

# 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.

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

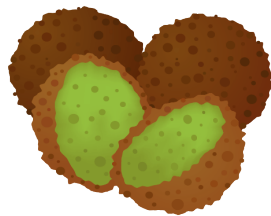


Figure 1: Sample emoji rendering by Aphee Messer

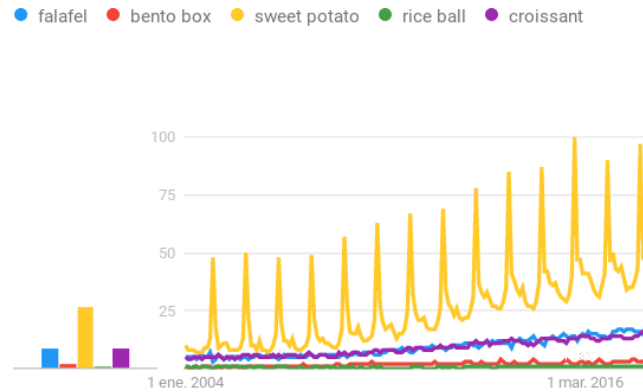


Figure 2: In English, “Falafel” is as common as “croissant” in Google’s database.

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.” The figure includes “sweet potato,” which is more popular in Google’s database but clearly seasonal, while Falafel shows consistent usage. Some of the emoji related to Japanese food, RICE BALL and BENTO BOX are also presented for comparison, though they may not be the ideal food for comparison to falafel.

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.”

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 5 and 6. 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, 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,

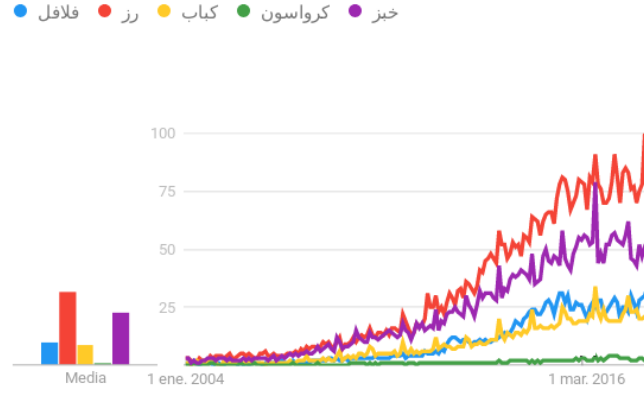


Figure 3: In Arabic, “Falafel” competes with basic staples in search popularity.

English, count	Bing	Google	YouTube	English, scaled	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	6,460	25,000	301	Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	21,900	607,000	13,500	Rice	3.39	24.28	44.85
Sweet potato	13,700	46,200	786	Sweet potato	2.12	1.85	2.61
Croissant	12,100	91,800	537	Croissant	1.87	3.67	1.78
Bento box	2,160	8,760	229	Bento box	0.33	0.35	0.76
Rice ball	926	1,010	154	Rice ball	0.14	0.04	0.51

Arabic	Bing	Google	YouTube	Arabic	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	301	5,670	460	Falafel	1.00	1.00	1.00
Rice	1,690	10,400	595	Rice	5.61	1.83	1.29
Bread	601	72,200	703	Bread	2.00	12.73	1.53
Kebab	303	2,650	625	Kebab	1.01	0.47	1.36
Croissant	62.2	405	63.7	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.

while in Arabic, the falafel result counts are behind but on the same order of magnitude as rice and bread.

## 2.2 Use in sequences

FALAFEL as street food is served as a wrap or in a flatbread, so sequencing it before KEBAB (pictured in a wrap) facilitates the FALAFEL + KEBAB and the FALAFEL + STUFFED FLATBREAD pairs, which could transform the wrap and flatbread emoji into unambiguous representations of a falafel wrap or pita. FALAFEL + SALAD is another common menu item. Some restaurants serve a falafel burger as a vegetarian option, which users might represent via FALAFEL + HAMBURGER.

## 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 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 hummus, tahini, shakshuka or baklava are missing. Dner kebab has an emoji in the form of STUFFED FLATBREAD, though the proposal “UTC document L2/15-084”<sup>1</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15084-kebab.pdf>

### 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”<sup>2</sup> 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.

### 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 pharaohs.

### 3.5 Other exclusion factors

The FALAFEL emoji is not a logo, brand, or other excluded category.

Section 2.1 compared falafel’s popularity to that of foods represented by early emoji such as bento boxes and rice balls, but these comparisons are only one part of the overall range, and the argument does not hinge on those comparisons.

