

The Eastern Mediterranean Playbook

A crash course in the culture, cooking
and keys to new menu items.





This is the Eastern Mediterranean.

When we say Eastern Mediterranean, we talk about this is a vibrant food region that stretches from the coasts of Greece and Turkey to Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Syria, and Jordan. It extends into Egypt and other parts of North Africa. Some call it the Middle East while others refer the Levant.

And this is the regional food in a nutshell.

Eastern Mediterranean food is a matter of diverse ingredients and distinct flavours. This region is a melting pot of cultures and religions, combining bold and spicy influences from the east with fresh and zesty influences from the west.

Historical influences

Things that have shaped this food culture over the years.

Ancient civilisations

The region's food has roots in ancient civilisations like the Romans, Greeks, Egyptians and Mesopotamians. Ingredients, combinations and cooking techniques that were introduced in those civilisations are still fundamental to Eastern Mediterranean cooking.

Trade routes

Being the link between Europe, Asia and Africa, this region has been a hot spot for trade throughout history. Ingredients such as spices from India and China has reached the Eastern Mediterranean this way.

Religious exchange

The Eastern Mediterranean is a mosaic of religions, including Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Each culture has added its own culinary traditions and dietary laws, such as halal and kosher rules, which in turn has shaped the regional menus.

Fertile crescent

Located in the western parts of what's known as the fertile crescent, this region benefits from a climate suitable for agriculture. Various types of herbs, fruits and vegetables prosper in the Eastern Mediterranean, making fresh produce a trademark of this food culture.

Colonial impact

Colonial powers, such as the Ottoman, British and French, controlled parts of the Eastern Mediterranean at different times. This has brought new crops and eating habits into the local cuisines. Ingredients like coffee and dishes like kebab became widespread much because of the Ottoman empire for example.

Essential ingredients

Some of the staple ingredients that define this food culture.

Fruits

Pomegranate, fig, date...

Vegetables

Tomato, onion, eggplant...

Herbs

Parsley, mint, coriander...

Spices

Cumin, sumac, cinnamon...

Nuts

Almond, pistachio, walnut...

Seeds

Sesame, nigella, coriander...

Grains

Rice, bulgur, couscous...

Legumes

Chickpeas, lentils, fava beans...

Cheeses

Feta, akkawi, labneh (strained yoghurt)...

Sauces

Tahini, harissa, hummus...

Breads

Pita, lavash, manakish...

Meats

Lamb, chicken, beef...

Significant flavours

A summary of the Eastern Mediterranean taste spectrum.



Warm & earthy

Cumin, coriander, cinnamon and allspice add warmth and depth.



Zesty & tangy

Preserved lemon, sumac and pomegranate bring zesty freshness.



Herbal & aromatic

Parsley, mint and oregano add bright and aromatic taste notes.



Spicy & smoky

Harissa, chili flakes and smoked paprika bring heat and intensity.



Rich & creamy

Tahini, yogurt and olive oil add creaminess and balance to bold flavours, for example.

8 reasons why this food culture is trending.

Incredible flavours, plant-based delights and powerful ingredients have made Eastern Mediterranean food a top trend.

1. Bold flavours

Things like sumac, za'atar, tahini, pomegranate molasses and labneh add depth and excitement to modern menus.

2. Fresh ingredients

Dishes packed with vibrant and diverse ingredients appeal to foodies and make a mark in social media feeds.

3. Wellness appeal

Fresh vegetables, legumes, lean proteins, olive oil and herbs, making it both flavourful and heart-healthy.

4. Sharing compatible

The meze-style of eating encourages sharing plates and social dining, which has gained popularity in restaurants.

5. Increased globalization

More people are traveling to Eastern Mediterranean destinations, bringing back a love for the food.

6. Street food boom

Street food, like shawarma, kebab and falafel, is now widely available, offering affordable and delicious options.

7. Vegan-friendly

Many traditional dishes, like hummus, tabbouleh, lentil soups, and roasted eggplant are naturally plant-based.

