tells that “it is not so very long since that we had a bread introduced from Parthia, known as water-bread, from a method in kneading it, of drawing out the dough by the aid of water, a process which renders it remarkably light, and full of holes, like a sponge: some call it Parthian bread.”<sup>9</sup>

The first documented incident of the sandwich goes all the way back almost to the beginning of our common era, when Rabbi Hillel the Elder (110 BCE – 10 CE), sometimes referred to as Hillel the Babylonian,<sup>10</sup> wrapped the Passover sacrificial lamb and the bitter herbs and ate them in fulfillment of one of the Biblical Passover rules, “they shall eat the flesh in that night, roast with fire, and unleav-

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5 Mason 1777: 427.

6 Mehdawy & Hussein 2010: 31–32.

7 Jacob 2007: 78.

8 Athenaeus, 3, 112 c, cited in Ricotti & Ricotti 2007: 36.

9 Pliny the Elder: Book XVIII, Chapter 27.

10 This is to acknowledge Babylon as his birth place. He died in Judea.

ened bread; and with bitter herbs they shall eat it" (*Exodus* 12:8). What Hillel ate was by no means the first invented sandwich. People must have been consuming meat, herbs, and vegetables wrapped in flat bread as he did for millennia before him. What he actually started was the symbolic "matzah-maror sandwich", the first to be documented as *korech/karich*, a generic name for wrapping, and which started to specifically designate a wrap or rolled-up sandwich.<sup>11</sup> Apparently there were attempts to call the sandwich a "Hillelit" after the name of its "inventor", but the name never caught on. "If it had", Rabbi Sinclair argues, "we rabbis would never tire of pointing out how the English word was named after a gambling addict, while the Hebrew after a great sage".<sup>12</sup>

After Hillel made his *korekh*, we had to wait several centuries for further documented evidence of the sandwich. This time it happened during the era of the mediaeval Arab-Islamic rule, which spanned the lands between China and southern Spain and Sicily. Extant records of the Arab sandwich comprise a variety of sources ranging from recipes in cookbooks and books on dietetics and medicine to food-poems and anecdotes in contemporary chronicles and belle letters. More or less, the same types of breads that the ancients had at their disposal continued to be baked in the ovens of the mediaeval Arab cooks, be they the clay ovens *tannūr* for the flat breads, the iron plates or marble slabs for the paper-thin sheets of bread, or brick ovens *furn*, where spongy, crusty, domed breads were produced. With these breads, a lot of sandwiches were made.

Up until the late 1980s, especially before the publication of Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq's tenth-century cookbook *Kitāb al-ṭabīkh* with its chapter on sandwiches,<sup>13</sup> what we knew was meager. A single recipe in Muḥammad Ibn al-Karīm al-Kātib al-Baghdādī's cookbook *Kitāb al-ṭabīkh* written in the thirteenth century, describes what looks like a sandwich with two layers of bread enclosing a filling. He calls it *bazmāward*:<sup>14</sup>

It is made by chopping grilled meat that has been allowed to cool down a little, add to it mint leaves and a small amount of vinegar, salted lemon, and walnut. Sprinkle them with a bit of rose water, and chop fine with a cleaver, adding vinegar gradually [while doing this] until it has its fill of it.

Remove the pith from good-quality *samīdh* bread [*furrānī* white bread, thick, crusty, and pithy, baked in *furn* 'brick oven'], and fill the cavity with this filling,

11 The word is derived from the verb *karach* to 'wrap' or 'encircle'. Cf. Arabic *k-r-kh* /*k-r-j* 'roll' (*Lisān al-'Arab*). In Persian, *charkh* is 'wheel'.

12 Sinclair 2008.

13 al-Warrāq 1987: 57–58. English translation in Nasrallah 2007: 149–152.

14 al-Baghdādī 1964.

and fill it well.<sup>15</sup> Cut the bread into medium rectangular slices. Take an earthenware tub, wet it with water and dry it well, then spray it with rose water, and spread fresh mint leaves in the bottom. Put the slices in this tub in layers, and cover them with more fresh mint. Set the tub aside for an hour and then serve. It will be delicious even when kept overnight.<sup>16</sup>

Before the discovery of this recipe, we knew that some sandwiches were actually made. For instance, a poem by the famous poet of Baghdad Ibn al-Rūmī (d. 896) describes how to construct *wasṭ*, which turns out to be similar what al-Baghdādī calls *bazmāward*. The poem occurs in al-Mas'ūdī's tenth-century *Murūj al-Dhahab*, in the famous episode on Abbasid Caliph al-Mustakfī (d. 945), whose boon companions recite gastronomic verses at his request:<sup>17</sup>

You, seeker of delicious food, take a couple of fine breads, round and thick  
(*jardaaq*),

The likes of which no one has seen, Slice off the top crusts, so that you make  
them thin.

Spread on one, finely minced young chicken and birds of *judhāba*,<sup>18</sup> delectable  
and delicate, which a mere puff would melt.

On this arrange lines of almond intersected with lines of walnut.

Let its dots be cheese and olive, and its vowels mint and tarragon,<sup>19</sup>

So that it looks divided as if by stripes, white as milk, and multi-colored silk of  
Yemen (*washī*) resembles.

Now take boiled brown eggs, and with their dirhams [egg white] and dinars  
[egg yolk] the *wasṭ* adorn.<sup>20</sup>

Give your lines a dusting of salt, but not much, just what it needs.

And inspect it with your eyes for a second or two, for the eyes have a share in  
it, too.

Look at it appreciatively until your eyes have their fill, then cover it with the  
other bread, and eat it with joy.

