FACT SHEET: Somali Food and Culture

Traditional Eating Patterns

- Family meals are common
- Three meals a day: quraac [breakfast], qado [lunch] and casho [dinner]
- Lunch is the main meal of the day, breakfast and dinner are light meals
- Breakfast may consist of a sweet bread with honey or jam
- Lunch and dinner may consist of meat, rice and vegetables
- Meat is a staple of the diet
- Meals are plated individually
- Utensils are not usually used
- Food is eaten with the right hand only

Religious Influences

Religion plays a big role in the life of the Somali people and so Islamic dietary practices decide what can and cannot be eaten.

- Halal foods are foods that are allowed such as plant foods and some animal foods if they conform to the Islamic prescribed method of slaughtering.
- Haram foods are forbidden by the Islam religion and include pork, blood and blood products and animals not slaughtered in the proper manner (halal). This also includes no alcohol. Gelatin is typically avoided as it may contain pork.
- Observe Ramadan (ninth month of the lunar calendar) where they fast during the day and only eat at night—this lasts for 30 days. Pregnant women, people who are ill and children under the age of 14 do not have to fast.

American Influences on the Somali Diet

- Eating more fast food such as French fries and pizza
- Drinking more fruit juices and soda
- Eating snacks, especially high-fat snacks
- Store-bought breads or making njera with pancake mix or all-purpose flour
Traditional Foods and Beverages¹-⁵

- **Meat** is a staple of the diet (camel, goat and lamb are preferred but include beef, chicken and fish) – meats may be fried in ghee (clarified butter), grilled or broiled
- **Rice and/or pasta** are included with meat and chicken dishes, especially at lunch
- **Vegetables** - okra, bagal (similar to a radish), potatoes, carrots, peas, green peppers, spinach, garlic
- **Fruits** - mango, guava, bananas, dates, pears, oranges, apples
- **Anjera** – sorghum, teff or corn flour mixed with milk or water and possibly eggs – similar to a thin pancake
- **Malawa** - made with wheat flour, sugar, oil and eggs – similar to a pancake
- **Spices** such as turmeric, cumin, coriander, curry
- **Milk** – camel, goat and cow (camel is considered the best)
- **Black tea** – most common drink, with milk and a lot of sugar

**raw, sliced banana is typically served with rice or pasta dishes**

Traditional Dishes¹-⁵

Otka – camel meat dried and fried in butter and spices
Ambola – red beans, rice and salt served with sesame oil and sugar
Iskudahkaris – meat, vegetables, onions cooked in oil and rice and then water is added
Sugo – onion, garlic, spices, carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, meat and oil and served with rice or spaghetti
Sambosa/sambusa – deep-fried filo pastry with meat and vegetables
Fool – pinto beans, tomatoes, onions and served with bread
Baasto – spaghetti with meat sauce and sometimes vegetables or a salad
Halwa – sugar, water, cornstarch, butter and spices are usually served during holidays and weddings
Dates are typically eaten during Ramadan when breaking the fast.

Traditional Health Beliefs

- Traditional doctors use herbal medicine and other rituals such as fire burning and prayer⁶
- Certain conditions are believed to be caused by spirits⁶
- Breastfeeding is common in children up to 2 years old, but they believe colostrum is not healthy, so it is supplemented with camel, goat or cow's milk²
- Tea increases breastmilk production¹
- Chicken injected with hormones is bad for the human heart¹

References: