

Arts  
& Lifestyle

# EXPLORING

# International Project Cuisine



Saskatchewan

Reference Book

## 4-H MOTTO

Learn to do by doing.

## 4-H PLEDGE

I pledge

My HEAD to clearer thinking,

My HEART to greater loyalty,

My HANDS to larger service,

My HEALTH to better living,

For my club, my community and my country.

## 4-H GRACE

(Tune of Auld Lang Syne)

We thank thee, Lord, for blessings great

On this, our own fair land.

Teach us to serve thee joyfully,

With head, heart, health and hand.

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Agriculture and  
Agri-Food Canada

Agriculture et  
Agroalimentaire Canada



AGRICULTURE COUNCIL  
OF SASKATCHEWAN INC.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Objectives .....	1
Requirements .....	1
Tips for Success .....	1
Achievement Requirements for this Project .....	2
Tips for Staying Safe .....	2
Resources for Learning .....	3
<b>The Basics of International Cuisine</b> .....	4
<b>The Cuisine of India</b> .....	7
A Vegetarian’s Delight .....	7
Rich in Spices .....	8
Rice – The World’s Staple .....	9
The (not so) Humble Flatbread .....	10
Spiced Tea – Masala Chai .....	10
The Cuisine of Northern India .....	11
A Day in the Life .....	12
<b>The Cuisine of East Asia</b> .....	14
Rice – The Staple of Staples .....	14
The Ancient Noodle .....	15
Soy – The Wonder Bean .....	15
Tea – An Accidental Invention .....	17
Chopsticks – An Ancient Cutlery .....	18
<b>The Cuisine of China</b> .....	19
A Day in the Life .....	21
The Eight Culinary Schools .....	21
Guangdong/Cantonese School .....	22
Jiangsu .....	23

Shandong .....	23
Szechwan .....	24
<b>The Cuisine of Japan .....</b>	<b>25</b>
Sushi and Sashimi – A Wealth of Varieties .....	25
A Day in the Life .....	27
<b>The Cuisine of Korea .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>The Cuisines of Mainland South East Asia .....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>The Cuisine of the Mediterranean .....</b>	<b>30</b>
Eastern Mediterranean Cuisine .....	33
The Cuisine of the Middle East .....	33
Staples of Middle Eastern Cuisine .....	35
A Day in the Life .....	37
Greek Cuisine .....	38
Greek Staples – A History of Worship .....	38
A Day in the Life .....	40
North Africa – Moroccan Cuisine .....	40
A Day in the Life .....	42
Southern European Cuisine .....	42
Italian Cuisine .....	43
Italian Staples .....	43
Italian Regionalism .....	46
Lombardy and Veneto .....	46
Tuscany .....	46
Campania .....	47
Emilia-Romagna .....	48
Sicily and Sardinia .....	48
A Day in the Life .....	49
<b>The Cuisine of Latin America .....</b>	<b>51</b>
The Cuisines of Central America and Mexico .....	51
A Day in the Life .....	53

Regional Staples .....	54
The Importance of Maize .....	54
Beans and Rice .....	54
That's a Spicy Pepper! .....	55
Hot, hot, hot Sauce .....	56
Salsas – The Sauce of Latin America .....	56
Caribbean Cuisine .....	57
The Cuisines of South America .....	59
A Meat Lover's Dream .....	60
Find Your Soul <i>Mate</i> .....	60
A Day in the Life .....	61
Tex-Mex: A Fusion Cuisine .....	62
<b>Wrapping Up</b> .....	63
<b>Glossary of Common Terms</b> .....	64
<b>Suggested Resources</b> .....	66



## Objectives

Successful completion of this project should allow members to:

- ✓ Understand the concept of international cuisine.
- ✓ Be able to identify given ingredients, their origin and history.
- ✓ Learn basic cooking terminology, with special regard to the different cultures explored.
- ✓ Understand the importance of religion, climate and history in the shaping of a region's cuisine.
- ✓ Understand the role that food plays in culture.
- ✓ Gain an understanding of the immense wealth of cuisine that exists in the world.
- ✓ Identify different types of world cuisine.
- ✓ Distinguish between types of world cuisine.
- ✓ Cook basic ethnic meals.
- ✓ Adhere to traditional etiquette when eating a given country's cuisine.
- ✓ Respect other culture's cuisine.
- ✓ Work with other group members to further their progress in learning.
- ✓ Learn how to shop for ethnic ingredients and follow a recipe to prepare an ethnic dish.
- ✓ Understand how culinary traditions are formed.

## Requirements

- ✓ An interest in international cuisine.
- ✓ A source for research like the Internet or a library.
- ✓ A kitchen with basic cooking equipment.
- ✓ Either a selection of ethnic markets or a local grocery store with an international foods section.

## Tips for Success

- ✓ Attend club activities regularly.
- ✓ Listen and ask questions; work with your leaders and well as with other club members.

- ✓ Share any new culinary discoveries or knowledge with others – this will help you remember what you’ve learned, and teach others about the rich world of international cuisine.
- ✓ **Be patient!** It takes time and practice to learn new words, and even more time and practice when it comes to cooking cuisine that is very different from what you’re used to. Rushing through a recipe could cause you to harm yourself or others.
- ✓ Ask questions about or research anything in your reference book that is unclear. There is a lot of information out there about the world’s food, seek it out.
- ✓ Remember to have fun! You’re embarking on a fantastic culinary exploration. Think of everything you will experience on your journey.

## Achievement Requirements for this Project

- ✓ At least eight recipes from your activity book.
- ✓ Completed presentation on the ingredient of your choice.
- ✓ An ethnic restaurant review.
- ✓ A clear understanding of one country’s cuisine and the ability to explain it to others as well as cook at least two dishes from that region.

## Tips for Staying Safe

If you’re taking this project, you’ve probably completed at least one other 4-H cooking project or have experience with basic cooking techniques. When you’re in the kitchen, you’re coming into contact with a lot of potentially dangerous pieces of equipment. A hot oven or boiling water could easily burn you. A slip with a sharp knife could give you a bad cut. Always remember to work slowly and carefully in the kitchen and be aware of potential dangers. For example, always turn pot handles sideways on the stove so you don’t walk by and tip it over. When you’re finished with a knife, either clean it and put it away or place it in the sink to be washed later. NEVER leave a knife out on the counter. If you think you need a little help in the kitchen with chopping or taking things out of the oven, enlist the help of an adult, older sibling or friend. Make sure you always have the permission of a parent or guardian to cook in the kitchen.



## Resources for Learning

### People

- Find out if there are any local ethnic markets in your town. Most people would be happy to sit down and talk to you about their culture's cuisine.
- Chefs at local ethnic restaurants may be interested in talking with you about their passion.
- Everybody eats, right? Don't forget that your 4-H group leader, fellow club members, maybe even parent or guardian may know a lot about a given country's cuisine. Get them involved in your activities and share with them what you are learning.

### Resources

- Libraries have great selections of books and DVDs on food history, world cuisine and recipes.
- Ethnic cookbooks or recipe websites.
- Television shows and documentaries about ethnic cuisine.
- Websites dedicated to a type of ethnic cuisine. Remember to stay safe while searching online. **Never** talk to strangers online, or agree to meet, **even** if they claim to be able to help you with your projects. It's not safe to meet with someone you don't know. Tell your parents or guardian right away if someone you don't know tries contacting you online. **Never** give out any personal information (not even your name!) to anyone you don't know. Stick to using credible sources of information, like websites designed by legitimate institutions or groups, to find information.

### Places or Organizations

- Restaurants, libraries and ethnic food markets.

## Unit 1: The Basics of International Cuisine

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Have you ever wondered where pizza was invented? Ever heard of curry? Ever walked down the “**international**” section of the grocery store and were curious about the products on the shelves? By the time you’ve completed this 4-H project, you’ll have all the answers and feel like a globetrotting food connoisseur.

Most people have a routine set of foods that they like to eat. They might be typically North American **dishes**, but if you have any ethnic blood in your family or know foreigners, you’ve likely been exposed to a far more diverse range of world **cuisine** (a fancy way of referring to all the various foods, dishes and **cooking** styles from a particular **culture**). Even if you feel like you don’t really know international cuisine, you’d be surprised to learn that many of the foods we eat every day and consider a part of the average Canadian **diet** actually have their roots in countries much farther away. For example, pasta is pretty common in Canada (I bet you love a big plate of spaghetti and meatballs.), but both of these are more **traditionally** associated with Italian cuisine. However, even Italians can’t claim they invented the noodle, which was likely a Chinese creation. Even this single example shows how the various cuisines of the world have borrowed from each other over time and have evolved through the years. What we call Canadian food didn’t actually exist as Canadian food 400 years ago. The First Nations People who originally inhabited the land ate primarily the plants and animals that they found in the wild. Tribes in different **regions** might eat fish, bison, caribou, seal, wild berries and seeds. The emphasis was on **nutritional** value, ease of procurement, storage and transportability. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, traditional dishes were basic and rich in calories. Dishes that we might associate with First Nations people, like bannock, were actually introduced by fur **traders** and share much of their make-up with the Scottish scone. We do owe a few of our most popular “Canadian” foods to First Nations People, like maple syrup.

Think about the food that we grow here in Canada. In the west, they grow a lot of fruit; on the Prairies, they grow grains and pulse crops (lentils, beans, etc.); and out

east we get a lot of potatoes and dairy (among other things). These are the things that grow across Canada thanks to the **climate** and soil in the different regions. It's not surprising, then, that a lot of the dishes we eat contain these foods; they're right next door. And in fact, if you live in one of these regions, your family may even be helping produce them. But many of the foods that grow well in Canada don't grow well in other parts of the world. Other countries have different climates, soils and physical features (such as rivers or oceans), so different types of foods thrive there. For instance, you see a lot of fresh fish in the dishes of Japan and also the Caribbean. Although these two cuisines are very distinct, they are united by the fact that they've developed in island nations where fish is particularly **abundant**. Similarly, in coastal Canada, fish and other seafood is far more prevalent than in the Prairies. So it's not surprising that the cuisine of other countries is built around what is locally available and abundant in those areas. In fact, the types of foods that grow well and are easily available in any given region is one of the main factors that determines a culture's cuisine. Trade also plays an important role in determining what foods are available in any given time and place. We'll talk more about trade later in this section.

But there's more to international cuisine than just the types of foods that are locally available. Remember, someone has to cook this food and, as I'm sure you already know, the world is made up of an incredible amount of diverse cultures with even more diverse cooking traditions. Culture plays an important role in dictating a region's style of cooking. Religion also contributes a great deal to culture, and some religions have very specific guidelines for what should and should not be eaten. For instance, some Hindus don't eat beef because the cow is considered sacred. Some Muslims don't eat pork because, among other reasons, it's considered unclean. And some Jewish people don't eat shellfish or pork for the same reasons. If you're a strict Catholic, you probably eat fish on Fridays, which is another food-related religious tradition. So combinations of culture and local religions, which have been around for a long time, have helped to shape the types of dishes that are prepared in any given region.

Keep in mind that throughout history, cultures and religions and the types of food that have been grown in given regions have changed. Historically, world exploration and the mingling of cultures has led to today's global network of commerce. This commercial network allows countries to buy and sell products with other countries (collectively called "trade"). As I'm sure you know, as the world was explored and different places were settled, there was cultural exchange. As people mingled, they brought with them their own culinary traditions and exchanged ideas with others; in many cases they also brought these things back to their homeland. For instance, when Europeans explored and settled the New World, they tasted chocolate for the first time. You can imagine how well that went over. This led to an absolute craze in Europe for chocolate, and although only the rich could truly afford it, it was highly sought after. Nowadays, everyone associates chocolate with either Switzerland or Belgium, when in actuality it came from Central America. This is just one example of how the co-mingling of cultures has also led to the mixing of cuisines. Throughout time many cultures have shared and borrowed (and in some cases perfected) culinary traditions from each other. This process actually continues today and is commonly referred to as "fusion" cooking. Fusion cooking emerged largely from urban centres, which often have very diverse populations and a high density of restaurants. It's no surprise that many of the best chefs got together and traded ideas. One popular example of fusion cuisine is Tex-Mex, which combines the food of the southwestern United States with that of Mexico. We will discuss Tex-Mex in greater detail in the Latin American unit of this project. I bet you can think of a few foods that you'd like to "fuse" together!

Hopefully now you realize that some of what you might consider basic or ordinary dishes you eat everyday actually have a very interesting story involving the land (or water), crops, climate, and of course, the people, whose actions and movements allowed that dish to be on your plate today. Perhaps you'll look at your spaghetti and meatballs a bit differently now. As you explore this manual, you're going to learn many more interesting stories and fascinating facts about the cultures, **ingredients** and dishes that collectively make up international cuisine.

## Unit 2: The Cuisine of India

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You may not have an Indian restaurant in your town, but if you've ever tried Indian food, the first word that might come to your mind is "exotic". Many of the flavours of Indian food are completely foreign to us because we don't typically use them in North American cooking. In particular, the diverse **spices** of Indian cooking are what really make their cuisine different than other world cuisines. Another distinctive aspect of Indian cuisine that differs from many parts of the world is the prevalence of **vegetarian** dishes. Although many of the world's cuisines have vegetable dishes, in India, religious customs have strongly shaped what foods are and are not eaten.

If you look at India on a map, you'll notice it's a fairly big country. In fact, it's often referred to as a subcontinent that includes India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (and sometimes additionally Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bhutan). India itself is the world's second most populated country; almost a fifth of the world's population lives on the Indian subcontinent! You can imagine that with such a large landmass, the climate and topography varies substantially within the country. As we mentioned earlier, different soils and climates produce different foods and historically the regional cuisine found in the region has varied greatly. The subcontinent is bounded by the Himalayas to the north, the Hindu Kush mountains to the northwest, the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean to the west, and the Bay of Bengal to the east. The **geography** varies from alpine in high snow-capped mountains to hot and tropical rainforests.

### A Vegetarian's Delight

Along with the diverse geography of India, there has also been a diversity of cultural and religious influences that have shaped the cuisine. Historically, two of the most important and prevalent religions in India are Hinduism (which accounts for about 80 per cent of the population) and Jainism. One of the tenets of these two religions is that the cow is sacred and therefore should not be eaten. The origins of this belief are attributed to both spiritual and economic reasons. The avoidance of meat from a spiritual standpoint is due to the basic tenet of a pious, nonviolent and ethical life. From an economic perspective, it made far more sense to keep animals rather than

kill them for food. Indians realized that cows are far more valuable alive, as much more food could be obtained throughout the life of cow from its milk than from its flesh. Milk products abound in Indian cuisine. *Ghee* (clarified butter, rhymes with “bee”) is often used as the foundation of many Indian dishes, and yogurt, buttermilk and cheese are common too. All of these products have a longer shelf life than fresh milk, and this is particularly useful in the hotter parts of the country. Considering the benefits of milk products, you can see why many Indians choose not to eat cows. In addition, vegetarianism spread due to the abundance of vegetables, fruits, grains and legumes that grow in India’s lush climates. In fact, a balanced and healthy vegetarian diet was available as far back as 1000 BC. India shares its western border with Pakistan, a predominantly Muslim country. This region’s religious belief system prohibits the consumption of pork. To the east of India are several East Asian countries where Buddhism is a popular religion. Many followers of Buddhism do not eat meat. This combination of Hinduism, Jainism, Islam and Buddhism has resulted in a strong tradition of vegetarian cooking. That’s not to say that India is a wholly vegetarian country: it’s estimated that between 20 and 30 per cent of India’s population is vegetarian. While Hindus eschew beef in their diets, they do not all necessarily avoid other meats, and dishes that feature lamb, chicken and fish are quite common.

