

Faith, Food, and Fusion: Jewish and Muslim Dietary Traditions in Contemporary Greek Gastronomy

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Abstract:

This study investigates the evolving influence of religious foodways on the culinary identities of Jewish and Muslim immigrant communities in Greece, and their role in shaping the trajectory of modern Greek gastronomy. Through a mixed-methods approach that combines survey data (n = 2,900)—including 1,930 Muslim and 970 Jewish participants—with fieldwork, interviews, and archival sources, the paper explores the intersections of faith, migration, and food. The research is framed around three core questions: In what ways do religious beliefs shape food practices for these immigrant groups? How do their traditions interact with and influence Greek cuisine? And how is food used to sustain cultural identity in a multicultural society? Results show strong adherence to halal and kosher dietary frameworks, especially among older participants, alongside evidence of culinary adaptation—both creative and pragmatic—that incorporates local Greek elements. Hybrid dishes such as Sephardic-style phyllo pastries and halal variations of Greek street foods reflect a cuisine in motion. These religious foodways thus serve as both anchors of memory and platforms for cultural exchange. Greek gastronomy, viewed through this lens, emerges as dynamic and dialogical rather than fixed and static.

Keywords: religious diet, halal, kosher, food culture, immigration, Greece, mixed methods, culinary identity, cultural hybridity

1. Introduction

Food is never just about nutrition; it carries memory, tradition, and identity (Ray, 2016). In contexts shaped by migration, what people eat—and how they prepare and share their meals—offers insights into broader patterns of cultural exchange and transformation. Greece, often associated with its ancient culinary heritage, provides a rich setting to explore these themes. Despite popular perceptions of Greek cuisine as timeless, it is in fact a living, evolving system shaped by diverse cultural threads (Vergopoulos, 2005). Among the most enduring and yet underexplored of these influences are the dietary traditions of Jewish and Muslim communities. Jewish communities have been present in Greece for more than two millennia. The arrival of Sephardic Jews in Thessaloniki after the Spanish expulsion of 1492 added new flavors and preparation methods rooted in Mediterranean and Ottoman traditions (Borovaya, 2016). Muslim populations have similarly long-standing ties to the region, dating back to the Ottoman era. More recently, migration from Syria, Egypt, Albania, and other countries has added new layers to this already complex culinary landscape. Both communities organize their foodways around religious dietary laws—Kashrut in Judaism and Halal in Islam—which function as more than just nutritional codes. They shape everyday habits, create bonds, and act as expressions of belonging (Mandelbaum, 2001; Gökarıksel, 2009).

This study investigates how Jewish and Muslim immigrants in Greece use food to navigate the balance between continuity and change, and what this means for Greek cuisine more broadly. The research addresses three central questions:

1. How do religious beliefs shape the food choices and traditions of Jewish and Muslim immigrants in Greece?
2. How have these communities influenced the evolution of Greek cuisine?
3. In what ways does food function as a vehicle for maintaining cultural identity in a multicultural society?

By situating these questions within broader discussions of migration, hybridity, and identity, the paper tries to shed light on how food operates as both a personal and political force in modern Greek society.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Religion and Food Practices: Food practices rooted in faith go beyond dietary rules—they reflect spiritual worldviews and social cohesion. Jewish and Islamic laws around food—Kashrut and Halal—set clear boundaries for what can be consumed, how it is prepared, and in what contexts it may be shared. These boundaries are not just restrictive; they serve to create meaning and order (Gökarıksel, 2009; Mandelbaum, 2001). In diaspora settings, where ideal ingredients or facilities may not always be available, religious foodways adapt. Immigrants rely on substitutions, informal markets, and improvised rituals to maintain adherence while also fitting into new cultural landscapes. This blend of continuity and improvisation reveals the elasticity of food traditions under pressure.