15 The recipe omits to mention that in order to remove the pith, the bread has to be slashed horizontally, and the top is set aside to put back after the filling is applied. However, the verb used, *yuhashsha*, is suggestive of this. From other recipes, we also know that the filled bread is pressed well with a heavy weight first and then sliced into pieces.

16 My translation. Cf. al-Baghdādī 1939: 202; al-Baghdādī 2005: 79.

17 al-Mas'ūdī: 693–697. Arberry translated this episode as a preface for his English version (al-Baghdādī 1939: 21–30).

18 *Judhāba* is a casserole, similar to sweet bread pudding, roasted in the *tannūr* with grilling meat suspended atop of it, so that it receives all the dripping juices.

19 Imagery is inspired by orthography.

20 Dirhams are silver coins, and dinars, gold coins.

Sink your teeth into it and earnestly bite, thus you hastily demolish what you have compiled.<sup>21</sup>

In the same episode, *awsāt* (sing. *wast*) are again mentioned in a poem on *bawārid* ('cold dishes') by the gourmet poet Kushājim (d. 961). This time they are identified as *awsāt shaḥīrāt*, analogous to what we call today "open sandwiches". They are coated with olive oil and sharp cheese, and are said to excite the appetite of the satiated and sharpen their hunger with their wonderful aroma.<sup>22</sup> They must have been offered as appetizers.

In the year 1948, another solitary sandwich recipe came to light. In his important study on the history of Arab cuisine *Studies in Arabic Manuscripts Relating to Cookery*, the French Orientalist Maxime Rodinson translated a recipe from a manuscript of thirteenth-century Aleppan cookbook *Al-wuṣṣa ilā 'l-ḥabīb fī waṣf al-ṭayyibāt wa'l-ṭīb* by Ibn al-'Adīm (d. 1262), as a testimony on the complexity of the Arab mediaeval cuisine. The recipe was for a chicken sandwich, named *awsāt Miṣrīyya* ('sandwich Egyptian style'). It is a very interesting recipe, worth given in full due to its far reaching popularity in the Western regions, as we shall see:

Use *furrāmī* bread (pithy and spongy baked in brick oven), and let it be soft, in the making of which borax was used.<sup>23</sup> Slit the bread open [horizontally], and set it aside to cool off. Remove all pith completely, put back the top as it was before [and set it aside].

Push the pith through a sieve. Toast shelled pistachio very well, but be careful not to burn it, when cool enough remove the skin [by rubbing it between the fingers], and crush it in a mortar. Chop some parsley, mint, and rue; and squeeze some fresh lemon juice.

Boil chicken, and then brown it in good quality olive oil. When it is done and cooled off, discard the bones, and, with another knife, chop the meat until it becomes as fine as the bread crumbs. Avoid too much contact with the chicken fat. When the chicken is ready, rub the bread crumbs into the [chopped] herbs, and let there be more herbs than crumbs. Knead them together very well, and fold in the pistachio, and add drops of olive oil and *hurāqat shayraj*,<sup>24</sup> add a good amount of this to make it look greasy, also add a bit of chicken fat. Fold in a bit of lemon juice and knead the mixture. Then, fold in the [prepared] chicken, but avoid working the mix too much lest it should develop an unpleasant greasy odor (*zafar*). Add more lemon juice, enough to suit your taste.

21 My translation. Cf. al-Baghdādī 1939: 24–25.

22 al-Mas'ūdī: 693.

23 Bread was brushed with some dissolved borax before baking to make it look glossy.

24 Ibn al-'Adīm (1986: 530–531) describes how to make it: "Put sesame oil in a frying pan, and add to it some chicken extremities such as the wing tips, and gizzards, liver, or a small piece of lamb. Let them fry until the oil looks dark brown. [Strain] and set aside, and use as needed."

Mix olive oil, *hurāqat shayraj*, chicken-fat, add rose water. Give the mix a whip and pour a generous amount of it on the outside and inside of the bread, and let it absorb it. Put as much as you desire of the stuffing in the bread, spread it well all over the face of the bread. Cover it with its lid [i.e. the cut off top of the bread], and with a knife, cut it into slices. Make them as big or small as you wish. Layer the slices [in a vessel] and garnish them with herbs, parsley, and mint. However, do not let these herbs stay overnight as they will spoil and no longer smell fresh. If you like to perfume the filling, take a *qa'b* [container like a large glass with rounded bottom] either *Yamānī* (soapstone from Yemen) or *jawz* (from walnut wood), infuse it with ambergris aroma [by burning it], and when it is filled with smoke, put the filling in it. Do the same thing if you also want to perfume the bread with ambergris. This is by far the most ingenious of dishes.<sup>25</sup>

Our mother lode of sandwiches had to wait until 1987, when the Arabic edition of al-Warrāq's tenth-century cookbook was published. Five sandwich recipes and an illustrative poem give us, and for the first time, a clear idea of what constituted the sandwich during the ninth and tenth centuries, along with the proper terminology related to it. We learn that the *bazmāward* was analogous to what we call today rolled and wrapped sandwiches, which we sometimes slice into pinwheels. Three recipes attest to this.

The first is *bazmāward Madīnī* ('Baghdādī style'), which is unique in that it is baked in the *tannūr* oven after rolling it. Raw meat is pounded into a fine mince along with kidney fat, onion, fresh herbs, and rue, with a lot of spices (coriander, black pepper, caraway, cumin, spikenard, cloves, nutmeg, ginger, and cassia). Then the meat is kneaded with five raw eggs, along with a little chopped garlic and onion. Then, sheep caul fat is spread on soft *ruqāq* bread, and the pounded meat-mix is spread all over it. Five whole shelled boiled eggs are arranged in a row along the meat. The bread is tightly rolled up and trussed with clean intestines. The roll is tied to four wood sticks with a thread, and then it is lowered into the *tannūr* and placed on a flat tile put directly on the fire. When the roll is done it is sliced crosswise into slices, which the recipe calls *bazmāward*.

