

Leban.

Next to water, "leban" and "shenina" are probably the most universally drunk beverages in Iraq and women balancing tiers of leban boxes on their heads may frequently be seen in Baghdad. To the European leban looks like "curds and whey" and tastes sour. It is a culture of lactic acid bacteria and yeasts flourishing in symbiosis and causing fermentation of milk. The lactobacillus is a minute rod-like structure about ten thousandths of a millimetre in length and much narrower. It multiplies by breaking into two parts, each of which grows till it is the size of the original rod, this simple process of reproduction taking place about every half hour, so that in a short time a glassful of leban will contain many million of these tiny organisms, both living and dead.



The lactobacillus has two important characteristics. One is that it will grow at somewhat higher temperatures than many other organisms and therefore when making leban, if the milk is maintained at a temperature somewhat above that of the body the lactobacillus will flourish while other bacteria will fail to do so. Furthermore the organism is not killed readily by the acid which it forms from the milk sugar. Many other bacteria which occur in milk, some of which may be disease producers, are killed by this acid. Leban therefore, providing it is mixed with clean water, is safer to drink than the milk ordinarily found in Baghdad.

The yeasts are small oval organisms which ferment the lactose of the milk, changing it to lactic acid alcohol. For the production of goods leban the alcohol fermentation is more important than the acid. The actual flavour of the leban is determined by the proportion of lactic acid and alcohol in the leban together with the products of other bacteria in the milk.

The custom of using fermented milk such as leban, kefir or yogurt probably originated in attempts to preserve milk. The acid formed prevents the rapid growth of putrefying bacteria and maintains the milk in state fit for human consumption for a longer period than would otherwise be possible.

When prepared under ordinary household conditions the milk must first be boiled to kill as many organisms in it as possible. This should be done even if the milk has already been boiled some hours previously, as microorganisms develop rapidly in such an excellent natural food. When the milk has cooled to 42°C, that is when it is fairly warm to the touch but not unpleasantly so, the "starter" is added. This should be kept from the previous day or obtained from a market vendor or neighbour, but too much must not be added or the acid in it will cause curdling of the milk. The starter should be of good flavour and whenever the leban has formed it should be chilled in the refrigerator, at which low temperature the growth of the organisms ceases and more acid is formed.

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Bacteriologically Turkish yogurt is supposed to be somewhat different from leban, but those familiar with both say that the flavours are indistinguishable. A simple method of obtaining a starter for yogurt when none is otherwise available is as follows. Put a little fresh unboiled milk into a small bottle which has been well washed and sterilized in the sun. Keep the milk at 42° C until it has clotted and then, using a boiled spoon, transfer a little of the clotted milk to another bottle in which is some fresh boiled milk reduced to a temperature of 42°. Keep at the same temperature but as soon as the milk is coagulated put into the refrigerator till the next day when it should be again transferred in the same way and held at 42° C until the milk has clotted. This should be repeated daily for about a week at the end of which a starter of good flavour should be ready for use with larger quantities of milk.

Sometimes leban has an unpleasant taste and slimy appearance, or it clots without tasting acid. This is because, through incorrect temperatures or heavily contaminated utensils, the essential organisms have lost control and some other bacteria have taken precedence in the milk. Many organisms cause clotting of milk but it is only certain ones which produce the desirable lactic acid and alcohol and the conditions must be such that they, not others predominate in the milk.

To wash the leban bowl after use and expect to keep milk fresh in it is asking for trouble. Simple washing, no matter how clean it looks to the human eye, does not remove all the bacteria from bowl, and if a few remain they soon start multiplying in thousands with consequent souring of the milk. To sterilise a bowl after using leban the simplest method is to wash it well and leave it in the blaze of Iraq's sun for half an hour. If the bowl be of mulberry wood, which is favourite in which to make leban, it should be left in the sun much longer. In the absence of sun the dish should be well boiled.

Leban may be made from the milk of sheep, camel, goat, buffalo or cow. The leban of goats' milk reputedly does not curdle when boiled whereas some cornflour or egg must be added to the others to prevent excessive curdling during cooking.

Leban is served in several forms. It may be eaten chilled with dates, date syrup or sugar and in this form is a summer substitute for the European breakfast cereal. It may be drained through muslin and the resultant cream cheese seasoned and flavoured with chopped herbs or cucumber. Leban to which water has been added and which is offered as a drink is usually mistakenly referred to as shenina by Europeans. True shenina is leban which is churned until butter is formed. The fat is removed and the resultant butter milk is shenina. In Europe butter is not made from whole milk but from thin cream which is allowed to sour or soured artificially by adding a starter of good flavour. Soured skimmed milk has the same chemical properties and flavour as butter milk. Since the fat is removed from shenina it is regarded as lighter and more refreshing than leban and is drunk in larger quantities.