Culinary Identity and Hybridity: Culinary identity isn't static—it evolves as individuals and communities interact with new contexts. Bhabha (1994) refers to this as “cultural hybridity,” where identity is formed in the in-between spaces of cultural contact. This is clearly visible in the kitchen. Whether it's the incorporation of cumin and sumac into Greek recipes or the presence of halal street food in urban centers, hybrid culinary expressions emerge where cultures meet (Avieli, 2014; Papataxiarchis, 2006). These hybrids are not diluted forms of tradition but new expressions of identity, anchored in both origin and adaptation.

Theoretical Positioning: The dual role of food—as both a conservator of cultural memory and a site of innovation—makes it an ideal lens for studying the intersection of faith and identity. Jewish and Muslim communities in Greece exemplify this interplay, making them well-suited subjects for investigating how food mediates cultural continuity and transformation.

3. Methodology

Research Design.

The study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Ivankova et al., 2006), combining quantitative survey data with ethnographic fieldwork. This allows for large-scale pattern recognition alongside deep contextual exploration.

Quantitative Component.

A total of 2,900 individuals participated in the survey, including 1,930 Muslims and 970 Jews residing in Athens and Thessaloniki. Stratified sampling ensured demographic diversity. Questionnaires covered dietary observance, food preparation habits, perceptions of Greek food, and involvement in cultural food activities.

Qualitative Component.

The qualitative phase involved 45 semi-structured interviews, participant observations during religious meals, and archival research in libraries and community centers. Participants included elders, community leaders, home cooks, and restaurant owners. Interviews explored how people interpret and practice religious food laws, as well as how they adapt recipes to new cultural realities.

Data Analysis.

Quantitative data were analyzed using chi-square (χ^2) tests to detect significant associations, while Cronbach's Alpha assessed internal consistency. Variance measures highlighted differences in response spread. Thematic analysis of qualitative data provided rich narrative context to interpret statistical trends.

Methods of Statistical Analysis.

In order to perform the data statistical analysis, we used descriptive statistics and inferential procedures to compare Jewish and Muslim participants in relation to their food consumption and their perceptions toward Greek gastronomy and food-related exchanges. We relied on a chi-square (χ^2) test of independence as our primary inferential tool to assess whether responses were distributed significantly differently by religious group across a number of aspects of food culture and practice.

The chi-square statistic compares observed frequencies to those ones expected in the absence of association between religion and response categories. A χ^2 result that is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) means that the variables are not independent, i.e., that religious affiliation is associated with responses.

Furthermore, Cronbach's Alpha values were computed for each set of variables to measure the internal consistency of multi-item scales or similar questions. Low values may reflect lack of internal consistency or conceptual heterogeneity or variation of interpretation on the part of the participants.

Also, the variance was calculated for each religious group to see the distribution of the response in the various categories. High variance implies greater heterogeneity in the perception within a group, which may signify somewhat less uniformity in terms of attitudes or practices.

Table of All Chi-Squares

Variable	Chi-Square (χ^2)	Degrees of Freedom	p-value	Cronbach's Alpha	Variance (Jewish)	Variance (Muslim)
Frequency of Traditional Dish Consumption	17.92	2	0.00046	-0.02	5,004.25	26
Adaptation of Greek Recipes	8.09	2	0.0045	-0.04	37,636.00	233,289.00
Presence of Religious Food Restrictions	8.09	1	0.0045	-0.02	N/A	N/A
Gender Distribution	0.00	1	1.00	N/A	117,504.98	18,826.58
Participation in Culinary Exchanges	9.14	1	0.0025	-0.09	2,304.00	44,100.00

4. Findings

Presentation of the findings

The findings of Statistical analysis indicated significant differences in food perception and practice as between Jewish and Muslim respondents in various aspects pertinent to Greek culinary culture.

Residency Duration in Greece: The proportion of Jews born in Greece (60.0%) was far higher than among Muslim interviewees (15.03%). On the other hand, recent migration was (self-)reported more in Muslims where 35.03% lived in Greece for less than 5 years. Chi-square test results found a very close correlation between religious preference and length of residency ($\chi^2 = 568.26$, $p < .001$), as Jews have a longer history in the country overall.

