

Charles Akl

Food for Copts

ذاء للقبطي

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FOOD FOR COPTS

Back cover of the book:

Everything Abla Nazira left out of her famous cookbook! A journey into the Egyptian Coptic kitchen, revealing its little-known intricacies: a hundred and twenty different ways to make *ful medames*, and hints and tips on how to get around the vegan bent of Coptic fasting, which lasts for a good part of the year. Drawing on daily menus and traditional recipes, Akl delves into secret-filled homes to describe, in multi-layered language generously seasoned with his acerbic wit, the customs, practices and values of a minority community that has resolutely closed in on itself to protect its cultural identity within a not-always-friendly larger society. Prepare yourself for a tasty lesson in anthropology, literature, cooking and appreciating food!

Charles Akl is an Alexandrian who hates being a writer less than he hates other professions. He loves to sit.

The Copts in Ramadan (excerpt)

A study of Coptic school sandwiches – or how to end up with the best chicken sandwich in the world.

We've touched briefly on how the food industry in Egypt is affected by periods of Coptic fasting as a result of an entire group of people moving in a specific dietary direction. A similar phenomenon happens in Ramadan. And here, I'm not bringing up Ramadan only to talk about how the Muslim fast affects the food industry, nor just to round out the conversation about fasting in general. Food industry demographics and the general concept of fasting are not, in and of themselves, the subject of this study – the Coptic kitchen is. But it's necessary to mention the Ramadan fast because it affects the Coptic kitchen in two ways: one direct and the other indirect.

The direct effect is seen when certain products flood the local market, and there's a surge in television advertising for them. You find the shops teeming with different brands of ghee, oil, fresh nuts and dried fruits. Some establishments begin to sell so many seasonal products it can seem like

they've switched to an entirely different line of business. The *fino* bakery, for example – which normally only sells baguette-shaped *fino* bread – starts offering *kunafa*, *qatayef* and various other oriental sweets. These are all promoted with enticing sales and discounts, and sparkling adverts are found in every imaginable medium, making them impossible for Copts to ignore. The result is that Christian families change their diets during Ramadan, and Coptic homes are filled with the same foods that crowd the market, and the homes of Muslim families. After all, sales and discounts have no religion.

The indirect result of these Ramadan-linked changes in the food industry is the sense of guilt that afflicts the Copt when he consumes extravagant amounts of *kunafa*, *qatayef* and all the other Ramadan products. There's no religious reason for the guilt; it stems from Coptic Christians' sense of parity. In spite of their smaller numbers, they constantly compare the considerable influence of the Islamic diet on them and their influence on Muslim families who, on the contrary, are hardly affected by Christian dietary considerations, since those aren't so openly and relentlessly advertised in public spaces.

The effect of this lopsided comparison is amplified in places where Christian and Muslim families come together in an environment where a recurring food ritual occurs. The workplace, for example, is a social setting where Muslims and Christians meet, and where every so often essential food rituals take place. This proximity obliges the Christian to refrain from eating during Ramadan. The obligation is partly self-imposed, as the Christian, offering solidarity to his hungry colleague, doesn't want to eat in front of him. The rest of the obligation is imposed on the Copt by some Muslim zealots, and is expressed either as an outright objection, or in the best scenario, through whispering and disapproving looks. In some cases, there's conspicuous grumbling and tut-tutting if a Christian eats a sandwich or smokes a cigarette during the day in Ramadan, and occasionally, threats are openly made and security forces move to arrest people in working-class coffee shops who are not observing the fast. In such situations, the Christian is forced into dark, abandoned rooms, or onto the emergency staircase, or under his desk, or into the bathroom to get his caffeine or nicotine fix and practice his food rituals.

Most of the time, the Copt will readily choose to adhere to Ramadan eating rules in public places. But if he feels the matter has been forced on him, or includes any element of compulsion, a psychological complex will begin to form and a covert emotional war will start inside him. This inner turmoil might declare itself through a simple slip of the tongue or in an argument, but if it's not released through a healthy outlet, it could escalate into a tactical, long-term revenge plan – a plan that affects the very identity of the Coptic kitchen.

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And now, let's turn to school: another environment where Muslim and Coptic citizens mingle, but this time, the smaller-sized ones. And in this case, rather than a mature, free community, it's a society of little clones, controlled by the thin strings which connect these munchkins to their parents, so they become hidden extensions of their begetters, and an outlet for all their complexes and issues with power, authority, citizenship and equality. Every move these miniatures make is determined by the whims of their controllers, who regulate their behavior at home and at school. But during the short, half-hour, mid-day break – when the children enjoy some degree of freedom – most, in fact nearly all, of the strings that control each child are released, except for one: the sandwich.

