



AfriFOODlinks
FOODChronicles

Tunis



AfriFOODChronicles

Welcome to a new edition of the AfriFOODChronicles!

In this edition, we travel to Tunis, one of the oldest and most complex food systems in North Africa. Tunis' food story is shaped by empires, power, culture and flavour.

In this issue we will explore:

- How Tunis' history has shaped the city and its food system
- What food security looks like for households in Tunis
- How people in Tunis access food in different parts of the city
- Who holds the power over food in Tunis, and who doesn't

By pulling these themes together, we can see how food in Tunis relates to broader questions of urban justice, livelihoods, and everyday urban life.

We hope you enjoy your journey with us,
AfriFOODChronicles
Editorial Team



Welcome to Tunis

Where history, markets and food meet



The history, culture and daily life of Tunis is deeply connected to food.

The city's form and function has been shaped by empires, colonialism, urban growth and more recent governance systems.

Understanding Tunis' food system goes beyond the narrow alleys of the Medina and the wide boulevards of the French-built Ville Nouvelle. Tunis' food system requires us to go beyond markets and prices, and reflect on how history, governance and power have shaped what people eat today.

A Brief History of Tunis



The city of Tunis is built on layers of history, stretching back thousands of years.

Each era has shaped the form and function of Tunis' food system that we see today.

For example, the era of the Carthage developed trade routes through North Africa and the Mediterranean. Under Roman rule, agriculture and commerce were reshaped from highly productive subsistence farming to export-oriented production. In the 7th century, the Arab-Islamic expansion left a lasting impact on Tunis' religious, architectural, cultural and urban fabric. An example of this is the Medina: a dense urban area of souks, mosques and artisans that remains an important space in Tunis today.

But Tunis' history does not end there. Under Ottoman rule, another layer of administrative and culinary shifts occurred, significantly shaping how food was traded and cities were governed. Following this, in the 19th Century, the French introduced urban forms such as the Ville Nouvelle's European-style streets, markets and public buildings.

Each of these periods has left a legacy on Tunis' food system that continues to shape how food moves, who sells it and how people are able to access it.

Shaped by Empire, Trade and Labour



From couscous, to citrus dishes, harissa, fish stews, and pastries, the food eaten in Tunis today reflects the city's layered histories of creativity and coercion.

Food Cultures of Tunis



The food culture of Tunis is not a simple mix of cultures. It is a layered rich dish of centuries of trade, migration and colonisation, each bringing specific ingredients to the table.

Grains, foraged herbs, preserved food and couscous were contributed by indigenous Amazigh communities. These remain a staple of Tunisian cuisine today. Spices, cooking styles and new crops, that are now essential to everyday cooking, were introduced during the Arab-Islamic period.

Pastries, layered dishes and systems of food preparation and trade were added during Ottoman rule. Under European colonial rule, 'formal' market structures, commercial regulation and European style butcheries and bakeries were introduced.

While these eras have resulted in Tunis' food culture we see today, it is important to remember that these shifts were not equal exchanges. These shifts occurred through empire, conquest and colonial oppression.

The city's food culture is a record of Tunis' past and embedded in everyday urban routines.

Governance and Power

Food governance in Tunis reflects a centralised political system where national ministries hold the majority of formal authority over food.

Functions such as agriculture, food import and export, food safety standards and price controls are predominantly determined by the central government. This results in decisions impacting everyday access to food staples such as wheat, often being made at a national level as opposed to a local (city) level.

However, **the Municipality of Tunis plays a crucial role in managing the spaces where food can be bought and sold.** The Municipality oversees markets, enforces food hygiene rules, allocates market stalls, manages waste and regulates street trading. The Central Market is a clear example of this municipal role in action. Municipal officers monitor pricing, cleanliness and quality of food while also acting as mediators between vendors when necessary.

While there is clear formal food governance taking place from a National and Municipal level, **the interests of these spheres of government do not always align.** For example, National supply chains can be overly rigid and leave little flexibility for municipal traders to find alternative suppliers, or adjust pricing. At the same time, Municipal regulations are inconsistently enforced which can create mistrust and frustration between traders and municipal officers.

Informal traders play a key role in providing affordable access to nutritious food for low-income residents. Unfortunately, informal trade regulation falls in a grey zone between the national and municipal governments' policies. This passing on of mandates results in informal traders often facing more policing than support.

This fragmented governance context adds another layer to how food flows through the city and who does and does not benefit from it.