### **Rich in Spices**

One of the hallmarks of Indian cuisine is its diversity of spices. Spices have been the foundation of Indian cooking since ancient times. In fact, black pepper, something we take for granted in Canada, was for a long time India’s most valuable commodity. Many of the spices associated with Indian cuisine have been used for thousands of years. You’ve probably heard of curry and you may even have seen “curry powder” in the spice section of your local grocery store (it’s often a deep yellow colour). Curry means “sauce” in Tamil (the language of the Tamil people of south India and northeastern Sri Lanka), and rather than referring to a specific flavour or dish, it’s the style of having bite-sized pieces of vegetables and sometimes meat in a rich flavourful sauce. The “curry powder” that we find in our grocery stores is actually a blend of a variety of dried spices including cumin, coriander, cloves, cardamom, turmeric, ginger and chili powder, among others. That

sounds like a lot, right? But Indian cuisine has even MORE flavourings that include cinnamon, black mustard seed, saffron, turmeric, nutmeg, garlic, black pepper and mint to name just a few more. **Herbs** and spices serve more purposes than just flavouring a dish; sometimes they are used for colour, aromatics or to thicken a dish. Saffron, for example, adds both a vibrant colour and a delicious savoury flavour.

With so many spices, you can imagine that different combinations can produce a wide variety of flavours. Indian cooks need to know the characteristics of each herb and spice, how they taste when combined, and what effect they'll have on the overall dish. This is what Indian cuisine is all about. In fact, the importance of spices in this region goes far beyond food. Remember how we talked about international cuisine being shaped by trade? Historically, it was the motivation to find trade routes to access these exotic spices that led to world exploration by Europeans. India was an important source for these spices, but Europeans wanted to find an easier and more efficient route to access them, which actually led to the happenstance discovery of the New World. At the same time that Europeans were visiting India for spices, they were also bringing with them their own culinary traditions and ingredients. In fact, potatoes, which are now an important part of modern Indian cooking, are not native to India. They were brought to Europe by Spanish explorers who borrowed them from the natives who were cultivating them in modern day Peru and Bolivia.

### **Rice – The World's Staple**

One of the **staples** of Indian cuisine is rice. In fact, rice, the world's most cultivated cereal grain, was cultivated in India more than 5,000 years ago. It came to India from China, and cultivation later spread into the Middle East. It's believed that after his conquest of India in 327 BC, Alexander the Great brought the humble grain to Greece and from there it spread throughout the Western world. India is the second highest consumer of rice in the world, after China. One third of arable land in India is used for growing rice. *Basmati* ("bas-mah-tee") rice is a very popular type of rice that is highly prized above all others. Basmati rice, grown widely across southern and eastern Asia, is a type of long grain rice, of which there are several varieties, used in Indian cooking. Basmati has a distinctive fragrance and a delicate nutty

flavour. Although it sounds exotic, basmati is widely available in grocery stores in Canada. In India, rice is eaten boiled, steamed or fried and flavoured with spices like turmeric and saffron. In the tropical south, rice is often flavoured with coconut milk. In fact, rice is such a big part of Indian cuisine that there is a whole class of rice-based dishes called *biryanis* ("bee-ree-ah-nee"). A typical biryani combines rice (of course) with meat or vegetables in flavourful spices.

### **The (not so) Humble Flatbread**

Another staple of Indian cuisine is flatbread. In fact, in the northern and central regions of India, flatbreads are more common than rice. These often unleavened (non-risen) breads are a common addition to a savoury curry and used as a tool to sop up the tasty sauce. Flatbreads are used much like we might use a fork or spoon. That might seem strange to us but, traditionally, Indian food is eaten with the hands. That's right, if you make an Indian feast for your family you won't get in trouble for not using any utensils! Small pieces of the flatbreads are torn off and used to scoop up portions of the spice-filled dishes. This makes it especially easy to eat every last bit on your plate. Depending on the region, different breads are made from different grains. In the north, millet flour is used and in the south, breads are often made with rice flour. The basic skillet-cooked whole wheat breads are called *roti* ("row-tee") or *chapatti* ("cha-pah-tee"). *Papadums* ("pah-pah-dahms") are crisp, thin wafers made from black *urad* ("oo-rad") beans (related to the *mung* bean, a small green Indian bean) and often sold dried and are then roasted, grilled or fried at home. They, like other flatbreads, can be served flavoured or plain. You may have heard of another type of flatbread called *naan* ("nahn"), which is growing in popularity in North America. Naan are actually a type of yeasted flat bread that is baked inside a hot *tandoor*, a traditional clay oven in which many Indian dishes are cooked.

### **Spiced Tea – Masala Chai**

You've probably heard of *chai* (rhymes with "bye"), which in Hindi actually means "tea". When we westerners say "chai tea", we're actually being repetitive. The spicy, milky and sweet drink we now drink so often in the west is known as *masala* ("mah-sah-lah") *chai* in India, where it is drunk with great regularity. The word "masala" means, "blend of spices", so masala chai literally means, "spiced tea". This delicious



beverage is made by boiling milk, water and loose black tea leaves with a variety of spices. This spice mix varies from region to region, and it's actually said that each family in India has its own unique recipe. However, the most frequently used spices are cinnamon, ginger, cloves, cardamom and pepper. Masala chai is most often served sweetened with sugar or honey and the result is a hot, creamy and fragrant beverage that warms the drinker to the core. Masala chai has an interesting history that goes back 5,000 years. According to legend, a king created the recipe as a healing beverage. For centuries, this drink has been considered a very important part of India's alternative medicine and healing tradition. Does it work? Well, with the sheer quantity of antioxidants available in the black tea and the invigorating properties of warming spices like cardamom, cinnamon and cloves, it just might heal what ails you.

## The Cuisine of Northern India

This is often the cuisine that we in the west most commonly associate with Indian food. Many western-based Indian restaurants feature many dishes from Northern India. The cuisine of this region has been influenced over the centuries by the invaders who entered from Central Asia. These nomadic meat-eating cultures found the land in northern India to be very similar to the high arid country they came from and they continued to raise sheep in the foothills of the Himalayas. For this reason, lamb is quite popular in the north, particularly in the Kashmir region. Goat and chicken are also quite common here. The cuisine is also influenced by Muslim tribes, who introduced a highly refined cooking style inspired by Persian culture. These **techniques**, combined with locally abundant herbs, spices and other ingredients came together to form what we refer to as Moghul cooking. Dishes in this style include rice and meat based biryanis (see above) and braised meat and vegetable dishes called *korma* ("core-mah"). Common spices in this region include cinnamon, cardamom, nutmeg, cloves and saffron. Sauces are often made with cream and yogurt. Here, the tandoor oven is used to cook marinated meats on skewers, known as *Tandoori* ("tan-doo-ree") food, and is one of the most popular cooking styles in India.

## A Day in the Life

Main **meals** in India are lunch and dinner, with more emphasis on lunch. Breakfast is often simple, in some regions people might only have bread and butter served with milky spiced tea. Most Indian meals consist of several dishes, all served at the same time, including **dessert**. I'll bet if you were served chocolate cake at the same time as your spaghetti, you'd go for the cake first. In India, all the dishes are placed on a large round tray called a *thali* ("tah-lee"). The meal usually features a main dish, which is often based on a **protein**. For non-vegetarians, this could be broiled meats, a biryani or a fish dish. Vegetarian main dishes could be based on cheese or legumes like chickpeas, a commonly eaten legume in India, in a rich and flavourful sauce. Side dishes are also placed on the thali, and could include *dhals* (curried lentils, pronounced "dahl"), *raitas* (yogurt salads, pronounced "right-ah"), *samosas* (savory deep fried pastries containing spicy potato or meat, pronounced "sah-moh-sahs"). The thali will also feature **starches** like rice or flatbreads, and desserts that are often sweet, milk-based puddings or custards. Meals were often served with *chutneys*, which are relishes made from fresh fruits, vegetables and spices. Chutneys range in flavour from sweet to sour, spicy to mild and any combination of these. Mango chutney is by far the most common in the west, and is delicious on almost any dish. Eating practices in India are highly ritualistic. The purity of food is of utmost importance, and placement on the plate is carefully organized, based on ancient belief systems, religious taboos and regional needs. Indians believe that food has six tastes: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent. All six must be present to have a balanced meal. In addition, meals are traditionally taken while sitting on the floor or on low stools and food in India is customarily eaten only with the right hand as described in the section above on flatbreads.

Like almost every other culture, Indians have a sweet tooth, and there is a huge variety of Indian desserts to satisfy even the most sugar crazed among us. Many Indian desserts are specifically created to aid in digestion after a big spicy meal, which is why many of them contain milk. *Gulab jamun* ("goo-lab jah-mun") look a little bit like Tim Hortons' famous Timbits, but are actually fried milk balls soaking in sweet rose syrup. *Barfi* ("bar-fee") is made with condensed milk and sugar, boiled until thickened, and served cut into various shapes. Barfi can be made or served

with a variety of fruits, nuts and spices to add flavour and texture. What an odd name for such a delicious dessert. Indians have their own version of ice cream, called *kulfi* ("cool-fee"). Kulfi is not whipped like our western ice cream, which makes it denser and creamier and popular flavours include cardamom, rose, mango and pistachio. Because of its thicker texture, kulfi takes longer to melt than our style of ice cream, but then, if it's melting, you're probably not eating it fast enough. This is just a small taste of the many deliciously sweet and satisfying Indian desserts.

## Unit 3: The Cuisine of East Asia

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When we refer to “East Asian” cuisine, we refer to the dishes of China, Japan, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. That’s a lot of countries. Some of the cuisine found in these regions is the most ancient of the world’s culinary history. Strong, delicious flavours abound in East Asian cuisine, yet trying to lump each country into one category is difficult. In actuality, there are many East Asian countries and some of the bigger ones (China in particular) that have so many different regions, each with their own culinary traditions, that they have to be tackled separately. For our purposes, we’re going to group them into three main categories: Chinese, Japanese and South East Asian. But first, let’s discuss important staples, features and techniques common to all regions of East Asian cuisine.

### **Rice – The Staple of Staples**

I bet if I asked you to characterize East Asian food with one ingredient, you’d probably choose rice, right? In our experience in the west, it’s hard for us to separate our understanding of East Asian culture from rice, and indeed rice is a very important part of the cuisine from this region of the world. In fact, rice was first cultivated in China. Scientists believe that rice actually originated 8,000-13,500 years ago in the Pearl River region of China. From here, rice spread all over south Asia and farther into Europe and the Americas. You can imagine with that kind of history, rice is a really important grain, especially to the people of China! In fact, the Chinese have developed a list of the “seven necessities” of life, and rice features prominently on this list (along with firewood, oil, salt, sauce, vinegar and tea). This humble grain has actually come to be associated with prosperity, which has led to the Western custom of throwing rice at a wedding. The cultivation of rice is well suited to the often warm and humid climate found in East Asia, and since rice can be grown nearly anywhere, for example on the side of a hill or mountain, it’s particularly well suited to the region’s varied geography. In fact, Asian farmers account for 92 per cent of the world’s rice production! As we mentioned in Unit 2, there is an incredibly diverse range of rice varieties. In Asia, there is often a preference for softer and stickier varieties of rice, particularly in Japan, where sticky rice is used to make sushi.

Rice is so ever-present in East Asia that it is nearly always served with every meal. There are some notable exceptions of course (we can't forget the noble noodle), but rice is by far the most prevalent staple in all of East Asia's cuisine.

### **The Ancient Noodle**

Although the Chinese do not have a long tradition of baked goods the way we do in Europe and North America, they have absolutely excelled in the creation of noodles. It's no surprise; noodles have been around since the Han Dynasty period (206-220 BC). These early noodles were made from wheat and were a common staple during this period, and continue to be to this day. Noodles in Asian cuisine come in all kinds of styles and sizes. The sizes range from long threadlike noodles to thick and square noodles to short and wide ribbon-like noodles. Each noodle type is chosen carefully to complement the dish in which it will be used. The ingredients of the noodles vary and they can be made from wheat flour, rice flour or mung bean flour. Egg and other ingredients may be added during production to give the noodles an enhanced colour, flavour or texture. Noodles tend to cook quite quickly and are generally cooked by boiling or frying in oil. Dishes that feature noodles prominently include the popular Vietnamese soup dish called *pho* (more about this below, pronounced "fuh"), which uses a thin rice noodle; the Chinese dish *lo mein* ("low-main"), which uses a thick wheat-based noodle; and the Thai dish *khao soi* ("cow-soy") which is a soup-like dish featuring deep fried crispy egg noodles. Though nowadays most noodles are made by machine, it's not uncommon to see noodles being hand stretched in the streets of East Asia, and noodle stands are quite popular, where hungry diners can get a steaming bowl of cooked noodles served with vegetables, fish or meat.

### **Soy – The Wonder Bean**

Another important East Asian staple is soy. The soybean is a species of legume native to that part of the world, and is a truly remarkable one! It is a fantastic source of protein and is used to make numerous food products. Soybeans can be shelled, cooked and eaten with a little salt. You may have seen this product in your local grocery store labelled *edamame* (the Japanese word for the bean, pronounced "ed-ah-mah-may"). This simply refers to soybeans steamed in their pods. They can also

be processed to make soy bean curd, better known as *tofu* ("toh-foo"), which is often served in place of meat in East Asian cuisine. In fact, tofu has been eaten in China for over 2,000 years. Tofu has become a popular ingredient in western cuisine because it is relatively low **fat** but very high in protein, easily replaces meat in many dishes and is very versatile. Tofu comes in a variety of textures ranging from the very soft *silken* tofu (which has the constituency of jell-o, pronounced "silk-in") through soft, firm and extra firm, which has the consistency of fresh mozzarella cheese. Because of this versatility, tofu has become a staple protein source in western vegetarian and vegan diets. Tofu is made by pressing the curds created from soymilk into white blocks, which are then adapted freely into dishes. Tofu has a very subtle flavour (many people say it doesn't taste like anything), making it very versatile (suitable for sweet or savoury dishes) and very susceptible to marinades and sauces. Soybeans are also used to make other meat alternatives like *tempeh* ("tem-pay"), a fermented soybean product, which was originally developed in Indonesia. Tempeh has a distinctive nutty flavour and, like tofu, is relatively low in fat and high in protein. Another popular soybean product is called *miso* ("mee-zoh"), a traditional Japanese seasoning made from fermented rice, barley, cultures and soybeans. Miso looks like a thick paste and, like many soybean by-products, is salty and savoury. It is used in a variety of dishes and, other than flavour, adds high levels of protein, vitamins and minerals. It is prominently used in the popular Japanese dish miso soup.

Soybeans are also used to make one of the most widely used condiments in East Asia: soy sauce (called soya sauce in Canada). Soy sauce is a savoury dark brown (often black) liquid made from the fermented paste of boiled soybeans, roasted grain, water and salt. Soy sauce originated in China sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and later spread throughout East Asia. Throughout the years, people have turned soy sauce production into an art form and there are many different styles and flavours, all with different recipes, to choose from. Soy sauce is famous for containing the distinct basic taste called *umami* ("oo-mah-mee"). For a very long time, food scientists struggled to identify what the mystery taste was that didn't seem to fit into the other four major tastes: sweet, sour, bitter and salty. As it turns out, that mystery taste was umami. This taste is easiest to describe as "savoury", and

umami actually means “pleasant savoury taste” in Japanese. Scientists learned that the human tongue has receptors for glutamates, a type of amino acid that ignites the umami flavour. Soy sauce in particular is naturally high in glutamates, so it enhances the flavour of savoury foods. This is why you see it so often sitting on the table at any East Asian restaurant, right beside the salt and pepper. Fermented fish sauces and shitake mushrooms are also known to pack a pretty strong umami punch, which is why they are both common in this region’s cuisine. Thanks to the humble soybean, we’re able to infuse our food with a whole new flavour. These versatile beans are also used to make milk, oil, flour and many other products. Now that’s a valuable legume.

