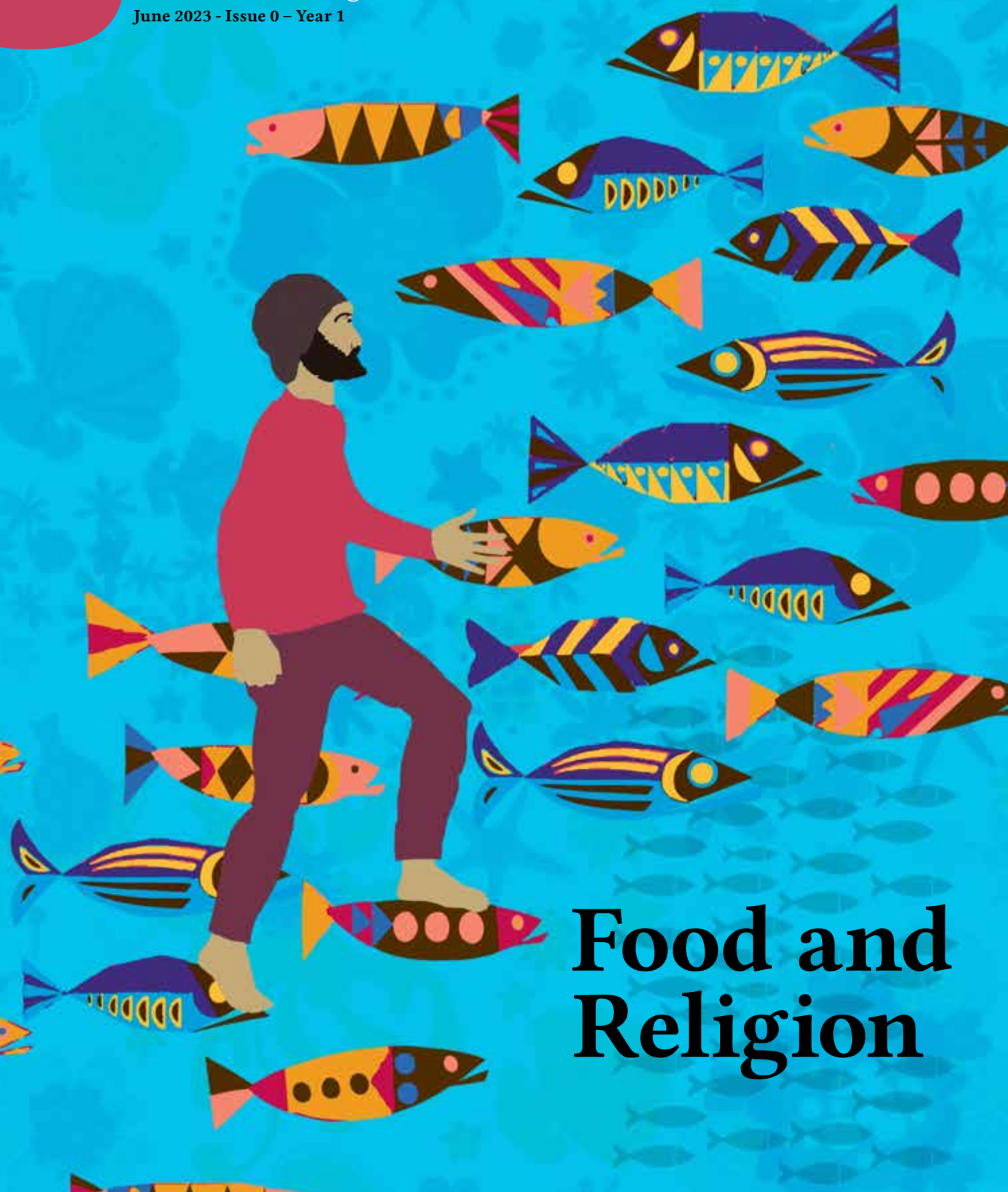


# JUSUR

*An intercultural magazine*

June 2023 - Issue 0 - Year 1



**Food and  
Religion**

# Coming in the ne



# jusur

June 2023 - Issue 0 - Year 1

*An intercultural magazine*

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## A message from the Editor-in-chief

### A Bridge to the Future



*Wael Farouq is professor of Arabic language and culture at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan (Italy) and author of many publications in the field of Arab-Islamic studies.*

No culture exists that lacks a heart beating with the love of God. And among every people, in every language and every school of political or economic thought, the Prophet Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace, is present in some form with his sacred message. The Muslim World League is thus by definition a home for every people, language, culture and school of thought. But, since its Secretary General, Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa, is keen on the League embracing human plurality in its fullness, he strives to make it an inclusive space for every religion. In the shade of that enormous canopy believers of all faiths can

show and share what they find true, good and beautiful in what they believe.

