

# “Kon vino i esperansa todo se alkansa”: Cuisine and Cultural Memory in the Sephardic Jewish Diaspora

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## Abstract

The Catholic monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabel, expelled the Sephardic Jews from Spain in 1492. Though there no longer remains any tangible trace of their existence, Sephardic Jewry once formed an integral population on the Iberian Peninsula. After they left Spain and resettled in various locations, such as modern-day nations including Morocco, Turkey, Greece, the Netherlands, and Curaçao, they used food as a tool of cultural integration and religious preservation as well as a way to access the emotional ties to their distant homeland. Their cuisine was the medium through which they maintained their heritage, identity, and cultural memory even as they explored and integrated new culinary elements gained from their entry into foreign communities. In my project “*Kon vino i esperansa todo se alkansa: Cuisine and Cultural Memory in the Sephardic Jewish Diaspora*,” I will explore the multivalent processes of migration, assimilation, and cultural retention in the Sephardic Jewish diaspora using food as my focus. By conducting literature-based research about the Sephardic dispersion and by recreating recipes from five distinct geographic destinations, I hope to elucidate how Sephardic cuisine changed in each location and what these transformations can reveal about the greater diaspora. Further, using the example of Sephardic Jewry and its cuisine, I intend to illustrate the critical role food plays in shaping and preserving communal connection and cultural identity.

## A (Very) Select Bibliography

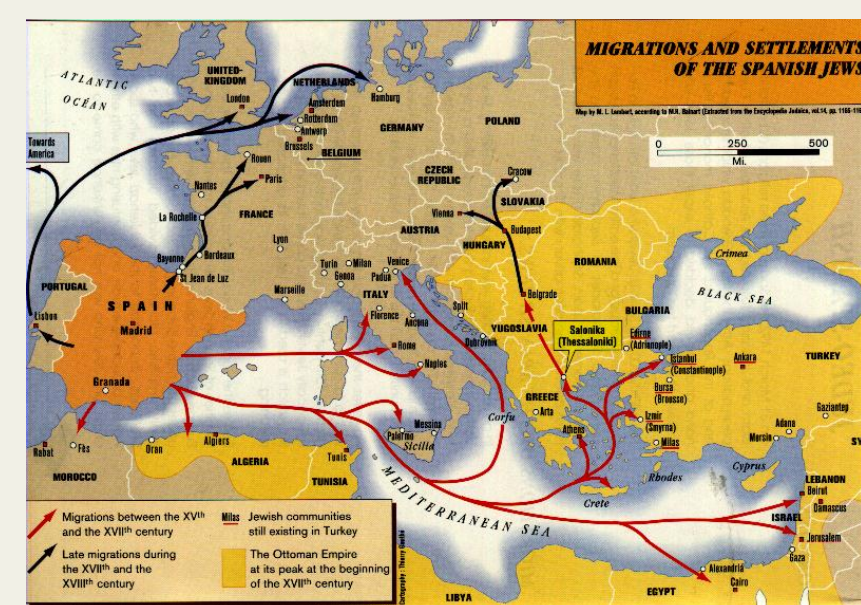
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## Starting questions

- What did Sephardic cuisine and food culture look like before the diaspora?
- What were the factors that most aided or hindered the assimilation of the Sephardic Jews in these five locations?
- How was this assimilation expressed through food?
- What was the Sephardic aspect of the food in these five locations?
- How did Sephardic food culture change over time in these locations and how does that reflect their relationship to the Sephardim’s contemporary society?
- Was there a location that allowed for a particularly harmonious union of Sephardic and non-Sephardic culinary heritage and cultural identity?
- How does food act as a signifier of cultural identity?
- How is this mostly unknown history applicable to food ritual and culture today?

## Methodology

Use sources from a variety of genres – including historical texts, agricultural and economic records, artistic representation, poetry and literature, and cookbooks – to recreate Sephardic culinary identity as it changed throughout five locations of the diaspora and analyze how their food reflected their complex relationships with their new locations of settlement.