### **Tea – An Accidental Invention**

Throughout all of East Asia, tea is as ubiquitous as rice in its regular consumption. East Asians enjoy tea at every meal, and also maintain sacred traditions and intricate ceremonies that involve the ancient beverage – it’s *that* culturally important. Legend has it that tea was created when the Chinese emperor Shen Nung tasted boiled water “contaminated” with leaves from a tea bush nearly 4,700 years ago. From that fortuitous moment on, tea has become one of the most widely consumed **beverages** in the world. In China, the birthplace of the drink, tea culture is of utmost importance, and one can find a teahouse on almost every corner. Tea is considered one of the seven necessities of Chinese life (as mentioned above), and no wonder, tea contains an incredible number of antioxidants, which can protect against cancer and other illnesses. Shen Nung must have been pretty excited to make that discovery! Other than as an everyday drink, tea is consumed for a number of reasons, such as a sign of respect or to apologize. In China, when children serve their parents tea, it’s a sign of regret and submission. Remember that the next time you forget to do your chores. Tea is, of course, incredibly popular in the rest of South Asia as well. In Japan, green tea is most widely consumed with any type of meal, from savoury to sweet. Japan has also developed an elegant and artful tea ceremony (called *chanoyu*, literally “hot water for tea” in Japanese, pronounced “chah-no-you”) in which powdered green tea (called *matcha*, pronounced “mah-chah”) is prepared and presented according to an ancient ritual of concentrated and graceful movements. It can take years of practice to master the art of the Japanese

Tea Ceremony, and some people spend their lifetime in pursuit of perfecting the art. In Thailand, Thai tea is a cold spicy drink made from strongly brewed *ceylon* ("say-lon") tea and sweetened with sugar and condensed milk. Tea in Asia is often consumed "loose", as in whole dried tea leaves left to steep in hot water.

All types of tea come from the *Camellia sinensis* plant. The varieties of tea we get from the plant all depend on how they are processed, depending on what point they are harvested, heated and dried. Popular black teas are named after the regions from which they come, like *Assam* ("ah-sahm"), *Nepal* ("nuh-pahl"), *Darjeeling* ("dar-gee-ling") and the aforementioned Ceylon. Green tea is popular in the west and particularly Japan. Green tea is so prevalent in many parts of South Asia that it is simply known as "tea". *Oolong* ("oo-long") is a traditional Chinese tea that tastes like a mix between black and green tea and, like green tea, has been known to aid substantially in weight loss. White tea is another type of Asian tea that's becoming more popular in the west, and is the least processed of all other types of tea. Due to this minimal processing, it contains more nutrients than its fellow teas, and is considered the highest in antioxidants.

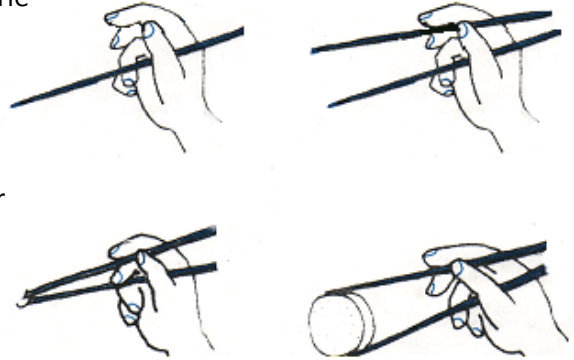
### **Chopsticks – Ancient Cutlery**

I'll bet you think everyone in East Asia eats with chopsticks, right? Not quite. Chopsticks, the short tapered sticks used as traditional eating utensils are used predominantly in China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. In the rest of East Asia, it's tradition to eat with ones hands, but more recently diners use western style cutlery. Chopsticks were actually invented in ancient China over 3,000 years ago. Now *that's* ancient cutlery. Chopsticks can be made from a variety of materials, often plastic or wood. In fact, it's said that the last king of the Shang Dynasty (during which chopsticks were invented) used ivory chopsticks. Today, you can find chopsticks in most East Asian restaurants of countries where they are used frequently.

It can be pretty messy and frustrating to try using chopsticks for the first time, but take heart: with practice, you too can become a chopstick master. Here is the best way to learn: hold the lower chopstick stationary, resting at the base of the thumb and between your ring and middle fingers. Now hold the second chopstick like a pencil, using the tips of the thumb and index and middle fingers. Keep the lower



chopstick stationary and only move the second chopstick to pick up pieces of food. Keep at it until you can pick up food and put it in your mouth successfully. When you aren't using your chopsticks, be sure to set them down to the right of your plate, and when you're finished, place them into the chopstick rest (if there is one). Enjoy.



## The Cuisine of China

Other than Italian, Chinese food might be the international cuisine that you're the most familiar with. Canada has a strong tradition of Chinese immigration, and if you're from anywhere in the west, it's likely that almost every small town you've seen has at least one "Chinese-Canadian" restaurant. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many Chinese people immigrated to Canada to work on the railroads that were being built from east to west. Once completed, many stayed on and built communities across Canada. As you can imagine, these Chinese immigrants brought their rich cultural heritage with them, and that includes some absolutely delicious and varied food. Because of this, many Canadians enjoy Chinese food on a regular basis and have some knowledge and understanding of some of the more popular dishes. However, the Chinese dishes we often see in Canada are just the tip of the iceberg. The Chinese eat an incredible diversity of dishes and they pride themselves on eating a wide range of foods. Not only that, they are experts at using every ingredient to its full extent, and not wasting anything. We can all learn a lot from the resourceful Chinese and their delicious and inventive cuisine.

The People's Republic of China is the most populated country in the world, and the third largest by landmass, after Russia and Canada. China's civilization is one of the oldest as well, going back more than 7,000 years. As you can imagine, 7,000 years is a long time to create a highly sophisticated national cuisine. Throughout their history, the people of China have valued food greatly. In fact, appointing a head chef was the first act of many new emperors and, as you can imagine, competition

would be fierce to earn that position. Throughout the years, the Chinese have borrowed from the cuisines of South East Asia and the Middle East. Foods introduced throughout this time include tea, lettuce, peanuts and chili peppers to name a few. A comprehensive agricultural development policy was in place as early as AD 220 and is maintained today. Not all of China is arable though, and the country has an incredibly vast mix of geography and climate. In the southeast, there are lush tropical rainforests, in the southwest lie the snow-capped Himalayas, the north houses near-frozen tundra, and dry deserts occupy central and western China. Despite this, Chinese peasants have spent centuries converting the land for **agriculture** by draining, irrigating, terracing, deforesting and reforesting. The result is a truly varied cuisine with something to please even the pickiest of eaters.

An emphasis on balance is prevalent in not only the region's cultural ideas, but also its culinary history. The concept of "yin and yang" – the idea that in every aspect of life there are two opposing forces that must be balanced (male and female, dark and light, soft and hard, etc.) – has a profound effect on Chinese cuisine. Dishes often include two opposing flavours: sweet and sour, soft and crunchy, flavourful and neutral. Dishes are often very elegant, and strike a balance between subtle and overpowering, whether it is taste, aroma or appearance. That's a pretty philosophical way to think about food, isn't it?

The Chinese also place great emphasis on texture. Some ingredients are loved purely for the way they *feel* in the mouth, rather than their taste. This is why you might find a Chinese dish that has very little flavour but highly interesting texture. A great example of this is tofu. The Chinese use a much softer version of tofu than we do in the west, and to the uninitiated, it can feel almost goeey in the mouth. Chicken feet are also prized for having a decidedly crunchy texture, which is a nice "yin" to the soft "yang" of tofu. A contributing factor to the fine art of texture in Chinese cuisine is the complex method of cutting up ingredients to the proper size to determine the overall flavour of the dish. The thickness of the pieces always determines how long the dish will cook and how the pieces will be seasoned. Hopefully you can see how the Chinese have greatly refined their cooking styles based on centuries of experimentation and an emphasis on balance and texture.

## A Day in the Life

All Chinese people are united by a love of good food. Social events of every kind are centred around an emphasis on delicious food shared between friends and relatives. On an ordinary day, breakfast is quite casual, with bowls of noodles or *congee* (a rice porridge, pronounced "con-gee") eaten regularly. Lunch is eaten at midday, often with family, but in the cities most people can be found eating a quick lunch at a noodle stand before getting back to work. Supper is considered the main meal of the day and eaten with family around 6 or 7 p.m. Snacks are eaten regularly throughout the day, sometimes even after supper. Typical meals consist of the basic combination of *fan* and *cai* (rhymes with "eye"). The *fan* (which means cooked grain) is the foundation of the meal and refers to the staple, often rice, noodles or bread. *Cai* is the complementary dish (or dishes), which could be a stew, meat, fish, tofu and/or vegetable preparation. In everyday eating, there is often more *fan* than there is *cai*, but at festivals or social events, the emphasis is on many varied *cai* dishes. In some regional dishes, both the *fan* and the *cai* are combined. On a regular day, the amount of accompanying *cai* dishes varies greatly depending on how many people are eating and the economic status of the family. A soup is also usually served, like a warming hot and sour soup (a spicy and sour soup made with mushrooms, tofu and pork). The Chinese table is often round, which makes sharing the varied dishes easier. All the dishes are served together at once, and diners fill their own rice bowl with the *fan* and then take portions of the *cai* throughout the meal with chopsticks (more on those later). Both the *fan* and *cai* are eaten in alternating mouthfuls. Desserts in China are served either alongside meals or at the end, and just like Chinese cuisine itself, there are a great variety of Chinese dessert offerings. From baked confections like our pastries (called *bing*) to sweet candies made with sugar, nuts and fruits (called *tang*, "tung") and steamed rice based dishes (called *gao*, "gah-oh"), there's no end to your dessert options in China.

## The Eight Culinary Schools

As China is such a large country with such a long history, you can imagine the diversity of cuisine that can be found throughout its many regions. There are actually eight different cooking styles, known as the Eight Culinary Schools (as in school of thought) recognized within the country. They are all named for the

provinces from which they come and are Anhui, Guangdong (or Cantonese), Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Szechuan (or Sichuan) and Zhejiang. Of these eight, four are considered the more influential regional traditions, referred to as the Four Great Schools, and they are Guangdong/Cantonese, Jiangsu, Shandong, and Szechuan/Sichuan. Each of these schools has a rich tradition that draws much from history and culture in its cuisines.

### **Guangdong/Cantonese School**

This school is the one that most westerners refer to when they think of Chinese food, and the dishes are light, crisp and fresh tasting. Indeed, Cantonese style food is quite popular throughout China, and Cantonese chefs, renowned for their skill and demand of the highest quality ingredients, are sought out the world over. This school's food is not highly seasoned and tastes its best when the fresh ingredients are allowed to shine through simple sauces. Popular dishes include the controversial delicacy shark fin soup (many species of shark are threatened and endangered by overfishing), steamed fish and stir-fried vegetables, but the region is known for its sheer diversity of dishes. In fact, one way to experience this first hand is to head to your local Chinese restaurant for the traditional meal known as *dim sum*, where the emphasis is on having very small portions from a variety of dishes, rather than a meal dominated by any one flavour. Dim sum literally means "touch the heart" in Cantonese, as the dishes are often small but hearty, and were never meant to serve as a full meal, but only a snack. In fact, dim sum was traditionally eaten as early as sunrise. As time has gone on, it's become more traditionally eaten in the afternoon but some restaurants feature dim sum in the evening as well. This meal is intended to be social, and is always served with copious amounts of tea. Dishes are served "family style", which means everyone is meant to sample each dish, and considering they can number in the several dozen, it's definitely a culinary adventure. Find out if there's a Chinese restaurant in your town that offers dim sum and gather a group of friends or family to enjoy a tour through the Cantonese school of cooking with you. You'll be surprised how diverse the dishes can be.

## Jiangsu

It comes as no surprise that the Jiangsu school of cuisine originates from the eastern coastal province of Jiangsu. This cuisine, sometimes called *Su* ("soo") cuisine, is actually made up of a group of smaller schools and places heavy emphasis on texture (soft being a key feature), a strict use of high quality and seasonal ingredients, matching colours and shapes in each dish and using soup to enhance flavour. This style is quite popular in the lower Yangtze River Valley, thus seafood is a common main ingredient. Delicate vegetables are paired with equally delicate fish, such as baby cabbage hearts with crabmeat or shrimp, to bring out their natural sweetness. Slicing and carving techniques are very precise, and flavours are light, fresh and sweet, and presentation is always executed with the utmost care. Despite a strong European presence (particularly in Shanghai) beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the region's most classic dishes rely on purely local ingredients, including crisp, stir-fried shrimp, Yangchow fried rice, "lion's heads" (giant pork meatballs with cabbage and fresh dried shrimp), stewed crab with clear soup and Liangxi crisp eel.

## Shandong

The two major styles that define this school are Jinan and Jiaodong cuisine. This school is considered one of the most influential, and the majority of Chinese cooking styles have emerged from it. Many modern schools of Chinese cooking have their roots in the Shandong style. In this school, the emphasis is on aroma, freshness, crispness and tenderness. Soups play a major role, and vary from clear and fresh tasting to thick, creamy and heavily flavoured. Seafood features prominently in this school as well, and dishes include scallops, clams, squid and sea cucumbers, to name just a few. What makes the Shandong school unique is its use of corn, a grain that is not historically cultivated in northern China. The corn grown here is chewy and starchy with a grass-like aroma and served steamed, boiled or fried. Other common ingredients include peanuts (eaten as a snack or mixed into a variety of dishes), grains used to make steamed bread that often replaces rice as the fan of a meal, potatoes, cabbages, sea grasses and vinegar. In fact, the Shandong region is considered one of the premier regions for vinegar production in China. Unlike some of the lighter versions found in the rest of China, this region's vinegar is rich and full bodied with a complexity not found elsewhere.

You may have heard of one of the stranger Shandong dishes, called “bird’s nest soup”. Well, the name is no joke, and this is actually made with an edible bird’s nest. The nutrient-rich nests used to make the soup are built by some species of swiftlets. These birds build their nests on cave walls (and increasingly in structures people build specifically for the birds) over the course of a roughly 35 day breeding period. Incredibly, the nests are made from the birds’ own saliva! It is believed that eating these nests provides the diner with a variety of health benefits (though there is no scientific evidence to support these claims). In fact, these nests have been used in Chinese cuisine for at least 400 years and the nests sell for over \$1,000 per kilogram – one of the most expensive animal products eaten by humans.

## **Szechwan**

This school lies within the “spicy zone” of Chinese cooking: central China. This region has historically featured spicy food, even before the introduction of the chili pepper from the Americas in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The people of Szechwan believe that heat awakens the taste buds, allowing the full range of flavours to be experienced. Garlic, chili oil, black and brown peppers, ginger, star anise, fresh coriander and fresh citrus are all important flavours in this style of cuisine. An important spice mixture used with regularity in the Szechwan school is called Chinese five-spice. This aromatic mixture of star anise, cinnamon, cloves, fennel and Szechwan powder is used in many different dishes. The combination of these five spices may have come from the ancient Chinese belief that the universe is composed of five elements (wood, metal, water, fire and earth), which is a concept that carries over into many aspects of daily Chinese life. The Szechwan region is the most populous province of China, and its high mountains and deep gorges around the Yangtze River contribute to a humid and warm climate, ideal for year-round agriculture. Because of this, the region is known colloquially as “heavenly country”. Rice, wheat, canola, corn, bamboo shoots and citrus fruits are the main crops. Popular Szechwan dishes include hot and sour soup, hot pot (a Chinese-style fondue) and Kung Pao chicken. In addition, a significant Buddhist influence has led to a variety of vegetarian meals in this school and many dishes include tofu.

## The Cuisine of Japan

Japan is a country comprised of a chain of several thousand islands, so it's no surprise that seafood and sea vegetables (seaweeds) play such an important role in its culinary history. The largest islands are Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku and Kyushu, which account for about 97 per cent of the land area of the country. Stretching 2,500 kilometres off the coast of Asia, the northern islands have a temperate climate while those in the south are warm and tropical. Much of Japan is mountainous, leaving only a tenth of the land suitable for agriculture. However, the resourceful Japanese have found methods of cultivating enough rice (the most prevalent staple) to feed its whole population. This is quite a feat, considering Japan has the world's tenth highest population, with over 127 million people. The Japanese have an incredibly rich culinary history that continues to this day. Japanese food is known for its intricacy and delicacy and Japanese cooks are sought out the world over. In fact, did you know that the famous and highly respected Michelin Guide has awarded Japanese cities more Michelin stars than the rest of the world combined? That truly is an impressive culinary accomplishment for an equally impressive culinary tradition.

Historically, Japan has been an isolated country, contributing to a highly refined national cuisine with strong traditions in both the food itself and the traditions associated with eating. The Japanese diet relies heavily on simple ingredients like fish, vegetables, rice, fruits and sea vegetables and has changed very little throughout the country's long history. Simplicity of flavours is of key importance here, letting the freshness of the ingredients shine through. Yet while simplicity is important to flavour, presentation is anything but simple! There is meaning and tradition behind every decision made on the plate; every ingredient is carefully chosen to represent nature and the seasons, both of which are reflected in the composition of each dish. Regionalism is far less prevalent in Japan, and the overall characteristics of harmony, beauty of presentation and freshness of ingredients dictate the cuisine across the country.

### **Sushi and Sashimi – A Wealth of Varieties**

Because Japan has such an impressive and delicious culinary history, it's no surprise that its cuisine has become very popular throughout the world. Most people, even if they haven't tried it, have heard of *sashimi* ("sah-shee-mee") and *sushi* ("soo-shee") in

particular. Sashimi consists of very fresh raw fish or shellfish cut very thinly to enhance the appearance and flavour of the fish. Sushi is a flexible dish that comes in many different varieties. It generally consists of rice flavoured with tangy sweet vinegar (called *sushi-meshi*, the ingredient all sushi has in common, pronounced "soo-shee meh-shee") topped with raw fish or shellfish. It is often served dipped in soy sauce. The type you're probably most familiar with is known as *Maki-sushi* ("mah-kee"), which means "pressed sushi" and consists of sticky rice (rice prepared to be clumpy so that it adheres to itself and other ingredients) rolled with a variety of fillings into *nori* ("no-ree"), paper-thin sheets of seaweed. This type of sushi is then cut into bite-sized discs and eaten with pickled ginger, soy sauce and *wasabi* ("wah-sah-bee"), a hot horseradish that also often accompanies sashimi. A delicious maki sushi roll exemplifies the balance of Japanese cuisine elegantly: the roll brings a variety of flavours, sometimes sweet, the soy sauce brings salty, the pickled ginger brings sour and the wasabi brings spicy. The most common types of seafood used in sushi and sashimi are *ika* (squid, "ee-kah"), *maguro* (tuna, "mah-goo-row"), *anago* (sea eel, "ah-nah-go") and *odori* (shrimp, "oh-doh-ree"), but due to the flexibility of the dish, there truly are innumerable types of sushi rolls. Since sushi has become so widely enjoyed outside of Japan (it's not uncommon to see it prepared fresh in some Canadian grocery stores), many variations have been made to suit western tastes, like the ubiquitous California roll, which consists of avocado, imitation crab, cucumber and flying fish roe (eggs). Head down to your local Japanese shop or restaurant to sample the incredible variety of sushi rolls out there, you're sure to find something you like.

Another well-known concept from Japanese cuisine is *teriyaki* ("tear-ee-ah-kee"). Teriyaki is a method of Japanese cooking where meat (traditionally fish, but now more commonly other meats) is grilled while being coated or basted in a marinade. The idea of basting meat as it grills isn't unique to Japan, but teriyaki marinade is. Traditionally, teriyaki marinade is made by combining soy sauce, a sweetener such as sugar or honey, and *mirin* ("meer-in"), which is a sweet Japanese rice wine (used more for cooking than for drinking). This combination brings together salty, savoury and sweet flavours, plus a bright flavour element from the mirin. Once mixed, the liquid is boiled to thicken the sauce and concentrate the flavours, and then used as a marinade and grilling condiment for the meat.



## A Day in the Life

Breakfast and lunch are often quick and light meals in Japan, with the main meal being dinner. The most common breakfast will consist of miso soup, rice and pickled vegetables. Noodle dishes are the most popular fast-food lunch eaten in urban centres, and other lunch options include the well-known *bento box*, a single packaged homemade or takeout meal with balanced portions from a variety of ingredients. The evening meal, which is eaten at low tables with cushions for the diners to sit on, will include rice served with fish, meat or vegetable side dishes (known as *okazu*, "oh-kah-zoo"). One-dish meals (hot pots) of fish, meat or tofu and vegetables served with rice are also common. In addition to rice, noodles are commonly eaten as staples in Japan. Two popular Japanese varieties are *udon* ("oo-dahn") and *soba* ("soh-bah"). Udon are made from wheat flour and are typically thick. Soba are thinner and made from buckwheat flour (which can give them a grey-brown colour) to which other ingredients are sometimes added. Japanese desserts are just as carefully prepared as every other dish, and the emphasis is just as much on presentation as it is on taste. Delicately constructed *wagashi* ("wah-gah-shee") are a traditional Japanese sweet and are made with adzuki bean paste and various fruits and nuts.

As we mentioned earlier, traditions associated with eating are strictly adhered to, even today. For instance, at a formal Japanese meal, it is tradition never to serve a large amount of any one dish, and a banquet can consist of many small portions served in a particular order determined by their method of preparation. Regardless of how grand the occasion, from a wedding to a simple everyday meal at home, the emphasis is on balance, composition and subtlety of flavours. There is a focus on presentation in traditional Japanese cuisine. The traditional table setting includes a bowl of rice at the diner's left and a bowl of miso soup on his or her right. Each *okazu* will have its own plate placed behind these. Chopsticks are placed at the front of each diner in a chopstick rest with the pointed ends facing left. Before beginning any Japanese meal, it is tradition to say *itadakimasu* ("ee-tah-dah-kee-mah-soo") or "I humbly receive" with both palms pressed together in front of the chest. This custom is a polite method of thanking your host and showing gratitude to the chef for their hard work. Maybe this is something we Canadians should try to do more

often. Also, remember that being a picky eater is heavily frowned upon in Japan. It is considered ungrateful. If you are enjoying a delicious Japanese meal with a gracious Japanese host, be sure to eat every last grain of rice to show your sincere appreciation for their hard work.

## The Cuisine of Korea

Like Japan and China, Korea's cuisine is based on rice, vegetables, fish and meat. However, the real emphasis in Korean cuisine is on sensible eating and nutritional balance. Flavour and colour are of great importance, which has led to a diet that is both healthy and attractive. Despite the political division that exists in the country (democratic South Korea is separated from communist North Korea), the cuisine of the region is quite consistent throughout. Korea has a very temperate climate, with harsh winters and long and humid summers. Because of the harsh winters, Korean cuisine has a long history of developing methods of food preservation by salting and pickling nearly everything to ensure its longevity. This has led to the ancient creation of the national dish of Korea, *kimchi* ("kim-chee"). Kimchi consists of pickled and preserved vegetables, meat, fish or a combination of the three. The ingredients are fermented in earthenware jars either in straw huts or buried in the ground for several months. The resulting spicy and salty dish is added liberally to a variety of dishes and is known for being incredibly healthy. In fact, one serving can provide over 50 per cent of the daily recommended amounts of vitamin C. Now *that's* a super food.

## The Cuisines of Mainland South East Asia

The cuisine of South East Asia includes the countries of Thailand, Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam. Many of these countries have been heavily influenced by the cuisines around them, including China and India. Thailand in particular draws much from these two cuisines. Simple and unique, Thai dishes draw from the Chinese influence on balancing the five flavours of bitter, salty, sour, hot and sweet. Chili peppers, which contribute to the hot flavour, can be found in many dishes. Chilies were well received in Thailand when they were brought by the Portuguese. In addition, Thai cuisine features many noodle dishes, a staple borrowed from China. Indian

influences in Thai food include delicious curries and the frequent use of coconut milk. In addition, the spices cardamom, coriander, cumin, nutmeg and cloves were brought over from India and feature prominently in Thai cuisine. Both the cuisines of Malaysia and Myanmar bear significant similarities with that of Thailand, especially in the widespread use of chillies and coconut milk. Vietnamese cuisine, in contrast, is known for the wide variety of noodle soups it boasts. Each soup has its own distinct history, flavour and regional influence. The most popular of these soups that we see so often in the west is *pho* ("fuh"). This dish is an aromatic beef broth filled with noodles, sliced beef, onions, and cilantro and garnished with Thai basil and bean sprouts. You can't go wrong with a big bowl of pho. Cambodia, the country sandwiched between Thailand and Vietnam, has a cuisine heavily influenced by both those countries, which gives it a delicious and varied culinary lineup. Similarly, the dishes of landlocked Laos are heavily influenced by those of its southern and eastern neighbours.

The cuisines of Singapore, the Philippines and Indonesia differ in that they are island nations. Indonesia is the world's largest archipelago with between 13,000 and 17,000 islands, of which only about 6,000 are inhabited. Over 7,000 volcanic tropical islands comprise the Philippines, and Singapore is made up of 63 islands. With so much surrounding water, you can imagine that fish is a common staple here. In addition, much of the region is lush and tropical, so the usual staples that traditionally grow in the tropics are common here, like cassava, coconut, corn and tropical fruit. Rice continues to be a staple throughout the region. Like the rest of South East Asia, influences from China and India are common. However, there are also other influences that include Polynesia and Arab. In fact, the popular national dish of Indonesia, *satay* ("sah-tay"), a dish of seasoned skewered grilled meat, is thought to have been a legacy of the Arabs. Filipino cuisine, by contrast, has some Spanish influence due to occupation by that country from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to 1898. This has led to an integration of Spanish ingredients like *chorizo* (a spicy pork sausage, "chore-ee-zoh") and Mexican ingredients like tomatoes and chocolate into the cuisine of the Philippines. The diversity of influences in this region has resulted in some very unique, varied and delicious cuisines.

## Unit 4: The Cuisine of the Mediterranean

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As you might have guessed, Mediterranean cuisine is the food that comes from the countries and cultures on the Mediterranean Sea, the large body of water that lies between Asia, Europe and Africa. The world's earliest civilizations bordered the great sea, which is no surprise due to the region's temperate climate and rich soil. Agricultural pursuits have always thrived in the Mediterranean, which has led to a culinary tradition featuring an abundance of fruits and vegetables. Since ancient times, the Mediterranean Sea has played an important role in transporting travellers, merchants and their goods throughout the region. This allowed the people of the region to share culinary traditions with one another, leading to many commonly used ingredients. In fact, much of the region's cuisine has been founded around what is called the "Mediterranean triad": wheat (for bread), grapes (for wine), and olives. Because they are the ingredients most frequently associated with the Mediterranean region, let's begin by discussing olives.

Olives are the fruit of the olive tree and are a truly ancient food. This is because olive trees have been cultivated in the Mediterranean for thousands of years. But the trees themselves can be ancient, too. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years, and an olive tree still alive today is estimated to be over 1,500 years old and still producing fruit. Given that people have been growing olive trees for so long in the Mediterranean, it's no surprise that there are thousands of different varieties of olives. Olives are green when unripe and turn purple or black when fully ripe, and both ripe and unripe olives are eaten. Olives are naturally very bitter, so they need to be cured before being eaten. Curing involves soaking the olives in a solution of some kind (frequently brine) to remove the unpalatable bitter flavours. Once cured, olives can be eaten straight, or can be pitted and stuffed with something, such as pimento (a type of red bell pepper), a garlic clove, anchovies or cheese. Other preparations of olives include pickling them with wine vinegar and/or herbs and spices. Olives are ubiquitous in the Mediterranean, and are eaten as a snack or as an accompaniment to a larger meal. Olives are so common and abundant that many bars and restaurants will provide a small dish of olives at every table free of charge.

Olive oil is produced from the juice of olives and has a long history outside of food. It was (and still is) burned in oil lamps and is used in making soap and cosmetics. In fact, the trade in olive oil was a major part of commerce within and beyond the Mediterranean region, stretching at least as far back as the days of the Roman Empire. While the uses of olive oil outside of the kitchen have diminished over time, culinary uses have been and continue to be very important – so much so that olive oil is a major commercial product for some Mediterranean countries. The oil is produced by crushing olives then extracting it by physical or chemical processes. There are several grades of olive oil. The best quality oil is called *extra-virgin olive oil* (EVOO) and is produced only by physical means, usually by pressing or centrifugation at high speeds. However, the difficulty in physically extracting the oil also makes EVOO the most expensive. One of the reasons that EVOO is so highly prized in the culinary world is its flavour profile, which can contribute significantly to the food with which it's made. In fact, EVOO is so highly regarded that there are professional tasting panels that rank the quality of the oil – just like wine. These tasters identify, characterize and score the oil based on the naturally-occurring flavour compounds. This isn't just a matter of taste, either: these flavour compounds give EVOO its characteristic green colour and also have important health benefits. Olive oil is the most prominently shared ingredient in all the cuisines of the Mediterranean. Olive oil has a particularly important place in the cuisines of Spain, Italy and Greece, which are three of the four top consumers of olive oil in the world (the USA being the other). This versatile oil is used both for cooking and as a dressing for salads, fish and meat. Considering just how important olives have been to the history and culture of the Mediterranean, it's no surprise that the ancient Greeks considered olives to be sacred. There will be more about that later in this unit.

The Mediterranean region has fertile soils and abundant sunshine, both of which are key factors in agriculture. So it's not surprising that dishes throughout the Mediterranean feature fresh vegetables, beans and legumes so prominently. Vegetables like eggplant, tomatoes, cucumbers, artichokes, squash, spinach and other lettuces are commonly used. These vegetables can be baked, sautéed, grilled, roasted, pureed and served fresh atop salads. Aromatics like onions and garlic often take centre stage in the region, and their flavour is often allowed to shine through

in a simple dish, unfettered by complicated sauces. Many people believe that the “Mediterranean diet” is associated with health and longevity due to the high nutritional value in the fresh vegetables that dominate their dishes. Not only that, but the sheer variety of produce found in this region means a diner can cover a lot of different nutritional bases in just one day. Legumes like chickpeas, lentils and white kidney beans also grow well here, and are found throughout every Mediterranean nation’s cuisine. In addition, fresh herbs grow well throughout this part of the world and feature prominently in its cuisines. While there is some cultural variation, the use of certain herbs like basil, oregano, thyme, rosemary, marjoram, parsley, mint, garlic, tarragon, fennel, cilantro and saffron is common. Many Mediterranean cooks rely on fresh herbs and aromatics to give their simple dishes intense flavour, which is why such a fertile growing climate is paramount in the region’s cuisines.

Though much of the Mediterranean has been increasingly overfished and polluted, seafood still remains a staple ingredient. Shellfish feature prominently in soups, stews and pastas. Anchovies, both fresh and preserved, are widely eaten in a variety of dishes. Other fish eaten regularly include sole, flounder, grouper, swordfish, eel, squid and octopus. In the cuisine of Greece, a country boasting hundreds of colourful islands surrounded by the bright blue waters of the Mediterranean, fish is abundant. Each island has its own traditions when it comes to the types of fish it consumes. As time has gone on, the farming of land mammals, particularly goats and sheep, has become more prevalent which is reflected in the many meat dishes of the larger countries that make up the region. In addition, goat and sheep’s milk is used to make the rich and varied cheeses and yogurts found throughout the Mediterranean.

