Proposal to Add Emoji Symbol for Falafel to Unicode

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Abstract

This proposal requests the addition of a Falafel emoji to a future version of the Unicode Standard. The emoji food set is lacking in Middle Eastern and North African foods, and in unambiguously vegetarian, kosher, or halal foods outside of fruits and vegetables. A falafel emoji addresses these gaps.

1   Introduction

Falafel is a ball of fried chickpeas or fava beans, and is popular in the Middle East and North Africa, and increasingly throughout the world. One of its key advantages is that it accommodates a range of food preferences: given reasonable care in preparation, it is vegan and vegetarian, halal, and kosher (for the remainder of this proposal, "VHK")

The proposed emoji would picture three falafel balls, with one in the center split open to reveal the green interior of the ball. Figure 1 presents a sample rendering by Aphee Messer.

The food category in the emoji set includes a wide range of fruits and vegetables, but very little else that is VHK. For example, cheeses may not be VHK due to rennet, and the Japanese origins of emoji have led to a wide range of explicitly or likely shellfish-based food emoji. The current emoji set has good
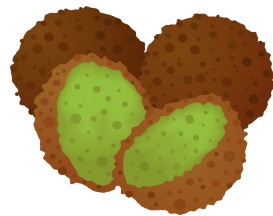

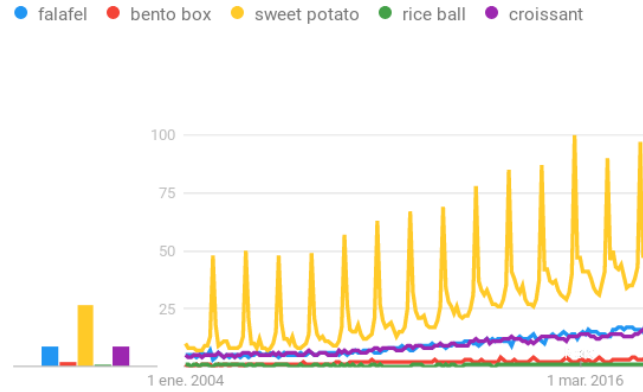Figure 1: Sample emoji rendering by Aphee Messer

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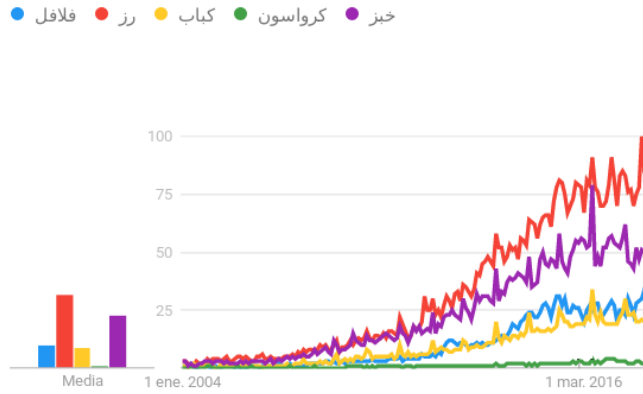Figure 2: In English, "Falafel" is as common as "croissant" in Google's database.

Figure 3: In Arabic, "Falafel" competes with basic staples in search popularity.

representation of foods from the American and East Asian regions, but very little from the Middle East and North Africa.

2 Expected Usage

2.1 Frequency

Figure 2 shows frequencies of various food terms in Google's English-language database of user searches. In this data set, the usage of "falafel" is roughly as popular as "croissant," and noticeably more popular than some of the Japanese food emoji (see figure). Figure 2 includes "sweet potato," which is more popular in Google's database but clearly seasonal, while Falafel shows consistent usage.

To preserve the scale, "rice" was omitted from the plot of English search terms: being a basic staple, it was searched on Google 17 times more often than "falafel."

English, count	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	6,460	25,000	301
Rice	21,900	607,000	13,500
Sweet potato	13,700	46,200	5,010
Croissant	12,100	91,800	537
Bento box	2,160	8,760	229
Rice ball	926	1,010	154

English, scaled	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	3.39	24.28	44.85
Sweet potato	2.12	1.85	16.64
Croissant	1.87	3.67	1.78
Bento box	0.33	0.35	0.76
Rice ball	0.14	0.04	0.51

Arabic	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	301	5,670	460
Rice	1,690	10,400	595
Bread	601	72,200	703
Kebab	303	2,650	625
Croissant	62.2	405	63.7

Arabic	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	5.61	1.83	1.29
Bread	2.00	12.73	1.53
Kebab	1.01	0.47	1.36
Croissant	0.21	0.07	0.14

Figure 4: Search engine hits in thousands, from three search engines. Counts are given on the left, and as a percent of the falafel count to the right.

