

# *On the Historical Raison d'être of Arabic Cookery Literature: An Essay on Productive Idleness*

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**ABSTRACT:** Cookbooks do not write themselves. Like any book, in any language or genre, they have authors and readers and cooks that use them and, in periods prior to print, also scribes who copied them in manuscript form. In medieval Iraq, cookery books were born out of idleness. Furthermore, they were not necessarily penned by cooks. The article probes the question of why and how recipe collections were created. Using a variety of sources—such as biographical dictionaries, the literary form known as mirrors for princes, and illuminated manuscripts—the article explores the political and social environment that led to the development of cooking and cookbook-writing as leisure activities of the caliph and his entourage. It contends that in medieval Baghdad, idleness led not only to the invention of dishes, but also to a whole literary genre: cookery books in Arabic.

**T**HE ARAB CUISINE, in terms of the number of extant manuscripts in one language, is the oldest fully documented cuisine that currently exists. Its large collection is comprised of thirty-five culinary manuscripts, copies of ten cookery books from Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Tunisia, and al-Andalus (Islamic Spain), and over four thousand recipes. This is only a fraction of a vivid textual tradition, mostly lost today. While the sources do not tell us how exactly cookbooks came into being, they occasionally allude to the circumstances of their composition: “These faults [of respecting hygiene rules] have led many caliphs and many kings to cook in person, so much

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so that they have created dishes and composed many culinary treatises.”<sup>1</sup> However, while this is the reason for cooking, it is not the cause for compiling or owning recipe collections; other political and societal circumstances made court agents write down their creations in the kitchen. Two elements differentiate Arabic cookbooks from medieval cookbooks written in other languages: their compilers’ identities and their *raison d’être*. Through examination of various contemporary sources, this article probes the question of what led court members to create recipe collections. It investigates the relationship between idleness, court culture, and creative endeavors.

## POLITICS OF COOKING

Finding faults in the cooking of their professional cooks resulted from the ruling elite’s desire to create a new court tradition. The latter emerged when the Abbasid caliphs (750–1258)—whose ascent to the caliphate power was, as in most regimes, achieved through violent struggles and wars with neighboring empires—started developing their own court culture that was a beacon for later Islamic dynasties in the region. This court culture came into being thanks to the political stability that followed the civil war in the ninth century as well as social dynamics inside the caliphal court in later generations—the caliphal family simply grew bigger, as each caliph had many children. In fact, after the reign of caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 754–75), his children and later generations no longer left Baghdad to govern the provinces of the caliphate in order to create their own dynasties. As Hugh Kennedy explains:

The generation of caliph Mansūr’s [*sic*] children did not have the same opportunities to establish their own sub-dynasties. Apart from his son and heir Mahdi [*sic*], the caliph had eleven other sons. Few of them led charmed lives. [...] Unlike the earlier generation, they remained firmly based in Baghdad and some were active at court.<sup>2</sup>

Some of the caliph’s offspring received the duty to escort a pilgrimage to Mecca or were appointed temporarily as provincial governors.<sup>3</sup> During the caliphate’s third generation, of caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775–85) and his seven sons, the non-heirs were more active in running the caliphate.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it was clear that not all could play a central role in the regime’s political affairs—and their alternatives were few. This situation led to finding creative solutions in serving the caliph *sur place*, in his palace. Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī is a case in point.

Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī (d. 839), the caliph al-Mahdī’s son from his black concubine Shikla, was an Abbasid prince, half-brother of Hārūn al-Rashīd (r. 786–809) and uncle of the caliphs al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn (r. 813–33). In the sources he is known, like his mother, as an accomplished musician and poet and a talented cook. Apart from that, he once held the most important political position in the caliphate. After the civil war between Hārūn al-Rashīd’s sons al-Amīn and al-Ma’mūn, and due to al-Ma’mūn’s choice to rule from Merv in Iran and not from Baghdad, Ibn al-Mahdī was nominated caliph in Baghdad in 817, where he reigned for two years. But eventually his political career was deemed a failure, and in the year 819 al-Ma’mūn regained control over Baghdad. It was when al-Ma’mūn returned from Merv to reclaim his throne and Ibrāhīm accommodated this turn