The second recipe is named *Ma'mūnī*, after Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 833). *Ruqāq* bread is spread with pounded skinned walnut and citron pulp, topped with a layer of chopped cooked chicken, mint, tarragon, basil, and salt, and then rolled up. The third is an elaborate *bazmāward*, said to have been prepared for Caliph al-Mutawakkil (d. 861). Soft *ruqāq* bread is spread with multiple layers of finely chopped leaf vegetables, shredded cooked lamb, finely chopped herbs, nuts and olives, and thinly sliced boiled eggs. All is sprinkled with salt, and drizzled with

<sup>25</sup> My translation, based on Ibn al-'Adīm 1986, II: 548. Cf. Rodinson 2001: 159–160.

vinegar and rose water. The bread is tightly rolled, and then sliced crosswise into discs. The recipe dictates that they are arranged on a platter and passed around, as we do nowadays with trays of hors d'oeuvre.

The *bazmāward*, therefore, is a sandwich roll usually sliced into pinwheels, which leads us to the possibility that it was its shape that gave it the name *bazmāward*. Back in the late 1930s and with just one sample to speculate on, Arberry suggested that the name was a compound word: *bazm* 'feast' and *award* 'brought'.<sup>26</sup> However, in light of what al-Warrāq's recipes describe, the name might well have been a combination of *bazm* ('tightly wrapped') and *wārid* ('long'; *wird* is 'tree' and 'log'). Ergo, *bazmāward* is a 'tightly wrapped log'.<sup>27</sup> Besides, *al-bazma* is synonymous with *al-akla* – food eaten in one bite or morsel, which is in keeping with the practice of eating small and thin *bazmāward* slices. No wonder it was nicknamed *muyassar wa-muhanni* ('delightful and easy to eat') and *nawāla* ('a morsel').

With this information in hand, we realize that what was considered *bazmāward* in al-Baghdādī's thirteenth-century cookbook, in the tenth century and earlier was more appropriately named *waṣṭ* because the filling is stuffed inside the hollowed out bread. Evidently, by the time we proceed into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the line between what constituted the *bazmāward* on the one hand, and *awsāṭ* on the other had already blurred, but the sandwiches themselves continued to be made more or less the same way.

The *waṣṭ* recipe al-Warrāq gives made by Ibn Dihqāna requires round and thick white bread.<sup>28</sup> It is slit crosswise with a knife, and the sandwich is assembled by layering the cut side of one of the bread halves with finely chopped leaf vegetables, followed with a layer of cooled off cooked meat, with chopped cheese, olives, almond, pistachio, and pine nut sprinkled all over. It is then spread with another layer of the chopped vegetables, and covered with the top half of the bread. The sandwich is pressed for about an hour, and then sliced into triangles or squares, and arranged in a platter and served.

We also sample an open sandwich, *waṣṭ mashṭūr*, prepared by the Abbasid gourmet Prince Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi (d. 839). The crusty edges and top of *furrānī* bread are sliced off, and the face is spread with *binn* and slathered with walnut oil.<sup>29</sup> It is then toasted on a grill set on a brazier. After smearing it with yolk of

26 al-Baghdādī 1939: 202, n. 1.

27 Meanings culled from *Lisān al-'Arab* and Steingass's dictionary, where *wardān* is given as rolling pin.

28 Ibn Dihqāna: boon companion of Abbasid caliphs, gourmet, and author of a cookbook (d. 891).

29 *Binn* is a cereal-based fermented condiment, not so salty, and in consistency similar to ointment.

soft-cooked eggs (*nimbarisht*), it is good to eat. The recipe suggests an optional final sprinkle of grated cheese, which will make it even more delicious, we are assured.

Ibn al-Mahdī composed the following verses to illustrate his recipe:

What a delicious sandwich on the brazier I made, slathered with *binn* and walnut oil.

Fragrant and shining, as if the *binn* I used with ambergris and musk was embalmed.

Of nigella seeds I put what it needed, as for fennel, I did sprinkle some.

Olive oil I made sure to add, for it gives a luscious coating and a saffron-glow.

Smear with egg yolk, with cheese sprinkled, looking like speckled embroidered silk.

As colorful as striped silk it looks, exuding musk and camphor.

The taste, luscious as pure honey, for the best aromatic spices I did put.<sup>30</sup>

From the eleventh and twelfth centuries only one sandwich recipe survived. It occurs in the medical treatise *Minhāj al-bayān fīmā yasta'miluhu al-insān* ("Systematic description of foods") by Ibn Jazla (d. 1100). The *bazmāward* entry describes the best way to make it: grilled meat is minced fine, and moistened with the aromatic fat which separates when *fālūdhaj ḥalwā* is thickened and cooked.<sup>31</sup> Rose water, lemon juice, and mint may also be added into the meat, which is spread on *ruqāq* bread, and then rolled up and cut into, what he calls, *awsāṭ*. He thinks that it is good for strong stomachs only, but once it is finally digested it can be very nourishing, and recommends drinking *muthallath* or sweet drinks (sherbet), after eating it.<sup>32</sup>

Four new sandwich recipes showed up in 2001, with the publication of the English translation of the fourteenth-century *Kitāb waṣf al-aṭ'ima al-mu'tāda*, which is an augmented version of al-Baghdādī's thirteenth-century cookbook.<sup>33</sup> Due to the interesting variety they offer, I am translating them in full, directly from a manuscript copy, given a slightly different title, *Kitāb ṣifat al-aṭ'ima*:<sup>34</sup>

To make *shatāyir* (open sandwiches), take fine-tasting yogurt, mix it with some *murrī* (fermented sauce) and picked over thyme. Spread the mix on soft *ruqāq* bread, and moisten it with *zayt al-anfāq* (extra virgin olive oil from unripe green olives). Turn a sieve over it, and create smoke by [burning] a piece of

30 Nasrallah 2007: 151–152.

31 *Fālūdhaj* is condensed starch-pudding. Fats used are usually sesame oil or clarified butter.