Geographic Distribution: Geographical distribution was also significantly different between the two groups ($\chi^2 = 568.25$, $p < .001$). Jewish respondents were more concentrated in Athens (528 out of 970), and Muslim respondents were more diversified, with a great number residing outside of main urban centers (1380 out of 1930).

Dietary Restrictions: Around 70 percent of the Jews kept kosher and about 75 percent of Muslims followed the halal dietary system. Yet, variability was larger among Muslim respondents ($\sigma^2 = 233,289$), which indicates a larger heterogeneity in this group concerning the stringency or interpretation of dietary rules. Cronbach's Alpha (-0.02 point) showed also the low internal consistency which could be attributed to the variety of participants' understanding of such limitations.

Adaptation of Greek Recipes: The Muslim interviewees adapted Greek recipes to suit traditional or religious dietary habits more often (69.7%) than the Jewish interviewees (40.0%). This difference was statistically

significant ($\chi^2 = 168.29$, $p < .001$), indicating that Muslim individuals had more flexibility to incorporate local food into religiously permissible diets.

Culinary Similarities: Most members of both groups identified connections between their traditional food and Greek cuisine, yet Muslims were significantly more likely to do so (75.1%) compared with Jews (50.0%). This difference was statistically significant (with $\chi^2 = 11.35$, $p = 0.00075$), indicating that Muslim respondents found more similarities between Greek dietary customs and their own.

Contribution to Greek Cuisine: More Muslim respondents, compared to Jewish respondents, felt that their communities have introduced ever ingredients/foods in Greek cuisine (50.7% vs. 40.0%, $\chi^2 = 59.74$, $p = 1.07 \times 10^{-13}$) indicating a stronger identification of the Muslims with the Greek food.

Market proximity and eating habits: Greek food markets were believed to be “not at all similar” to Jewish dietary practices, at 44.9%, compared to 33.6% among Muslims. A much higher percentage of Muslims, as opposed to Jews, near that same percentage of Jews found the Greek options “close” to their dietary norms ($\chi^2 = 60.70$, $p < .001$). Dispersion among Muslims was much greater ($\sigma^2 = 72,622$), indicating more heterogeneous opinions for this population.

Involvement in Culinary Exchanges: When it came to culinary events in Greece, a statistically significant difference also appeared between Muslim (60.8%) versus Jewish (54.9%) respondents ($\chi^2 = 9.14$, $p = 0.0025$), with higher engagement in cultural food activities.

Qualitative Component

Duration and location of the field work: Fieldwork took place over 7 months (November 2024 and April 2025), mainly in Athens, and Thessaloniki, as both cities have the highest concentration of Jewish and Muslim communities. They were selected because of their Jewish historical importance and their present importance as centers of immigration.

Semi-Structured Interviews: A total of 45 participants were interviewed in depth through semi structured interviews, 25 Muslim immigrants (Syrian, Egyptian, Albanian and Afghan immigrants) and 20 Jewish participants (Sephardic immigrants and Holocaust descendants). A purposive sampling of participants who can share different views, elders, home cooks, leaders in community and restaurant owners also was selected to participate in the FGDs (Kvale, 2007). The interviews were conducted either in Greek or in English according to the preference of the participant. Interview guides focused on: Religiosity and dietary observance Religion, with its significant and social facets, covers various aspects of life including the normative pattern of dietary behavior, both on philosophical and psychological grounds.

Participant Observation: Fieldwork was conducted during communal meals, religious celebrations (such as Ramadan iftar, Passover Seder), and cooking classes in people’s homes and community kitchens. The observers paid particular attention to the techniques of food preparation, the use of ingredients, and the symbolic meanings of some of the different dishes (Pink, 2012). Fieldnotes were compiled during the time of data collection and later developed in field journals for thematic themes.

Archival Research: Archival work was done in libraries, museums, and community archives, especially in Thessaloniki, which once had one of the biggest Sephardic Jewish communities in Europe. The consultants reviewed historical cookbooks, synagogue records, oral histories, and photographs of Jewish foodways before and after the Holocaust. Sources were scarier for Muslim communities as a result of more recent migration waves, but bulletins and personal collections made important contributions toward understanding changing food customs.

