

the seventh night...

Ka^ck and Shattered Dreams

There was once a simple and devoutly pious man who lived in a simple house and lived a simple life. He was supported by one of the town's nobles. Each and every day, he would receive from the nobleman three *ka^ck* and a little clarified butter and honey. This was his daily sustenance and it satisfied his hunger.

But alas, every man—no matter how devout—dreams of more.

The *ka^ck* he ate daily, relishing it for his breakfast, lunch, and dinner. As for the butter, he realized how expensive it was. He decided to collect each drop that he was given and put it into a jar. He hung the jar from the ceiling for safety, so that no one and nothing would touch it. Every day he placed the clarified butter in the jar and then devoured the *ka^ck* and honey.

One day, sitting on his bed, his staff in his hand, his mind began to wander. He looked at the jar and recognized its value. Although this was a man of goodness and devotion, he, like any human being, dreamed of better things.

Thus began his flight of the imagination. He closed his eyes and pondered. "Thank goodness for the *ka^ck* for, as a result of these biscuits, I have accumulated enough butter to sell for the price of a ewe and then take into partnership a farmer who has a ram! In the first year the ewe will bring forth a male and a female lamb; then, in the second year, a female and a male. These female lambs will eventually bear other males and females, until there is a great number. Subsequently, I will be able to take my share."



He smiled and said to himself, "With the males, I will be able to buy cows and bulls. These will increase and swell in number and become many. Upon selling these, I will buy a piece of land and build a luxurious palace on it with a beautiful garden. Additionally, I will don extravagant robes and clothing. I will purchase servants and slave girls and then find a woman to marry and put on a wedding the likes which no one has ever witnessed. I will slaughter cattle and make the finest of feasts with rich meats, elaborate dishes, and sweets beyond belief, including *ka^ck*. After all, I must give credit where credit is due, for without them I would have been given no butter!"

He continued to muse, his thoughts turning now to the musicians, singers, and entertainment he would provide. "I will decorate the halls with flowers and perfumes. I will adorn this feast with the most lavish of décor. I will then invite everyone, from the wealthy to the destitute, the religious men and the religious scholars, captains and lords, the important and the petty. Anyone who so desires will be my guest!

"Finally, I will go to my bride and unveil her and revel in her beauty. It is then that I will sit back and say that the time for devotion has passed; I will rejoice in the birth of my new son. I will make banquets in his honor and teach him the disciplines of life: philosophy, mathematics, science, and culture. I will rear him to be polite and well mannered, of good repute, so that he will become famous among the learned and will be well respected. He will learn piety and righteousness, and I will bestow on him the gifts of affluence and status. Yet if I find him to be disobedient, I will punish him with this staff!"

As he said this, he raised his hand as if to punish his son, and the staff hit the jar of butter that hung from the ceiling above his head. It broke, and the pieces of pottery came crashing down, as did all the dreams before him. The butter that had made his future ran down his head and onto his beard and his ragged clothing.

Perhaps counting chickens before they hatched would have been a lot safer than adding up drops of butter.



What could be more exciting than re-creating what food historians who specialize in Arab cooking consider one of the most ancient baked products? *Ka^ck*: the name itself, whether it's Aramaic or Egyptian, indicates the ancient nature of this biscuit.

In the medieval sources we find *ka^ck* shaped in various forms: rings, rounded cookies, even fruits and birds. Their texture is crispy on the outside and flaky inside. In some cases, the dough contains an interesting

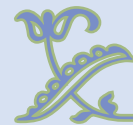
combination of spices, forming a not-too-sweet bread. Although the biscuit was popular in the Arab world, the Western kitchen also felt its effects. Because of the Arab-Muslim conquest of Spain, the Crusades, and the developing spice trade, the cooking techniques and ingredients of the Arabs spread into northern Europe. The introduction of new spices to the West came about because of the Arabs, so here's something to consider: *cookie* and *ka'k* have the same consonants—could there be a connection?

Although the ancient recipe is for a stuffed *ka'k* with a filling of *sawīq* (which was a barley-based product for the poor and a wheat-based mixture with sugar, almonds, or even pomegranates for the affluent), we have chosen to make the plain *ka'k*. The plain *ka'k* recipe is similar to a western Arabic recipe found in the 13th century *Anonymous Andalusian Cookbook*, in which it is explained that oil is preferred over butter, as it keeps longer when people are traveling. Since we had no travel plans in mind, we stuck with the butter, which we also felt would be tastier.

We include this recipe partly out of nostalgia. Whenever we walked into Sitty's house, we smelled the aroma of fresh-baked *ka'k* coming out of the oven. Sitty was the perfect grandmother. She always seemed to know when we would be there; no matter what time we arrived, let alone what day, there were dozens of freshly baked sweet *ka'k* waiting for us. She made sure that we got to put on the last touches, dipping them into the sugar-based syrup.

Although the original recipe calls for the *ka'k* to be fried, we found it impossible to do so, as the dough for these cookies is similar to pie dough and very flaky; the dough pieces completely disintegrated while frying in the sesame oil. We then decided to bake them, and—lo and behold—success: a flaky and melt-in-the-mouth cookie! However, according to Leila's husband, we shouldn't have made them at all; our *ka'k* had ruined his entire diet. Nonetheless, in his opinion, these were the tastiest of all the medieval sweets.

We replaced the musk in the original recipe with ground anise seed, for the sake of easier availability.



*Take sifted flour kneaded
with clarified butter,
musk, and rosewater.
Roll out thinly with sawīq.
Fry in sesame oil.
Put them in syrup and a little
musk and rosewater.
Arrange them side by side
on the dish and sprinkle
crushed pistachios over them,
layer by layer.*

SOURCE: *Kanz al-Fawā'id*

Ka^ck

Makes 30



INGREDIENTS

Basic recipe for qaṭr (see page xi)

prepared with rosewater

3 cups flour

2 teaspoons ground anise seed

1 cup clarified butter

2 tablespoons rosewater

½ cup finely ground pistachios



- ☛ Prepare the *qaṭr* and set aside to cool in a shallow bowl. Place the flour and anise seed in a bowl and mix well. Add the butter and rosewater and work them into the flour mixture by hand to form a soft and pliable dough.
- ☛ Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.
- ☛ On a floured surface, roll out the dough to ¼-inch thickness, flouring the rolling pin every so often.
- ☛ Cut into rounds, triangles, squares, or rectangles. Excess pieces of the dough can be gathered up and rolled again. Carefully and gently transfer the dough cutouts to an ungreased baking tray.
- ☛ Bake the *ka^ck* for 14 minutes or until the bottoms turn golden. Place under broiler for about 2 minutes or until tops are golden. Remove the tray from the oven and allow to sit for about 2 minutes. Carefully and gently remove the *ka^ck* from the tray with a flat metal spatula, and then place the *ka^ck* in the syrup, gently pressing them down to ensure the *ka^ck* is immersed in the *kaṭr*. Remove the *ka^ck* from the syrup with a slotted spoon, allowing the excess syrup to drain off. Place the *ka^ck* in a serving dish.
- ☛ Once all the pieces have been arranged on the platter, sprinkle with the ground pistachios.