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# Just Stick It

## *From kebabs to corn dogs, skewered meats through history*

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**AFTER EXITING A BAR** in New York's East Village, I recently found myself a little tipsy, a lot hungry, and surrounded by dozens of variations of one particular late-night snack — meat-on-a-stick. In a three-block radius at 2 a.m., my skewered-meat choices were dizzyingly diverse in origin, aroma, and taste, including peanut satay, adana kebab, chicken yakitori, shish kebab, and deep-fried corn dogs.

I chose the satay, slept off the booze, and woke up still perplexed by the night's international smörgåsbord of meat skewers. Why do so many regions of the world eat chunks of meat impaled on a stick? What is the history of this culinary device, and what makes it so appealing that it's become the chosen mini-meal of everyone from drunken 20-something bargoers to Japanese businessmen?

I Googled it. Up popped a mind-boggling array of stick-pierced meats — along with Japanese yakitori and Southeast Asian satay were Andalusian pinchitos, Greek souvlaki, khorovats from Armenia, and West African suya. Where there was meat, it seemed, there was meat-on-a-stick. I had to know more.

*The Oxford Companion to Food* traces meat-on-a-stick back to the cities of the ancient Near East, attributing its rise in popularity to the fact that skewering small pieces of meat was more convenient than roasting whole animals. The practice also caught on in the Mediterranean. Roasting meat recurs so frequently in *The Iliad and the Odyssey* that this type of cookery is sometimes referred to as the "Homeric method." As when following a ritual sacrifice, Nestor's men "sliced the rest into pieces, spitted them on skewers/and raising points to the fire, broiled all the meats."

To more precisely locate the origin of the practice, I e-mailed Sami Zubaida, professor emeritus of politics and sociology at the University of London, who has written extensively on cuisines of the Middle East. His response was short and, given the subject, appropriately to the point. "The history of grilling meat is the history of cooking meat for the whole humanity!" he wrote. I

pressed him for more, but while he was able to assign the etymology of the word *kebab* to the Arabic (the earliest textual reference he's uncovered was in ninth-century Basra, referring to the kebabing of fish), Zubaida ultimately says of the various Near Eastern cultures, "No doubt they all grilled meat one way or the other."

*Food: A Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* confirmed Zubaida's claim that preparing meat over open flames was indeed the original method for cooking meat, albeit a serendipitous one, first discovered in the aftermath of wildfires. In the wake of a blaze, bits of blackened animal flesh remained, and so our predecessors gradually developed a taste for charred flesh.

As early humans mastered fire, the ability to cook meat with purpose soon followed, leading to the first and most basic incarnation of meat-on-a-stick, meat on the bone. "*Homo erectus/ergaster* was almost certainly butchering meat," Alan Outram, an environmental archaeologist and paleoeconomist at the University of Exeter, wrote me in an e-mail. "There is a pattern on archaeological bones that definitely indicates roasted joints (meat on the bone)."

### *Why do so many regions of the world eat chunks of meat impaled on a stick?*

From there, the logical conclusion is that because smaller pieces cook more quickly and evenly, early chefs would have begun to develop kebabery techniques. Richard Wrangham, Harvard professor of biological anthropology, insists that there is no way to pinpoint precisely when meat cookery evolved from roasting large pieces to smaller morsels. He was willing to speculate though, "Since human ancestors were already cutting meat 2.5 million years ago, they could have been putting bits of meat on sticks or on fire any time after controlling fire." And in his recent book, *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*, he writes that a sharpened stick

of spruce found at Schöningen, a 400,000-year-old archaeological site in Germany, was “charred at one end as if it had been used as a poker, or perhaps held over coals to cook strips of meat.”

And so the path from this possible first kebab back to Homer or Zubaida’s ninth-century kebab reference is a difficult one to trace. Some scholars believe that in the tree-barren Central Asian steppe, warriors in the field used their swords to grill meat in lieu of small wooden sticks. Zubaida doubts this story: “Swords as skewers is possible, but not attested,” he wrote me.