Regardless of nation, every culture in the Mediterranean has similar ideas about food and eating. A meal is not simply an act of nourishment in the Mediterranean; it is a special place for interacting with loved ones, for being social, and showing respect and friendship. Food (and especially eating) is one the most important aspects of many Mediterranean cultures, and social occasions are rarely without a table brimming with a delicious feast. The Italians serve their food “family style”, which means everyone at the table serves themselves from a variety of large dishes

spread over the table. This tradition is still observed at many Italian restaurants in the West. Due to the heavy influence food has in this region, many rituals have grown, whatever the religion. A calendar of fasting rites has grown around Catholicism (*Lent*), Judaism (*Shabbat*) and Islam (*Ramadan*), and consumption of some ingredients is banned any time of the year. In addition, each stage of life is given its own culinary traditions. Upon birth, cakes or sweet baked goods are offered, animal sacrifices often accompany marriages and eggs – the symbol of eternity – are eaten at funerals.

While people often tend to lump all the cuisines of the Mediterranean together, there are three main regions of the Mediterranean: the eastern Mediterranean, North Africa and southern European. From these regions, we will discuss the cuisines of the Middle East and Greece (the eastern Mediterranean), Morocco (North Africa) and Italy (southern Europe). If you wish to learn more about the other countries that make up the rich tapestry of Mediterranean cuisine, you can find a wealth of information by searching online. Let's begin this section by discussing the rich cuisine found in the eastern Mediterranean.

## Eastern Mediterranean Cuisine

The cuisine of the eastern Mediterranean encompasses that of the Middle East and Greece. There are many common ingredients and dishes throughout this area, but some regional culinary customs still exist. Let's begin by discussing the rich cuisine of the Middle East.

### The Cuisine of the Middle East

Although many of this region's current borders have only taken shape in the last century, the Middle East is home to some of the oldest civilizations in the world, and their cuisines are firmly rooted in that history. The countries that make up the Middle East can be separated into two different sections: the eastern and south eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea include the countries Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan and Egypt (although Egypt is technically in North Africa, its cuisine is far more similar to Middle Eastern cuisine); and the countries of southeast Asia which include Iraq, Iran and the countries of the Arabian peninsula. However, from a

culinary perspective, we can split both regions up into three distinct traditions, Persian (Iranian) cuisine, Arabic cuisine and the food of Israel, which despite borrowing from one another over the centuries have many distinct characteristics. All the countries that make up the Middle East are hot and dry with rugged terrain, much of it desert. However, there are large, famous rivers here too like the Nile, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which have allowed people to successfully cultivate the land and survive for thousands of years. In fact, the region that encompasses the Mediterranean Sea and the Nile, Tigris and Euphrates river deltas is known as the “Fertile Crescent”, and considered the “cradle of civilization”, a region that saw the development of many of the earliest human civilizations.

Given its central location between Asia, Africa and Europe, you can just imagine the sheer quantity of merchants from a variety of cultures that would have travelled through the Middle East, bringing with them ingredients and culinary traditions to share. At the time, the foundation of Middle Eastern cuisine was that of the indigenous Bedouin tribes. This group of nomad peoples survived predominantly on meat from sheep (lamb and mutton), dates and yogurt made from sheep’s milk. The early civilizations that settled in the region cultivated the land with fruits, vegetables, beans, herbs and nuts. Once the constant stream of spice caravans travelling back and forth to India began, Middle Easterners became rich from the spice trade and developed their own unique ways of using spices like ginger, cinnamon, turmeric, cumin, cardamom and cloves. As time went on, New World foods began to be integrated into Middle Eastern cuisine, and foods like tomatoes, sweet peppers and squash became vital ingredients in this region’s cuisines.

Religion has played a huge role in the development of Middle Eastern cuisine. With the exception of the Jewish state of Israel, Islam is the dominant religion in this part of the world. Muslim dietary laws exclude the consumption of pork and alcohol, so both are fairly scarce in traditional Middle Eastern cuisine. The major sources of protein are primarily lamb and legumes like chickpeas. Muslims adhere to a strict code of hospitality, and cooking and eating are very social and mark all important events like births, weddings and festivals. In Israel, Jewish dietary restrictions (called *kashrut*, “kah-shroot”) also exist, and following this code is called “keeping kosher”.



According to these laws, the consumption of blood is forbidden, so kosher butchers must slaughter animals and drain the blood from the meat prior to preparing it. Animals that “chew the cud” (called ruminants) like cattle, goats and sheep and also have cloven hooves are permitted on the basis that they cannot hold prey (and thus eat blood). But all others, including hogs, rabbits, horses and others are forbidden. The only fish that are considered acceptable are those with fins or scales, eliminating shellfish, shark, eel and squid from Jewish diets. Not every Jewish person follows the *kashrut*, but forbidden dishes are nonetheless not easily found in the cuisine of Israel.

### **Staples of Middle Eastern Cuisine**

One of the most important and versatile staples in the Middle Eastern diet is bread (remember it's part of the Mediterranean triad). A meal without some form of bread would be unthinkable, and it serves not only as a food, but also as a utensil and a napkin. Flat wheat loaves of different thicknesses are of primary importance and are either baked in clay ovens or on clay griddles. One of these breads has made its way into western diners' hearts: pita bread. No doubt you've heard of pita bread, either having it as a convenient substitute for sandwich bread or as a handy and quick pizza crust. Pitas are popular throughout the Mediterranean and we see them throughout the cuisines of Greece, North Africa, Iran, Armenia, Turkey and even parts of the Indian Subcontinent. When pitas bake, steam causes the dough to puff up and separate into two sides, creating a pocket that can be split open and filled with ingredients. Another popular bread product is known as *lavash* (“lah-vash”), a flatbread popular in Iran, Iraq and Turkey. Similar to the way naan is made in the Indian tandoori oven, lavash is made by rolling dough flat and placing it against the walls of a hot clay oven. When soft, lavash can be used as a wrap for sandwiches and other fillings but it often dries out quickly, making it hard and brittle. The bread is stored this way and sprinkled with water to soften it when it's ready to be eaten. Another popular type of bread is called *simit*, a chewy sesame seed covered bread ring that is either served plain or at breakfast with tea, jam or cheese.

Despite the religious restrictions placed on meat eating in the Middle East, non-restricted meats enjoy heavy popularity. Lamb and chicken are the most favoured meats in this area of the world. The most popular method of preparing meat is the

*kebab* ("kah-bahb"), which is meat cooked over an open flame. The kebab has become a major export of the Middle East and has spread in popularity around the Mediterranean and the world. The most common kebabs are cubed cuts of meat on skewers, known as *shish* kebab and *kofta* ("koff-tah") kebab, which is made from grilled meat shaped around the skewer and grilled. Kebabs are usually served with some type of bread and salad. You may have seen a large piece of meat rotating on a vertical spit in your local Middle Eastern restaurant. This is called *shawarma* ("shah-war-mah"), a type of kebab whose roots lie in the dish called *döner* ("doh-ner") kebab, which is a Turkish invention. Shawarma may be roasted for hours (or even a day), and is often served by shaving off pieces of the roasted meat and wrapping them in flatbread with *tabbouleh* (a salad made with couscous, "tah-boo-lee"), tomato, cucumber and the popular spreads made of sesame seeds (called *tahini*, "tah-hee-nee") and chickpeas (*hummus*, which is discussed below, "hum-us"). Kebabs and shawarma are among the most popular street foods in the Middle East and other parts of the Mediterranean.

The Fertile Crescent is the crescent-shaped area stretching from the Nile valley and delta, through the lands on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and continuing through the area surrounding the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Because the areas of the Fertile Crescent have a relatively large amount of water in what is an otherwise arid climate, vegetables, beans and pulses grow with great success. This has led to dishes throughout the Middle East that are rich with these freshly grown ingredients. Stuffed vegetables, called *dolma* ("dole-mah"), are common dishes in the Middle East and are often grape leaves, chard or cabbage stuffed with rice, ground meat, nuts and spices and stewed in oil and tomatoes. Other vegetables commonly stuffed are squash, onions, peppers and eggplant. Eggplant is such a popular and versatile vegetable it is sometimes called "the potato of the Middle East". To make one of the most widely enjoyed eggplant dishes, *baba ghanoush* ("bah-bah gah-noosh"), the dark purple vegetable is sliced, fried and dressed with yogurt and garlic before being mashed and mixed with tahini, lemon juice and cumin. This tasty dish is often eaten as a dip with pita bread or is added to other dishes. Another very popular dip that has found its way into western kitchens is the chickpea-based *hummus*. In fact, "hummus" is the Arabic word for

“chickpeas”. Hummus is made by mashing chickpeas and blending them with tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, salt and garlic. Hummus is considered a very ancient food and is very nutritious; it is high in iron and vitamin C with significant amounts of B vitamins and folate. In addition, chickpeas are a great source of protein and fibre and is eaten extensively by vegetarians and vegans the world over. Chickpeas are also used to make another popular Middle Eastern street food: falafel. These little balls are deep-fried mixtures of ground chickpeas, herbs and spices. It is most often served wrapped in a pita with tahini or hummus, salad and pickled vegetables. Falafel is considered a national dish of Egypt, Palestine and Israel.

### **A Day in the Life**

All throughout the Middle East, it's common to eat three meals daily. Breakfast is either fresh or reconstituted bread (like the lavash described above) with cheese, yogurt, fresh fruits and vegetables, honey, jams, nuts and *belila* (“beh-lee-lah”), a traditional Egyptian dish of sweetened cooked grains. Lunch is often light, including dishes like falafel or shawarma, eaten sandwich style wrapped in pita bread. Omelettes are also popular at lunchtime. Thick, sweet Turkish coffee flavoured with cardamom seeds is drunk throughout the day, with the exception of Iran, where tea is the preferred beverage. As with many cultures around the world, supper is the most important meal of the day. A simple dinner might be a one-dish meal like a soup, stew or stuffed vegetables. Bread, yogurt, olives and pickled vegetables are generally always served, no matter what the main dish. In some parts of the Middle East, cheese might serve in the place of yogurt. If a family is wealthy, meat would be included in the entrée several times a week. When a family sits down to eat, it's common for diners to take food from a common plate set in the middle of the table. Much like in India, utensils are rarely used, and food is scooped up with the hands and pieces of flatbread like pita. As in India, eating is restricted to the right hand. If you find yourself dining on Middle Eastern food and happen to be left-handed, you're going to have to adapt quickly to using your right hand. Use your left hand only to drink from your glass. Hospitality is of utmost importance in this part of the world, and there is strong emphasis on enjoying meals with family and friends. Ramadan is the religious holiday in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sundown for a month. After sunsets, grand banquets are held, cafes and pastry

shops are open at night and a general party atmosphere abounds. In fact, sweet pastries and desserts are plentiful in Middle Eastern cuisine, regardless of the occasion. *Filo* dough, paper-thin sheets of unleavened dough, is used for making these delicate pastries, and they are often layered with ground up nuts and honey, as in the wonderful dessert *baklava*. Baklava has become quite a popular dish throughout the world, and if you happen to spot some in your local bakery, I recommend you buy at least two.

## **Greek Cuisine**

Greek cuisine is founded on principles of freshness and hearty simplicity. Did you know that the cuisine of Greece is some 4,000 years old? In fact, it's believed that the first ever cookbook was written in 320 BC by Archestratus, an ancient Greek poet. Like the rest of the Mediterranean, olive oil, fresh vegetables, grains and bread, spices and cheeses abound in Greek cuisine. Like the Middle East, sweet desserts like baklava are common as well as kebab-like dishes, known as *souvlaki* ("soo-vlah-kee") or *gyro* ("yee-roh"), which are served wrapped in or alongside flatbreads like pita. The Greek climate and terrain is far better suited to goat and sheep farming than it is to raising cows, so beef dishes are fairly uncommon. Fish dishes are especially prevalent in Greece, which has the 11<sup>th</sup> longest coastline in the world and boasts around 1,400 islands. These islands include Crete, Santorini and Mykonos to name a few, which all have their own fish dishes based on what's abundant around the islands. Frequently used spices include oregano, mint, dill, bay, basil, thyme and fennel. Many of the dishes found in this region have changed little over the centuries, and key ingredients and staples still include those that have been used since ancient times.

## **Greek Staples – A History of Worship**

Two important staples that make up the backbone of Greek cuisine, olives and bread, have not changed since ancient times. These two foods were considered sacred and even had their own designated gods. Olives in particular are important in today's Greek cuisine, and Greece is the world's third largest olive producer. Olives feature prominently in Greek mythology, and the olive was considered sacred to Athena (the goddess of wisdom and courage, among other things). Olive oil is also

considered sacred, and was used for the anointing of kings and athletes in ancient Greece. Today, olive oil is still used in many religious ceremonies and the olive is considered a symbol of peace, wisdom and purity. Greek olive oil comes in dozens of varieties. Very few dishes in Greek cuisine do not feature olive oil. There is actually an entire category, called *lathera* ("lah-thair-ah"), for vegetable dishes cooked in an olive oil sauce with tomato and garlic. As in other Mediterranean countries, olives also feature prominently in Greek cuisine and are often served with every meal. Bread, crucial to the Greek diet, has changed little since ancient times. Greek breads were worshipped in the form of Demeter, the goddess of the earth and family. Flatbreads like pita and breads infused with olives and olive oil are readily available throughout Greece, and special breads are made for religious holidays, marriages and births. Another important ingredient that has been considered sacred since the days of ancient Greece is honey. Honey was not only eaten, it was also given as an offering to the gods, and used as a beauty agent and as a medicine.

Milk products like cheese and yogurt are also important in Greek cuisine. These products, which are mostly made from sheep's milk, feature prominently in the Greek diet. The varieties of cheese are plentiful, from salty *feta* ("feh-tah"), the fresh cheese *myzithra* (mih-zith-rah") and the hard yellow table cheese *kasseri* ("kuh-sair-ee"). Feta cheese may be the most well-known Greek cheese, where it is used in a variety of dishes, including the classic Greek salad (chunks of tomatoes, cucumbers, onion, olives and feta). Yogurt, popular throughout the Mediterranean, is used frequently in Greek cuisine. Greek yogurt (also known as strained yogurt) is very thick and sour, and low in fat and high in protein, and has become quite popular in the west. Yogurt is used as the base for the popular dip *tzatziki* ("dzad-zee-kee"), which is made with yogurt, cucumbers, garlic, olive oil and salt. It is always served cold as an accompaniment to any meal, or with pita as an appetizer. Tzatziki has many counterparts in the rest of the Mediterranean, and is also popular in Turkey, though it is slightly more liquid than Greek tzatziki.

### **A Day in the Life**

Traditionally, Greeks eat an early breakfast (between 6 and 8 a.m.), which might include semi-sweet cookies called *paximathia* (similar to the Italian *biscotti*, "pax-ee-mah-thee-ah"), dipped into a cup of Greek coffee (a variation of Turkish coffee) or mint tea. The main meal of the day is lunch, which is often eaten between 2 and 2:30 p.m. This meal usually begins with *mezzes* ("mezz-uh"), the name for a selection of small dishes, which can be hot, cold, spicy or savoury. The main course is often a thick soup or hearty stew served with rustic bread and a salad. As time has gone on, and Greece has become more urbanized, supper has slowly become the main meal of the day. Dining out is very common in urban areas, and restaurants called *taverna* ("tah-verr-nah") and *estiatorio* ("ess-tee-ah-toh-ree-oh"), in Greece will be bustling well into the night. Urban Greeks eat late, usually never before 9:30 and often around 10:30 p.m. Sweet desserts are always served, no matter which meal is being eaten. In the past, before women became a valuable part of the work force, a woman's skill was determined by her proficiency at making sweets. Greek desserts are traditionally served on special plates and ornate trays with small spoons for preserved fruits in syrup. The wide variety of sweets offered in Greek cuisine include cakes, cookies, fried dough covered in honey and stuffed filo dough pastries. The Greeks sure know how to end a meal.