But among Arabic search terms, falafel is in the same range as basic staples. Figure 3 shows search frequencies in Google's database in Arabic. "Rice" (رز, in red) appears in the database of searches only three times as often as falafel (فلافل, in blue). Another staple, "bread" (خبز, in purple) is only 70% more popular than falafel at the end of this period. Falafel seems slightly more popular than "kebab" (كباب, in yellow), while "croissant" (كرواسون, in green) seems largely unknown.

Trends in image searches are presented in the appendix in Figures 7 and 8. The results are largely similar, but rice is somewhat more common in Arabic image searches and English speakers are enamored of croissant photos.

Figure 4 shows the search result counts in three search engines, in English and Arabic. Apart from Arabic Google's anomalous count for bread and a disproportionate number of English-language videos about sweet potatoes, the results largely follow those from the trend lines: in English, falafel result counts are behind but on the same order of magnitude as sweet potatoes and croissants, while in Arabic, the falafel result counts are behind but on the same order of magnitude as rice and bread.

2.2 Multiple uses

2.3 Image distinctiveness

The ideal falafel is briefly fried so that the exterior is brown, but the interior remains green. We believe, from our conversations, that we should show three falafel balls, and one of the of the balls should be cut open to show the distinctive green color. The brown-to-green pattern is distinctive and easily recognized even in small fonts. However, we leave it to the vendors to choose the most effective designs.

2.4 Completeness

Middle Eastern food has almost no representation in emoji. Distinctive foods commonly found in the melting pot of Middle Eastern cuisine such as kebabs, hummus, shakshuka or baklava are missing. Dner kebab has an emoji in the form of STUFFED FLATBREAD, though the proposal "UTC document L2/15-084"[1] makes only brief reference to its Turkish origins and instead bills it as "Germany's most favorite fast food snack." FALAFEL would be the first VHK Middle Eastern food represented in emoji.

3 Selection Factors for Exclusion

3.1 Overly specific

FALAFEL has a level of specificity comparable to many other emoji, such as those for the croissant, bento box, or dner kebab. And it is as prominent for a particular region of the world which is currently underrepresented.

3.2 Open ended

Falafel recipes are largely uniform, so there is no need for additional emoji for different falafel subtypes. One can find recipes for flatter discs or donut-shaped falafel, but we feel that these are relatively uncommon and the traditional ball is sufficient to express the idea of falafel. HUMMUS has been previously proposed and rejected by the Unicode Technical Committee. The universe of iconic and visually distinctive foods in the Middle East is fairly scoped.

3.3 Already Representable

Closely comparable emoji are not reasonable substitutes for falafel.

The KEBAB emoji depicts dner kebab wrapped in Lafah, a thin wrap sometimes used to serve falafel, but despite the similarity in wrapping method, a kebab is an entirely distinct food from falafel. As above, a key feature of falafel is that it is unambiguously VHK.

Falafel is often served in the form of a stuffed pita, but the STUFFED FLATBREAD emoji is designed to be ambiguous about its contents—and even whether the flatbread is a pita at all, or a frybread or focaccia. "Emoji Additions Tranche 6: More Popular Requests and Gap Filling"[2] does propose "falafel" as an alias, but the proposal describes "ingredients, such as meat, vegetables, and condiments," and the proposed character in that document shows brown strips that can not be falafel.

Beyond Lafah and pita, one may also find falafel on a mezze plate along with other small dishes. Expressing the latter use with existing emoji, for example via STUFFED FLATBREAD + FORK AND KNIFE WITH PLATE, may leave significant ambiguity that the author is writing about flatbread containing primarily falafel, minus the flatbread.

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[1] http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15084-kebab.pdf
[2] UTC document L2/15 195R2, https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15195r2-emoji-add-tranche6.pdf

3.4 Transient

The plot above from Google's database shows consistent usage of "falafel" in the English-speaking world since 2004. Pre-Internet, falafel is old enough that its origins have been lost. Claims include that its origin traces back to ta'amia, a fava-bean based fritter perhaps originating among Christian Copts of Alexandria in centuries past, or even the times of the pharoas.

4 Location on the emoji keyboard

FALAFEL as street food is served as a wrap or in a flatbread, so sequencing it before KEBAB (picured in a wrap) facilitates the FALAFEL + KEBAB and the FALAFEL + STUFFED FLATBREAD pairs, which could transform the wrap and flatbreat emoji into unambiguous representations of a falafel wrap or pita.