<sup>1</sup> Ambrosio Huici Miranda, ed., *La cocina hispano-magrebí en la época almohade según un manuscrito anónimo* [*Kitāb al-ṭabīj fī-l-Maghrib wa-al-Andalus fī ‘aṣr al-Muwahhidīn*] [Spanish-Maghreb cuisine in the Almohad era according to an anonymous manuscript] (Madrid: Imprenta del Instituto de Estudios Islámicos, 1965), 79.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs: When Baghdad Ruled the Muslim World* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

of events by becoming a courtier that Abbasid court culture emerged at its finest. As Kennedy points out, al-Ma'mūn “needed to find new people and create a new cultural ambiance and a new court style to bind it [the court] together.”<sup>5</sup> Cookery books seem to emerge at that point in time. Most of the courtiers mentioned in the sources as possessing cookery books or compiling books themselves were members of the second and third generation of the Abbasid family and their companions.<sup>6</sup> After a few years, al-Ma'mūn pardoned his uncle Ibrāhīm and he was allowed to take a prominent place in al-Ma'mūn's court, where he devoted his time to pastime cultural activities.

Ibn al-Mahdī was an important figure in the caliphal pastime scene in a way that altered the Abbasid culinary perception. He played a starring role in the Iraqi cookbooks as a prolific cook and an inventor or composer of recipes and gastronomic poems. *Ibrāhīmiyya*, a dish of meat cooked with various spices (coriander, ginger, pepper, Chinese cinnamon, mastic) in a sour juice of verjuice (made from unripe grapes) or vinegar, balanced with sugar and perfumed with rose water, is named after his given name, Ibrāhīm.<sup>7</sup> The tenth-century Iraqi cookbook *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* (The Book of Dishes), attributed to Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq, quotes Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī's recipes by using the term “li” (by): “*Muṭajjana* of chicken breasts by Ibn al-Mahdī” (*muṭajjana bi-ṣadr al-dajāj li-Ibn al-Mahdī*).<sup>8</sup> He also contributed to the Abbasid culinary culture through knowledge transmission. In his household was a talented female cook named Bid'a. She was especially known for her *sikbāj* (sour beef stew, Sassanian origin) and *bawārid* (cold dishes).<sup>9</sup> It is not known where Bid'a acquired her skills, but her specialties did not derive from her homeland of Byzantium, and it is possible that Ibn al-Mahdī was the one who taught her the culinary arts.

Lastly, Ibn al-Mahdī wrote a cookbook himself. The most direct testimony to this is a section taken allegedly from the book itself (*min kitāb al-ṭabkh li-Ibrāhīm bin al-Mahdī*; “from the cookbook of Ibrāhīm ibn al-Mahdī”) and is embedded in the thirteenth-century anonymous cookbook *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* from al-Andalus.<sup>10</sup> This section contains nineteen recipes. Considering other existing historical cookery books in Arabic, which are in most cases voluminous and contain hundreds of recipes,<sup>11</sup> it was probably a small selection of Ibn al-Mahdī's book. Also, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* quotes recipes taken from his cookbook: “A recipe for *janb mubazzar* (spiced side of ribs) [...] from the copy (*min nuskhāt*) of Ibn al-Mahdī.”<sup>12</sup> All these examples show Ibn al-Mahdī's engagement in the cooking scene of the caliphate after his unsuccessful political career. Instead of pursuing a political path, he dedicated his time to various culinary enterprises as part of a growing institution of companionship.

<sup>5</sup> Kennedy, *The Court of the Caliphs*, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Limor Yungman, *Les livres de cuisine du Moyen-Orient médiéval (IVE–Xe/Xe–XVIIe)* [Cookbooks in the medieval Middle East, fourth/tenth to tenth/sixteenth century] (PhD diss., EHESS, Paris, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Karīm al-Kātib al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, ed. Qāsim al-Sāmarrā'ī (London: Al-Warrak Publishing, 2014), 48. English translation: *A Baghdad Cookery Book*, trans. Charles Perry (London: Prospect Books, 2005), 31.

<sup>8</sup> Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, ed. Kaj Öhrnberg and Sahban Mroueh, *Studia Orientalia* 60 (Helsinki: The Finnish Oriental Society, 1987), 75; English translation by Nawal Nasrallah, *Annals of the Caliphs' Kitchens: Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq's Tenth-century Baghdadi Cookbook* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 172–73.