## Pre-Expulsion Sephardic Life in Spain

- Historical connection to the Iberian Peninsula – arrived 3<sup>rd</sup> century or before.
- Sociocultural, political, and economic significance in the caliphate of al-Andalus.
- Context of the *convivencia*, the period of simultaneous toleration and living among the three Abrahamic faiths on the Iberian peninsula.
- “Those who left the peninsula took with them their well-defined Sephardic traditions” (Gampel, 34)

## Some conclusions, remaining questions

- The most interesting and complex displays of cultural integration are to be found where there are also parallel non-Sephardic Jewish populations with whom the Sephardic exiles interacted.
- Often in the places where Sephardim were legally allowed or welcomed, there was the greatest culinary evidence of assimilation.
- Physical space and organization plays an important role in this analysis – physical proximity, being neighbors or within the same neighborhood especially, engendered greater social interaction among Sephardic and non-Sephardic populations, aiding their assimilation, which became reflected in their food choices.
- Important role of Sephardim in cultivating, trading, and popularizing many foods we still eat today, ie artichokes, eggplants, citrus.
- Sephardic cuisine closely resembles that which we call the Mediterranean Diet; in many ways, Sephardim became so assimilated that it is hard to differentiate between the two.
- Sephardic cuisine often equally or more greatly influenced the culinary culture of the places they settled post-expulsion.
- Even when a given population had tenuous relationships with the Sephardic Jews – be they Muslims, Christians, or other Jews – often they shared with, helped to shape, and were influenced by Sephardic food culture.
- Lingering connection to Spain and Spanish identity: what did pre-expulsion Sephardic cuisine and cultural heritage look like?
- How can we begin to bring this understanding to shift our modern perception of Jewish history, which is so often Ashkenazi-centric (Ashkenormative)?

## Acknowledgements

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## The Ottoman Empire

- Istanbul (Constantinople), Izmir (Smyrna), Edirne (Adrianople), Salonika (Thessaloniki), Safed, and Rhodes
- *Dhimmi* status – overarching Islamic culture and society
- Full integration but simultaneously varied across locations
- Some of the most well-known Sephardic dishes today are of Ottoman Sephardic origin
- Preservation of Ladino and strong Sephardic identity
- Notable dishes: *borekas*, *boyos*, *keftes*