8. Sustainable cooking

This food culture emphasizes local, seasonal and simple ingredients, aligning with the sustainable food movement.

— Features superfoods like sumac and fermented delights such as yoghurt and torshi (pickles)!

— Packed with green protein sources like chickpeas, lentils and beans!

The new toolbox of Eastern Mediterranean flavourings.



- ✓ Eastern Mediterranean flavourings with a twist.
- ✓ Easy to find at your regular wholesaler(s).
- ✓ Suitable to use in several ways for multiple menu items.
- ✓ Perfect for all skill levels and types of food outlets.
- ✓ Developed and customised for professional kitchens.

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Shawarma Seasoning

Salt, cumin (11%), paprika (11%), coriander seed, onion, black pepper, turmeric, ginger, oregano, cloves, cinnamon, chilli pepper, natural citrus flavouring, anti-caking agent (E551, E536), smoked paprika, lemon peel (1%).



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Powdery mix of reds, browns and yellows.

Taste

Rich blend combining the warmth of paprika, earthy cumin and refreshing lemon zest with hints of coriander, cinnamon and chili.

Texture

Fine ground spices that allow even coating, nice mouthfeel and good flavour absorption.

Simply rub any meat or...

- Add to hummus for a savoury kick
- Season veg. mushroom shawarma
- Mix spicy mayos and vinaigrettes
- Flavour potatoes or cauliflower
- Spice up nuts and other snacks
- Infuse olive oil to drizzle over bread
- Make shawarma butter for steaks



Spice blend with all the taste notes you need to make a perfect shawarma.

USP

Unlike traditional shawarma blends, this one has a fresh twist of lemon

USP

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Zaatar Seasoning

SESAME seed (36%), salt, sumac (15%), garlic, red bell pepper, coriander leaf, oregano (4%), thyme, rapeseed oil, cumin, chilli pepper, anti-caking agent (E551), coriander leaf extract.



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Vibrant mix of green herbs, spices and sesame seeds.

Taste

A punch of flavour and a touch of elegance with earthy and herbal notes are paired with nuttiness from sesame and a tangy citrus hint from sumac.

Texture

Coarse and grainy because of sesame seeds and dried herbs.

Mix with olive oil and pair with bread or...

- Sprinkle over roasted greens
- Rub chicken, lamb and fish
- Complete bowls or nacho plates
- Stir into tahini to make a savoury dip
- Add zing to labneh or goat cheese
- Amp up avocado toasts
- Make butter to pour over popcorn



Cherished blend of earthy spices, fragrant herbs and tangy sumac berries.

USP

Both black and white sesame seeds make this Zaatar visually appealing

USP

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Tahini Sauce

Water, SESAME seeds (22%), garlic puree, roasted garlic puree (2.8%), concentrated lemon juice (1.9%), salt, sugar, garlic powder, acidity regulator (citric acid), modified maize starch, SESAME flavouring (0.2%), flavouring, black pepper, stabiliser (xanthan gum), onion powder.



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Creamy white and smooth sauce.

Taste

Nutty, earthy and rich sesame notes with a slight bitterness and freshness from lemon.

Texture

Silky with a quite thick but runny and pourable consistency.

Just serve, bundle with veggie sticks or...

- Mix with chickpeas to make hummus
- Spread as a base under grilled salmon
- Use for creamy salad dressings
- Pair with eggplant to get baba ganoush
- Spread on a plate, add roasted greens and sprinkle with Zaatar
- Add to sandwiches and paninis
- Serve with kebab and falafel



Sesame-based sauce and key ingredient in iconic Middle Eastern dishes.