There is much wisdom in custom, and leban, dates and khubz have long been the staple food of Iraq. It may seem a strange diet to Europeans but it is as suited to the summer heat of Iraq as are roast beef and Yorkshire pudding to the winter cold of England.

11. Leban.

4 tins milk

2 tsp. leban

Boil the milk and allow it to cool to 42°C or until it feels fairly warm to the hand but is not uncomfortably hot. Mix the leban with a little of the milk in the bowl in which it is to be made. When smooth pour over the rest of the milk and mix thoroughly. Cover the bowl and protect it from draughts with a thick cloth. The temperature should be maintained between 40° and 45°C. When the leban has formed chill it in the refrigerator until wanted.

All utensils should be clean and dry.

When diluted with water and a little salt is added this makes a most refreshing summer drink.

12. Omelette.

4 eggs

2 tbsp. water

Salt and pepper

2 tbsp. vegetable oil

Beat the eggs and water very thoroughly. Make the fat smoking hot, pour in the egg mixture and when slightly browned below, lower the fire. If wanted fill with a scalding savoury mixture, fold over and serve; or may be served without filling.

13. Omelette à l' Italienne.

1½ tins soft breadcrumbs

1 tin cream

6 eggs

Salt and pepper

½ tin grated cheese

Butter

Make a smooth sauce with the breadcrumbs and cream. Beat the eggs, season, add the grated cheese and mix all together. Heat some fresh butter in a frying pan, pour in the omelette mixture, and when cooked fold over the omelette. Serve with a purée of tomatoes.

If wanted fill the omelette.

One type of filling is a medium white sauce to which chopped cooked, meat, fish, shell fish, or vegetables are added. Heat to scalding, spread on the omelette and fold it over.

Grated cheese, chopped hard boiled whites of eggs, finely chopped parsley, salt and pepper all bound with raw egg yolk make a good filling.

Another variation is minced cooked meat or flaked fish with chopped cooked onions, tomatoes, sweet green pepper, and seasonings.

An uncooked filling may be made with very finely chopped onion, tomato freed from seeds and drained, minced sweet green pepper and chopped boiled ham.

14. Porridge.1 tin medium oatmeal or
ed boiled wheat (burghu)

Sprinkle the meal into boiling water, 10 minutes, to prevent lumps. Then simmer for 15 minutes longer. Add more water if needed.

If wanted soak the meal in water for 2 hours, then soak overnight. A spoonful of cream is an improvement. Serve for breakfast with sugar and cream. Some people prefer suet.

15. Qawarma.

1 young fat sheep

Salt and pepper

Clean the meat of fibrous parts and dice. Remove all the fat and fry the fat has been extracted. Add salt and pepper with plenty of salt and pepper. Pour the scalding mixture into the jars and seal. The meat may be well distributed in the jars all winter. This is the oriental style.

16. Spiced Meat.

2 tbsp. curry powder

40 cloves

2 pieces of cinnamon 4" long

½ tsp. black pepper

3 tbsp. salt

1 head of garlic

Mix everything except the meat in a mortar. With a long sharp knife rub inside with spices. Take the meat, cut to the length as the meat, (any more than 1" in spices and insert in the hole) firmly with a long piece of string. Cover with cold water. Add the spices. Bring to the boil and skim off the fat. Cover with a thick blanket over the lid. Cook for 2 hours. Cut out the meat, allow it to cool.

17. Stuffed Pancakes.

1 egg

½ tin flour

Water

Salt and pepper

Beat the egg, add the flour and cream. Season. Allow to stand for 10 minutes. Chop the parsley and grated cheese.

14. Porridge.

1 tin medium oatmeal or crushed boiled wheat (burghul) 4 tins water
Salt

Sprinkle the meal into boiling salted water, and stir for the first 5 or 6 minutes, to prevent lumps. Thereafter, simmer covered for half an hour or longer. Add more water if necessary.

If wanted soak the meal overnight. If crushed wheat is used wash and then soak overnight. A spoonful of oatmeal added to the crushed wheat is an improvement. Serve for breakfast with salt and milk, or even better, with cream. Some people prefer sugar instead of salt.

15. Qawurma.

1 young fat sheep Large earthenware jars
Salt and pepper

Clean the meat of fibrous tissues and bones. Chop the meat into small dice. Remove all the fat and fry separately discarding the fibrous tissue once the fat has been extracted. Add the meat to the fat and cook till soft. Season with plenty of salt and pepper. Have ready dry, warm jars. Pour the scalding mixture into the jars and continue stirring until cool in order that the meat may be well distributed in the fat. When cold cover. Will keep all winter. This is the oriental variety of "corned mutton".