It was through this understanding that Jusur was born: a melting pot of all the elements that make up humanity, which offers us cultural models of shared human values in which we find ourselves united despite our different religious beliefs. 'Jusur' is an Arabic word in the plural form. Its root's multiple meanings traces a surprising and exemplary path for the dialogue to which we aspire. The verb 'jasara' means 'to go away' and 'to pass through,' while the noun 'jasaara' means 'boldness' and 'bravery of heart.' As for the word 'jisr' (singular of 'Jusur'), it is the 'bridge.' The meaning of 'going away' and 'passing through' reflects our determination to open up new horizons, a task that requires arming ourselves with the second meaning of the word: bravery of heart. If this path is completed, the third meaning of the word is realized, because the person becomes a bridge, a link between two worlds: the world of the present in which we live and the world of the future to which we aspire.

This is how this word was chosen: we see this magazine as a road to take together to the future. And so its doors are open to everyone, no one excluded, not so much for the sake of a dialogue that may end in agreement or disagreement, but in order to lay the foundation stones of a future that unites us in all our rich differences.

Nothing more than food unites humanity in its plurality, because while we all need it regardless of where we come from or who we are, the cultural and religious manifestations related to eating are so varied that many thinkers see them as the fundamental signs of identity, both of individuals and communities. If we go beyond the outward rituals of eating or abstaining from food and we consider their meanings, their essence, it turns out religion sees food as a positive driver for doing good. Islam, for example, links food to the purpose of life and how it is lived. It is not enough for food to be licit; it must also be 'good' in terms of how it is obtained, i.e. it must be procured in such a way that it does not cause harm to anyone.

Our hope is that this first issue will demonstrate three qualities: the specificity of each identity, the rich diversity of different identities, and a clear idea of how we might reform the present in the hope of moving towards a better future.

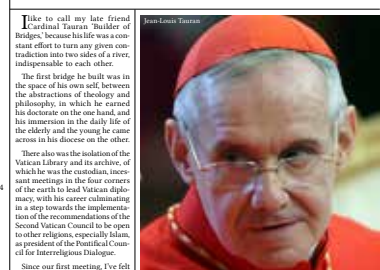
## 4 Editorial

Muhammad bin Abdul Karim al-Issa

### Tauran, Builder of Bridges: From Tolerance to Testimony

#### Editorial Tauran, Builder of Bridges: From Tolerance to Testimony

By Muhammad bin Abdul Karim Al-Issa



I like to call my late friend Cardinal Tauran 'Builder of Bridges,' because his life was a constant effort to turn any given contradiction into two sides of a river, indispensable to each other.

The first bridge he built was in the space of his own self between the abstractions of theology and philosophy, to which he attached his doctrine on the one hand, and his attention to the daily life of the elderly and the young he came across in his diocese on the other.

There also was the isolation of the Vatican Library and its archive, of which he was the custodian, nearest meetings in the four corners of the earth to lead Vatican diplomacy, with his career culminating in a step towards the implementation of the recommendations of the Second Vatican Council to be open to other religions, especially Islam, as president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue.

Since our first meeting, I've felt a special closeness with him that went beyond the friendship and mutual respect required by our formal positions as officials and religious leaders perhaps because of the similarity of our journeys, despite the deep differences between our cultural and religious backgrounds.

I too studied Islamic doctrine and specialized in Islamic jurisprudence, which mainly aims to simplify Islamic teachings from divine abstraction to ways they can be embodied in the daily life of ordinary individuals. I practiced it as a judge, then as a minister of justice, before assuming the secretary of the Muslim World League under the difficult circumstances our world has been experiencing for decades.

To date, I have made openness to other religions and cultures a priority for religious and intellectual leaders who are members of the Muslim World League, and I have spared no effort in the attempt to achieve this on the ground.

Perhaps the second reason for our closeness was our common awareness of the difficult challenge faced by dialogue today, both within a given religion and between religions.