32 Ibn Jazla: fol. 43r.

*Muthallath* is non-alcoholic grape wine, boiled down to a third of its original amount.

33 Translated directly from the manuscript. Al-Baghdādī 2001: 381–382, 448.

34 al-Baghdādī, MS 11. I am indebted to the director of the National Library in Cairo, Laila Rizk, for making this manuscript available to me.

walnut [shell] and a drop of oil underneath it. Do this several times until the entire bread is redolent with the aromatic smoke. Roll the bread while it is hot and eat it, or keep it protected from the air [covered] until needed.<sup>35</sup>

For Christians during Lent, here is a vegetarian version:

A Recipe for *rubbānī bazmāward* [lit. for monks]: Take *ruqāq* bread, which has been infused with aromatic smoke.<sup>36</sup> Spread it flat and moisten it with the hot liquid of *sikbāj* thickened with [crushed] almond.<sup>37</sup> Add just enough so that the bread does not disintegrate. Arrange in the middle a row of egg white [boiled and sliced]. Add to the rest of the space [chopped] tarragon and green olives. Roll it, slice it, and fill up a platter with it.<sup>38</sup>

The third recipe is unique in that it uses a device called *warda mushabbaka* to be placed in the middle of the bread before baking it. It is a kind of latticed metal disc used to inhibit the formation of a dome in *furn* bread:<sup>39</sup>

*Bazmāward*: Take some nicely grilled meat as much as needed from the ribs and other parts, and finely mince it with a cleaver. Add to it fresh mint leaves. You may also add a little bit of parsley leaves. Sprinkle it with a bit of vinegar and lemon juice, and if wished, replace lemon juice with salted lemon or juice of sour fruits. Mince everything together and season with a small amount of crushed mastic and cassia, and sprinkle with a little good-quality rose water. Keep on mincing until it becomes very fine in texture.

Now, use *khubz al-furn* for this.<sup>40</sup> Watch it while baking so that it will be perfectly done, neither soft nor too crisp. Let the breads be round with not so high edges, and let there be in the middle *warda mushabbaka* (latticed metal disc).<sup>41</sup> [When bread is done, take it out of the oven], bend the *warda*, to remove it, and then slash open the bread, and stuff it with the prepared grilled meat, and stuff it well. Cut the bread into small pieces and arrange them in trays. Scatter some mint and parsley leaves on them. It is good eaten the same day and the day after, God willing.<sup>42</sup>

35 al-Baghdādī, MS 11: 37.

36 As described in the previous recipe.

37 *Sikbāj* is stew soured with vinegar, usually cooked with beef but for Lent it is thickened and enriched with crushed nuts.

38 al-Baghdādī, MS 11: 37.

39 Hans Wehr's *Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic* is the only source where *warda* in this context is provided. According to Wehr, it is a 'washer' in the Egyptian vernacular.

40 It is crusty and pithy bread, usually round, baked in the brick oven. Also referred to as *ṭulma* in the recipe, which most probably is descriptive of a not-too-high round bread. Originally, *ṭulma* is a disc of bread baked in the hot ashes or a heated stone, analogous to *malla* bread.

41 From the details and the gadget used for the bread, we understand that the final baked bread should be round with a more or less evened up surface, and altogether neither too thin nor too thick.

42 al-Baghdādī, MS 11: 108–109.

The last recipe is called *awsāt*, even though it is rolled like a *bazmāward*:

*Awsāt*: Take the exact same grilled meat mix prepared in the *bazmāward* [recipe above], and spread it on the *jardaḡ*.<sup>43</sup> It can be kept flat-open, or folded and rolled tightly and then sliced and arranged [in a platter] as described [in the recipe above]. *Awsāt* can also be prepared in another way: Take the grilled meat and mince it by itself, without the mentioned *hawāyij* [i.e. vegetables and spices, etc.], and it is spread on the *jardaḡ* in stripes, and in between put [sliced] shelled boiled eggs. The bread is then rolled tightly and cut into *awsāt*, four to three fingers wide, each. Some people would [just] take this grilled meat we've just mentioned and make *awsāt* with *jardaḡ* bread.<sup>44</sup>

### CULTURAL AND CULINARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ARAB SANDWICH

It is obvious by now that the “inventory” of the extant mediaeval Arab sandwich recipes surveyed above is impressively extensive and varied. The sandwich was an important food. As a cold dish, it was usually served before the main hot meal to allow, according to medical beliefs at the time, its proper digestion in the lower part of the stomach, where the strongest digestion takes place. It was a popular snack food, and was good for nibbling by passing it around in large trays and platters in social gatherings, similar to today's “butlered” hors d'oeuvres. The dainty pinwheels were also good for garnishing large trays of sliced preserved meats. One of al-Warrāq's *halām* recipes calls for ten kinds of *bazmāward*, variously filled with fruit conserves and walnut, to be arranged all around the meat.<sup>45</sup> To obtain neatly cut slices, mess-free, a special knife was used. It was called *sikkīn al-bazmāward*, which must have had a very thin blade.