<sup>9</sup> For the biography of Bid'a, see Limor Yungman, “Beyond Cooking: The Roles of Chefs in Medieval Court Kitchens of the Islamic East,” *Food & History* 15, nos. 1–2 (2017): 91–92.

<sup>10</sup> Miranda, *La Cocina*, 155–64.

<sup>11</sup> The exception is one cookery book, *Kitāb al-Ṭibākha* [Book of cookery] by Ibn 'Abd al-Hādī from fifteenth-century Damascus, that is comprised of forty-four recipes.

<sup>12</sup> al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, 225; Nasrallah, *Annals*, 361.

## THE CALIPH AND I: COURT COMPANIONSHIP

“Court” in the Islamic context could be defined as “an elite social configuration created by a potentate. The potentate patronizes qualified agents specializing in the production and performance of cultural contents, and the ensuing artistic and intellectual activity takes place according to specific codes in a supportive environment enabled by temporary dimming of power relations.”<sup>13</sup> These power relations and activities were outlined by the agents themselves—the caliph and his entourage, his boon companions (*nadīm*, pl. *nudamāʾ*). The Abbasid court was composed of these cultural agents who came from various professions and ethnic backgrounds. Since sources on the courtly habits of the Umayyad caliphate are limited, scholarship tends to see the Abbasid caliphate as setting the role model for later Islamic dynasties in courtly manners and court culture.<sup>14</sup>

In the process of constructing a court culture, “the court plays the role of a cultural laboratory, which develops repertoires of behavior and knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, the Abbasid kitchen acted as the physical “laboratory” where dishes were created, invented, and elaborated, and where the prototype of an Arab cuisine for dynasties to come was set. The cuisine is an inseparable part in the formation of court culture, according to fourteenth-century Arab sociologist and historian Ibn Khaldūn. In his *Muqaddimah*, he explains the accumulation of luxurious items, with an emphasis on gastronomy, as a natural process of nation formation:

When a nation has gained the upper hand and taken possession of the holdings of its predecessors who had royal authority, its prosperity and well-being grow. People become accustomed to a great number of things. From the necessities of life and a life of austerity, they progress to the luxuries and a life of comfort and beauty. They come to adopt the customs and [enjoy] the conditions of their predecessors. Luxuries require development of the customs necessary to produce them. People then also tend toward luxury in food, clothing, furnishings and household goods. [...] The larger the realm ruled by a dynasty, the greater is the share of its people in these luxuries.<sup>16</sup>

The boon companions’ role was to entertain and exchange with the ruler—to keep him company and to keep boredom at bay. They could be family members or not, and their roles are described in several Arabic sources. In his mirror for princes (*Ādāb al-mulūk*), Arab writer al-Thaʿālibī (d. 1038) stresses the boon companions’ cardinal role in court by saying that they are “the lamps of his [the king’s] session, the keys to his happiness, the cores of his heart and God’s gifts to his soul. It is necessary that they be from people of distinction, the most select elite, bringing together decorum first, education second, and service ethics third.”<sup>17</sup> Their importance lies in providing distraction to the ruler. As al-Thaʿālibī keeps emphasizing:

Among the things that relieve, soothe, relax, and assist them in bearing the burdens of kingship and enduring the affliction of leadership are holding entertainment sessions, stringing

<sup>13</sup> Erez Naaman, *Literature and the Islamic Court: Cultural Life under al-Šāhib Ibn ʿAbbād* (London: Routledge, 2016), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “The Abbasid and Byzantine Courts,” in *The Oxford History of Historical Writing*, vol. 2: 400–1400, ed. Sarah Foot and Chase F. Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 518–23.

<sup>15</sup> Gadi Algazi and Rina Drory, “L’amour à la cour des Abbassides : Un code de compétence sociale” [Love at the Abbasid court: A code of social competence], trans. Marie-Pierre Gaviano, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 55, no. 6: 1255.

<sup>16</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, vol. 1, trans. Franz Rosenthal (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), 338.