USP

Compared to other tahini's, this is silky smooth and made with lemon juice

USP

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Harissa Sauce

Water, rapeseed oil, sriracha chilli (13%) (pickled chilli, sugar, water, modified maize starch, acidity regulator (E260), thickener (E415)), red bell pepper (13%), sugar, tomato paste (4.7%), red chilli puree, harissa seasoning (sugar, spices (other spices, cumin (0.1%)), red bell pepper, tomato, maltodextrin, salt, dried garlic, garlic, anti-caking agent (E551)), salt, ginger puree, white wine vinegar, acidity regulator (E260, E330), modified maize starch, garlic, coriander, cumin (0.5%), allspice, cloves ground, flavouring.



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Deep red, vibrant sauce.

Taste

A spicy and smoky set of flavours with distinctive chili heat, a hint of sweetness and fresh citrus notes to balance it all.

Texture

Smooth and creamy with tiny spice grains. Compared to other harissa varieties, this one is thin like a sauce rather than a paste.

Serve right away, swap the ketchup or...

- Add to hummus for a fiery kick
- Season shakshuka and tomato sauce
- Mix with honey and use as glaze
- Flavour olive oil to drizzle over pasta
- Combine with mayo and serve as dip
- Make harissa butter for corn cobs
- Spice up North African fish stew, Moroccan lamb stew and roasted chickpeas



North African chili sauce that brings generous warmth and depth of flavours.

USP

Because it's pourable and ready to serve, this harissa is different

USP

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Perserved Lemon Paste

Lemon puree (76%), water, acid (spirit vinegar), salt, modified maize starch, concentrated lemon juice.



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Smooth and light-yellow paste.

Taste

Spirited lemon flavour with pungent aroma from the peel and more acidic notes from the pulp and juice. All balanced with a pinch of salt.

Texture

Silky smooth with a thick yet pourable consistency.

Flavour sauces and dressings or...

- Spread on salmon before grilling
- Boost the taste of shakshukas
- Infuse marinades for chicken
- Stir into yogurt with garlic and herbs
- Mix with chopped olives and capers
- Add some tang to couscous or risotto
- Make chutney with onions and spices



The sunny taste of pickled lemons in a convenient paste format.

USP

Rare product with outstanding reviews, much thanks to its balanced taste

USP

EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN Chermoula Pesto

Sunflower oil, coriander (25%), parsley (23%), chilli pepper, potato flakes, wine vinegar, salt, potato starch, acidity regulator (E330, E270), garlic (0.6%), flavouring, cumin.



UMAMI



HEAT



SWEETNESS



ACIDITY

Appearance

Bright green paste with flecks of herbs and spices.

Taste

Rich and herbal thanks to a lot of coriander and parsley, but also a tangy kick from vinegar and slight spiciness from chili and garlic.

Texture

Smooth yet slightly grainy, much like an Argentinian chimichurri or an Italian pesto.

Serve with bread, mix with yoghurt or...

- Dress grilled meats and vegetables
- Use as topping for salads and bowls
- Spread on grilled cheese sandwiches
- Spice up shrimp cocktails and moulles
- Drizzle over poached eggs
- Stir into rice and potato salads
- Mix with cream for simple pasta sauces



Oily paste combining loads of fresh herbs for a rich taste.

USP

One-of-a-kind pesto with classic chermoula herbs, but no cheese or nuts

USP

Cooking techniques

These techniques help you capture the rich and vibrant flavours of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Grilling is a favoured technique for cooking meats and vegetables, even some fruits. This method highlights the natural flavours of the ingredients, often enhanced with marinades or spices. Kebabs and grilled vegetables are staple dishes.

Roasting is used for meats, vegetables and nuts, providing a depth of flavour and a crisp texture. It's particularly popular for preparing lamb and eggplants.

Baking is essential, especially for making the wide variety of breads that are central to every meal, like pita and lavash. Sweets and pies, like baklava and sambousek (stuffed pastry), are also commonly baked.

Slow cooking or **stewing** is a technique used to make rich, flavourful dishes that fully incorporate the flavours of spices and herbs with main ingredients like meats and legumes. This method is perfect for dishes like tagines and bean stews.