Integration of Methods

The qualitative and quantitative strands were combined through a sequential explanatory design such that findings from the surveys guided the drafting of the interview guide and the selection of observations focus areas (Ivankova, Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2006). For instance, significant trends in ingredient substitution or ritual food preparation were further examined through interviews and field observations in the survey. Conversely, qualitative findings allowed deeper interpretation of survey data by providing some explanation in terms of the causes of observed behavior that would not have been obtainable with numerical data alone.

5. Statistical Results Overview

Statistical Analysis Methodology

To assess differences between Jewish and Muslim respondents regarding their dietary habits, perceptions of Greek cuisine, and participation in culinary exchanges, we employed a combination of descriptive statistics and inferential methods. The primary inferential tool used was the chi-square (χ^2) test of independence, which enabled us to evaluate whether responses varied significantly by religious group across several dimensions of food culture and practice.

The chi-square statistic compares observed frequencies with expected frequencies under the null hypothesis of no association between religion and response categories. A statistically significant χ^2 result ($p < 0.05$) indicates that the variables are not independent — i.e., there is an association between religious affiliation and responses. Additionally, Cronbach's Alpha was calculated for each variable set to assess the internal consistency of multi-item scales or related questions. Low values indicate poor internal consistency, suggesting either conceptual heterogeneity or variability in interpretation among participants.

Finally, variance was computed for each religious group to examine the spread of responses across different categories. High variance suggests greater diversity in perception within a group, potentially indicating less uniformity in attitudes or practices.

Comparative presentation of results.

The statistical analysis revealed significant differences in food perception and practice between Jewish and Muslim respondents across several dimensions relevant to Greek culinary culture.

Residency Duration in Greece: Jewish participants were significantly more likely to be born in Greece (60.0%) compared to Muslim respondents (15.03%). Conversely, Muslims reported higher proportions of recent migration, with 35.03% having resided in Greece for less than five years. The chi-square test confirmed a strong association between religious affiliation and residency duration ($\chi^2 = 568.26$, $p < .001$), indicating that Jews have been present in the country longer on average.

Geographic Distribution: There was also a statistically significant difference in geographic distribution between the two groups ($\chi^2 = 568.25$, $p < .001$). Jewish respondents showed a stronger presence in Athens (528 out of 970), while Muslim respondents were more evenly distributed, with a large proportion residing outside major cities (1380 out of 1930).

Dietary Restrictions: Approximately 70% of Jewish respondents followed kosher dietary laws, compared to 75% of Muslim respondents who adhered to halal practices. However, variance was notably higher among Muslim respondents ($\sigma^2 = 233,289$), suggesting greater diversity within this group regarding strictness or interpretation of dietary rules. Cronbach's Alpha value (-0.02) indicated low internal consistency, possibly due to variability in how participants interpreted these restrictions.

Adaptation of Greek Recipes: Muslim respondents were more likely to adapt Greek recipes to meet their religious dietary needs (69.7%) compared to Jewish respondents (40.0%). This contrast was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 168.29$, $p < .001$), supporting the hypothesis that Muslim participants demonstrated greater flexibility in integrating local cuisine into religiously appropriate diets.

Culinary Similarities: A majority of both groups recognized similarities between their traditional dishes and Greek cuisine; however, Muslims showed a slightly higher recognition rate (75.1%) than Jews (50.0%). This difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 11.35$, $p = 0.00075$), suggesting that Muslim participants perceived a closer alignment with Greek food traditions.

Contribution to Greek Cuisine: Muslim respondents were more likely than Jewish respondents to believe that their communities had introduced ingredients or dishes into Greek cuisine (50.7% vs. 40.0%, respectively), with a chi-square statistic of $\chi^2 = 59.74$, $p = 1.07 \times 10^{-13}$, again pointing to a stronger sense of culinary integration among Muslims.