## **North Africa – Moroccan Cuisine**

The country of Morocco is a great representative for North African cuisine. It is situated in North Africa, right at the mouth of the Mediterranean, giving it both Mediterranean and Atlantic coastlines and a rugged mountainous interior. The country is actually officially known as the Kingdom of Morocco, as it is a constitutional monarchy, much like Canada and the United Kingdom. Morocco's population of 32 million people enjoys a varied cuisine rich in cultural diversity thanks to merchants, invaders and immigrants moving through the region for thousands of years. Through the different groups that moved through the region, Moroccan cuisine gained spices like saffron, cinnamon, cloves, ginger and nutmeg. Moroccan chefs, like others in North Africa, are known for their abundant use of spices. A Tunisian hot chilli sauce called *harissa* ("hah-riss-ah") is popular throughout all of North Africa, especially Morocco. This fiery spice mixture is made using *piri piri*

("peer-ee peer-ee"), serrano and other hot chili peppers, plus other ingredients like garlic, coriander, caraway and cumin. Harissa is often added to a variety of stews, sauces and even as a breakfast spread. That's one way to wake yourself up in the morning. Much of the country's livestock is free range, resulting in fresh and flavourful meat. Dried fruits like dates, raisins and apricots also often make appearances in Moroccan cooking. Traders also brought wheat to North Africa, which led to the creation of *couscous* ("koos-koos"), a dish made of tiny granules of durum wheat. Couscous is popular throughout the Mediterranean, but is considered one of Morocco's national dishes and a staple of the region. Couscous is consumed like one might use rice, pasta or noodles, as a staple accompaniment for a delicious sauce filled with meat (chicken is the most popular meat in Morocco) and/or vegetables or in a soup or stew. Couscous is also used to make the popular Middle Eastern dish *tabbouleh*, a salad made of couscous (or, traditionally, bulgur), tomatoes, cucumbers, parsley, mint, onion and garlic and dressed with olive oil and lemon juice.

There is an old Moroccan proverb that states, "Here, you eat with your eyes", and colour plays a huge role in the country's cuisine. The eggplant's rich purple, pure white garlic and vibrant saffron are just a few regularly used ingredients that infuse dishes with a burst of colour. One of the national dishes of Morocco, a popular slow-cooked stew-like meal called *tagine* ("tah-geen"), is one such colourful dish. Tagine is named for the earthenware vessel in which it is cooked. Shallower than a Dutch oven, the tagine has a distinctive conical lid that streamlines the cooking process. As steam rises during cooking over hot coals, the conical lid traps the steam, which then condenses in the top of the lid and drips back into the stew. This not only allows the flavours to concentrate, this process actually uses much less water than cooking in a traditional vessel would. When the lid of the tagine is removed, the hearty and aromatic stew within can be served right from the base. Typically, a tagine consists of meat or fish and vegetables or fruit. These stews are served with bread, which is dipped into the stew, and are often featured during both lunch and supper. Tagine is one of the most recognizable North African dishes, and has experienced popularity all over the world.

## A Day in the Life

Breakfast in Morocco is eaten early and usually consists of bread or pastries with olive oil, honey or jam with sugary mint green tea. Sometimes Moroccans eat a French-style breakfast of a croissant with the milky coffee called *café au lait* (in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Morocco was a French protectorate). A second meal is occasionally eaten around 10 or 11 a.m., and will usually consist of a traditional soup made of tomatoes, chickpeas, lentils, eggs, herbs and spices called *harira* ("hah-ree-rah") as well as fresh bread. Lunch is traditionally the biggest meal of the day (except during the Islamic religious holiday Ramadan, in which Muslims fast from sunup to sundown). It often takes place between 2 and 3 p.m., which is late by Western standards, and is generally followed by a nap. Wouldn't it be great if you got to take a nap after your lunch? This meal often consists of couscous, the traditional main course, cooked with vegetables, nuts and spices and served alongside a meat dish. Tagine is also popular at lunch. Moroccans, like diners in the Middle East and parts of Asia, eat with their hands, using pieces of bread as utensils. Supper is also eaten late by Western standards. This meal is usually a lighter version of lunch, with a dish like harira or tangine eaten with bread. Like most cultures that live in the Mediterranean, Moroccans love sugar and sweets. All drinks are heavily sweetened, from popular mint green tea to fresh juices and thick coffees. Desserts, which are served during the meal rather than after, are no exception. The very sweet desserts of Morocco include sugar laden pastries like *kaab el ghzal* ("cab-el-gah-zahl"), a rich pastry stuffed with almond paste, and *halwa shebakia* ("hal-vah-shuh-bah-kee-ah") a pretzel shaped deep fried dough dipped in honey and sprinkled with sesame seeds. Cookies are popular during Ramadan and coconut fudge cakes are also popular. Each meal in Morocco will often end with fresh fruit and tea.

## Southern European Cuisine

The Mediterranean region of southern Europe includes Spain, southern France and Italy. All three of these countries have an incredibly rich and varied history that makes up their traditional cuisine. In fact, there could be a whole separate 4-H project dedicated only to the cuisines of these three countries. Because of this, we are only going to focus on the food found in Italy. We will touch lightly on Spanish



cuisine in the following unit on the cuisine of Latin America, but if you'd like to learn more about Spanish and French cuisine, you can find a wealth of information online or at your local library.

## **Italian Cuisine**

The cuisine of Italy, perhaps more than any other in the Mediterranean, is recognizable and eaten throughout the world. Italians have great reverence for quality foods, fresh ingredients and the act of eating itself. This boot-shaped peninsula has a long and rugged Mediterranean coastline, fertile valleys and the highest mountains in Europe. Italy is also home to two large islands with their own unique culinary traditions, Sicily and Sardinia. Poverty has played a strong hand in shaping the cuisine of Italy, as it has in many other Mediterranean countries. Until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, peasants didn't own their own land and suffered famines regularly due to agricultural disasters, population pressures, war and plague. Italian food emerged from the tradition of *cocina povera* ("poor cuisine", pronounced "koh-chee-nah-pro-verr-ah"), which draws on humble seasonal ingredients to create rich, but simple, flavours. Many dishes in Italy have only four to eight ingredients and chefs rely on the freshness and quality of ingredients rather than complicated preparation. In Italy, the ingredients are allowed to shine.

## **Italian Staples**

How does one start a paragraph about Italian staples? With pasta, of course! I'm sure when you think of Italian food one of the first things to come to mind is pasta. Italy's pasta tradition dates back to at least 1154, but only relatively recently has pasta become such a component of a main meal. Traditionally, pasta was eaten as a small simple item, often plain and with the hands. The first written record of tomato sauce being eaten with pasta is in a 1790 cookbook. Prior to the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, pasta was almost always prepared fresh and not dried. Dried pasta became popular due to its easy storage. It was often brought on long, exploratory sea journeys to the New World, which helps explain its quick spread throughout the world's cuisines. Given this rich history, it's no wonder that Italy has such an incredibly diverse offering of pastas. Most pasta is made from unleavened dough and formed into sheets or cut into shapes, then cooked and served either plain,

drizzled with oil, or with a sauce and other ingredients. Some pasta is made with other grains and eggs are sometimes used instead of water. Each pasta shape has its own special purpose. The long, thin strands like spaghetti or linguini are ideal for delicate sauces like *pesto* (a sauce made of garlic, basil, pine nuts, olive oil and parmesan cheese, "pest-oh") or simply drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil. The thicker and sometimes concave or twisted pastas like *fusilli* (spiral, "few-see-lee") or *farfalle* (bowtie or butterfly, "far-fah-lay") are great for thicker sauces like tomato sauce (called *marinara*, "mer-in-era", or *Neapolitan*, "nee-ah-pahl-it-un" sauce), so that they can stand up to the bold sauces. In addition, chunkier sauces cling to the holes and grooves of these types of pasta, making it a much better vessel for the sauce. Another popular type of pasta (particularly in the north) is the filled varieties, like *tortellini* ("tort-uh-lee-nee") and *ravioli* ("rah-vee-oh-lee"), which are little pockets of pasta dough stuffed with delicious mixtures of cheese and meat and/or vegetables.

What pasta dish would be complete without a rich grated Italian cheese to top it? The Italians, like many Mediterranean people, have a long history of making delicious cheeses. In fact, there are more than 450 types of cheese. Of these, 34 have actually been granted protected status by the European Commission, which prohibits other cheese makers of using the names under protection if they aren't made in the region in which they have traditionally been made. A good example of this is *Parmigiano-Reggiano* (what we call "Parmesan", pronounced "par-mah-gee-ah-no-reh-gee-ah-no"), which comes from only five provinces in Italy. Parmigiano-Reggiano is touted as the king of Italy's cheeses, and nothing compares to the complex taste of this cheese freshly grated on a bowl of pasta with rich tomato sauce. In fact, the wonderfully savoury flavour of Parmigiano-Reggiano is a great example of the umami flavour we discussed in Unit 3. Remember how we said that foods with a lot of umami flavour have high levels of glutamate? Parmigiano-Reggiano has the second-highest glutamate content of any naturally produced food (second only to a French cheese called *Roquefort*, "rock-fort"). Those ready-made canisters of Parmesan we buy on the shelf at grocery stores don't hold a candle to the fresh stuff right off the block! We all know about *mozzarella* ("mott-zah-rell-ah"), arguably the Italian cheese that's had the most success outside of Italy. The most popular topping for pizza, mozzarella is used in a variety of ways in Italian cooking. Traditionally made from the milk of the water

buffalo, most fresh mozzarella is made from cow's milk. The cheese curds are formed into balls and stored in water or brine to maintain their white colour and freshness. Fresh mozzarella has a chewy texture and this light subtle cheese is featured in the *caprese* ("cah-pray-zee") salad and on *margherita* ("mar-gah-ree-tah") style pizzas (both discussed later in this unit). The common mozzarella we're used to in North America is the mass-produced block type that is grated onto pizzas or pasta dishes. This is dried and harder than fresh mozzarella.

There are many more Italian cheeses to sing the praises of, though, like *Provolone* ("pro-vuh-lone"), *Taleggio* ("tah-ledge-ee-oh") and particularly *Gorgonzola* ("gore-gun-zoh-lah"), the creamy blue cheese that gets its distinctive flavour from blue mould veins that are allowed to develop within the creamy curds. *Asiago* ("ah-see-ah-go") has been a favourite cheese in Venice for centuries. Originally made from sheep's milk, but now made from cow's milk, Asiago tastes like an interesting cross between Parmesan and cheddar and is used in dishes that require a creamy, melting cheese. More aged Asiagos have a nutty taste and can be grated onto dishes or eaten with both fresh and dried fruits. A popular Italian cheese we see regularly in western food is not actually a cheese at all, but a bi-product of the cheese making process. *Ricotta* ("rick-aw-tah"), the very smooth and soft white cheese we eat in lasagna and manicotti, is made from the whey from other cheeses and combined and recooked to make ricotta. Finally (but not really finally as there are so many Italian cheeses), we have *mascarpone* ("mass-kar-pone"), the quintessential dessert cheese. This cow's milk cheese has a spreadable texture similar to cream cheese. It's most popular usage is in the well-known Italian dessert called *tiramisu* ("tee-rah-mee-soo"). Tiramisu (which means "pick me up" in Italian) is made from coffee soaked ladyfinger cookies layered with a creamy filling made from whipped egg yolks and mascarpone. With the huge variety of Italian cheeses, we could dedicate a whole 4-H project to just this topic. There truly is a cheese for every dish in Italian cuisine.

Italy, more than any other European country, truly adopted the New World ingredients brought over from Latin America in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These included potatoes, corn and, of course, tomatoes. It's hard to imagine Italian food today without the tomato. Tomatoes abound in Italian cooking, from rich and rustic

tomato sauces to the classic caprese salad made from fresh raw tomatoes, fresh mozzarella and fresh basil leaves all drizzled with extra-virgin olive oil. Tomatoes in Italy are allowed to ripen on the vine before sale, which makes them especially flavourful. Not surprisingly, they are often used raw in many Italian dishes. Potatoes are used to make the delicious dumplings called *gnocchi* ("nyo-kee"), often eaten as an appetizer instead of soups or pasta. Corn is the main ingredient in *polenta* ("poh-lenn-tah"), a dish made from finely ground cornmeal boiled in water or stock. Polenta, a traditional peasant food, is used as a starchy companion to other ingredients like meat and vegetables. These are hardly the only vegetables that feature prominently in Italian cooking. Popular Italian vegetables include eggplant, zucchini, peppers, spinach and other leafy greens.

### **Italian Regionalism**

The country we now know as Italy did not unite until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Up until that time, it was comprised of a series of city-states that had their own cultural identities. For this reason each area of Italy has its own specialties based on its geography, climate and economics. Let's discuss the better-known regions and their traditional dishes.

### **Lombardy and Veneto**

These two regions are Italy's highest yielding agricultural areas, with rolling fields of olive and lemon trees. The capital of Lombardy is the wealthy city of Milan, and this region is known as the Italian "white belt" due to its love of rice, butter, cheese and cream. It is home to the classic rice dish called *risotto* ("riz-oh-toh"). The special type of rice used for risotto is cooked with copious amounts of butter, wine and broth over time, making it exceedingly creamy. Risotto is the most common way of cooking rice in Italy. The capital city of Veneto is the island city of Venice, which is linked by a network of canals and bridges. The foods of this region prominently feature fish, and polenta is the preferred staple with pasta and rice following close behind. This region has a strong pastry tradition and is where the rich dessert tiramisu was first created.

### **Tuscany**

Tuscany is well known for its scenic landscapes, as well as being the birthplace of the Italian Renaissance, a time of great advances in science and art. We all know the

names of great artists like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, who both lived in this region in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The cuisine of Tuscany is built on simplicity, and rightly so, since the fertile landscape produces such fresh and delicious ingredients, it would be a shame to overwhelm them in any way. It is thought that Tuscany produces some of the world's best olive oils, and is known for its crisp and flavourful spinach and delicious legumes and beans. Tuscany is famous for a soup of peasant origins, *ribollita* ("rib-oh-lee-tah"). The name literally means, "reboiled", as it was often made of leftover *minestrone* soup (a vegetable, bean and pasta soup with a tomato base) and stale bread. Made with inexpensive vegetables, this soup was well suited to peasants returning from a day of hard manual labour in the fields that belonged to their feudal lords.

### **Campania**

Due to heavy emigration of Italians from this region to America, much of our understanding of Italian food comes from this region. Campania's capital city is Naples, considered one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. With that kind of history, it's no wonder it has such incredible culinary traditions. In Campania, what we think of as typical Italian foods and dishes like tomatoes, spaghetti, mozzarella and of course pizza are at their best. Although pizza is eaten all over Italy, it is still considered a *Neapolitan* ("from Naples") dish. Neapolitan pizza is quite different from the pizzas you get from Domino's or find frozen in the grocery store. Italian pizza has a thin crust, simple and light toppings, and is traditionally baked in a wood-fired brick oven. The high temperatures give the crust a fantastic crunchy texture outside and a chewy texture inside. Nothing quite compares to perfectly prepared brick oven pizza. The most common varieties of pizza in this region are *pizza margherita*, which has a simple tomato, olive oil, basil and fresh mozzarella topping, and *pizza marinara*, which is topped with a tomato sauce flavoured with garlic and oregano but no cheese. While Italians like their pizza toppings light, they do enjoy a variety of flavours, and toppings can include anchovies, bacon, mushrooms, olives, peppers and even seafood.

### **Emilia-Romagna**

This region is well known for being the place where some of Italy's richest cuisine comes from. Cheese, butter, cream and pork products are all important in this part of Italy. The provinces of Parma and Reggio Emilia are where Parmesan cheese got its name, and it is still made according to tradition there. This region is also very famous for its pork-based meat products like *prosciutto* ("pro-shoo-toh"), a well-known dry-cured ham that is thinly sliced and added to a variety of dishes for its rich, salty flavour; *pancetta* ("pan-cheh-tah"), a salt cured pork belly meat used similarly to bacon; *mortadella* ("more-tah-dell-ah"), an Italian sausage flavoured with spices from the region of *Bologna* (that is actually the precursor to the bologna – or baloney – we eat in sandwiches); and other very popular Italian sausages. Filled pastas are very popular in the Emilia-Romagna region and there is an enormous range of offerings, from the well-known tortellini and ravioli to the lesser known *agnolini* ("ah-noh-lee-nee"), *cappelletti* ("cah-pah-leh-tee"), *cappelacci* ("cap-ah-latch-ee") and *balanzoni* ("bah-lan-zoh-nee").