**River Banks**

We live in the era of big data, where many people resort to stereotypes to understand a post-truth world in which information and images flow without constraint.

These people are divided into two camps. The first camp champions the clash between stereotypes, whose sacred mission is the exclusion of the other, of difference, using violence and murder if necessary, or by the far right, which who label identify themselves to Islam, or by the far right, which calls for the expulsion of migrants to let them die at sea. Some among them may also carry weapons and shoot migrants in mosques, as has happened in Denmark and New Zealand.

The second camp champions dialogue between stereotypes, which seeks to avoid confrontation and violence, believing that, for the sake of dialogue and coexistence, "it is necessary to overcome differ-

I felt a special closeness with him that went beyond the friendship and mutual respect required by our formal positions as officials and religious leaders.

## 6 The Dossier

### Food and Religion

#### Context Specific: How Religious Norms Impact Societies

By Olivier Roy ..... 8

#### A Dietary Prerogative: The Real Whys and Wherefores of Halal and Kosher

By Joseph H.H. Weiler ..... 10

#### Critter Cuisine: Food Metaphors from the Animal Kingdom

By Mohamed Makhzangi ..... 17

#### Orthodoxies of Abstinence: The Meaning of Fasting

By Anba Ermia ..... 21

#### Against Consumption: Nizar Ayad on Taming the Will

By Marianna Massa ..... 23

#### Dead Man Dines: What Is Eaten on the Other Side

By Ahmed Abdel-Latif ..... 24

#### Intermittent Fasting, Zen Style: Not Eating in the Buddhist Tradition

By Rev. Fausto Taiten Guareschi ..... 30

#### Mummified Alive: Fasting in the Sokushinbutsu Tradition

By Wakako Saito ..... 33

#### Fasting in the Sixties: An Iraqi Tale of Coexistence

By Inaam Kachachi ..... 36

#### Parable of the Victuals: Metaphorical and Literal Meanings of Food

By Ezzat El-Qamhawy ..... 39

#### The Meals We Speak: On Food, Language, and Translation

By Stefano Arduini ..... 45

#### All the World in a Taste Bud: Food's Boundless Universe

By Maria Teresa Zanola ..... 48

#### Eat Your Words: Geert Jan Van Gelder on Arab Dish Discourse

By Fatena Alghorra ..... 51

#### Transcendent Nourishment: Sufi Cuisine in South Asia

By Haji Syed Salman Chishty ..... 53

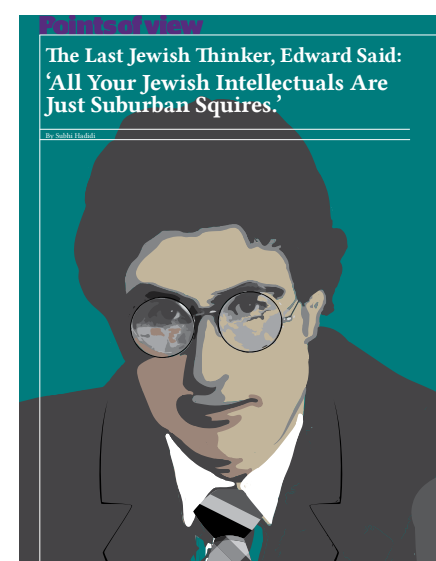
## 58 The Reportage

### Interfaith Dialogue in the New G20 Formula

## 59

By Elisa Ferrero

### Religion's Answer to the G20: Bernhard Scholz on the R20



**Points of view**  
The Last Jewish Thinker, Edward Said: 'All Your Jewish Intellectuals Are Just Suburban Squires.'

By Subhi Hadidi

## 61 Points of view

By Subhi Hadidi

### Edward Said The Last Jewish Thinker

## 64

By Amr Khafagy

### Messi's Trophy: The 2022 World Cup in Qatar



## 68

### People and places

By Davide Perillo

### The Stones of Paradise: Women Saved by Faith

## 72

### An interview with...

By Pia De Simone



### Charles Taylor

## 76

### Science and environment

By Marco Bersanelli

### The Deepest Wellspring: On the Wonder and Amazement behind Science

## 80

### The world of education

Antonella Sciarrone Alibrandi

### Growth Scars: Antonella Sciarrone Alibrandi on the Importance of Difference

## 82

### Culture is a legacy

By Khaled Azab

### The Couscous Cure: Ramadan's Golden Grains

## 85

### Counterpoint

The sermon of Arafat



### How Islam Can Drive Away Discord

# All the World in a Taste Bud: Food's Boundless Universe

By Maria Teresa Zanola

Food may provide us with nourishment, health, joy, and the shared pleasures of the table. But beyond all that, it can serve as a gateway to an individual's culture, identity, tradition, knowledge, and profession. We cannot dissociate food from all these values; our memory gathers so many daily or celebratory moments in which attention is turned to food as an element of identity, as a glue that binds the people gathered around

it in a ritual that is part of our history.