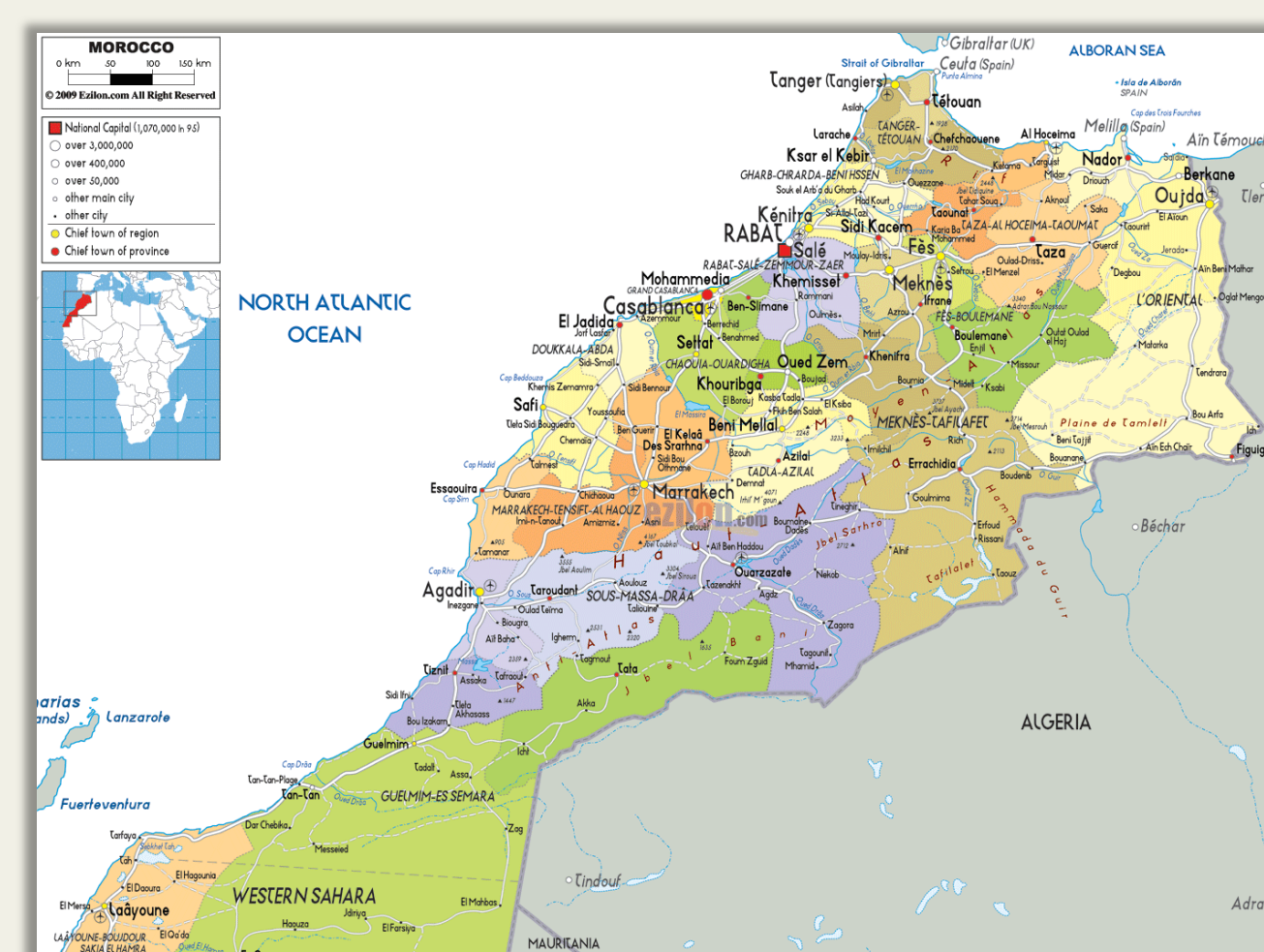


## Italy

- Four cities: Livorno, Venice, Ferrara, Ancona
- Spectrum of acceptance and assimilation – mostly based on economic benefit of Sephardim
- Tensions among Sephardic, Ashkenazi, and indigenous Italian Jews
- Notable dishes: *carciofi*, *bomba*, *pasticcio*

## Morocco

- Established connection between Spain and Morocco prior to expulsion
- Half of the Sephardic Jews who were expelled hopped over the Strait of Gibraltar to Morocco – huge density of Sephardim
- Complex relationships with indigenous Moroccan Jewish community, Berber tribes, European populations
- Different example of Islamic society
- North to South difference in Sephardic/Spanish influence
- Notable dishes: *zeilouk d'aubergine*, *adafina*, *couscous*



## The Netherlands

- Focus: Holland
- Majority were *conversos* who had settled in Portugal as Christians while still secretly practicing Judaism then made their way to the Low Countries in the 17<sup>th</sup> c.
- Practice of Jewish identity was very different, no indigenous Jewish population
- Religiously-tolerant Christian context, economic importance of Sephardim, different agricultural production
- Notable dishes: *boterkoeke*, *bolas* (doughnuts), *shkanah*



## Curaçao

- Influence of time in the Netherlands
- Historical primacy – were some of the first on the island, thereby helping to establish the culinary and national culture
- Intermixing with slave, Dutch, and Spanish populations – role in colonialism and slave trade through economic connection
- Completely distinct agricultural context – much more tropical, unlike previous culinary culture
- One of the most harmonious cultural integrations I studied
- Notable dishes: *tutu*, *funchi*, *panlevi*