5 Appendix

The specifications for emoji proposals require screen shots of searches in several search engines. These are provided here for reference. The counts are transcribed from here to Table 4. As per the specification, these searches were done in a browser's privacy mode
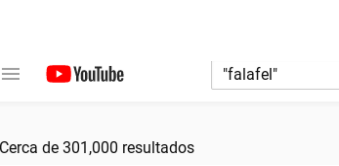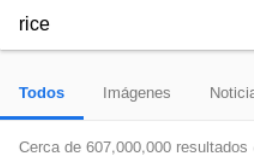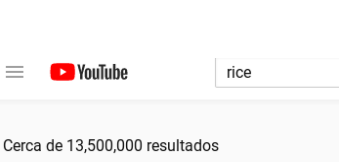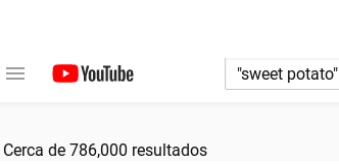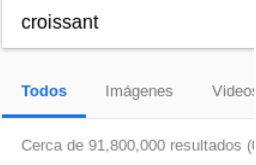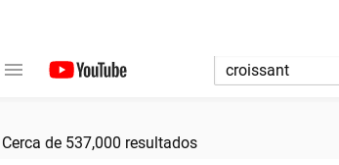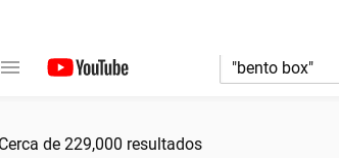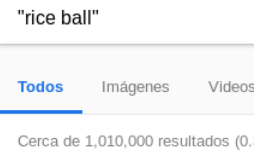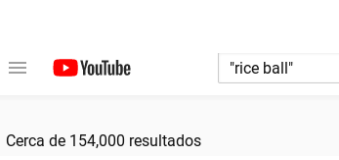
	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	falafel **Todos** Imágenes 6,460,000 Resultados	falafel **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 25,000,000 resultados ((	☰ ▶ YouTube "falafel" Cerca de 301,000 resultados
Rice	rice **Todos** Imágenes 21,900,000 Resultados	rice **Todos** Imágenes Noticia Cerca de 607,000,000 resultados	☰ ▶ YouTube rice Cerca de 13,500,000 resultados
Sweet potato	"sweet potato" **Todos** Imágenes 13,700,000 Resultados	"sweet potato" **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 46,200,000 resultados ((	☰ ▶ YouTube "sweet potato" Cerca de 786,000 resultados
Croissant	croissant **Todos** Imágenes 12,100,000 Resultados	croissant **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 91,800,000 resultados ((	☰ ▶ YouTube croissant Cerca de 537,000 resultados
Bento box	"bento box" **Todos** Imágenes 2,160,000 Resultados	"bento box" **Todos** Imágenes Maps Cerca de 8,760,000 resultados (0.	☰ ▶ YouTube "bento box" Cerca de 229,000 resultados
Rice ball	"rice ball" **Todos** Imágenes 926,000 Resultados	"rice ball" **Todos** Imágenes Videos Cerca de 1,010,000 resultados (0.	☰ ▶ YouTube "rice ball" Cerca de 154,000 resultados

Figure 5: Screen shots of English language searches

	Bing	Google	YouTube
falafel	فلافل الجميع 301,000 النتائج	فلافل الكل صور حوالي ٥'٦٧٠'٠٠٠ م	فلافل ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 460,000 نتيجة
rice	أرز الجميع 1,690,000 النتائج	أرز الكل صور حوالي ١٠'٤٠٠'٠٠٠	أرز ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 595,000 نتيجة
bread	خبز الجميع 601,000 النتائج	خبز الكل صور حوالي ٧٢'٢٠٠'٠٠٠	خبز ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 703,000 نتيجة
kebab	كباب الجميع 303,000 النتائج	كباب الكل صور حوالي ٢'٦٥٠'٠٠٠ م	كباب ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 625,000 نتيجة
croissant	كرواسون الجميع 62,200 النتائج	كرواسون الكل صور حوالي ٤٠٥'٠٠٠ من	كرواسون ▶ YouTube ≡ حوالي 63,700 نتيجة

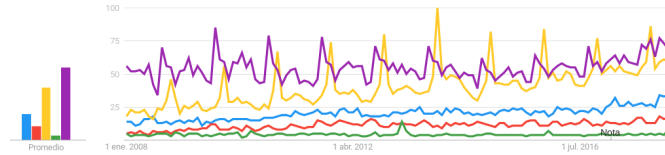Figure 6: Screen shots of Arabic language searches

Figure 7: Counts of pictures in Google's English database, using the same color key as Figure 2. Croissants are very photogenic.
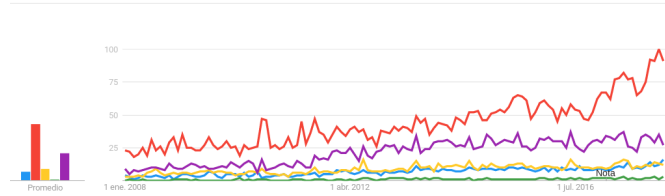

Figure 8: Counts of pictures in Google's Arabic database, using the same color key as Figure 3. Rice (red) appears more often than in the search result count; falafel (blue) less often.