At the same time, food — as we said — is work; the work of those who cultivate the land and follow the production and marketing process. It is the fruit of laborers, cooks, those who work to support a family, and the exploited or poorly paid. Sometimes it is even the byproduct of the unemployed or those with humble professions that no one wants nor thinks about

when we buy our bread, fruits, and vegetables.

There is a universe around food, and we all take part in it in our daily pursuit to feed ourselves, feed those who may have difficulties procuring sustenance for themselves, or even when we abstain from eating for reasons of health, religion, or otherwise for stretches of time.

Since ancient times, food has

been sought after and prepared as a support for the most diverse existential conditions, but its relevance has always been such as to also become an artistic object that inspired imagination and creativity; over the centuries, food — and the act of preparing it — has been painted, sculpted, narrated, represented, studied, and filmed.

It's enough to take note of the number of museum exhibitions that feature food as their main focus, not to mention fully-fledged museums that are entirely dedicated to a single dish. These museums reconstruct narrative and figurative paths, which allow us to follow the history and development of the most diverse recipes, how they're prepared, and their influence on traditions and cultures. Think of the role of cocoa and chocolate, or tea, coffee, potatoes and tomatoes — which have become a staple of many cuisines around the globe despite the fact that they originated in the Ameri-

cas — or spices, to name a few.

Many artistic works have also helped ignite people's passions towards some of these foods. One could amass collections of paintings, prints, videos, novels, and short stories about these dishes; each and every one of which has an exciting linguistic, cultural, social, and economic story to be told.

## Are We What We Eat?

Food Studies — understood as critical studies on food and its contexts in the fields of science, art, history, and society — have long been established to answer a number of key questions regarding the historical dynamics of food.

What is the impact of food on the environment? Has food contributed to acts of power or coercion among peoples? Why are some foods indexes of identity? Why have some foods globalized more than others?

These challenging questions require in-depth knowledge, and they are today the cornerstone of many international research projects. There have also been talks about foodscapes — urban food landscapes (commercial infrastructures and private and/or collective productive spaces) that affect the eating styles of individuals, their consumption, practices, and representations. Moreover, food landscapes have also been found to enhance the beauty of natural landscapes, be they cultivated or uncultivated, giving unexpected glimpses of extraordinary visual impact in our countryside.

Food is thus an element of wonder, and where wonder is stirred, there lives the desire for knowledge and the anxiety for freedom. Food brings us back to childhood memories, to the thoughts of people who live and have lived with us, to special meetings, to rebellions for imposed nourishment, and to the passion for coveted nourishment.

I am convinced that each of us has their own food-related stories, be it something that they loved, hated, dreamed of, desired, or rejected. Anyone could tell that story when they reflect on a lifetime of traditional dishes, the places and festivities they've been to, or even

the special dishes they may have had while visiting a family that's not their own. I dare not imagine the set of paintings and panels that could be composed, and that would be perhaps the truest gateway to the knowledge of the other.

## Talk, Live as You Eat

Language also plays a very important role in this gallery of wonders that is food. Language preserves every trace of the evolution of food with words that remain unchanged in different times and spaces. It also does so with less frequent, more specialized terms, which recall specificities of treatments and working methods that change over time with untranslatable words that constitute details of each linguistic and cultural tradition.

When learning a new language, words pertaining to that language's cuisine await us — both the most frequent ones and those that we do not initially learn but are still commonplace in that culture's day-to-day life. We do not immediately need to know how to say 'spoon' and 'teaspoon', 'fork' and 'dessert fork', 'knife' and 'dessert knife', or the distinct names of various pots and pans. And yet, we use them every day to cook all manner of dishes.