<sup>17</sup> Naaman, *Literature and the Islamic Court*, 60.

the necklace of courtiers, in addition to asking the clouds of happiness for rain and producing the fire of pleasure by drinking the blood of a bunch of grapes [wine]. The foundation of this condition [namely, the kings' relaxation] is superior and royal music.<sup>18</sup>

Maḥmūd ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Sindī ibn Shāhak Abū al-Faṭḥ, known as Kushājim (d. 961), a poet and boon companion who was also a court cook to the Ḥamdānid ruler Sayf al-Dawla in Aleppo,<sup>19</sup> contends in his book on boon companions, *Kitāb Adab al-nadīm* [Etiquette of the boon companion], that the knowledge required from them is also in the culinary arts: "It is also good for the boon companion to know how to give the recipe for an exceptional (*gharīb*) dish, to describe an unknown musical style, to declaim a melancholy poetry and to interpret a melody."<sup>20</sup> Evidently, cooking was part of a wider "job description." Kushājim specifies that if the boon companion is not talented in cooking, he could not be considered as an accomplished *raffiné* (*ẓarīf*) nor as a perfect *nadīm*: "For the best elements of this corporation, the one who cannot interpret ten different musical styles, who does not know how to cook ten rare dishes, is neither an accomplished 'elegant person' (*ẓarīf*) nor a perfect companion."<sup>21</sup> To this end, it is obvious that the *nadīm* had to be able to cook by himself, and even excel in it, as other sources attest. These passages clarify that companions had an important role in defining and fine-tuning the culinary arts by sharing their savoir faire.

It is evident, then, that the boon companions had manifold roles and therefore came from various backgrounds. A companion could be a poet, a physician, a vizier, or a cook. Often, these skills were embodied in one person, as in the case of Kushājim. According to Anwar G. Chejne, the courtier had to be "fit physically and is expected to have a good knowledge of the Quran, Prophetic traditions (*ḥadīth*), Arabic grammar, poetry, prosody, music, history, and even the arts of cooking and horse breeding."<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that some physicians in the Abbasid court were included in the caliph's circle, such as Eastern Christian physician Jibril ibn Bukhtishū' (d. 828), not all agreed on that point. In the eleventh century, Niẓām al-Mulk (d. 1092), vizier in the Seljuk Empire (1037–1194), advises to exclude officials and dignitaries, and even physicians, on the grounds that: "The physician is always forbidding us to eat pleasant and pure foods when we are not ill; he gives us medicine when we have no symptoms and bleeds us when we have no pain."<sup>23</sup> *Nudamā'* were ranked and received salaries and rewards. Even their cooking skills were rewarded: caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 847–61) awarded his boon companion 'Alī ibn al-Munajjim one hundred thousand dinars for the preparation of a meal he liked. But on second thought, he arranged to pay the sum in installments so as to avoid criticism.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Naaman, *Literature and the Islamic Court*, 61. One component is wine, added as an acceptable pleasure of the ruling class despite its prohibition in Islam. See Limor Yungman, "Tracing the Origins of a Practice: The Earliest Recipes for Alcoholic Beverages in Medieval Arabic Cookbooks," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* [Review of the Muslim World and the Mediterranean] 151 (2022): 41–64.

<sup>19</sup> Ṣalāh al-Dīn al-Safadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, vol. 21 (Beirut: Dār ihyā al-turāth al-'arabī [House of the revival of the Arab heritage], 2000), 129.

<sup>20</sup> Abū al-Faṭḥ Maḥmūd ibn al-Ḥusayn Kushājim, *Adab al-nadīm* (Cairo: al-Khānājī Library, 1999); French edition translated and edited by Siham Bouhlal, *L'Art du commensal: Boire dans la culture arabe classique* [The art of being a dining companion: Drinking in classical Arab culture] (Paris: Actes Sud, 2009), 35.

<sup>21</sup> Bouhlal, *L'Art du commensal*, 35.

<sup>22</sup> Anwar G. Chejne, "The Boon-Companion in Early 'Abbāsīd Times," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 85, no. 3 (July–September 1965): 331–32.

<sup>23</sup> Niẓām al-Mulk, *Siyar al-Muluk or Siyāsāt-nama*; translated from Persian by Hubert Darke, *The Book of Government or Rules for Kings* (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Chejne, "The Boon-Companion," 333.



The boon companions' institution had changed since the first Abbasid generation. Under the first three Abbasid caliphs, al-Saffāh, al-Manṣūr, and al-Mahdī, the boon companions were kept at a physical distance—behind a curtain—from the caliph.<sup>25</sup> A shift occurred during the rule of these caliphs' successors: they became physically closer to the caliph. While they were expected to have some qualifications in terms of proper conduct and manners, their position apparently became more respectable and they gained more influence and dignity.<sup>26</sup> Under al-Ma'mūn the physical boundaries became completely blurred and broken, and companions were in close contact with the caliph. This enabled the intimate sharing of foods and drinks, cooking and drinking sessions, and cooking competitions.