The sandwich was an emblem of elegance and luxury. Of the nicknames heaped on it: *luqmat al-qāḡi* (‘judge's morsel’), *luqmat al-khalīfa* (‘caliph's morsel’), *narjis al-mā'ida* (‘narcissus of the table’), and the luscious *fakhdh al-sitt* (‘lady's thigh’). Dreaming of *bazmāward* was a good omen: it foretold enjoying leisurely life with lots of easy money. In high society, social decorum dictated that *awsāt* and *bazmāward* should be eaten sliced thinly.<sup>46</sup> But eating whole rolls of *bazmāward* was not unheard of, although it was looked down upon as gluttony. An anecdote

43 Typically, *jardaḡ* is round, thick and coarse bread, unlike the thin *ruqāḡ*. It seems that *jardaḡ* is being used here to designate round flat bread, which can be folded.

44 al-Baghdādī, MS 11: 110–111. See Appendix for more recipes I found in the still unedited and unpublished Istanbul MS of al-Warrāq's tenth-century cookbook *Kitāb al-uṣṣla ilā 'l-ḡabīb li-Yuḡtana bihi 'an Jahd al-Ṭabīb* (adapted and augmented version, copied in 1297).

45 Halām/ahlām is meat preserved in vinegar and spices. See Nasrallah 2007: 213.

46 al-Washshā' 1906: 134.

tells how a glutton once ordered his cooks to prepare for him *bazmāward*. He particularly asked for them to be left unsliced. He wanted them to be stuffed with chicken fat, clarified butter, herbs, eggs, cheese, olives, and walnut. Soon enough a “pyramid” of the filled rolls was brought in a square tray, and one roll after the other, he devoured them all.<sup>47</sup>

During the Fatimid caliphate in Egypt in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the sandwiches were conveniently offered to the public to celebrate end of Ramadan. Large trays piled with pastries and *bazmāward* were offered to the public to eat and take home.<sup>48</sup> As fast food, these sandwiches were cheaply purchased from the cooks-shops in the food markets. From books on *ḥisba* (market-place food inspection), we learn that some shops specialized in selling grilled meats thinly sliced (*musharraḥ*), and others sold *shawī marḍūḍ* (‘minced grilled-meat’).<sup>49</sup> While mincing and slicing, the cooks moistened the meat with the dripping fats and juices, and soured it with sumac or lemon juice. We may safely assume that these grilled meats were conveniently stuffed or wrapped in breads and served like today’s *shawirma* sandwiches.

To my knowledge, the last significant mention of the mediaeval Arab sandwich occurs in fifteenth-century Cairene allegory of the dishes titled *Kitāb al-ḥarb al-ma’shūq bayna laḥm al-dān wa-ḥawāḍir al-sūq* (‘The Delectable war between mutton and refreshments of the market-place’), where *awsāt kbātūnī munawwa’* (‘assortment of ladylike sandwiches’) were enrolled in the army raised to defend their beloved King Mutton.<sup>50</sup> Strangely enough, no written records of such sandwiches came down to us during the Ottoman era, ubiquitous as it had been before their time. This surely does not mean that it did not exist, or that the tradition did not continue. An anonymous lithograph made in the 1850s portrays a typical seller of “döner”, which is grilled meat thinly shaved from layers of meat-slices threaded into a vertically revolving spit. The picture also shows a pile of round and not-so-flat bread, so similar to the mediaeval discs of *furrānī* bread used in making the *awsāt* sandwiches, as we have seen them made in the mediaeval recipes above.<sup>51</sup> Modern-day *shawirma* sandwich is a sure descendant of this long tradition.

The appeal of the sandwiches never faded, but their mediaeval names surely did. *Shaṭā’ir* (‘the split’) is the “official” name of the sandwich in standard Arabic. In

47 al-Ṭabarī: 2129.

48 Ibn al-Ṭuwayr 1992: 182.

49 al-Shayzarī 1946: 30–31; Ibn al-Ukhuwwa 1938: 93.

50 al-Ḥajjar 1992: 114.

51 The color lithograph is reproduced in Yerasimos 2005: 84. Interestingly, what is now called *shawirma* in the Middle East is the Arabized form of the old Ottoman *çevirme*, which in modern Turkish is replaced with *döner* (both mean ‘meat cooked revolving’).

Arab world dialects, other names were coined. In Iraq, for instance, it is all *laffa* ('roll, wrap') or *sandawīch*, whether it is a wrap or stuffed hollowed-out *furn* bread. In the Levant, 'arāyīs sandwiches are no more than the *bazmāward* and *awsāt* of mediaeval times. Pita bread is opened up, moistened with olive oil, filled, and then rolled and cut into smaller pieces, or left flat and divided into sections. In *Armenian Food: Fact, fiction, and folklore*, we are assured that spreading filling on lavash (paper-thin sheets of bread) and rolling it tightly was popular fast food and basic meal for many Armenian generations.<sup>52</sup> In fact, it was the Armenian immigrants in America who popularized lavash bread as well as the sandwiches made with it. They named it Hye and Aram sandwich (Armenian), sold in delis as whole rolls or sliced as pinwheels, exactly like *bazmāward* was served in mediaeval times.