This is a treasure trove of a heritage that never ceases to fascinate and involve each of us in its inestimable wealth and the depth of the messages it sends. It is an invitation to observe how much food is part of our experiences. It is a discovery that pushes us to verify how food is a fundamental part of the structure of our lives and daily choices. It is a curiosity that guides us to reflect on the extent to which food is a vacation or routine, a factor of sustainability or pollution, or an element of pressure or freedom.

Food lives with us. Our food choices also determine the types of production our economies engage in, influencing the work of millions of people worldwide. Let us return to the importance that food has for work, for those who prepare it with maternal and paternal love for their children, and for those who reach unattainable peaks of skill, mastery, art, and dedication in their pursuit of the culinary arts.



Food is an empty plate that can be filled, that hopes to be filled, that awaits to be filled lest it remain desolately empty. We take for granted that plates welcome whatever is placed in them. But there are dishes that do not satisfy, that cannot satiate our hunger for nourishment and hope.

We must learn to respect our food and seek to understand it. Only in this way can a dish of one tradition serve as a gateway to the world of another.

Offering a traditional dessert to a guest says a lot more than we can imagine. It tells our story and expresses our humanity and desire to open ourselves to the other and welcome them into our lives.

## A Golden Spice: The Saffron Road

Akrotiri (now called Santorini) was an ancient Bronze Age port city that was destroyed and buried by a volcano eruption in BC 1628. The ancient ruins of the city were discovered around 1860 by workers of the volcanic rock quarries for the Suez Canal, but archaeological excavations did not begin until a century later, bringing to light buildings with pictorial material.

**The story of saffron is emblematic: a precious and refined food desired by many peoples. A food that is both local and global. As is the case with pepper, through the history of one single spice passes the history of humanity.**

In a room of one of these buildings, two female figures are portrayed collecting a flower — the crocus or saffron. It seems that the frescoes represent a spring festival during which thanks were given for the gift of the plant with all its multiple pharmaceutical properties.

Assyrian botanical writings once attributed therapeutic properties to saffron; and now, it seems that saffron is starting to become more widely used in the treatment of depression, making it the spice of good humor!

From the Greco-Roman period to the Middle Ages, the saffron trade spread everywhere throughout the Mediterranean. It was produced in Morocco, bought by perfumers in Rosetta in Egypt and by doctors in Gaza, and used to dye fine fabrics in Tyre and Sidon. The trade was even highly regulated, with pirates and smugglers of the widely coveted spice sentenced with hefty fines and imprisonment.

From Persia to Spain, the saffron trade spanned centuries and fashions, arriving first in Central Europe, then in Britain. Eventually, Austrian, Cretan, French, Spanish, Sicilian, and Ottoman saffron varieties also became available. By the fifteenth century, the spice was used in more than seventy recipes as an ingredient for sweet and savory preparations.

Precious, sought after, and desired, saffron is a local and global spice; a story of yesterday and all times. It seems impossible to reconstruct such a complex map and such a rich tapestry of events in just a few lines. And we have only briefly mentioned a few passages in the history of a single spice... Imagine how much could be written or told of every single dish that we enjoy!



*Maria Teresa Zanola is Professor of French Language and Translation at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, and President of the European Language Council.*

## Eat Your Words: Geert Jan van Gelder on Arab Dish Discourse

By Fatena Alghorra

Food is always a great conversation starter with strangers. However, in this case, food will be the opportunity for starting a dialogue with the Dutch scholar Geert Jan van Gelder — Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Oxford — who has always dealt with the history of Arab culture.

