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Ethnic and traditional Iranian breads: different types, and historical and cultural aspects

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ABSTRACT

Background: Bread making has a long history in Iran. Because of the inseparable relationship between Iranian people and bread, an increasingly wide variety of this healthy and nutritious food is prepared and consumed throughout the country. The present work aims at documenting and providing information about breads of Iranian cuisine.

Methods: The required information was obtained via a direct face-to-face questionnaire-based survey among housewives, domestic people, and Iranian bakers. The statistical society was selected by random sampling among people from the top eight most populous cities in the country.

Results: More than 30 types of ethnic and traditional bread of Iranian cuisine are introduced in two main categories: the first group includes breads that are consumed all around the country, and the second group consists of those that are prepared in special regions, or by ethnic groups.

Conclusion: The historical and cultural aspects of the Iranian foods showed that bread is the most common and popular food in the country.

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1. Introduction

Wheat is the most important and essential staple food crop in the world [1,2]. Due to its good taste, low price, and high nutritional value, it is a food for more than 35% of the people around the world [1,3,4]. Production of wheat by the top 50 countries was 548 million metric tons (MMT) in 2003, while the production increased to 696 MMT in 2013. China is the largest producer of wheat in the world with production of more than 120 MMT. The other principal wheat producers are India, USA, Russian Federation, France, Canada, Germany, and Pakistan. Iran is also a big producer of wheat in Asia, with production of more than 9 MMT [5].

Bread is the most important wheat-based foodstuff that is produced throughout the world [6]. It is also the most popular product that is consumed in Iran [7]. The first bread was prepared over 12,000 years in the past [8]. Findings show that the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Babylonians consumed bread many decades BC [9]. Bread is known to be of global importance in nutrition, providing an important source of vitamins, dietary fibers, proteins,

antioxidants, and micronutrients [10]. It is produced by cooking fermented dough, basically made from wheat flours, yeast, and water [11,12].

Several additives may be added to the wheat flour-yeast-water dough in order to increase shelf life of bread and improve its palatability, quality, sensory perception, retainability, or even nutritional value [9,11]. The most commonly used additives are vegetables (such as potato, onion, and spinach), fruits and nuts (such as raisins, walnuts, and peanuts), seeds (such as poppy, cumin, and sesame), salt, sugars, lipids, milk, egg, spices, and food starches [11]. In recent decades, many researchers have worked on addition of different ingredients to wheat flour-yeast-water dough [13–20]. Pontonio et al investigated the use of sourdough starters for bread-making from eight Iranian wheat flours [7]. Coelho and Salas-Mellado (2015) added chia seeds to the formulation of wheat bread. They reduced the intake of saturated fatty acids in the new formulation. Sęczyk et al (2017) added flaxseed hulls to wheat flour dough. They found that flaxseed hull is a beneficial food additive [21].

Also, many studies have addressed the incorporation of non-wheat flours in the bread-making process [22–27]. For example, 30% of wheat flour was replaced with sweet potato flour in the bread-making process. Cardenas et al [28] showed that there is no difference in protein quality or sensory properties of the wheat-sweet potato bread. Olapade and oluwole [12] prepared bread

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with composite flour of wheat, *ach*, that was enriched with 0–15% cowpea flour. The potential of bread-making with composite flour of wheat-chia was investigated by Coelho and Salas-Mellado (2015).

Traditional and ethnic Iranian breads are famous for their taste, quality, and varieties [29]. There are two main reasons why Iranian national cuisine has a wide variety of breads: (1) bread is considered as the first food of the Iranian people and its consumption in the daily diet is very common; and (2) Iran as an integrated country accommodates various ethnic groups. The ethnic and racial diversity significantly includes *fars*, *tork*, *kord*, *torkman*, *arab*, *balooch*, *gilak*, *lor*, and *tabari*. The remainder consists of minor groups, mainly comprising *armenians*, *assyrians*, and *georgians*. In addition to countless kinds of bread that are prepared throughout the country, there are also numerous types of bread that are produced by these ethnic groups. *Sangak*, *barbari*, *taftoon*, and *lavash* are the most popular breads in Iran [7,29]. Iranian breads are prepared in different composition, shape, size, texture, color, and flavor.

Recently, there has been increased attention to the issue of traditional and ethnic foods [30–37]. The main causes of using these foods have been mentioned in [2,38,39]. To the best of the author's knowledge, few reports have been published about the ethnic and traditional Iranian breads in literature. The present work aimed at introducing and documenting the most popular of the ethnic and traditional Iranian bread prepared in Iran.

2. Materials and methods

A random sample of people from the top eight most populous cities in the country was selected. Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Karaj, Tabriz, Shiraz, Ahvaz, and Qom have the largest populations in Iran, respectively. These cities have a combined population of about 20 million people, almost 25% of the total population.

A direct face-to-face questionnaire-based survey was conducted among housewives, domestic people, and bakers to find the required information. Also, a data gathering process was completed by searching online databases, reviewing scientific publications and literature, as well as by looking in historical documents. All the pictures presented in this study were taken after buying breads from the bakeries of the cities mentioned above.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Historical background

The Persian word for bread is *nan*. The Sasanian inscriptions of the 3rd century have mentioned this word. Also, analyzing historical documents show that the word “*nan*” is mentioned in the Pahlavi texts of the 9th century. A definition of *sangak*—one of the most popular Iranian breads—was found in the comprehensive Persian encyclopedia “*Borhan-e-Ghate*” in 1651. One of the oldest bakeries of Tehran is located in Luti Saleh. It is the name of an old passage in Tehran that was founded in the 19th century during the Qajar period.