### THE SANDWICH GOES WEST

My focus so far has been directed towards the mediaeval eastern region, which yielded an impressive repertoire of the sandwich. It is a different story when we turn westwards to al-Maghrib and to Andalusia and Sicily, where the Arabs ruled for several centuries. From the entire western region, only a couple of Arabic cookbooks survived, namely *Anwā' al-ṣaydala fī alwān al-aṭ'ima* and *Fiḍālat al-khiwān*,<sup>53</sup> and not a single mention was made in them of *awsāt*, *bazmāward*, or *shatā'ir*. This is rather puzzling. *Ṭa'ām al-mashriq* ('food of the eastern region') was repeatedly mentioned in these two cookbooks as the eastern food was a major inspiration in the development of the Andalusian and Sicilian cuisines. When Ziryāb, the celebrated musician of Baghdad, fled to Andalusia in 822, he had a huge impact on the high society. He taught them the art of refined living, which included etiquette of dress and table manners. He introduced many of the *Mashriqī* dishes he came to learn and love at the Abbasid courts. It is hard to believe that he did not also introduce the socially-friendly dainty sandwiches of *bazmāward* and *awsāt*. The situation in Sicily is more intriguing. In his book *Cucina Paradiso: The Heavenly Food of Sicily*, Clifford Wright comments,

When I asked Sicilians what the foundation was for *cucina arabo-sicula*, they nearly all gave the same answer – folklore and intuition. One has to look at

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<sup>52</sup> Pertosian & Underwood 2006: 30. Lavash is beyond doubt no other than the *ruqāq* bread used in making the Arab mediaeval *bazmāward* sandwiches. In fact, in the Armenian vernacular this thin bread was called *parag-hatz*, where *parag* is the corrupted form of *waraq* ('paper, leaf'), used in mediaeval times to designate the thin sheets of *ruqāq* bread.

<sup>53</sup> *Anwā' al-Ṣaydala* 2003; al-Tujībī 1984, respectively.

what the Arabs brought to Sicily in the way of new crops and recognize what the Arabs themselves ate.<sup>54</sup>

As it happened, aside from intuition, folklore has preserved for us, modern readers, two Arab dishes, which were said to have been named after eleventh-century Arab Emir of Catania, Muḥammad ibn al-Thumna (d. 1062), who appealed to Norman troops from southern Italy to help him defeat his Muslim adversaries on the Island around 1053. This opened the door for the Normans to take political control of the island within decades. One might speculate whether that was why indeed the beloved Arab recipes of this Muslim leader survived the hostilities and persecution his Muslim brethren had to endure for centuries to come.

The dish that concerns us most here is a chicken sandwich, named *Pasticcio di Mohammed ibn Itmnaḥ* (Thumna),<sup>55</sup> of hollowed-out bread, stuffed with chicken. In Sicily it is deemed “a very typical example of *cucina arabo-sicula*,”<sup>56</sup> and it is strikingly reminiscent of the thirteenth-century *awsāt Miṣriyya*, previously discussed. For the sake of comparison here is a brief description of how it is made:<sup>57</sup> Chicken is cooked and deboned, and cut to small pieces, and broth reserved. Bread is cut horizontally, and pith is hollowed out. The bread pith is moistened with chicken broth, to which is added a mix of ground almond, pistachios, capers, and parsley, along with beaten eggs and lemon juice. This is to be added to the chicken pieces, and spooned into the bread cavity. The upper crust is returned to the bread, and the whole thing is baked for twenty minutes. The sandwich is served at room temperature sliced, we may reasonably assume, into smaller pieces, as was usually done with mediaeval *awsāt*.

J.C. Grasso comments that modern Sicilians pride themselves on this thousand-year-old chicken, and in his recipe, he claims that he has “drawn it from his original wording without changing a single ingredient”.<sup>58</sup> Mary Taylor Simeti sees similarities between this sandwich and the mediaeval chicken *awsāt*. Her research also led her to Apicius’s *sala catabia* from ancient Rome, which used the same technique of filling hollowed-out bread.<sup>59</sup> I can add to this list a tenth-century sandwich-like preparation in one of al-Warrāq’s chapters dealing with

54 Wright 1992: 22.

55 The other dish is *Tummala*, an elaborate rice and chicken casserole, traditionally served at Christmas. See Simeti 1989: 72–75.

56 As observed by Felice Cunsolo, “a noted Sicilian researcher” (Wright 1992: 146).

57 Recipe in Grasso 1984: 90–91.

58 He does not specify his source for the “original wording”.

59 It is usually called a salad. Alexandrian bread is hollowed out, crumbs soaked in light vinegar, and mixed with pounded pepper, honey, mint, garlic, coriander, cheese, salt, spiced wine, water, and oil. The bread is filled with this mix, chilled, and served. See Grocock & Grainger 2006: 177.

*khall wa-zayt* dishes (lit. ‘vinegar and olive oil’). The top crust of fine-quality thick white bread is carved out, the bread is moistened inside and out with sour grape juice, and then topped with ground mix of almonds, sour grape juice, and olive oil. Then shredded chicken breast is spread all over, and sprinkled with chopped cucumber pulp, mint, and basil. It was served chilled.<sup>60</sup>

The continuity of this food in varying degrees of similarities from antiquity through the tenth (al-Warrāq’s recipe), eleventh (Ibn Thumna’s recipe), and thirteenth centuries (Ibn al-‘Adīm’s *awsāt miṣriyya*) is truly intriguing. What is even more so is the inclusion in a nineteenth-century American cookbook of a sandwich similar to these mediaeval Arab sandwiches. It uses oysters for a filling instead of chicken, and here is the recipe:

To Make Oyster Loaves:

