

Most Popular Lebanese Food

Gaining independence in 1943, Lebanon is a relatively new Middle Eastern country. However, it's home to some of the most ancient civilizations in human history as evidenced by the many fascinating Phoenician ruins along the Mediterranean coast.

Lebanon's rugged mountain region has been a refuge for many persecuted religious and ethnic groups throughout history. Lebanon thus has a rich cultural makeup that encompasses various Arab and Mediterranean traditions.

One of the best examples of Lebanon's cultural bounty is its wonderful culinary customs. Drawing from the bounty of the Mediterranean Sea and temperate climate, Lebanese food offers dishes that have become global sensations.

While they have many dishes in common with other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean countries, they also offer some unique food of their own. I've compiled a list of the most popular Lebanese food that you can find in Lebanon and abroad.

Popular Lebanese Food

1. Shawarma
2. Falafel
3. Labneh
4. Hummus
5. Lahm Bi Ajin or Sfiha
6. Manakish
7. Tabbouleh
8. Fatayer
9. Ka'ak
10. Kibbeh
11. Fattoush
12. Ma'amoul
13. Mutabal
14. Mujaddara

Shawarma

Shawarma is a popular meat dish throughout Lebanon and the rest of the Middle East, with a unique cooking method involving thinly cut slices of meat stacked in a conical shape atop a spit.

You'll often see shawarma being roasted on the spit in the window or open kitchen of a Lebanese restaurant or street cart. Shawarma was originally made with goat or mutton meat, but you can also find it made with beef, chicken, turkey, or veal.

Lebanese chefs will slice thin pieces of meat directly from the spit to enjoy as a platter with rice, dips, and vegetables, or wrapped in a thin pita bread as a sandwich. I'm partial to the shawarma pita, which comes with tasty sauces, pickled vegetables, and fresh veggies.

Falafel

Another popular dish around the Middle East and Mediterranean, falafel are fried patties or croquets made from ground raw garbanzo beans or chickpeas, parsley, scallions, garlic, cumin, and coriander.

Falafel is one of the most popular Lebanese dishes in the world for vegetarians and meat eaters alike, offering a savory snack or meal. Falafel has a perfectly crunchy outer layer that cedes to a soft, fluffy inside, bestowing an irresistible texture profile.

You'll find falafel on the appetizer menu at any Lebanese eatery. You can also use it as a salad topper or, my personal favorite, wrapped in a pita with hummus or labneh, and pickled vegetables.

Labneh

Derived from the Arabic word "labna", Labneh is simply strained yogurt that has been filtered to a thickness like that of soft cheese. It has a sour taste and a thick, creamy consistency akin to sour cream.

Labneh is a popular condiment and dip for Lebanese dishes. Lebanese preparation for Labneh is like most Middle Eastern mezze, served in a bowl or plate with a light drizzle of olive oil, spices, and fresh mint.

It's a popular dip for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. You can also use it as a condiment to spread on shawarma or falafel pitas. I like it with Zaatar seasoning as a dipping sauce for fresh pita bread.

Hummus

Perhaps the most ubiquitous Lebanese dish on the planet, hummus is a beloved bean dip made with garbanzo beans, tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, cumin, and paprika.

Lebanese preparation involves topping the dip with whole garbanzo beans, ground spices, and a hearty drizzle of olive oil. It is one of the oldest dishes in the Middle East, with written recipes dating back to the 13th century.

Lebanon has fought to claim hummus as a Lebanese creation, although many other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern neighbors assert themselves as the founders.

In my opinion, there's no better appetizer on the planet. I love hummus with pita, olives, cherry tomatoes, and carrot sticks.

Lahm Bi Ajin or Sfiha

Lahm Bi Ajin, also known as Sfiha, is a Middle Eastern flatbread topped with minced meat like lamb or beef along with minced onions, garlic, tomatoes, parsley, chili pepper and paprika.

The flatbread can be cooked in a stone oven or tandoor or over a dome or flat top and is usually a crepe-like thickness but with more bubbly char and savory flavor. Lebanese tradition usually

minces lamb meat with the minced vegetables and spices, then tops the flatbread with the mixture before roasting.

I liken it to a Lebanese pizza without the cheese. It's light, flavorful, and a wonderful meal or starter.

Manakish

Manakish is the broader term for flatbread, under which Sfiha lies. Manakish is typically a breakfast or lunch dish made with a simple pizza-like dough topped with a thick layer of spices, cheese, or minced lamb.

In Lebanon and other Middle Eastern countries, bakers place a portion of each topping on a large round of Manakish to supply the household with a variety of breakfast and lunch options over the week.

The most common form of Manakish is the flatbread slathered with a spice paste made with olive oil, thyme, oregano, marjoram, sesame seeds, salt, and then baked. Like pizza, Manakish is crispy at the edges and chewy in the middle. I like to put feta on it.