Market Proximity to Dietary Habits: Greek food markets were perceived as "not at all close" to Jewish dietary habits by 44.9% of respondents, compared to only 33.6% of Muslim respondents. In contrast, 50.2% of Muslims found Greek food offerings "close" to their dietary norms, compared to 35.0% of Jews ($\chi^2 = 60.70$, $p < .001$).

Variance among Muslims was significantly higher ($\sigma^2 = 72,622$), reflecting a broader range of perceptions within this group.

Participation in Culinary Exchanges: Muslim respondents showed higher participation rates in culinary events in Greece (60.8%) than Jewish respondents (54.9%), and this difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 9.14$, $p = 0.0025$), suggesting greater involvement in cultural food initiatives.

Qualitative Insights

Interviews and participant observation also allowed for a deeper understanding of the ways in which these dietary laws are interpreted and (re)negotiated in practice. Numerous respondents reported that their kitchens were “hybrid spaces” that juxtaposed traditional use with local innovation.

During Ramadan, we noticed varied tables where iftar was celebrated, from traditional (dates, lentils, stews) to Greek (lighter salads, feta cheese, olives). Similarly, Passover Seders from the beginning included greens and wines that were indigenous to the particular part of the world in which the Seder was held -- a statement that can be made elsewhere as well about how ritual foods are transformed -- without losing their religious force.

Moreover, these findings also prove that although religiously mandated dietary taboos are powerful ethnic markers, they may be selectively adhered to, differentially applied, and transcended. The same dietary considerations seem to be subject to situational interpretation and negotiation, varying in terms of availability, affordability, convenience, and intergenerational transmission.

Influence on Greek Cuisine. There are several more measurable ways that trail from both Muslim and Jewish foodways to contemporary Greek cuisine. New kinds of ingredients, flavors, and cooking methods have made their way into the diet of the latter-day Greeks. This continues to be evident among immigrants, but the influences can increasingly be seen in Greek food cultures more broadly, and especially in urban diasporic socialites such as Athens and Thessaloniki. New Ingredients and Flavors Data shows that 68% of Muslim informants and 52% of Jewish ones frequently use foreign ingredients such as Sumac, cumin, coriander, preserved lemons, pomegranate and saffron. Other frequently used products are Halal meats, kosher wines, and specific legumes of Sephardic background chickpeas, lentils. Many of these ingredients have become available in Greek superstores and organic markets, attesting to people’s access to different culinary traditions. Research further shows chefs and amateur cooks adding foreign elements into traditional Greek dishes.

A Greek restaurant owner, for example, stated: Flatbreads and filled pastries such as borek, pita wraps, and borek are also becoming commonplace on the streets. Having witnessed pickling and fermenting (practiced in Jewish as well as Muslim homes) gain popularity among Greek artisanal food producers.” One particularly memorable hybrid dish was neat, called “Sephardic spanakopita,” panes of phyllo filled with spiced spinach, onions and (Jewish) Moroccan-influenced seasoning. Another was “halal souvlaki” with tzatziki and harissa sauce, a combination of Turkish and North African influences with Greek street food culture. These developments indicate that migrant food traditions are not just passively accepted but actively incorporated in Greece's ever-growing culinary map. (Papataxiarchis, 2006; Avieli, 2014).

6. Summary of Key Findings

Taking into consideration the research outcomes from the Quantitative results several notable trends emerged:

- Residency: Jewish participants were far more likely to be Greek-born (60%) than Muslim participants (15.03%) ($\chi^2 = 568.26$, $p < .001$).
- Dietary Observance: 70% of Jewish respondents followed kosher rules, while 75% of Muslims adhered to halal. The Muslim group showed higher variance, indicating broader interpretation.
- Adaptation: Muslim respondents more frequently adapted Greek dishes to meet religious needs (69.7% vs. 40.0%; $\chi^2 = 168.29$, $p < .001$).
- Perceived Contribution: 50.7% of Muslims, compared to 40% of Jews, felt their food traditions contributed to Greek cuisine.
- Market Access: Muslims reported better alignment between their dietary needs and what Greek markets offered.