3.2. Bread types

There are numerous types of breads in Iranian national cuisine. Due to the wide varieties of products and different favorites of people, several categorizations of bread types may be used throughout the country. Iranian breads may be categorized in different ways as below: (1) by the type of flour: wheat-based, barley-based, rice-based, etc.; (2) by size and volume: flat, raised, and semiraised; (3) by method of cooking: hot stone-baked, tandoori, oven-baked, steam-baked, etc.; (4) by the type of ingredients added to wheat flour-water-yeast dough: sesame bread, potato bread, etc.; (5) by texture: doughy, soft, crispy, brittle, and dry; and (6) by whether or not the bread contains sugar: sweet and nonsweet. Also, the Iranian breads can be classified into two major types according to the geographical distribution (observed spread range) and popularity of breads throughout the country.

The first group include those breads that are commonly produced and used in all urban and rural areas. *Sangak*, *barbari*, *taftun*, and *lavash* are the most favorite. In other words, the breads of this group are the most popular and may be baked in each district of the country. More than 20 types of breads can be found in the first group. The second group consists of breads that are prepared and consumed in a special zone, or by an ethnic group. For example, *lako* is the name of a popular bread that is baked in some parts along the Caspian Sea coast. *Lako* is usually unfamiliar for people of central and south provinces. Another example is the favorite bread

Table 1
The most popular and common breads consumed throughout Iran.

No.	Persian name	Geometric shape	Bread type	Price (\$ per loaf of bread)	Main ingredients	Texture type	Image
1	<i>Barbari</i>	Pseudo-ellipse	Nonsweet, semiraised	0.1–0.3	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven, sesame	Crispy, soft	Fig. 2
2	<i>Lavash</i>	Rectangle, pseudo-ellipse	Nonsweet, flat	0.05–0.15	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Soft, crispy	Fig. 4
3	<i>Nan-brenji</i>	circle	Sweet, semiraised	1.5–2.7 *	Rice flour, egg yolk, cardamom, sugar	Soft	—
4	<i>Nan-esfenaj</i>	Circle	Nonsweet, semi-raised	0.4–0.5	Weat flour, water, salt, spinach	Soft, doughy	—
5	<i>Nan-fantezi</i>	Pseudo-ellipse	Nonsweet, raised	0.25–0.5	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Crispy	—
6	<i>Nan-ghagh (ghandi)</i>	Circle	Sweet, flat	1.0–1.3 *	Wheat flour, sugar, water, leaven, sesame, oil	Crispy, brittle	—
7	<i>Nan-hamburger</i>	Circle	Nonsweet, raised	0.07–0.15	Wheat flour, water, salt, baking powder	Doughy	—
8	<i>Nan-jow</i>	Circle, rectangle	Nonsweet, semi-raised	0.4–0.65	Barley flour, water, salt, leaven	Stiff, dry	Fig. 5A
9	<i>Nan-khoshk</i>	Circle, rectangle	Nonsweet, flat	0.1–0.15	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Dry, brittle	—
10	<i>Nan-mashini</i>	Rectangle, pseudo-Ellipse	Nonsweet, Flat	0.07–0.13	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Soft	—
11	<i>Nan-sabzijat</i>	circle	nonsweet, semiraised	0.4–0.5	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven, dill, parsley, tarragon	Soft, doughy	Fig. 5B
12	<i>Nan-sandvichi</i>	Pseudo-ellipse	Nonsweet, raised	0.07–0.25	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Soft, doughy	Fig. 5C
13	<i>Nan-sibzamini</i>	Circle	Nonsweet, semiraised	0.4–0.5	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven, potato	Soft, doughy	Fig. 5D
14	<i>Nan-sokhari</i>	Rectangle, square	Sweet, semiraised	1.1–1.5 *	Wheat flour, water, salt, sugar, leaven, vanilla, oil	Dry, brittle	—
15	<i>Nan-tost</i>	Rectangle, square	Nonsweet, semiraised	1.2–1.7 *	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven, oil	Soft	—
16	<i>Sangak</i>	Pseudo-triangle	Nonsweet, semiraised	0.17–0.4	Wheat flour, water, salt, sour paste, sesame	Crispy	Fig. 1
17	<i>shah-abbasi</i>	Circle	Nonsweet, raised	0.13–0.26	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Doughy	Fig. 5E
18	<i>Shirmal</i>	Circle	Sweet, semiraised	0.18–0.5	Wheat flour, water, sugar, vanilla, baking powder	Doughy	Fig. 5F
19	<i>Taftun</i>	Circle	Nonsweet, flat	0.13–0.26	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Crispy	Fig. 3
20	<i>Tanuri</i>	Circle, rectangle	Nonsweet, flat	0.13–0.26	Wheat flour, water, salt, leaven	Crispy	—

* Per kg of bread.

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