Swords or no, kebabing caught on. It spread to the South Asian subcontinent by way of the Moghul Turks, resulting in an assortment of skewered meats, including the famous Lucknow kakori kebab (a succulent repast of finely minced lamb, marinated in a medley of spices). From there it was on to Southeast Asia, where Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand still grill their own versions of satay. Satay in turn found its way to what is now Cape Town, becoming the South African staple sosatie.

By stringing together these bits of history, I figure there are a few key attributes that give the meat skewer its staying power and assure its ubiquity.

### **SIMPLICITY**

The method is inherently versatile and portable. Skewered meat can be grilled in a small space and does not require utensils, making it the ultimate street food. In Japan, workers heading home after a long day tuck in for bamboo-skewered chicken in Tokyo’s “Yakitori Alley.” This tiny thoroughfare boasts dozens of unassuming restaurants, some consisting of only a few stools for patrons and a narrow yakitori grill, specially designed to perfectly cook scores of chicken sticks at a time.

In Australia, one entrepreneurial company aims to take the ease of modern kebabing even further, with the Rota Chef Skewerite Satay and Kebab Maker. The metal box contraption allows the chef to skewer up to 64 meat sticks at a time. The company claims that the device will end the scourge of “personal injuries through skewer accidents.” Place the meat in the box, insert skewers through a grated top plate, and slice between each of the sticks. Remove the box and voilà, 64 uniformly butchered kebabs.

### **EXPENSE**

At their most basic, kebabs are cheap, made of small pieces of meat shoved onto hardly more than a twig of

wood. Many versions of meat-on-a-stick are derived from scraps. In Peru, African slaves, working on haciendas and sugar plantations, used the only meat they had — unwanted beef offal and gristle — and combined a traditional Andean recipe for llama marinated in aji peppers with the Spanish brocheta to create the anticucho. Today these skewered spicy beef hearts are a staple of Peruvian street food and fine dining alike. In Japan, yakitori leaves no morsel of chicken wasted. Everything gets skewered — the mune (breast), the prized seseri (neck), and even kawa, crispy bits of skin.

### **VERSATILITY**

The simplicity of the form allows chefs to cater their stuck meats to regional palates, preferred animal parts, and traditional spice profiles. Unlike larger cuts of meat, bite-sized chunks readily absorb marinade — candlenut and coconut milk in an Indonesian Lombok beef satay, or aromatic lemon and onion in Iranian tikkeh kebab. Walking through Beijing’s Wangfujing night market a few years ago, I was dumbfounded by the diversity of skewers — everything from lanced grasshoppers to Uyghur-style mutton to pierced seahorses. A Chinese scholar friend from UC Berkeley sheepishly admitted to me that while studying in Beijing, he sampled goat penis on a stick. (“The meat was very tough, dry, and chewy,” he told me of the six-inch sausage-like item. He stopped after one bite.)

### **FUN**

Because of its portability, meat-on-a-stick is often eaten in public spaces — in open-air markets, on streets, at festivals, aboard trains and buses. Go to any county or state fair from Oregon to Maine and you’ll find America’s quintessential skewered meat: the corn dog. This deep-fried, cornbread-encrusted meat snack is so embedded in our nation’s culinary landscape that Brady Sahnaw, now a 34-year-old executive for a financial education company in Oregon, established National Corndog Day in 1992. “It’s a great rallying item,” Sahnaw told me. “People identify eating the corn dog with going to the fair.” Beyond its unifying patriotic charm, the corn dog also lets us display our individuality by providing countless ways to wolf it down. “I pull the stick out and nibble off the bottom,” Sahnaw said. “Some people eat all the corn off and then eat the dog.”

It doesn’t matter how you choose to eat it, Sahnaw promised. “Once you’re doing it, everyone likes it.” 