Power, Markets and Urban Food Control: The Central Market of Tunis

Tunis' Central Market is a clear example of how power, regulation and everyday livelihoods intersect. The market consists of formal vendors who operate inside the market from rented stalls and have to follow hygiene regulations and rely on the Bir El Kassaa wholesale market for stock. The traders at the market often come from families who have traded at the market for generations, while some traders form part of a new wave of traders. Both groups of traders share **frustrations about deteriorating infrastructure, security concerns and the limitations imposed by tightly controlled supply chains.**

Informal food vendors are located outside the official boundaries of the market, and are essential for residents who cannot afford supermarket prices or large quantities of food. These traders sell fruits, vegetables, herbs and prepared food from makeshift stalls. The informal traders are able to charge lower prices due to fewer supply chain and formal market regulations. This causes tension between the formal traders inside The Central Market who feel undercut by the informal traders.

Despite the key role informal traders play in Tunis' urban food system, they face police harassment, limited protection and little recognition for their role in feeding the city.

Precarious small-scale vendors form a third group of traders who operate around the Central Market. These traders are granted stalls due to economic vulnerability, and sell homemade foods, spices and preserved goods. These traders are permitted to trade with "municipal tolerance", with the market acting as a safety net in a city where livelihoods are fragile.

The Central Market operates as more than a space of food trade, but is a microcosm of the city's wider governance challenges.

Food in Tunis

Food Security Snapshot

Food insecurity in Tunis is predominantly shaped by national economic pressures and global market dependencies

Unemployment, rising inflation and currency devaluation have placed growing strain on households in Tunis.

Tunisia's national dependence on imported staples such as wheat, makes the country vulnerable to global price spikes. In addition, climate related challenges have added pressure to domestic agricultural production.

The knock on effects of these national trends are felt by many households in Tunis. Often, this takes the shape of a reduction in food variety with a heavy reliance on vegetables,

bread and cheaper staples, while cutting back on animal protein and fruit.

Families are also obliged to shop more frequently and buy smaller quantities due to unstable incomes and daily price fluctuations.

Urban residents are particularly vulnerable as they rely significantly on markets, vendors and traders rather than cooked food.

Markets such as The Central Market play a crucial role in providing relatively affordable fresh produce to a wider range of urban households.

Food Access

Food access in Tunis is reliant on a combination of formal markets, neighbourhood markets, informal street vendors and supermarkets



The Central Market is a major hub of fresh produce for both residents and restaurants. The role of the market extends beyond commerce. The market also supplies smaller neighbourhood traders and shapes price levels across the city.

Neighbourhood markets offer localised access, predominantly for low- and middle- income households to affordable fresh food. Informal vendors, often trading around the market, on pavements or at busy intersections, fill an important affordability gap by selling produce in smaller quantities. Supermarkets cater primarily to middle-income consumers and offer packaged and imported goods.

The connection between these points of food access is the Bir El Kassaa wholesale market, which has a monopoly over the city's food supply. This centralised system restricts flexibility for all traders, but gives wholesalers a significant influence over availability and pricing.

The way people access food in Tunis is shaped by both formal systems of regulation, as well as the informal strategies that residents and traders have to rely on to navigate economic uncertainty.



Food Environments in the City

Tunis' food environment is diverse but deeply unequal

The Central Market offers a variety of fresh produce and food products which reflects Tunis' culinary traditions. But, **the quality of the food environment varies from one part of the city to another.**

Some neighbourhoods have easy access to multiple markets, bakeries and vendors while others rely heavily on informal traders. Ageing infrastructure, particularly in older markets, affects the food safety and cleanliness of these markets. Waste management also creates an ongoing challenge in market spaces that shape both vendor livelihood and customer experiences.

Seemingly food related factors such as transport costs and daily price fluctuations also affect the city's food environment.

Food that is convenient, affordable, and available nearby determines what many households in Tunis eat. **Tunis' food environment reflects broader patterns of economic inequality and uneven urban development in the city.**



Conclusion

Tunis' food system is shaped by history, power and everyday livelihoods.

Through understanding how markets, governance and livelihoods intersect, we can begin to **imagine a fairer urban food system.**

A food system that enables greater access to affordable food, where vendors are supported, and the city's creative and coercive histories are remembered for all who live and eat in Tunis.

Target Word

T	E	R
L	E	O
E	V	I

Make as many words as you can! Each word must be 4 letters or longer, and contain the middle letter. There is one target word that uses all 9 letters.

Good luck!

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February 2026

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AfriFOODlinks



**Funded by
the European Union**

All content adapted from the State of City Food System Report. For further information, references and data please see El Ati, J. (2024). *State of City Food System Report for Tunis*, AfriFOODlinks project, Cape Town, South Africa.

This publication is produced by the African Centre for Cities under the framework of the AfriFOODlinks project. AfriFOODlinks is funded by the European Union (EU). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author(s) only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

