

BREAD NOVICE

خلينا نخبز!

In many parts of the world, الخُبْز "bread" is a staple food. Where do you get bread? Do you buy it at the store? Do you make it at home? Let's begin this module by watching a short video. What do you see? Where do you think this is? Who do you think he's cooking for? As you watch, take note of the surroundings:



Now that you've watched the video, let's consider what the man in it might have been doing and compare to your own experience with bread. In many cities in the Arab world, people use a hybrid approach where they prepare the bread for baking at home, but actually bake it elsewhere. Why do you think people would go to a public oven? Why can't they just make bread at home?

Let's read the following article and learn about this unique tradition:



A MOROCCAN OVEN THAT'S OPEN TO ALL

THE NEW YORK TIMES

<https://www.nytimes.com/13/06/2007/dining/13oven.html>

ASSILAH, Morocco

The best way to understand this fortress town, on the Atlantic coast about 30 miles south of Tangier, is to let your eyes and your nose lead you through the narrow streets where only foot traffic is allowed. While visiting here for a few days, I sniffed my way through the warrens of the medina, built in the 14th century by Portuguese and inhabited later by Muslims and Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition. Today the town's population is international, with people from Spain and France buying quaint apartments as second homes.

Morocco, at the end of the spice route in Africa, developed a fine cuisine known for its pungent spice combinations. In Assilah, as in much of the country, people eat seasonally, shop at the outdoor markets, buy live chickens to have slaughtered on the spot, feathers flying helter-skelter. (In the big cities, where health inspectors and supermarkets are taking over, this is a dying custom.) At one market I saw eggs gathered the same morning, carefully protected by strands of hay; lemons preserved in salted

water; black and green olives from nearby orchards.

As everywhere else in Morocco, the home cooks make the most flavorful food. But not all of their cooking is done at home.

One morning, I happened upon a crowd of women, along with a few men and small

boys, all balancing boards on their heads piled with rounds of dough. I followed them into a small stucco building where smoke poured from the chimney. Inside, a baker

stood calmly underneath a portrait of the Moroccan king, Mohammed VI. He carefully placed the mounds of shaped dough on long wooden paddles and slid them into a brick oven fueled with eucalyptus branches.

From 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. each day, customers arrive in a steady stream, pay a few dirhams — about 25 cents — and then leave. About 20 minutes later, they return to pick up their golden rounds of bread.

Today many people have gas stoves or propane cooktops at home, and the

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communal ovens are disappearing. In my travels I have found them only rarely: in Jerusalem's old city; in Arab villages in Israel and the West Bank; on the Caribbean island of Montserrat.

In Assilah, as in other Moroccan towns, the ovens are in transition, still in use even though many people have their own stoves. "These bread ovens are a link with the past," said Paula Wolfert, the author of "Couscous and Other Good Food From Morocco," who lived in Tangier for seven years. "It was part of the community, an extension of the home."

Traditional cooks in Assilah wake around dawn each morning to knead and shape the dough. They let it rise for a few hours before carrying it to the public oven, known as a ferrane. Called khubz, the bread is about the size of pita but much denser. Sometimes it is made entirely with white flour; sometimes barley or coarse whole wheat flour is mixed in, and semolina is sprinkled on top.

Somehow, with dozens of loaves on the floor of his oven, the baker always knows whose bread is whose. But just in case he forgets, most people make an identifying mark on their dough.

"My housekeeper put a special stamp on the bread made out of iron with a design, a sort of

family mark on it," Ms. Wolfert said.

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She didn't sleep well unless there was a sack of wheat in the house to make bread.

Bread isn't the only food cooked in the ferrane. I saw metal plates filled with green peppers and tomatoes, ready to be quickly charred and then peeled for salads. Clay pots covered with tinfoil or parchment paper also waited their turn. Inside were tagines of fish — sardines, swordfish, snapper — rich with tomatoes, potatoes, cilantro and spices. Family secrets work their way into these tagines: the way the vegetables are cut, the ratio of spices, the kind of fish, even the shape of the clay pot. The public oven is also where families announce weddings, anniversaries and other special occasions, whether they want to or not. When someone brings a b'stilla, one of the jewels of Moroccan cooking — a chicken or pigeon pie made with nuts, sugar, cinnamon and orange blossom water — everybody knows that a big celebration is on the way. After all, no one would take the trouble to make b'stilla on just any old day. This delicious pie is topped with warka leaf, a thin dough somewhat like phyllo that is made by bouncing fistfuls of wet, pasty batter on a hot grill until it miraculously comes together.

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Other celebratory foods also appear at the ferrane, like crisp Moroccan cookies. Also made from warka, they are first baked in the oven, then taken home and soaked in honey. Later that day, I ate lunch at the home of Mohamed Benaissa, the town's mayor and an old friend from the time he was the Moroccan ambassador to the United States. The round bread and the fresh sardine tagine, the centerpiece of our magnificent meal, was assembled at the Benaissas' home by their cook, Halima Sella, and baked in the same public oven I had just seen, only steps away from the house. The Benaissas have two gas ovens in their kitchen, but they prefer to use the ferrane.

"The oven is a social equalizer," said Mr. Benaissa, who is also the foreign minister of Morocco. "It also creates jobs and is economical, especially in the summer, because we use little energy for so many people."

After lunch Ms. Sella showed me how to make her chicken couscous with onions, ginger, cinnamon and saffron, a dish I had adored at the Benaissas' home in Washington. She simmered it over the stove in a large couscoussier, a double-layered pot.

The chicken stewed in the bottom of the pot, producing steam that seeped through the

holes of a sieve and cooked the couscous in the top layer. Plastic wrap helped seal in the steam. Patiently frying almonds in hot oil, Ms. Sella insisted that the couscous be steamed three times, something that cooks rarely do in the United States.

As I tasted the Benaissas' food and reflected on the different varieties of tagine and bread I had seen at the oven, it occurred to me that Moroccan recipes are proud secrets embedded in families, transferred by word of mouth from generation to generation. A little more cumin, a little less cinnamon? Should the vegetables be diced in rounds or squares?

These secrets are not revealed even to the man at the ferrane who does the cooking.

**AFTER YOU'VE READ
THE ARTICLE, LET'S
DISCUSS:**



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- Where is the oven discussed in the article? What do you know about this place from the article, and where can you go to get more information?
- Besides bread, are there any other foods that get cooked at the public oven?
- The author mentions that the public oven plays a social function. How so? What sort of information might you gather while at the public oven?
- Based on information in the article, do you think public ovens will still be around in the future? What are the factors that might contribute to their decline or, conversely, allow for their preservation?
- Do you think a concept like the one we've discussed – a public oven – would be popular in your country or city? Do people typically socialize while doing everyday tasks, or is social interaction something that is done in its own "dedicated" times and spaces?