**Jusur (J):** *What prompted you to write a book on food and Arabic literature?*

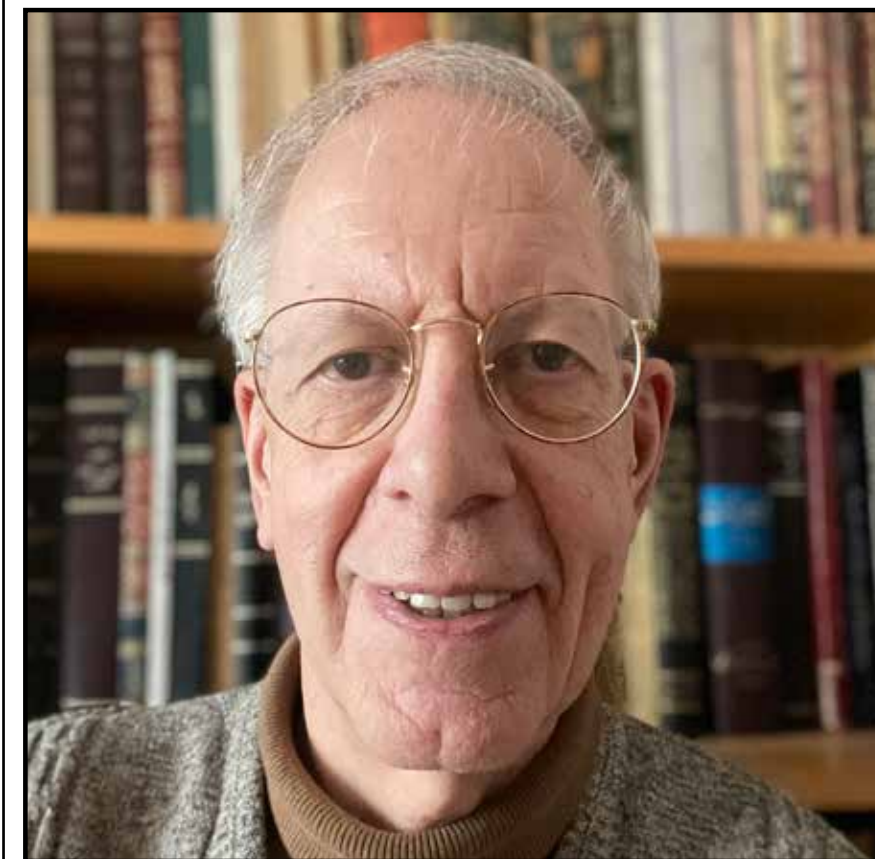
**Geert Jan van Gelder (VG):** As has often happened in my academic career, I was inspired by others. In 1994, there was a one-day conference in the Netherlands of Dutch specialists in Middle Eastern studies on the theme of food and culinary cultures in the Middle East. I was asked to give a lecture and to contribute an article in Dutch.

I became interested, not so much in Middle Eastern food, but in how food and eating were represented in premodern Arabic literary texts. This resulted in a few scholarly articles and my book 'Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food' (2000).

It was published simultaneously in the US as 'God's Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature' because the publishers there did not like my original title. My interests are primarily literary. Literature may deal with almost every imaginable subject, including food, so I wrote about the theme of food when asked. It is, after all, a very interesting subject.

**J:** *Is it possible to gain insight into the history of Arab culture by studying the status of food in Arab literature?*

**VG:** Culinary traditions are



an important part of culture in general. The term 'Arab culture' ('al-thaqafa al-arabiyya') is ambiguous. The Arabic word 'Arabi' may be translated into English with three adjectives, each having a different meaning: 'Arabian' (referring to geography), 'Arab' (referring to ethnicity or to modern politics when one speaks about Arab countries, even though not all inhabitants will identify themselves as Arabs), and 'Arabic' (referring to language and literature).

Which of these is meant when we discuss 'al-thaqafa al-arabiyya'? Is it about Arabs only, or also about everything written in Arabic? In pre- and early Islamic sources, one finds information about many Bedouin dishes. But already in those days, one sees the influence of Persian culture when 'faludhaj' is mentioned as a delicacy.

In the Abbasid period, this Persian impact on culinary matters becomes much stronger. I am unable to answer the question, for it would be better perhaps to speak of 'Middle Eastern culinary culture.'

This is also reflected in several important collections in Western languages about the topic, such as Sami Zubaida and Richard Tapper's *Culinary Culture of the Middle East* (1994); Manuel Marín & David Wainess' *La Alimentación en las Culturas Islámicas* (1994); and Kirill Dmitriev, Julia Hauser, and Bilal Orfali's *Insatiable Appetite: Food as a Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond* (2020).

**J:** *Some foods are mentioned in the Quran that are partly forbidden and partly lawful. Has religion had any tangible effects on the food*

culture documented in Arabic literature?

**VG:** The food prohibitions in the Quran certainly influenced the food habits of all Muslims. But the Quran is not a legal handbook, and it contains very few rules about different kinds of food. Far more important are the Prophet's sayings or Hadiths and the detailed discussions of jurists or the 'fuqaha'.

There is always a gap between the strict rules of the Sharia and daily practice, but I find it striking, for instance, that the taboo on eating pork is virtually universal and fairly strictly observed among Muslims, whereas drinking wine, also explicitly forbidden in the Quran, was widely practiced, with wine being celebrated by many poets.

