



Whether it is traditional grilled meats infused with spices, saffron flavoured coffee or its own brand of sticky *halwa*, Oman's gastronomic offerings are waiting to be discovered at every corner.

words // Pallavi Pasricha

Omani cuisine is perhaps the country's best kept secret, rooted in Middle Eastern traditions, and adding its own magic with flavours that have lingered over generations.

In a country where the desert and mountains merge into a 1700-long kilometre coastline; meats, seafood and dates dominate the local palate. But since Oman lay on the famed spice route, one often stumbles upon the subtle nuances of Arabian, African and even Indian food as the delicate aroma of cinnamon and saffron drifted into Omani kitchens.

From street food like lamb, skewered fresh off the grill, to local delicacies such as the pit-roasted *Shuwa* and Omani *halwa* served at posh restaurants, the capital city of Muscat is perhaps the best place to sample Oman's time-tested recipes.

FROM QAHWA TO KEBABS



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KEBABS AND BARBEQUES

The aroma of meat grilling will hit you from a distance as food stalls on street corners busily skewer the country's favourite snack, *Mishkak*. This is meat cut into pieces, seasoned overnight with fragrant Omani spices, and served hot with chilli or a tamarind sauce. These impromptu barbeques offer a range of meats such as camel, lamb, chicken and squid. These are no ordinary kebabs – the slightly charred chunks of meat are spicier and tangier due to the unexpected addition of tamarind. One of the best places to cut your teeth on the flavoursome *mishkak* is Qurum Beach near Love Street, where

every evening people gather near the grilling stations.

QAHWA, CHAI AND BREAD

For a desert where temperatures often soar beyond 50 degrees celsius, Omanis take their hot drinks very seriously, be it *Qahwa* (Omani coffee) or *Chai Karak*. *Qahwa*, freshly brewed with rosewater, saffron and cardamom, is not coffee as many of us know it - there is no milk, and since sugar is never added, it is served with dates to balance the slightly bitter taste. An intrinsic part of Omani culture and hospitality, there is no getting away from the steaming, brown liquid handed to you—it is considered rude to refuse

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the first cup of coffee offered to a guest. Also keep in mind that handing the cup back straight is a signal that you want more so they will pour more coffee. Otherwise, just shake the cup from side to side to indicate that you are done.

Chai karak is made with condensed milk and cardamom giving it a creamy, delicate flavour. A local favourite, consumed several times a day, there are various small tea shops and kiosks where you can relax over this brew.

But what steals the show is the paper thin Omani bread called *Khubz Rakhal*, the traditional accompaniment with *chai karak* at breakfast, which is somewhat like a crepe. Stuffed with cheese, eggs or honey, this crackly flat bread is best eaten hot off the pan. If you get a chance, watch how locals expertly spread the dough evenly with their hand on a hot cast iron griddle, break an egg on it and then swiftly take it out without breaking it – it is fascinating. The *rakhal* or stuffing has become innovative as Omanis adapt to modern times: think chocolate spread or the popular potato chips called ‘Chips Oman’.

A DATE WITH DATES

There is no escaping dates in Oman. This sweet, sticky fruit is omnipresent- offered at home, sprinkled on salads or turned into a sweet sauce for meat. But it is perhaps in the Omani bread, *Maldouf*, that dates truly take on the avatar of comfort food.



Bait Al Luban restaurant is one of the best places in Muscat to ask for a basket of these traditional date breads. Dates even have their own souk - the one in Nizwa, Oman’s oldest town, which is an hour away from Muscat and is the best place to pick them up.

RICE DOES MATTER

When it comes to dining with families, Omanis prefer to eat in private, usually sitting on the floor. Hence, many restaurants have

family dining areas where they eat from a big communal platter in which the popular rice dish called *Majboos* or *Kabsa* occupies pride of place. In this, the meat is cooked separately with onion and garlic and then mixed with the rice prepared with saffron and cardamom resulting in an aromatic yellow and creamy dish. Chicken Kabuli is yet another popular rice dish which is rich in flavours due to the generous dash of spices like cardamom, cloves and cinnamon.

ESSENTIALS	COUNTRY	LANGUAGE	CURRENCY	TEMPERATURE	SOUVENIRS
	Oman	Arabic and English	Omani Rial (OMR)	50°C (max) and 15°C (min)	Halwa, Chips Oman, frankincense, silver jewellery and crafts



Omani *halwa*, made of corn flour, sugar, clarified butter and rose-water, is traditionally slow cooked over a wood fire and topped with spices like cardamom.

MEATS

The hero of Omani cuisine is pit-roasted *Shuwa*, the country's favourite dish, whose preparation is an art in itself. The cooking requires painstaking effort as the meat is rubbed with traditional spices and date juices and then carefully wrapped in banana or palm leaves and put in an underground sand oven for at least 12 hours. The result is the softest, juiciest, melt-in-the-mouth meat with a spicy crust and a smoky flavour. Served on a bed of rice and eaten communally, *shuwa* is an intrinsic part of festivals. Its taste will vary according to the spices in which it is marinated – some prefer them fiery with a generous splash of chillies while others like it more flavoursome. Among seafood, *Rabees*, from the southern part is a favourite dish prepared with shark, fried along with the liver.

SWEET ENDING

What makes the nation go weak in the knees (and those with a sweet tooth will follow suit) is Omani *halwa* which has acquired a cult status. This sticky dessert, made of corn flour, sugar, clarified butter and rose-water, is traditionally slow cooked over a wood fire and topped with spices like cardamom. Some variations are made with dates, but this fudge-like sweet is worth every calorie and the right note on which to wrap up your culinary odyssey in Oman. ✨