During break, the sandwich is the only reminder of the child's ties to home. And it's taken very seriously: warnings and threats precede its handing over to the child, and monitoring and surveillance follow. But it's not just a symbol of the child's submission to his family and evidence of his obedience, it's also a coded message, a statement to the world from the sandwich maker, who is usually the mother. The type of bread, the filling, the number of sandwiches: all these are secret signs and symbols with which a mother determines her child's state of mind at school, and where he or she fits in the social-economic hierarchy. So how can we even think about discussing Coptic food – its meaning, significance and standing – without taking a closer look at the Coptic school sandwich?

I'm going to speak here about my personal experience. It may not apply to many others, but some may agree with my recollections. In any case, my experience alone counts, and represents the Coptic school sandwich, at least to a degree. The sandwiches my mother made me were, by the most conservative assessment, above average. The bread was always top-quality, with fillings that ranged from assorted cheeses to smoked meats and – rarely – luncheon meat. There would be vegetable toppings too: cucumbers and colorful bell-peppers, but never tomatoes. My mother knew full well how nutritious and rich in anti-oxidants tomatoes are, but she also knew they would make the bread soggy and, by break time, the sandwich would have fallen to pieces. This was a mistake many other mothers made, and their children would end up licking a collapsed mess off the bottom of their sandwich bags, trying to lap up the chunks of white cheese and tomato that had scattered from the torn, mushy bread. Here lies some good advice for sandwich-making: don't put tomatoes in sandwiches that won't be eaten until later.

The appearance of a student's sandwich – including the type of bread, fillings and toppings – gives a shorthand impression of their family. First of all, the fact that it is a sandwich, and not a bag of potato chips or a packet of cookies, shows that the parents are interested in giving their child healthy food and a proper upbringing. The absence of tomatoes, and hence an intact sandwich, suggest

a minimum level of education and intelligence; the presence and quantity of meat in the fillings is an expression of the family's economic standard; variety in the types of cheeses is a measure of culture and sophistication; the toppings and overall look of the sandwich denote the level of luxury the family lives in; and the quality of the bread signals whether or not the child is a good target for sandwich-nabbing. All this might be true, or it might be a statement the family consciously chooses to make to society in the form of a sandwich.

I've described above how my sandwiches normally looked, and what they contained on a typical school day. But there are two situations where the sandwich – and all its weighty connotations – must change, and those are our fast, and their fast; that is to say, the Coptic fast and the Ramadan fast. These are special times, when the role of the sandwich goes beyond filling hungry bellies and takes on a wider social and educational significance. During our fast, where only vegan items and sometimes sea-food is allowed, choices for fillings become extremely limited, sending the siyami – fast-compliant – sandwich plummeting to a below average level, and implying that the child who owns said sandwich belongs to a lower socio-economic group. This could make him feel inferior when he compares his sandwiches to those of his Muslim colleagues, which are bursting with luncheon meat or eggs with *basterma* – fenugreek-laden cured-beef. Also, Coptic children might end up developing a disdain for fasting, and turning away from it altogether.

Muslim families at school didn't pay much attention to the Coptic fast. First of all, the numbers involved were hardly big enough to attract interest; in our class, for example, there were 40 Muslim boys and only two Copts. Secondly, Coptic fasting isn't particularly noticeable since a fasting Copt eats, and doesn't refrain from food completely, as is the case with Ramadan fasting. So sandwich fillings don't immediately spring to mind as an obvious point for comparison. But to overlook them would be wrong because humans are base by nature, and no one can ignore the contents of his colleague's sandwich. As soon as someone starts to eat a sandwich, the nearby person's senses will perk up, and he'll try to see, smell and hear what the other person is eating. This is especially true, for example, when the sandwich filling is something as outrageous as eggs with *basterma*, which the human nose can detect at a great distance, while an experienced ear can more or less identify the fried *basterma*'s level of crispiness just from the sound of its crunch. The Muslim probably has no idea how this assault on the senses affects the fasting Christian.