Deep-frying is used to create crispy textures and deep flavours. Foods like falafel, kibbeh (stuffed meat croquettes), and various fritters are usually prepared using this method.

Sautéing is used to cook food quickly at a relatively high temperature in a small amount of oil. It's often used for cooking onions and garlic which form the base for many dishes.

Steaming is less common but still used, particularly for cooking couscous (traditionally steamed over a stew) or certain stuffed vegetables.

Poaching is occasionally used for gently cooking delicate foods like fish or eggs in a flavourful liquid.

Broiling is used to achieve a charred, smoky flavour on the surface of the food, like grilling. This is often used to finish dishes or cooking thin cuts of meat quickly.

Great way to tap into the fire cooking trend!

Falafel probably originates from Egypt and the original ingredient appears to be fava beans!



Drink pairings

Consider the rich flavours and bold spices when pairing beverages with Eastern Mediterranean food. Here are some well-suited options.

Non-alcoholic drinks

Mint Tea can cleanse the palate and complement nearly any dish. Especially heavy or rich foods.

Ayran is a yogurt-based drink that is both refreshing and excellent for balancing the spices in Eastern Mediterranean dishes. It's particularly good with grilled meats and spicy foods.

Lemon Mint Juice is a vibrant and refreshing drink that pairs well with rich foods, helping to cut through the heaviness and refresh the palate.

Tamarind Juice is known for its sweet and tangy flavour, which pairs well with spicy foods. It can also balance the richness of meat-heavy dishes.

Rosewater Lemonade adds a floral twist to the traditional lemonade, making it a fragrant complement to bold spices.

Hibiscus Tea is floral, slightly tart and preferably served cold with food. It works well with meze platters and seafood.

Black Tea with Cardamom is a warm, aromatic pairing for desserts like baklava or dates.

Turkish Coffee is thick, strong and a bold finish to a meal. Especially if the meal ends with sweet desserts like baklava or Turkish delight.

Carob juice is a dark, naturally sweet and made from carob pods. It pairs well with grilled meats and aged cheese, like akkawi.

Popular during Ramadan!

Gazoz is a trending drink from the Middle East, made by mixing carbonated water, fruit, herbs and syrup. Try these pairings:

- Zested lemon (or Preserved Lemon Paste), fennel seeds and shiso
- Kiwi, rose and sage
- Plum shrub, cinnamon and star anise
- Raspberry, vanilla, cream soda and mint

Alcoholic Drinks

Aniseed spirits like arak, ouzo and raki bring liqu-orce notes that pair well with grilled meats and rich, oily dishes.

Turn milky white when mixed with water!

Aromatic whites, such as Gewürztraminer complement the spices in Eastern Mediterranean dishes without overpowering them. Riesling brings a slight sweetness that balances harissa-spiced lamb or muhammara, while Sauvignon Blanc adds crisp and citrusy notes that are perfect for fresh salads, hummus and seafood.

Lighter reds, like Pinot Noir, can be a good match for lamb and beef kebabs as they provide a nice balance without overwhelming the flavours. Those wines usually pair well with eggplant dishes and spiced stews too.

Dry rosé is a great all-around choice for Eastern Mediterranean food. Especially meze, grilled meats and spicy dishes.

Light and crisp pilsners are great with falafel, hummus and grilled halloumi. But also seafood and grilled vegetables.

Belgian witbier add citrus and coriander flavours that match perfectly with fresh herbs and yoghurt-based dishes like tzatziki and labneh.

Malty amber ale brings caramel notes that balance out spicy dishes like kofta and Moroccan tagines.

Hoppy IPA can amplify Eastern Mediterranean dishes with garlic, sumac and fresh herbs. It carries bitterness and citrusy flavours that work well with grilled meats like shawarma.

Roasty porter adds chocolaty smokiness that's perfect for lamb, grilled eggplant and desserts.