### **Sicily and Sardinia**

The two islands that lie off the coast of Italy in the Mediterranean Sea, Sicily and Sardinia, have some of Italy's most interesting cuisine, having been influenced for centuries by a multitude of cultures from Greek and Roman to Arab and Spanish. Sicilian cuisine, in particular, draws from rich Arab roots. The Arabs planted citrus trees, rice and sugar cane on the island. They also introduced couscous, which features prominently in many fish dishes. In addition, the Arabs also brought along their love of all things sweet and Sicily is known for its delicious desserts. One dessert in particular has experienced popularity outside of Sicily, the deep fried pastry tubes filled with ricotta cheese, sugar and chocolate called *cannoli* ("cah-noh-lee"). Another popular Sicilian dessert export is *granita* ("grah-nee-tah"), a semi-frozen dessert similar to sorbet but with a coarser texture. Granita, made from sugar and water, is served flavoured with ingredients that grow on the island like almonds, oranges, mint or strawberries. It's no surprise that Sicilian cuisine is rich with fish dishes. Fish like tuna and swordfish are most popular and are plentiful in the waters off the island's coastline. Sardinian cuisine, in contrast, has a more pastoral culinary tradition. Bread, lamb, cheese and vegetables are eaten here far more often than

fish. Sardinians are known for producing excellent sheep-milk cheeses like ricotta and *pecorino* ("peh-koh-ree-noh") a hard cheese served on pasta or as a rich finish to a meal.

### **A Day in the Life**

In Italy, breakfast (known as *colazione*, "koh-lah-zee-oh-nay") is light and often taken at bars and cafes. The strong Italian coffees known as espresso and cappuccino almost always accompany breakfast, which is served continental style, similar to that of France, Greece and Spain. This style of breakfast consists of bread or rolls served with butter or jam and pastries. It is becoming more common for Italians to also enjoy fresh fruit and yogurt in the morning. Lunch is often eaten between noon and 2 p.m. and was traditionally the main meal of Italy, eaten with family at home. Meals in Italy are thought of more as an opportunity to spend quality time with family and friends than to fuel oneself for the day. These meals were often quite lengthy and usually consisted of three or four courses. On special holiday occasions, Italian meals can go on for hours as the diners enjoy each other's company and the many delicious courses. The first course is called *antipasto* ("an-tee-past-oh") and it means literally, before the meal. This course consists of small dishes, served either hot or cold. Traditional antipasti (plural of antipasto) that can be ordered at many Italian restaurants consist of a plate full of thinly sliced cured meats like prosciutto, olives, anchovies, artichoke hearts and a variety of cheeses like provolone and mozzarella. In southern Italy, minestrone soup might be served during this course instead. Following antipasto is the course known as *primo* ("first course", pronounced "pree-moh"), which will usually feature a hot dish like pasta (which was traditionally eaten as a first course), risotto or gnocchi. The next course is called, not surprisingly, *secondo* ("second course", pronounced "sek-on-doh") and is considered the main dish. This course will usually consist of a meat or fish dish, which could be veal, pork, chicken or locally caught fish. This course will usually be served with *contorno* ("side dish", pronounced "con-tore-noh"), which may be a salad or vegetables drizzled in olive oil. The next course is called *formaggio* ("cheese", pronounced "for-mah-gee-oh") and is considered the first dessert. The formaggio course is generally a selection of local cheeses and fresh fruit. Finally, the last course is called *dolce* ("sweet", pronounced "dole-chay") and is the dessert course that consists of cakes like tiramisu and cookies

like *biscotti* ("biz-cot-ee"), a twice baked biscuit that is often dipped in the second most important part of the dessert tradition, a strong cup of cappuccino or espresso. Italians certainly know how to enjoy their delicious food. You can imagine after such a big lunch, Italians wouldn't be that interested in doing it all over again for supper. Most Italians have a lighter supper later at night. This might consist of a salad, soup or leftovers from lunch.



## Unit 5: The Cuisine of Latin America

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Although the regions of Latin America and the Caribbean were historically populated by native peoples, European exploration and colonization of the New World predominantly by Spain and Portugal brought with it much European culinary influence. So, while Latin American cooking shares elements with Spanish cuisine, it has taken on a distinct regional identity. You've likely heard of tacos, burritos and guacamole, right? Well, that's just the tip of the iceberg in Latin American cooking. The diversity of Latin American cuisine reflects the geographical diversity of the region. From mainland Mexico, south through central America, into the vast expanse of South America, and east to encompass the entire Caribbean region, this area has great diversity of places, people and climates. Despite this diversity, this region is united by European (predominantly Spanish) colonization that took place hundreds of years ago, which has imparted cohesion to the foundation laid by native Latin American culinary traditions. These basic ingredients include maize (corn), beans and salsas made from tomatoes and peppers. Rice, among many other foods, brought by Spanish conquistadors, has also become a large staple in much of Latin America. Herbs and spices most commonly used are chili pepper, cilantro and *epazote* (ep-ah-zoh-tay"), a native herb that has an earthy and astringent taste. Aromatics are, as always, important in Latin American cuisine, particularly garlic and onions. However, despite many similarities in cooking techniques and ingredients, the Latin American region is incredibly large and diverse, so we'll discuss each region's culinary traditions individually.

### The Cuisines of Central America and Mexico

This large and varied region can be separated into three geographic zones: the fertile Pacific, where much fruit and sugar is grown; the central highlands, where cattle is raised and coffee is widely grown; and the forested area of the northeast, which is not well suited to agriculture. While the staples of rice, beans and corn are prevalent in all of these regions, each has its own distinct regional dishes. For instance, Nicaraguans like a corn-based tamale, which is a steamed cornhusk stuffed with meat and vegetables, called a *nacatamal* (nah-cah-tah-mahl). El Salvadorians

enjoy their *pupusas* (poo-poo-saz), which are stuffed corn tortillas. *Casamiento* (cah-sah-mee-en-toe) is a popular dish consisting of a mixture of rice and beans that is eaten with regularity. The cuisines along the tropical coasts (Panama, Nicaragua, Belize and Honduras) all share similar ingredients with their Caribbean neighbours, like coconut, plantains, bananas and cassava, which is a woody shrub that grows throughout most of Latin America. Cassava has a starchy root that can be eaten like potato (in chunks or mashed) and also produces tapioca (of pudding fame). Countries like Guatemala, which has the largest Native American population, draw more of their dishes from ancient Mayan tradition, and subsist on foods much like their ancestors. This cuisine includes dishes made with corn, beans, squash and some turkey, and uses techniques passed down for many centuries.

Mexico is a large country with incredibly varied terrain, so it's no surprise that its cuisine is just as diverse and varied. About a third of the size of the United States, Mexico boasts high mountains, deserts, forests, coastal plains and plateaus, as well as a deep history of food. When the Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1519, they found that the Aztecs had already created a strong culinary tradition that drew from ingredients never before seen by Europeans. Ingredients like corn, chilies, beans, tomatoes, avocados, squash and chocolate were all new to Europeans. In fact, many of the corn-based dishes we enjoy today can be attributed to the Aztecs. Exotic fruits, like pineapples and papayas, found exclusively in the region, and of course chocolate, appealed to the Spanish conquistadors. Over the three centuries following the Spanish domination over the Aztecs, the culinary traditions of the Old World began to mix with those of the New World and an entirely new cuisine emerged, which today is the rich tapestry of Mexican cuisine. Spices and herbs we now associate with this cuisine, such as cinnamon, black pepper, thyme and bay leaf were actually brought by the Spanish and incorporated into the existing traditions. The Spanish also introduced wheat, onions and meat, which had previously been a luxury in pre-Columbian Mexico, like cattle, chickens and pigs.

Regionalism is just as much a part of Mexican cuisine as it is a part of Central American cuisine. Central Mexico features a legacy of pastries influenced by the French who were present in that area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Southern Mexico,

particularly the Oaxaca region, is famous for its incredible variety of dried chilies, from which the region's delicious moles (chili and nut-thickened sauces) are made. The western states produce the dishes most commonly associated with Mexican cuisine like enchiladas, tacos and *pozole* (a delicious soup made from hominy corn filled with a variety of ingredients, pronounced "poh-zoh-lay"). As you might imagine, the coastal areas are known for incorporating fish into many dishes. The food found in the Gulf States is particularly interesting, as it served as the main east coast port of Mexico and was heavily influenced by Spanish culture. Olive oil is widely used in this region, as well as green olives added to many dishes. In addition, there is a strong Caribbean/African influence due to the legacy of African slaves who were brought by the Spanish to work on sugar plantations. Not surprisingly, coconuts and plantains are often found in many of the regional dishes here.

### **A Day in the Life**

Central Americans start their day with an early breakfast that always consists of strong coffee, beans and tortillas. Eggs and cheese will sometimes be included, though they can be more expensive. Mexicans, in contrast, often start their day with a very substantial breakfast consisting of eggs, often fried and served over tortillas with a tomato and chili sauce to make the popular *huevos rancheros* (literally rancher's eggs, pronounced "hoo-ay-voce-ran-chair-océ"). Mexicans will also enjoy a good strong cup of coffee in the morning, but will occasionally drink hot chocolate made from sweetened chocolate with cinnamon, melted in hot water. Drawing on Spanish tradition, a mid-morning snack called a *merienda* (mehr-ee-en-dah) is often eaten, which generally consists of coffee and a sweet pastry. Similar to South America, lunch is eaten around 1 p.m. and is considered the main meal of the day. In Mexico, this is referred to as *comida* (koh-mee-dah) and it features a number of courses and ends with dessert and coffee. Everything stops at lunchtime, and the concept of a "working lunch" is unheard of. This midday meal will often stretch into the evening. As you can imagine, suppers in both Mexico and Central America are light. Mexicans will sometimes only eat a pastry and hot chocolate, coffee, or tea. Dinner in Central America is usually eaten later, around 7 or 8 p.m. and will generally consist of a soup or bean dish and tortillas.

## Regional Staples

We have touched on a few of the important staples in these regions, including corn, chilies and beans. It's time to discuss these ingredients in greater detail.

### The Importance of Maize

The prevalence of some of the popular ingredients, like maize (corn), tomatoes and bell peppers (the red, green and yellow peppers you commonly see in grocery stores) in Latin American cuisine is due in large part to the climate these vegetables require to thrive. All these products require a lot of sun, heat and water to grow, and this area of the world has all these in great abundance. The majority of the maize that we eat, in particular, has been bred from varieties that grow well in the United States and Canada, but the traditional varieties of maize were very diverse and there is a movement to try and preserve those more scarce varieties for the future. Don't forget that the only way that plants continue to exist is because they're planted somewhere. If no one is planting them, eventually they die off and the seeds are only viable for so long. In Canada, we're used to eating maize either fresh off the cob or canned and frozen kernels. But traditionally in Mexico and Central America, the kernels are stripped from the ears of maize and dried. Once dry, the now hard kernels are pounded or ground between stones to produce maize meal. When combined with water, the maize meal becomes a paste called *masa* ("mah-sah") from which things like *tortillas* can be rolled out and either baked or fried on a portable griddle called a *comal* ("koh-mal"). Although the processing of the maize and the cooking of tortillas is now most often done with machinery in factories, there are still many people who continue to use the traditional methods to prepare tortillas. The fact that this is still done is a testament to how important the tortilla is to Mexican and Central American cuisine. Tortilla, in Spanish, means "small cake". You've probably encountered a version of tortillas made with flour instead of corn. These are a more modern variation created once wheat became more widely available in Latin America.

### Beans and Rice

Two additional staples of Latin American cooking that are often served together are beans and rice (*arroz y frijoles*, "ah-rose-ee-free-hoh-lays"). Several varieties of beans

are very common, including black, red and pinto beans. The beans can be prepared by boiling either alone or with other ingredients including tomatoes, other vegetables or meat (or meat broth) into a basic stew or mashed together to form a paste called "refried beans" (or *frijoles refritos*, "free-hoh-lays-ref-ree-toes") and then served with rice. Not only is this dish delicious and filling, it's also nutritious. Beans contain protein and fibre and when combined with rice, provide all the essential amino acids (what's called a "complete protein"). Though rice isn't native to Latin America, it was brought by Spanish and Portuguese colonists in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it quickly became a popular staple because the climate and geography were suited to its growth. You might think that from what I've written so far, most of the cuisine of Latin America is vegetarian. Actually, it's far from it. Although rice and beans are often served alone because it's affordable and nutritious, it is also served as an accompaniment to other dishes, including meat, and often the beans are cooked in lard to give them a more full-bodied flavour.

### **That's a Spicy Pepper!**

Let's talk a bit about peppers, which are very important to Latin American cuisine. When you think of peppers, you probably think hot or spicy, right? You're only partly correct. First thing's first. The tiny dried black balls ("peppercorns") that you grind to make pepper (as in, salt and pepper) are not the same as the big green, yellow and red vegetables that you see in the produce section of the grocery store. Small, black and wrinkly peppercorns come from a flowering vine common near the Indian Ocean, but the brightly coloured vegetables are technically a fruit called bell peppers. Bell peppers are a type of chili pepper, but they're the only chili pepper that lacks any spiciness (they're sometimes called "sweet peppers" to further make the distinction). Another well-known member of the chili pepper family you may have heard of is the jalapeño pepper. If you've ever encountered this pepper, it's probably what left you with the impression that all peppers are hot and spicy. Although these are the two most commonly known to most North Americans, there are many different varieties of chili pepper worldwide and several of them are common in Latin American cooking. Some chilies you may encounter include the *poblano* ("poh-blah-noh"), which is narrower than a bell pepper, dark green, typically thin fleshed and has a fairly mild flavour. The banana pepper (also called the yellow

wax pepper) is also a milder variety, medium-sized and typically (you guessed it) yellow pepper. It is often seen pickled and placed on sandwiches or pizza in North America. Some of the spicier members of the chili pepper family include the *Serrano* ("seh-rah-noh"), which is green and very narrow; the *habanero* ("hah-bah-ner-oh"), which is small, almost cube shaped and orange; and the Scotch Bonnet, which looks similar to the habanero but is a much sweeter and exceptionally hot pepper used in popular Caribbean jerk seasoning. Finally, you may have heard of chipotle peppers ("chih-pote-lee"). These are not a variety of pepper, but are actually smoked jalapeños. These peppers add a distinct smoky and spicy flavour to dishes. While some of these peppers are served chopped up in sauces or salsas, many varieties of chili pepper are dried, pulverized and used as a spice in Latin cooking. This powder is, not surprisingly, called chili powder. For example, a dried poblano pepper is called an "ancho" chili. What we in North America often buy as "chili powder" is actually a blend of pure dried chilies, cumin and sometimes other spices.

### **Hot, hot, hot Sauce**

Have you heard of cayenne pepper? This spicy chili pepper is commonly found in a powdered form but is also the main ingredient in many popular hot sauces. If you've been to a Latin American restaurant, you've likely seen a few bottles of sauce on the table, some with warnings on the label. These are varieties of hot sauce and are prepared with chili peppers, vinegar and salt. Hot sauce is a common table seasoning throughout all of Latin America, often placed right next to the salt and pepper. Despite what you may think, hot sauce doesn't just add spicy heat; you actually can taste the chili pepper that it's made from. However, to our North American palate, which is far less accustomed to regularly spicy food, unless used very sparingly, these hot sauces seem to overpower all flavour and just taste hot. If you regularly consume spicy foods, you may probably be able to taste more of the chili pepper flavour rather than just heat.