## COURT HOBBIES

Creating a court culture meant developing a taste for luxurious items “as far as possible from direct, common practicality,” since social usefulness of consumption and ostentatious leisure lies in the waste of time and resources.<sup>27</sup> The kitchen as a place and food cooked in it were another realm where elite members could express their wealth and power through using expensive, rare foodstuffs such as spices that arrived from the isles of Indonesia (mace, nutmeg, cloves), exotic perfumes used in cooking (ambergris, musk, camphor), or imported delicate blue-and-white Chinese porcelain or ornate gold and silver tableware. Stories about the ways in which the Abbasid court perceived, shaped, and developed a gastronomic palate and in practice established haute cuisine are told in the cookbook *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*. Gastronomic discourse revolved around the importance of striking a balance between delectable flavor and wholesomeness. This is echoed in gastronomic poetry, dietetic literature, and table etiquette manuals. Abbasid courtiers cooked and wrote culinary treatises for pleasure and social prestige. By that, unconsciously, they created a standardized kitchen, from which stemmed new social norms and manners. In that way, the Abbasid court created a “leisure class” in which the consumption of luxury products (goods and services) was exclusive to this class.

During the first two hundred years of the Abbasid era, once caliphs secured their reign, they saw the importance of developing a thriving court and an elaborate culture. Together with their entourage, they developed a complex culture that included different types of entertainments and hobbies: indoor games, like chess and backgammon, and outdoor games, like horse racing, pigeon racing, polo, archery, wrestling (often with lions), and animal fights.<sup>28</sup> Falconry was also a favorite pastime, combining physical exercise, excitement, training in military skills (shooting an arrow, the chase), and fresh, good food. Moreover, dishes made of game were “highly prized”;<sup>29</sup> the flesh of antelope was considered the best of game meat.<sup>30</sup> Further recipes from the cookbook *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* attest that game meat was part of the haute cuisine culture.<sup>31</sup> As an elite pastime, hunting was used to prevent idleness: “In Turkic epics and Latin chronicles,” Thomas Allsen explains, “political leaders

<sup>25</sup> Chejne, “The Boon-Companion,” 329.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 330.

<sup>27</sup> Maxime Rodinson, “Recherches sur les documents arabes relatifs à la cuisine” [Research on Arabic documents relating to cuisine], *Revue des études islamiques* [*Journal of Islamic Studies*] 17 (1949): 98. English translation by Barbara Inskip, “Studies in Arabic Manuscripts Relating to Cookery,” in *Medieval Arab Cookery*, essays and translations by Maxime Rodinson, A. J. Arberry, and Charles Perry (Totnes: Prospect Books, 2001), 94–95.

<sup>28</sup> Muhammad Manazir Ahsan, *Social Life under the Abbasids: 170–289 AH, 786–902 AD* (London: Longman, 1979), 243–74.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>30</sup> al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, 22; Nasrallah, *Annals*, 103.

<sup>31</sup> al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*, 106–09, 127–31; Nasrallah, *Annals*, 214–16, 241–47.

follow these prescriptions [for good health], compelling their followers to hunt lest they lose their physical edge and fall into idleness.<sup>32</sup> This seems to be true of Islamic stories as well. Hunting was then a “legitimate activity of rulers when done for the sake of amusement, diversion and relaxation.”<sup>33</sup>

Hunting and feasting were synonymous; Persian and Islamic illustrations depict paradise in a manner that associates hunting and banqueting.<sup>34</sup> According to a legend from the Arabic repertoire, the Persian-origin dish *ṭabāhaja* (sliced and braised meat) was invented on a hunting expedition by two boys who prepared it for hungry Sassanian king Bahrām Gor (r. 420–38).<sup>35</sup> This story of a Persian king, told in an Arab-Islamic cookbook, exemplifies the ways in which hunting and cooking were court practices in the region since pre-Islamic times. It also illustrates how the Abbasids were influenced by the Persian heritage. Other examples that associate cooking, feasting, and hunting are found in illuminated manuscripts from the Persian tradition, such as the *Divan* of Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava’ī (d. 1501), depicting cooks preparing food in nature (**FIGURE 1**) or the legendary hero Rostam roasting a hunted animal on the fire (**FIGURE 2**) in the Persian epic *Shāhnameh*.<sup>36</sup>



**FIGURE 1.** “Preparation for a Noon-Day Meal,” folio from *Divan* (Collected Works) of Mir ‘Ali Shir Nava’ī, 1580, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 13.228.21.2.