Take little round loaves, cut off the top, scrape out all the crumbs, then put the oysters into a stew pan with the crumbs that came out of the loaves, a little water, and a good lump of butter; stew them together ten or fifteen minutes, then put in a spoonful of good cream, fill your loaves, lay the bit of crust carefully on again, set them in the oven to crisp. Three are enough for a side dish.<sup>61</sup>

The book is *The Virginia House-Wife* by Mary Randolph, the first truly American cookbook, published in 1829. It includes recipes from southern cooking, England, France, Spain, among other places, and it is highly plausible that the Sicilians introduced this sandwich to America. They were the first mass wave of immigrants to Port of New Orleans, and it is in New Orleans that we find the last piece, so to speak, to our jigsaw puzzle. The significance of this sandwich is that it has been recognized as an earlier variant on a New Orleans sandwich called *po’boy* first traced in America in 1875 by Sicilian immigrants.<sup>62</sup> Other fillings used besides the oysters were roast beef and sausage, and it was dressed with rich gravy. Now, closely related to the *po’boy* and even more interesting, due to its name, is another New Orleans sandwich, the *muffaletta*.

The origin of *muffaletta* is unanimously acknowledged to be Sicilian. It is a giant sesame-encrusted bread, about ten inches in diameter, which is hollowed out and filled with thin layers of Italian cold cuts of meat, cheese, chopped olive salad (no *muffaletta* sandwich should be without it),<sup>63</sup> and dressed with extra olive oil and sour juices to moisten the bread and give the sandwich its distinctive flavor

60 “Another recipe by Ibn ‘Alyūn” (Nasrallah 2007: 239–240).

61 Randolph 1838: 69.

62 Wilson 2010: 125. The term *po’boy* is said to stand for ‘poor boy’.

63 It is mainly composed of chopped olives, with some chopped pickled vegetables, and herbs, along with lemon juice and olive oil.

and texture. The “official” date of the sandwich is usually said to be 1906, when the Sicilian immigrant Salvatore Lupo, owner of Central Grocery, “created” it as a *po’boy* sandwich. “Created” might be a bit of a stretch. The man is a Sicilian immigrant, and in his homeland the popular *muffaletta* bread, eaten sometimes stuffed with meat and other things was a daily routine all over Sicily for many generations. What he did in effect was giving the sandwich a name by calling it after the bread used in making it, the *mafalada* (variants *muffolette*, *muffuletta*, *mafalda*). But where does this name come from? Nobody knows exactly. In Western sources, it is said to be somehow connected to the Old French *moufflet*, which means ‘soft’, used to describe bread; or muffin. Some even speculate that it is Sicilian for ‘hollow bread’.

I believe that our key to this puzzle lies in its Sicilian Arabic roots – both the bread and its name, when more than a millennium ago the Arabs ruled there and Arabic for some time was the official language on the island. Today in Sicily, many foods still carry Arabic names, albeit with an Italian ring. In the case of the bread *muffaletta*, the Arab roots are sometimes acknowledged,<sup>64</sup> but no one has made the linguistic connection yet. Besides, encrusting the bread with sesame seeds has been acknowledged as an Arab signature touch, as it was they who brought sesame to the island.

Breads similar to *muffaletta* – round, oven-baked, thickish, crusty, and spongy – were known all over the mediaeval Islamic world. It was the bread used in making *awsāṭ*, including Ibn al-Thumna’s sandwich, as it was easily hollowed out and filled, and it did not disintegrate when moistened. Besides the discs, other forms were known, such as *mushaṭṭab* (‘slashed bread’), *maḍlū* (‘ribbed’), *mughaddān* (‘bent, twisted’), and so on.<sup>65</sup> Apparently, breads twisted in form acquired the name *mafalada* in Muslim Sicily. The word derives from the Arabic *malḥūt* or *maflūt*, which in this context means ‘wound’, ‘coiled’, ‘wrapped’, ‘rolled up’, ‘twisted’.<sup>66</sup>

64 See, for instance, Wright 1992: 64.

65 See, for instance, *Anwāʾ al-Ṣaydala* 2003: 52.

66 Incidentally, there is another *maflūta*, made after the end of Passover, on the Moroccan Jewish festival of Mimūna. Thin layers of yeasted dough are fried and served with butter and honey. The etymological connection lies in the traditional way this pastry is prepared: when one layer is fried, another disc of the flattened dough is spread on top of it and flipped; then another disc is put on top and the whole thing is flipped again, and so on until one ends up with a pile of fried layers. Therefore, the pastry is *maflūta* (feminine Arabic form, meaning ‘the flipped’). Exactly the same pastry was made in the mediaeval Islamic region. However, it was known as *al-murakkaba* ‘the compiled’. For mediaeval recipes, see *Anwāʾ al-Ṣaydala* 2003: 184; al-Tujībī 1984: 78. Another example on how foods change names when they travel in time or place.

Today, this common bread is shaped in a variety of ways,<sup>67</sup> but it is the serpentine twisted form – the *maflūt* – that is deemed the most orthodox.