The 'khamriyya' or Bacchic poem is one of the major poetic genres in Arabic, whereas one does not find 'taamiyya' as a literary term, even though there are poems about food; but, as I wrote in 'Of Dishes and Discourse', 'Bacchic poetry [...] has always enjoyed a much higher status than poems on food.' Wine is considered more 'spiritual,' whereas the description of food and dishes is generally a low, earthy subject, more suitable for jesting, 'hazl', and 'fukaha' than for high-status poetry — when food is mentioned in the context of generosity and hospitality.

**J:** Food is integral to the culture of Arab society, there is almost no occasion where it is not present. A person's generosity or stinginess is usually measured by the number of people they feed. An example of generosity is Hatim Al-Ta'i. Is the primary linguistic concept of food limited only to these two ideas of generosity and avarice?

**VG:** In pre- and early Islamic Arabic poems, the feeding of others is — together with bravery — one of the two main sources of glory and fame. Liberally giving food is the most common expression of generosity and nobility. See Chapter Two in my book 'Of Dishes and Discourse': 'Early Poetry: Feeding as Good Breeding'.

This old Bedouin ideal never dis-

appeared and survived in urban Arabo-Islamic culture. Its opposite, miserliness or stinginess, called 'bukhl' or 'shuhh' in Arabic, is very often illustrated with examples involving food in countless poems and anecdotes.

One of the oldest and certainly one of the most entertaining sources is, of course, Al-Jahiz's book, 'The Misers' (or 'Al-Bukhala'). The pre-Islamic poet whom you mention, Hatim Al-Tai, has always been proverbial, not only in Arabic literature and lore but even in Persian. See for instance the famous 'Gulistan' (or 'The Rose Garden') by Sa'di, where he is mentioned several times. He is said to have slaughtered a herd of several hundred camels for a party of strangers, as a result of which he became a paragon, not of foolishness, but of honor and generosity. However, it is usually forgotten that the camels did not belong to him but to his father (or his grandfather according to some), who was not at all pleased.

**J:** There are many cultures that, through Islam, have mixed or interacted with Arab culture. What do you think of the influence that this integration into Islamic society has had on the culture of food in Arabic literature?

**VG:** I have already mentioned the great impact of Persian culture in general and culinary culture in particular on Arabo-Islamic culture. This is noticeable, for instance, in the names of many dishes and foodstuffs that have a Persian origin such as 'faludhaj', 'bazmaward', 'judhabah', 'sikbaj', 'zirbaj', and 'khushkananaj', as they can be found in anecdotes and in the several medieval cookbooks.

These anecdotes and cookbooks, however — although they are part of Arab culture — are not representative of culinary practice in general because they strongly favor the higher classes and the courts of caliphs, viziers, governors, and the wealthy. I should add that Persian culture is not the only culture that mixed with Arab culture, for Arabs and the Arabic language also spread in Syria, Egypt, North Africa, and Spain. And it would be surprising if the local food habits

of Greeks, Copts, Berbers, Iberians, and others had not survived to some extent.