Tabbouleh

Tabbouleh is undoubtedly Lebanese, originating from its rugged mountain region. Tabbouleh is a flavorful salad, consisting of bulgur wheat, chopped parsley, minced onion, tomato, fresh mint, and a dressing of olive oil, lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

Tabbouleh is another pervasive dish that has long since garnered popularity worldwide. It's a meze or side dish at any Lebanese or Middle Eastern restaurant. It has a wonderful texture profile of the crunch from the raw vegetables and the pop and chew of the bulgur.

I love having Tabbouleh along with hummus and labneh as a light lunch or prelude to a dinner entrée.

Fatayer

Fatayer is the Middle Eastern empanada. Eaten in Lebanon and all Levant countries, Fatayer is a baked meat or vegetable pie with a dense, doughy crust.

It was first and foremost a minced meat pie, consisting of a thick layer of dough topped with minced lamb or beef and onions, then folded into a triangular pastry and baked.

If you're a vegetarian, there is also a spinach and feta variety that is in my opinion tastier than the meat pies. Whichever variety you prefer, they make a delicious mid-afternoon snack to enjoy with hot mint tea.

Ka'ak

Ka'ak is Lebanese ring-shaped biscuits or crackers. Ka'ak is a popular snack or accompaniment for egg or mezze dishes across the Middle East, Turkey, and some Southwest Asian countries.

In Lebanon, Ka'ak can be a hard cracker or a chewy bagel-like sweet bread, made with sweetened wheat flour dough, vegetable oil, eggs, sugar, water, and salt. The rings get a light egg wash and are then coated with sesame seeds before baking and drying into crunchy crackers.

The subtle sweetness combined with the sesame seeds is a delicious flavor profile that tastes great by itself or with dip. I enjoy Ka'ak in the morning with scrambled eggs or Shakshuka.

Kibbeh

The national dish of Lebanon, Kibbeh is a croquet made by mashing bulgur wheat and minced meat into a thick paste, adding pine nuts and spices, then forming oblong balls and deep frying them.

They are similar in appearance to falafel. Kibbeh is a classic snack and street-food sold on every corner. It's also as popular in Latin America as it is in the Middle East, with vendors carrying stacks of Kibbeh atop their heads selling them at the beach or boardwalk.

Another popular form of kibbeh is the raw paste alone, served on a dish like beef tartare or pate. I think the fried versions are better and enjoy them dipped in Labneh or topped with minced onion and tomato.

Fattoush

Fattoush is a popular side dish in Lebanon and all Middle Eastern countries. It's a simple salad of mixed greens and stale pieces of pita or flatbread baked to a crouton crisp. You can add tomato, onions, and radish or any other vegetable you like.

It's usually dressed with olive oil, dried herbs, and lemon juice. Some recipes add Sumac or pomegranate molasses for an extra tang.

Fattoush is a delicious and easily prepared side dish to accompany any meat dish, pita wrap, or mezze meal. I love the crunchy flatbread pieces that soak up the dressing.

Ma'amoul

Ma'amoul is a semolina butter cookie stuffed with dried fruits and nuts, baked, and dusted with powdered sugar. They take on different shapes, with some being dome-shaped, while others are flat. The most common fruits and nuts are dates, figs, pistachios, and walnuts.

Ma'amoul is a popular holiday dessert in Arabic, Christian, and Jewish Middle Eastern traditions. Most households prepare it for guests during the spring holidays of Easter, Eid Al-Fitr, or Purim.

Ma'amoul is a special occasion dessert that Lebanese often arrange in a "cookie tree" or pyramid. I love them for their buttery, nutty richness. They taste great with a cup of Arabic coffee.

Mutabal

Mutabal is another term for Baba Ghanoush, a popular eggplant dip made with roasted and mashed eggplant, tahini, lemon juice, garlic, salt, and pepper. It diverges from baba ghanoush in the addition of yogurt, and it's often spicier, too.

Mutabal is as common a mezze as hummus or labneh, and the three are often served together with fresh pita for dipping.

I like slathering mutabal on fresh pita and topping it with feta for some added saltiness. I think the yogurt adds both creaminess and tang.

Mujaddara

Meaning "pockmarked" in Arabic, Mujaddara is the Middle Eastern version of a peasant's meal, consisting of rice, lentils, and fried onions. Its cheap ingredients create a filling dish that covers all the macronutrient bases.

In Lebanon, it continues to be a favorite meal for the common man, although it often adds meat to the mix. The bite and slight sweetness of the onion and the crispiness of the baked rice put it a cut above your average steamed or stewed grain and bean dishes.

I'm content to eat a plate of mujaddara and Fattoush salad for every dinner of the week!

Final Thoughts

Lebanon has a wonderful culinary bounty that has many side dishes, salads, appetizers, entrées, and desserts that are world famous.... or should be! My list of the most popular Lebanese food has savory and spicy dips, refreshing salads, spiced meats, and pastries that will tantalize your tastebuds, and spur a desire to visit this Middle Eastern gem of a country.

Even if you can't make the trip, a Lebanese or Middle Eastern restaurant is never too far away. The ingredients to most of these dishes are easy to come by, too. You can create a Lebanese feast at home with any of these popular Lebanese foods on my list.