## CONCLUSION

Commenting on the ridiculously extreme turns some of the American cooks have taken in constructing the sandwich, such as the mishmash Dagwood or the unwieldy Scooby-Doo-style sandwich, Bee Wilson, remarks that, by contrast,

There are such things as the Muffaletta, that delicious New Orleans specialty in which layers of piquant olive salad and cold meat are placed inside an entire hollowed-out loaf, or the oyster loaf, where cooked oysters similarly fill out a hollow roll. There is a certain integrity to these sandwiches.<sup>68</sup>

Thus, our author of the tome on global sandwiches unwittingly gives credit where it belongs. The “certain integrity” which she recognizes in the *muffaletta* but she does not seem capable to pinpoint, stems from the weight of centuries-worth of history and tradition behind the sandwich. Mediaeval Arab cooks had a considerable role in the evolution of sandwiches through the myriad varieties they hospitably passed around to guests or sold as fast food at the grillers cook-shops in food markets. The cultural and lineal bearings they had on the metamorphoses of the modern sandwich cannot be denied. Their creativity is apparent in both the form and content of the sandwiches they came up with, and recognizing their contribution will give them a well-deserved place at the table.

Central to a full appreciation of Arab contribution to the long history of sandwich construction and consumption is a scrutinized record of its appearances in literary and culinary sources. Throughout this article and in the Appendix below, I trace and translate such appearances, and several of these not only mention the sandwich, but they also celebrate its cultural significance. Like all food categories with deep histories, Arab sandwiches are cultural constructs, too. They evolved out of a society that saw them as part of a larger scheme that stretched from the practical medical purpose of proper digestion to the aesthetic assembly of luxurious dishes. They also display in their elegant wraps the integration in Arab and Muslim cultures of multiple traditions, religions, ethnicities, and social and cultural practices. The colorful history of this food item shows in its different names, forms, and recipes from Baghdad to Sicily. The continuity of the sand-

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<sup>67</sup> See, for instance, Riley 2007: 73, 499.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson 2010: 88.

wich across the centuries and across Arab lands, on the other hand, has testified to its enduring purpose and position at Arab and even some western tables.

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## APPENDIX

Following are additional sandwich recipes I found in the still unedited and unpublished Istanbul MS of al-Warrāq's tenth-century cookbook. It is titled *Kitāb al-wuṣṣā ilā l-ḥabīb li-yuḡhtana bihi 'an jahd al-ṭabīb / Kitāb al-ṭabāyikh*. It is an adapted and augmented version, copied in 1297:<sup>69</sup>

(187r) *Ṣifat waṣṭ ṭayyib* (recipe for a delicious sandwich): Take some cooled off grilled lamb or kid, or cooled off meat of *sikbāj* (beef stew soured with vinegar). Mince the meat fine and mix with it parsley, chervil (*maqḏūnis*), rue, and mint, all chopped as fine as sesame seeds. Sprinkle them with salt, and set aside. Grate some sharp cheese with a knife and gather what falls from it. Coarsely crush walnut, and mix it with the cheese, adding, as well, thinly sliced stoned olives. Add these to the minced meat and sprinkle them with a little wine vinegar, juice of unripe grapes, or lemon juice. Slit open round white bread [*furrānī*] and spread the mix all over [the cut side]. [Cover the bread with its top], and press it, and then slice it into triangles and squares. Arrange the pieces on a platter and serve.

*Another Delicious Waṣṭ*: Take cooled off grilled meat, or meat simmered in salted water, taken out of broth, minced fine, soured with wine vinegar or lemon juice, and then allowed to cool off. Add to it seasoned salt (187v) and set aside. Now take chopped stoned olives, aged cheese grated with a knife, and parsley, fresh thyme, rue, mint, and tarragon, all chopped as fine as sesame seeds. Add to them crushed walnut, almond, and pine nut. Mix these with the ground meat, and add to them crumbled yolks of boiled eggs. Give the mix a sprinkle of pounded salt, and drizzle it with a little juice of unripe grapes, citron juice, vinegar, or lemon juice. Lightly sprinkle the mix with a little ground ginger and cardamom, and stuff it in soft round bread, which has crusty top and bottom. Press the bread, and then slice it into *awsāt*, the way you like. Fill up a platter or big serving bowl with them, and serve.

*Recipe For Another Waṣṭ by Ibn Dihqāna* [a simplified version of al-Warrāq's]: Take *raghīf ḥuwwara* (white bread, chewy in texture) split it open into two so that you have two crusts, and set it aside. Take cooled off [cooked, grilled] meat of chicken or *thanī* (3 year old sheep), or kid, and shred it as fine as threads. Chop all kinds of [leaf] vegetables and herbs (*buqūl*), except for watercress (*jirjīr*) and endive (*hindabā*), chop them as fine as sesame seeds. Spread the vegetables on one half of bread, and spread the meat all over them. Sprinkle with salt, cheese, chopped olive, walnut, skinned almond, and pine nut [all chopped]. Next cover them with another layer of the vegetables, and cover all with the other bread half.

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69 al-Warrāq 1297: 187r–188r.

Press it and then slice it the way you wish. Arrange the pieces in a platter, and serve.

*Bazmāward Recipe:* Shred [cooked] chicken meat into threads, and spread it on a *ruqāq* bread along with crushed walnut (188r), yolk of boiled egg, chopped chervil and mint, and a little of citron juice, salt, and a pinch of pulverized ginger. Divide each *ruqāqa* into four pieces, and roll each with the stuffing in it. Slice each roll into small tubes (like sugarcane joints *anābīb liṭāf*). Arrange them in a platter, and serve.

*Another Bazmāward:* Chop [cooked] chicken as fine as possible, and mix with it almond, skinned hazelnut, and walnut, all crushed, add also shelled sesame seeds. Spread all these on *ruqāq* bread, moisten it with almond oil or chicken fat, and give it sprinkles of salt, ginger, cardamom, cassia, all pulverized as fine as dust. Give it a sprinkle of citron juice, and roll the bread into cylinders (*ḥalāqīm*), and cut them into tubes (like sugarcane joints *anābīb*). Fill up a platter with them and serve.