Plant-based by default

Many Eastern Mediterranean dishes are plant-based, which means they are suitable for a wide audience including vegans and people with allergies. This tendency is partly cultural and religious, due to fasting practices that restrict the consumption of animal products at certain times. It also supports a smooth workflow where special orders and weird meat imitations are unnecessary. Here are some great examples of plant-based originals.

Hummus

Spread made from cooked and mashed chickpeas blended with tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic, and salt.

Falafel

Deep-fried balls made from ground chickpeas or fava beans, mixed with herbs and spices.

Tabbouleh

Salad typically made with parsley, tomatoes, mint, onion, bulgur, and seasoned with olive oil, lemon juice, salt and pepper.

Baba Ganoush

Dip made from roasted eggplants mixed with tahini, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic and various seasonings.

Dolma

Grape leaves stuffed with a mixture of rice, pine nuts, and aromatic herbs. While some versions include meat, many are vegetarian.

Fattoush

Bread salad made from toasted or fried pieces of pita bread combined with mixed greens, such as radishes and tomatoes. It's commonly dressed with lemon juice and olive oil.

Mujaddara

Dish made with lentils and rice, typically topped with caramelized onions.

Manakeesh

Flatbread that can be topped with a variety of ingredients, including zaatar and olive oil.

In addition, several dishes are (lacto-ovo) vegetarian. Such as:

Shakshuka

Poached eggs in a spiced tomato and bell pepper sauce, often with feta.

Grilled Halloumi

Fried or grilled halloumi cheese, often served with honey or herbs.

Eggah

Baked omelette with herbs and vegetables, similar to a frittata.



Foodie folklore and fun facts

*Pro tip:
Add to spike
the menu!*

The Eastern Mediterranean food culture is packed with history, tradition and unexpected twists. Get ready to discover the delicious stories behind the beloved flavours.

Baking with magic

The pocket in a pita bread forms because steam is trapped inside while baking at high heat.

Sprinkable brain food

In some Middle Eastern regions, it's believed that zaatar can enhance brain function. Which is why Lebanese children are sometimes encouraged to add the spice blend to their meals before taking exams.

A royal treat

The modern version of baklava was likely created in Istanbul during the Ottoman Empire. Under the sultan's watch, elite palace guards (janissaries) were served trays of baklava to celebrate Ramadan.

The milk of lions

Arak is made with aniseed, which contains anethole. This key aromatic compound is soluble in alcohol but not in water. That's why arak turns milky when mixed with water. Because of this chemical reaction, arak is called "milk of lions" in the countries of origin. The phenomenon is also referred to as "the ouzo effect".

From rags to riches

Mujaddara was originally considered poor man's food, as it was created to provide maximum nutrition at minimum cost. However, it's now beloved comfort food that appeal to a wide range of people.

Not technically cheese, but...

Labneh is basically yoghurt cheese. By straining yoghurt for hours, excess whey is removed, turning it into a thick, spreadable "cheese".

Before there was lemon

Long before lemons became widely available in the Eastern Mediterranean, sumac berries were the go-to ingredient for adding tangy acidity to foods.

Same thing, different names

Stuffed grape leaves have many names. They're called "dolma" in Turkey, "warak enab" in Lebanon and "sarma" in Balkan countries.

Meet the meaty family

Döner kebab from Turkey inspired shawarma in the Levant and eventually led to Greek gyros. It's also the grandmother of Tacos al Pastor, as Lebanese immigrants introduced the Mexicans to shawarma.

Modern classic with ancient roots

In the 2000s, chefs like Nigella Lawson and Yotam Ottolenghi "broke the internet" by sharing their recipes for watermelon and feta salad. But this combo has been enjoyed for centuries.

Baking predates farming

Charred fragments of flatbread, baked roughly 14,500 years ago in Jordan, have provided researchers with an unexpected discovery: People were making bread long before the advent of agriculture (which also happened in the Eastern Mediterranean, but 12,000 years ago).

Keys to Eastern MEDITERRANEAN taste