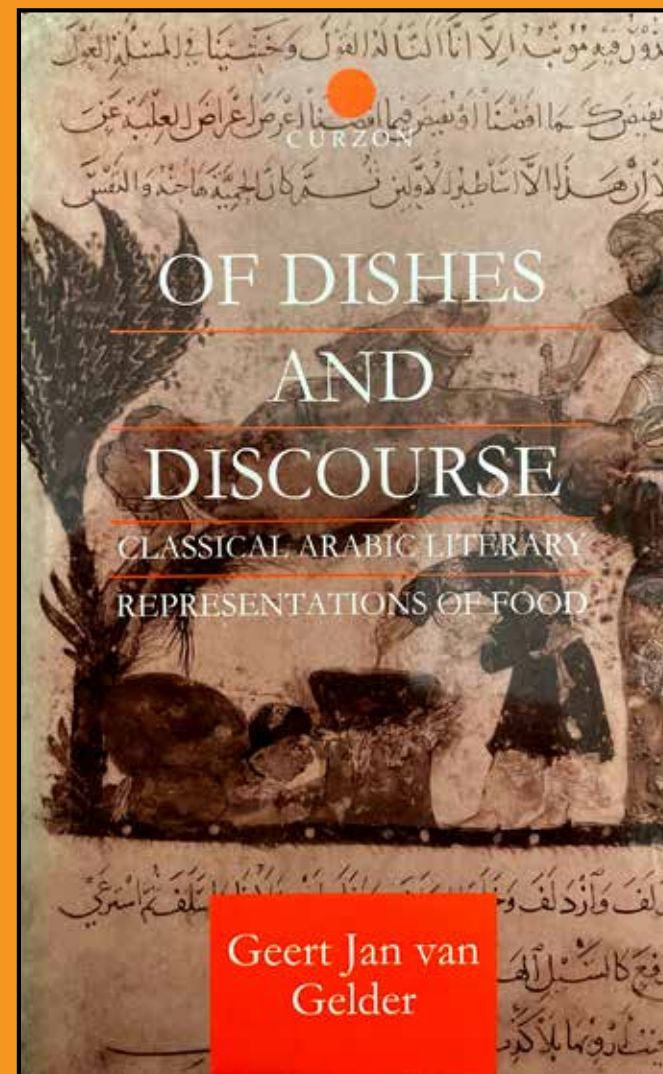
Just as literary genres and forms spread from the Arab West to the East (e.g. the 'muwashaha' and the 'zajal'), dishes also spread from the West to the East. Couscous, for instance, is found in 'Fudalat Al-Khuwan', a cookbook from the thirteenth century by the Andalusian Ibn Razin Al-Tujibi, with recipes from the Muslim West and Al-Andalus, but it is also mentioned as 'kuskusu' in a Syrian cookbook from the same period: 'Al-Wusla Ila l-Habib fi Wasf Al-Tayyibat wa-l-Tib', which was recently edited and translated by Charles Perry as 'Scents and Flavors'.

Muslim culture, in general, is of course much broader than the Arab world and Iran; modern Pakistan, Malaysia, and Indonesia all have their own culinary cultures, but I am not competent to speak on these cultures or to determine to what extent they are influenced by Arab foodways.

**J:** Is it possible, through careful observation of the various eras of Arab literature, to identify the changes that have taken place in Arab society due to the multiplicity of cultures influencing it?

**VG:** The answer to this question was already given, or at least implied, above. In terms of literary history (taking literature in the limited sense of belles-lettres) the most important watershed is not the coming of Islam in the seventh century, but the change from the Arab Kingdom of the Umayyads to the Islamic Empire of the Abbasids during the eighth century, when Arabic was adopted by many who were not ethnically Arab and who became leading figures in literary and political history. Clearly, the next major change took place with the growing influence of Western countries and the globalization of commerce.

# Stirring the Arab Pot: On Medieval Cookbooks and Good Behavior



No one disagrees on the value and historicity of food culture or its presence in Arabic literature from the pre-Islamic era until the one following the advent of Islam and on its intertwining with the different cultures that entered it.

Therefore, it may be superfluous to say that the first books that specialized in culinary culture appeared in the Abbasid era. An example is Ibn Sayyar Al-Warraq's 'Kitab Al-Tabkh' — a cookbook published in 1000 AD that contains cooking recipes dating back to the previous two centuries. Or the Al-Baghdadi book that carries the same title, which was published in 1239 AD and includes nearly one hundred and sixty Arab recipes and the explanation of the arts of food with delightful poems and entertaining stories, responding to the taste of Arabs at that time.

The critical edition of Ibn Sayyar's recipe book of 1987 by the Finnish orientalist Kaj Öhrnberg, in collaboration with the Lebanese researcher Sahban Mroueh, contributed to drawing the attention of a number of Western orient-

talists who were fascinated by Arab culture and its heritage and were lured by the magic of the East and its myths to dive into the history of this region by studying manuscripts, scientific treatises, and literary works that form the basis for understanding of Islamic culture at the time.

## Geert Jan van Gelder

Among these orientalists is the Dutch Geert Jan van Gelder — Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies of the University of Oxford — with his book 'Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food'. The book, published in 2011, was followed by a series of academic and literary studies on the subject.

In his volume, composed of seven chapters, van Gelder explains the decision to take Al-Baghdadi's book as a reference. In fact, he opens the introduction of his volume with a sentence that also appears in the introduction of Al-Baghdadi's book, in which he speaks of the various types of pleasure divided into seven categories: Humor, food, drink, clothing, sex, perfumes, and sound.