### **Salsas – The Sauce of Latin America**

Salsas are another group of very popular condiments in Latin American cuisine. Typically made from chopped tomatoes, peppers, onion and fresh herbs (particularly cilantro), there are many different types of salsa. What we buy as salsa in the

grocery store only scratches the surface of the many flavourful salsas in this region's culinary traditions. Similar to the chutneys of Indian cuisine, salsas add a fresh flavour and colour to any dish. In fact, "salsa" means "sauce" in Spanish. A few common types of salsa include *salsa fresca* (fresh sauce, "fress-kah", also known as *pico de gallo*, "pee-koh-de-guy-oh"), which is a fresh, uncooked basic salsa that is made from chopped tomatoes, onions and peppers combined with limejuice and fresh cilantro. *Salsa rojo* (red sauce, pronounced "sal-sah-roh-hoh") is made with cooked tomatoes, chili peppers, onions, garlic and cilantro. *Salsa verde* (green sauce, pronounced "sal-sah-ver-day") is made with cooked *tomatillos* (a small green variety of tomato, "toh-mah-tee-ohs") instead of regular tomatoes, as well as the ingredients listed above. *Chimichurri* ("chih-mee-chur-ee") is a spicy vinegar based sauce made with fresh parsley that is very popular in parts of South America, especially Argentina where it is served with grilled meat. You might have heard of another type of salsa that you would never consider calling a salsa – *guacamole* ("gwah-kah-moh-lee"). Guacamole has a long history in Latin America; it was invented by the Aztecs as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and the word translates from Aztec as "avocado sauce". Guacamole is a salsa made from chopped and commonly mashed avocados, garlic, lime juice and salt. Some guacamoles are prepared with roughly chopped tomatoes and onions among other ingredients. Another salsa that isn't always considered a salsa is *mole* ("moh-lay") sauce. Mole is made from unsweetened chocolate, chili peppers and a variety of spices and ingredients. This rich, dark and savoury sauce is typically served over meat or fish. Remember when we said that chocolate comes from the New World? Mole was one of the earliest uses of chocolate.

## Caribbean Cuisine

The Caribbean is a large region of tropical island nations originally inhabited by natives but later colonized by Europeans along with the rest of the New World. In fact, when Christopher Columbus first arrived in the New World, landing in the group of islands we now call the Bahamas, he established some of the earliest European settlements. Due to this European influence as well as an African influence due to the slave trade, combined with its island geography, the Caribbean has developed a distinct culinary identity within Latin American cuisine. Although the

native peoples of the Caribbean were nearly completely eliminated by slavery and Old World diseases, their staple ingredients and flavours remain. Cassava and corn were widely cultivated, cooked in dishes with wild animal meat and flavoured with hot chilies called *aji* ("ah-gee"). In fact, we owe our modern day barbecues to the native people of the Caribbean, who invented a stick-framed grill they called a *barbacoa* (bar-bah-koh-ah").

Common ingredients such as beans and rice are popular, along with cassava, cilantro, bell peppers, chickpeas, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, coconut, various locally available meats and curries. Other important staples like plantains and fish feature prominently. Plantains are a variety of banana and, compared to the sweet bananas we're used to in Canada, look large and unripe, are far less sweet and much starchier. Plantains are often fried, but they can also be boiled, grilled or used as an ingredient in soup. They are an obvious staple food due to the fact that they are harvestable year-round and a good, reliable source of **carbohydrates**. What about protein? You can imagine that a region comprised of island nations might incorporate a great deal of seafood into their culinary traditions. Caribbean cooking features a lot of fish and seafood. Lobster, crayfish, conch, crab, among a variety of fresh fish, are abundant in the Caribbean Sea and feature prominently in many flavourful dishes. Each island features different seafood offerings based on what is locally abundant.

Each island's cuisine is individually influenced by its history of colonization. The French Antilles (Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Barts) offer French-Creole cuisine with dishes like *crabes farcis* (breadcrumb-stuffed crabs, "crab-far-see"), and *blaff* (spicy, poached fish). Cuba and Puerto Rico have a distinctly Spanish influence, and a dish called *lechón asado* (roast suckling pig, pronounced "letch-own-ah-sah-doh") is a popular dish on both islands. Many dishes in this region begin with a foundation called *sofrito* ("soh-free-toh"), which is a sauce made of finely diced peppers, tomatoes and onions mixed with spices, cooked in lard (or oil) and simmered to make a flavourful base. In the former British West Indies (The Bahamas, Barbados, Jamaica, Turks and Caicos, etc.), you'll find an interesting blend of British and African foods seasoned with Asian Spices. A dish called *callaloo* ("cah-lah-loo")



is popular throughout the Caribbean but particularly in this region. This distinctive dish mixes both indigenous styles with African roots, and is a stew made from a given leaf vegetable (that varies from region to region), okra and coconut milk. Callaloo is the National Dish of Trinidad and Tobago. The Dutch Caribbean consists of the islands Aruba, Curaçao and St. Marten and is, not surprisingly, Dutch influenced. With such variety, the Caribbean is indeed a difficult region to characterize in a few short paragraphs. Needless to say, for sheer delicious variety, you're very lucky if you have a Caribbean restaurant in your town.

## The Cuisines of South America

South America is the fourth-largest continent in the world. Just looking at it on a map you can imagine how diverse the geography and climate is. About 60% of the continent is covered with grassy temperate plains. The Andes Mountains, the longest unbroken mountain chain in the world, dominate the west, almost stretching fully from north to south. Desolate deserts permeate the west coast, as well as the Caribbean and northeast coasts, while huge stretches of the interior of the continent are covered in lush tropical rain forests. Much of this land is unsuited to agriculture and the majority of the South American people live in cities. Much like Mexico and Central America, South American society was shaped by colonization predominantly from Spain. Brazil, on the other hand, was colonized by Portugal. Local ingredients and staples like beans, corn tortillas and chilis are shared with the rest of Latin America, with some notable exceptions. For instance, unlike other Latin American countries, potatoes are a staple food in areas of South America (notably Peru, Ecuador and Bolivia) where they grow far better than corn. In fact, today the Native Americans in these three countries cultivate about 30 different varieties of potato with colours varying from white to purple. In the tropical north, bananas replace potatoes as important staples. Banana leaves are used to wrap tamales and plantain chips are a common snack. Seafood is far more readily available as well, especially in Chile with its long coastline and in the Amazon rainforest with its many waterways. The fertile areas are strong growing regions for fruits and vegetables, and South America actually supplies much of North America and Europe during the winter months.

## **A Meat Lover's Dream**

Much of South America supports a large meat-loving population. In fact, in Argentina, meat is eaten for almost every meal. When the Spaniards arrived, they found the rolling, fertile land perfect for their herds of cattle. Much of the cuisine of Argentina comes from the *gauchos*, herdsmen of mixed Native American and Spanish descent, who live a nomadic life on the *pampas* (the fertile lowlands, "pahm-paz"). Their diet consisted largely of meat, most often beef, which is boiled or broiled over an open fire. In fact, the only common vegetable in the gaucho diet was boiled or roasted pumpkin. Cooking meat over an open fire continues to be a tradition in this region. Open-air *asados* (meat roasts, "ah-sah-doz") are still extremely common at big events like festivals or fairs. During the asado, whole split carcasses of sheep, goats, hogs and slabs of beef are impaled on crossed iron rods which are thrust into the ground at a 90° angle to a fire. The meat is deliberately unflavoured. During the slow cooking process (about two hours), the fat is encouraged to either drip down the carcass or onto the coals, creating flavourful smoke that permeates the meat. Once cooked, the meat is sliced and served on platters along with chimichurri sauce.

The largest country in South America, Brazil, covers almost half the continent. With deserts in the northeast, rain forests in the north and west, and rolling grasslands in the south, Brazil is indeed a large country with a varied landscape. The cuisine of Brazil differs significantly from other areas of South America (and indeed all of Latin America), because unlike the rest of the continent, it was colonized by the Portuguese, not the Spanish. Many of Portugal's popular dishes are still regularly eaten in Brazil. The Portuguese, who ruled over Brazil from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries planted large sugar plantations and imported huge numbers of African slaves to work on them. These slaves brought much of their culinary traditions with them, as well as some ingredients like okra, which have substantially influenced the cuisine found in Brazil.

## **Find Your Soul *Mate***

One of the most popular drinks in South American (and parts of Mexico and Central America) is the tea drink *mate* ("mah-tay"). *Mate* has been around since pre-Columbian times, and was discovered by the Guarani people of Paraguay. The arrival of the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century quickly spread *mate* throughout South America,

where it is consumed with great regularity today. Mate is made by steeping the dried leaves and twigs of the *yerba mate* ("yerb-ah-mah-tay") plant in hot, but never boiling, water as that can make the drink too bitter. The yerba mate plant is actually an herb, which is what the word "yerba" means in Spanish. The resulting drink tastes a little like green tea and is very grassy and earthy tasting. The traditional way to drink mate is in a hollow gourd (also called a mate) with a special straw called a *bombilla* ("boh-m-bee-yah") Mate is really a communal drink, and is often shared between a group of friends or family. The gourd is passed to each drinker in turn and refilled with hot water as it is emptied. Much like coffee, mate has plenty of caffeine, but mate drinkers believe that the caffeine in their drink of choice is nothing like that of coffee. Mate proponents claim that the wakefulness they feel after a cup of mate is smoother and without the "jittery" feeling associated with coffee. Like other teas, mate is loaded with antioxidants and other health benefits.

### **A Day in the Life**

South American mealtimes used to resemble those of Europe, with small early breakfasts consisting of cheese, fruit and bread or pastries with butter, avocado or marmalade, followed by long lunches and late suppers. Urbanization has changed that significantly. Lunches have become much lighter and larger meals are now eaten at suppertime. In some regions, particularly rural areas and Brazil, tradition remains and lunch is still the main meal of the day, lasting from around midday to 2 or 3 p.m. Much like the concept of the siesta in Spain, this time might not only be used for eating, but also for resting or bathing. Dinner in these regions is light and may consist of strong coffee, bread, cheese, soup and/or leftovers from lunch. Desserts are regularly consumed in all parts of Latin America, but in South America in particular, the influence of Spanish desserts has added to local traditional dishes. One of the most popular desserts in South America is called *dulce de leche* ("dohl-chay-de-letch-ay"). Heating sweetened milk until it tastes like caramelized sugar makes this pudding-like concoction. Literally, dulce de leche means "candy of milk". Versions of dulce de leche can be found throughout all of Latin America, from Mexico (where it's called *cajeta*, "kah-heh-tah") to Puerto Rico, where it's made with coconut milk. Dulce de leche can be eating straight, like a pudding, or as a sauce on baked goods or pancakes.

## Tex-Mex: A Fusion Cuisine

No doubt you've heard of the hearty bean (and often beef) stew called chili. This dish is ubiquitous in North America. For some people, their personal recipe is a source of great pride and has led to competitions such as chili cook-offs. While you might think that this dish is an important part of Latin American cuisine, it is in fact more representative of a type of cuisine called Tex-Mex. Tex-Mex has its roots in the cultural exchange that occurred in the regions of the southern United States that border Mexico (it stands for Texan-Mexican). It's a bunch of dishes that we often associate with being Mexican such as fajitas, nachos and chimichangas. These dishes often include ingredients that are rarely found in traditional Mexican cuisine, like cumin. In particular the heavy addition of cheese is definitely a North American influence. There's a good chance that the Mexican restaurant in your town is more Tex-Mex than Mex.

## Wrapping Up

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Wow, can you believe we just toured four of the world's greatest cuisines? What a culinary journey. I hope your eyes have been opened as to the sheer quantity of incredible food the world of international cuisine has to offer. From amazing ingredients that have travelled the globe, to dishes that have histories thousands of years in the making, hopefully this has been an awakening experience. What's impressive is that we've only begun to touch on the amazing variety of cuisines that exist in the world. So think of how much more there is to explore. Don't end your culinary journey here, keep seeking out and learning all you can. The most important part of this journey is to *taste* the amazingly diverse foods of the world. Don't be afraid just because something looks strange or even smells strange. You'll never know if you like it unless you actually taste it. Remember that to some cultures it can be seen as rude to not at least try the food that someone offers to you. Respect the people who prepared the food and respect the food itself. Just because *you* don't like something doesn't mean that the people who do like it are weird. Every person has different tastes and preferences that are shaped by time, experience and culture. You never know, you may like something in the future that you don't like now. So be open-minded about the world's foods and the people who make them. Each of the world's foods is important nourishment for someone, and it's important to keep that in mind as you continue your culinary adventure. It will make you a better cook, a better critic, and more importantly, a better and more appreciative eater.

## Glossary of Common Terms

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**Abundant:** An ample supply of any ingredient.

**Agriculture:** The practice of cultivating the soil and growing crops.

**Carbohydrate:** These provide the main source of energy for our bodies and are found in sugar, fruit and grains.

**Climate:** The typical weather conditions in an area over a long period of time.

**Cooking:** The practice or skill of preparing food for eating.

**Cuisine:** A style of cooking, usually regional or cultural.

**Culture:** The collective arts and intellectual traditions of a given group of people.

**Diet:** The foods, dishes and meals that are regularly eaten by an individual or group make up diet.

**Dish:** A set of ingredients deliberately combined together to produce a unified food item.

**Ethnic:** Relating to a population subgroup with a common nation or culture.

**Fat:** Some fats contribute to brain function and overall health. There are many different types of fat, they are saturated, unsaturated and Trans fats. Fats are contained in butter, avocados and oil.

**Geography:** The physical features of the earth in any given area, e.g., mountainous or tropical.

**Herbs:** Any plant with leaves, seeds or flowers that is used for flavouring food, e.g., basil or cilantro.

**Ingredient:** Any of the foods or substances that are combined to make a dish.

**International:** For our purposes, this word means many different nations.

**Meal:** One or many dishes combine to make a meal.

**Nutrition:** The process of providing or obtaining the food necessary for health and growth.

**Protein:** Large molecules of amino acids found in food that our bodies need to function properly. Protein is essential for growth and the reparation of tissues and is found in meat, eggs, legumes and nuts.

**Region:** An area of a country having definable culinary traditions but not always fixed boundaries.

**Spices:** An aromatic vegetable substance used to flavour food, e.g., cinnamon or pepper.

**Staple:** A main or important element in a cuisine, e.g., bread or rice.

**Starch:** A type of carbohydrate.

**Technique:** A way of carrying out a particular task.

**Trade:** The act of buying and selling goods and services.

**Tradition:** A long established custom or set of beliefs that have been passed along the generations.

**Vegetarian:** A person who does not eat meat for moral, religious or health reasons.

## Suggested Resources

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### Food in Canada

- Nutritional Guide of Canada: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/index-eng.php>
- Food Day in Canada: <http://foodaycanada.ca>
- The Great Canadian Food Map: [http://www.canadianliving.com/food/cooking\\_school/the\\_great\\_canadian\\_food\\_map\\_an\\_interactive\\_infographic.php](http://www.canadianliving.com/food/cooking_school/the_great_canadian_food_map_an_interactive_infographic.php)
- Food Network Canada: [www.foodnetwork.ca](http://www.foodnetwork.ca)

### Food History

- History of Food Guide: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fn-an/food-guide-aliment/context/hist-eng.php>
- Food Timeline Through History: <http://www.foodtimeline.org>
- The History Kitchen: <http://thehistorykitchen.com>

### Recipes

- The World's Healthiest Foods: [www.whfoods.org](http://www.whfoods.org)
- Kraft Canada: [www.kraftcanada.com](http://www.kraftcanada.com)
- Ethnic Vegetarian Recipes: <http://www.thesmartvegetarian.com/vegetarian-recipes-ethnic.html>
- Canadian Living: <http://www.canadianliving.com/food/>







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