**FIGURE 2.** “Rostam Roasting Meat,” folio from the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) of Ferdowsi, 1668, The Museum for Islamic Art in Jerusalem, MS 14–68; M 153–71, fol. 348r.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 211.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>35</sup> al-Warrāq, *Kitāb al-Ṭabikh*, 219; Nasrallah, *Annals*, 354.

<sup>36</sup> In this scene, Rostam is depicted kicking away a boulder pushed by Bahman, who was sent to kill him. See figure 2.

To distinguish themselves from their hated predecessors, the Umayyad caliphs, the Abbasids consciously adopted and adapted the Sassanian pre-Islamic Persian governing model.<sup>37</sup> The Sassanians had maintained a court haute cuisine and royal cookery books; the Andalusian thirteenth-century cookery book even refers to a work allegedly written by the Sassanian emperor Khosrow I Anūshirwān (r. 531–79).<sup>38</sup> Therefore, much of the Abbasid cuisine in Iraq was influenced by Sassanian court customs, and so was the courtiers' practice to write cookbooks. In global comparison, however, not all historical cookbooks were authored by elite members or for the same reasons. In medieval France, Guillaume Tirel, known as Taillevent, cook to the fourteenth-century French court, is the author of one of the earliest extant French cookbooks, *Le Viandier*, with the purpose of training apprentices.<sup>39</sup> Another common feature of medieval cookbooks, from the Middle East and Europe alike, was their masculine authorship, or at least this is what one must infer from the extant evidence. Recipe collections written by women are a later phenomenon.<sup>40</sup>

Writing and collecting cookbooks was a pastime of a tradition that is mostly lost. One existing cookbook, Ibn Sayyār al-Warrāq's *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh*—which is also the earliest known today—commemorates these now-lost cookery manuals written by Abbasid dignitaries. Recipe names in this cookbook often mention the source from which the recipe was taken, orienting the reader to its source and generating an authoritative, reliable tone: if it is taken from a certain caliph's personal cookbook, it must be a good, tested, and proved recipe. This may be compared to following a renowned Michelin Star chef's recipe nowadays. Various sources in Arabic also assure us that cookery books written or owned by the Abbasid elite did exist. For example, *Kitāb al-Ṭabīkh* includes recipes that are explicitly taken from now-lost cookery books composed by, or compiled for, a member of the Abbasid caliphate court. They are given in the following manner: name of recipe + for/by + name of compiler. For example, “*maḍīra li-l-Mu‘tamid*,” meaning, *maḍīra* dish (white stew cooked with meat and sour milk) by caliph al-Mu‘tamid (r. 870–92). Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Mawṣilī (d. 850), a singer and composer, companion at the court of Hārūn al-Rashīd, bequeathed his version of *hiṣrimīyya* (stew made with verjuice) and *nabāṭīyya* (poultry dish). By putting recipes into writing the kitchen acquired a certain “class character”;<sup>41</sup> medieval Arabic culinary writing became the mark of the educated ruling social class. Court members wrote cookbooks both to engage with culinary discourse and to create luxury commodities, the manuscript being a rare and sought-after object and social marker. A

<sup>37</sup> Other Arabic sources describe certain Abbasid caliphs' ways of imitating Sassanian customs.

<sup>38</sup> Miranda, *La Cocina*, 83.

<sup>39</sup> Bruno Laurioux, *Le règne de Taillevent. Livres et pratiques culinaires à la fin du Moyen Âge* [The reign of Taillevent: Books and culinary practices at the end of the Middle Ages] (Paris: Editions de la Sorbonne, 1997); Henry Notaker, *A History of Cookbooks: From Kitchen to Page over Seven Centuries* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> In Korea we find earlier testimonies for female authors than in Europe and America. See Yugyeon Yoon, “L'alimentation fermentée en Corée du XIIe au XVIIe siècle” [Fermented food in Korea from the 12th to the 17th century] (PhD diss., University of Tours, 2023).

<sup>41</sup> Jack Goody, *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 140.