That's why, when we were fasting, my mother's sandwich-making abilities and creative energy would shine, and she'd come up with innovative fillings that kicked my sandwiches up to top-notch status. During the fasting period, we'd change our usual bakery, and my father would make his way to the Cleopatra district in Alexandria specially to buy the best kinds of *fino* bread from Misbah's bakery on Port Said Street. And my mother would be fired up with enthusiasm to show off her talents

in making superlative sandwiches. The *ful* would be at its best, the stewed fava beans dressed up with snazzy trimmings like green olives or home-pickled lemons; the falafel would be homemade and garnished with tahini sauce and posh iceberg lettuce; tuna would take on new dimensions and importance; and olives would be served in ways we wouldn't see again for the rest of the year and would assume foreign names, such as tapenade – a spread made of black olives blended with garlic, coriander, capers, lemon juice and olive oil. New and unexpected ingredients would show up on the sandwich menu, like eggplant in a variety of options – fried, mashed into a *baba ghanoug* dip, or mixed with vegetables into a monk's salad, which, surprisingly, makes the best sandwiches. More vegetables would top the eggplant, including plenty of arugula and colored bell peppers. The plain tahini-halwa sandwiches, which I wasn't fond of as they were normally boring, would be jazzed up with nuts including almonds, hazelnuts and walnuts. And homemade jams would appear, made from seasonal produce, and full of chunks of fresh fruit whose natural sweetness kept the jams pleasantly tart.

My mother would embark on cooking escapades which, due to her bold experimental nature, often had unexpected results. This led to the creation of one of the most important sandwiches ever to have graced this world, one which many people found unusual at first, but grew to enjoy after tasting it: the fried artichoke sandwich with *siyami* mayonnaise. This concoction started out as an adventurous attempt to make a change – a break in our routine menu – but it was so good that my brother and I asked for it again and again, even when we weren't fasting. With this magical combination, a new taste burst to life that had never before been tried in school sandwiches, but it wasn't strange or off-putting. There was a faint note of fried chicken about it, because it tasted just as good, but it had its own unique flavor. It made you see vegetables in a whole new light: the crunchy outer layer, the rush of deliciousness from the warm soft inside – even hours after it was prepared – and the perfect harmony between the slight bitterness in the artichokes and the *siyami* mayonnaise. It was a peculiar amalgam of ingredients, each of which you might not necessarily enjoy on its own, but it attracted the curiosity and approval of everyone who tasted my sandwiches at school, which they did in tiny, measured bites, accompanied by threats and promises of dire consequences for anyone who got carried away and overindulged.

The artichoke isn't just fried, it's first marinated in vinegar so it softens without losing its flavor, as it would if boiled. Then it's coated in a rich mix of seasonings combining mustard, garlic powder, lemon juice, dried coriander leaves (or dried mint, or both), black pepper (or cumin, or both) and salt. I usually prefer using less of the spices which resemble each other, or which are very strong, to keep the overall taste coherent. That's why I believe no recipe should be followed closely, except after some experimentation, so each person can arrive at their preferred balance of flavors that best

suits their tastes. Returning now to the artichoke, the next step is to fry it in oil. The lemon juice makes the fried artichokes crunchier, and the vinegar makes the artichoke hearts more tender than frying alone would do. The resulting fusion of luscious smoothness and bold flavor takes artichokes, and fried food in general, to whole new heights.

Siyami mayonnaise differs slightly in taste from the *fitari* – non-compliant with fasting – kind, and it's best, instead of comparing them, to consider their merits as separate dressings, each being good in its own way. The *siyami* version is made from oil, vinegar, mustard, lemon juice, salt and white pepper, with mashed potatoes (also *siyami*) folded into the mix. To give the mayonnaise its gelatinous texture, a mixture of starch and water is cooked on low heat and stirred continuously. The previous ingredients are then added to the starchy paste and everything is combined in an electric blender until it thickens. In my mother's special recipe, she adds peas and beetroot, an ingenious twist that frees the *siyami* mayonnaise from all comparisons with its *fitari* counterpart and transforms it into a new and attractive vegetable dish that was so appealing we used to eat it by itself.

This sums up the sandwich situation during our fast. As for their fast, the Ramadan fast, that was a delicate affair. My brother and I, and most of the Christians I knew at school, used to feel embarrassed to eat our sandwiches in front of our fasting colleagues, many of whom started to fast at a very young age. At first, we tried taking sandwiches with us, and eating them, shamefacedly, in dark corners around school, but we soon felt that this could drive others away from us, and we didn't want to commit any strange or extreme acts that might fray the national tapestry of life. So we decided, for the most part, to fast during Ramadan. Our parents disapproved initially, but at our insistence, eventually gave in to what we wanted. Even though they did the same themselves at work, they had hoped their sons would raise the revolutionary Christian flag, which they hadn't had the courage to hoist themselves. They used our young age as an excuse, saying we wouldn't be able to stand the long hours of hunger, and that we had a biological justification, an advantage that would make the constant comparisons work more in our favor. For we follow their fast, and they don't follow ours – as long as it remains “us” and “them.”