16. Spiced Meat.

2 tbsp. curry powder 1/8 tsp. cayenne pepper
40 cloves 1 k. beef—rump steak
2 pieces of cinnamon 4" long 1 piece of tail fat
1/2 tsp. black pepper 3 small onions
3 tbsp. salt 1 bay leaf
1 head of garlic

Mix everything except the last 4 ingredients, and pound thoroughly in a mortar. With a long sharp knife make a hole in the centre of the meat and rub inside with spices. Take the piece of fat, which should be about the same length as the meat, (any mutton fat may be used except kidney fat), dip it in spices and insert in the hole. Rub the spices all over the meat and tie round firmly with a long piece of string. Put the meat in a pan and three quarters cover with cold water. Add the onions, bay leaf and any remaining spices. Bring to the boil and skim once. Cover the pan tightly and put a piece of thick blanket over the lid. Cook in a low fire for 1 1/2 hours. When ready take out the meat, allow it to cool, remove the string and slice.

17. Stuffed Pancakes.

1 egg 1/4 k. minced meat
1/2 tin flour Frying fat
Water 1 tbsp. parsley
Salt and pepper 1 medium onion

Beat the egg, add the flour and water gradually and beat till like thick cream. Season. Allow to stand for half an hour. Fry the meat, and the chopped parsley and grated onion and cook further. Season. Grease a small

frying pan and cook very thin pancakes. This quantity should make 16. Cook lightly, put on a spoonful of the meat mixture, fold in the ends, roll up and re-fry three or four at a time.

A richer batter may be made by adding a spoonful of butter and using milk instead of water. If double the quantity of batter is made when the pancakes are stuffed they may be re-dipped in batter and then re-fried. Any savoury fish, meat or cheese filling may be used for these.

Coffee Customs

The offering of coffee is the most usual form of hospitality in the Middle East. It is served at any time of the day particularly in the forenoons when much important business is settled over a cup or two of coffee, as was the custom in Britain two hundred years ago and still is, to a lesser extent, to-day.



In Egypt, at the present time, the name of a business man's coffee house may be seen inscribed on his visiting card.

Coffee (*Coffea Arabica*) of which there are more than thirty varieties, is indigenous to Abyssinia, and has been used in that country since time immemorial. From there it was introduced into Arabia where it was known to exist in the 15th century and from whence it spread over the east during the next century. The stimulating and sleep dispelling properties of coffee were early appreciated by the Mufti of Aden, and according to La Roque*, when the dervishes of the Yemen wished to remain wakeful during long prayers they received coffee from their superior, decanted from a red earthenware vase of a type still seen in the Sudan at the present time.

The drinking of coffee gave rise to serious disturbances on religious and medical grounds in Mecca, Cairo and European cities. Some believed that, like wine, it should be forbidden to Moslems; and others, like the young French doctor. That it was harmful to the health. In spite of the heated controversies on this subject the use of coffee became more and more widespread.

The first coffee house, which took the form of a club, was opened in England in Oxford in 1650 and in London two years later. The coffee house soon became the fashionable meeting place for wits and philosophers, and also for business men as it still is in the east to-day, and Lloyd's, at present the biggest insurance concern in the world, originated in a coffee house of that name. In France La Roque's father brought the cups & necessary utensils to Mareseilles in 1644, and coffee was offered privately in the houses of merchants who had acquired a taste for it on their journeys to the east. In due course all medical and religious controversies on the subject of coffee ceased and its popularity has continued undiminished to the present time.

*Traité Historique de l'origine et du progrès du café, tant dans l'Asie que dans l'Europe; de son introduction en France, et de l'établissement de son usage à Paris.

In Arab countries the ceremonial association of the preparation of coffee with the metal spoon or "mash" of long thick handle. The handle is supported by the thumb and the name of which varies in different "manasib"—usually "gahwachi" whose use of heat is necessary to be continually with his circular end. When the coffee is in weight but increased by the fine outer of the mortar—the "hava" or "hava" call. In some parts the result is better coffee on the mortar and the heat increases, alters the coffee a hurried and repeated and a final single.

The rhythmic preparation varies according to the summons to coffee and that the coffee is yet up.

The utensils used are pots with their faucets. They are made of silver or on their quality and the shape of the sheik's coffee to which was the "tel gama" in which the hot coffee is poured the foam up about the gahwachi. The gahwachi must be sure there is no foam will ruin his reputation if it meets with his coffee decanted into the coffee pots, generally "dallas", although it may be applied of any size and poured into tiny cups without hand. The gahwachi holds the hand. Only a s