The issue of religious dietary laws is still relevant for Jewish and Muslim immigrant families, with younger generations being more flexible.

The culinary tradition of immigrants in Greece is making a mark on Greek cuisine, when they bring new products, tastes and intermediate dishes.

Food is essential in cultural preservation — it happens when families or communities come together to share a food tradition.

For that matter, food can be a great vehicle for intermingling of cultures and forging inclusive culinary identities in contemporary Greece.

7. Discussion

Concerning cultural Adaptation Muslim participants demonstrated a greater willingness—or necessity—to adapt culinary practices, likely due to more recent arrival and less institutional support. Jewish participants, often with longer histories in Greece, showed stronger alignment with traditional practices.

In the subject -matters of Identity and Belonging Muslim communities were more vocal in asserting their influence on Greek food culture, viewing food as a pathway to integration and recognition. Jewish participants were more guarded, possibly reflecting a desire to maintain distinction or historical experiences of marginalization.

Finally, the variability and Access Muslim perceptions of market accessibility varied widely, suggesting differences in economic stability, regional settlement patterns, and religious stringency. This variation echoes similar findings in immigrant integration literature (Berry, 1997; Smith & Lee, 2021).

8. Limitations and Further Research

Whilst the use of mixed methods provides support for the validity of the findings, there are limitations to the study. There is a risk of bias in the use of self-reported survey data, especially for sensitive issues like religious practices. Also, although the quantitative survey data are more robust due to the high response rate, the reliance on self-reported data to construct the sample profiles may be subject to reporting biases, especially on sensitive issues, such as religious observance (Brown, et al, 2012). Moreover, while the qualitative part provides rich information, the small size is associated with reduced generalizability. However, the blending of the two methods represents a powerful tool for comprehending the intricate interaction of faith, food and identity among migratory communities in Greece.

As further research this work can be extended by comparing case studies from other Mediterranean countries or by interviewing Greek-born individuals who have embraced aspects of immigrant food cultures. Moreover, longitudinal analyses of generational food practice changes also yield important insights into processes of cultural adaptation and change.

9. Ethical Considerations

All respondents were told about the aims of the study, that they could withdraw at any time and that their answers would remain confidential. All respondents gave written / oral consent to be interviewed. To protect the anonymity, survey participants and interviewees were given code numbers. Particular sensitivity was shown in relation to religious, cultural and dietary sensitivities. Efforts were made to avoid making assumptions regarding religious and spiritual beliefs and practices of participants and to remain open to allowing participants to articulate the relationship between the material and spiritual dimensions of life in relation to food and faith (Guillemin and Gillam, 2004).

10. Conclusion

Religious dietary practices and Greek culinary culture intersect and diverge as this article explores in a comparison of Jewish and Muslim communities in Greece. The findings revealed statistical differences between the two groups in engaging local food traditions, modifying recipes, perception of similarity and cultural

exchange. The Jews in the sample tended to find foodways anchored in historical continuity, more likely to reject adaptation and reinterpretation of traditional kosher laws. Despite not being engaged as often in food-taste related activities, they were more likely to integrate in Greece as their birthplace and displayed a less wide distribution of responses, indicating a more homogenous association with national cuisine. The Muslim participants, however, reported significantly more integration in the Greek food surroundings, such as changing the traditional Greek dishes to comply with halal standards, perceived resemblance with the Greek food culture and participation in food events.

Chi-square tests confirmed significant associations, with statistically significant values were found across all but most in 201 difficult area of residence ($\chi^2 = 568.26$, $p < .001$) and market alignment ($\chi^2 = 60.70$, $p < .001$). Nevertheless, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients presented low values, which suggests that some constructs presented a low internal consistency. This indicates that the survey instruments that examine perceptions among religious minority communities will require improvement through extension research.

Variance testing also showed that Muslim participants had far broader spread of views and opinions than their Jewish counterparts, indicating that this group may have more varied experiences, due perhaps to recent waves of migration, generational change and regional variation.

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