No exact image is required.

## 4 Location on the emoji keyboard

As per Section 2.2, falafel is well-paired with wraps and flatbreads, so sequencing it before KEBAB (pictured in a wrap) facilitates the FALAFEL + KEBAB and the FALAFEL + STUFFED FLATBREAD pairs.

**Thanks** This document owes a debt to Jennifer 8. Lee for editing and extensive advice, Ronit Klemens for her expertise in Middle Eastern cuisine, and Aphee Messer for her visualizations.

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<sup>2</sup>UTC document L2/15 195R2, <https://www.unicode.org/L2/L2015/15195r2-emoji-add-tranche6.pdf>

## Appendix

The specifications for emoji proposals require screen shots of searches in several search engines, and plots Google Trends counts for images. 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

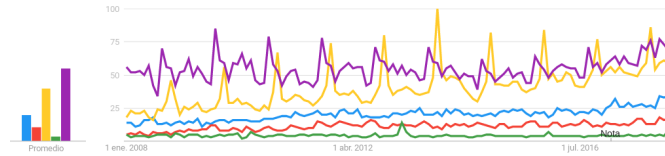


Figure 5: Counts of pictures in Google's English database, using the same color key as Figure 2. Notably, falafel is in blue. Croissants are very photogenic.

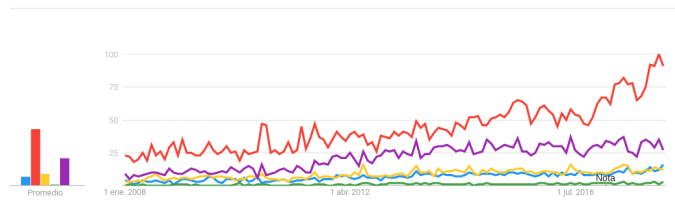


Figure 6: Counts of pictures in Google's Arabic database, using the same color key as Figure 3. Rice (red) appears more often than in the search result count; falafel (blue) less often, but still commensurate with kebabs (yellow).



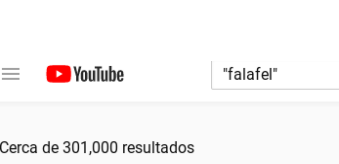

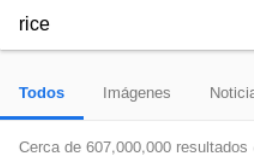
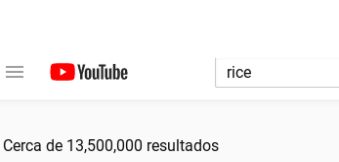


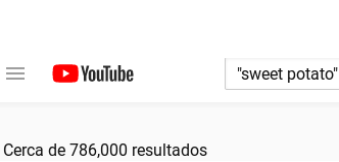

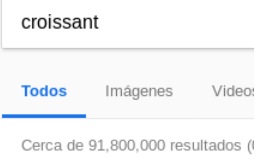
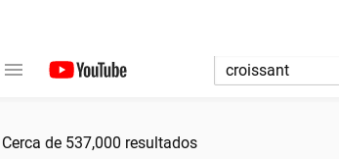


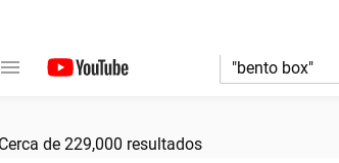

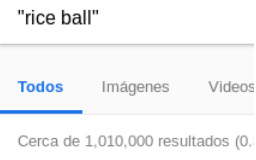
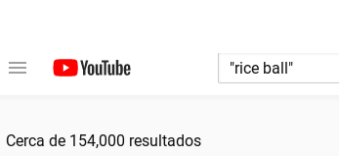
	Bing	Google	YouTube
Falafel	 <p>Search results for "falafel" on Bing. The search bar contains "falafel". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "6,460,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "falafel" on Google. The search bar contains "falafel". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "Cerca de 25,000,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "falafel" on YouTube. The search bar contains "falafel". The results show "Cerca de 301,000 resultados".</p>
Rice	 <p>Search results for "rice" on Bing. The search bar contains "rice". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "21,900,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "rice" on Google. The search bar contains "rice". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Noticias". The results show "Cerca de 607,000,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "rice" on YouTube. The search bar contains "rice". The results show "Cerca de 13,500,000 resultados".</p>
Sweet potato	 <p>Search results for "sweet potato" on Bing. The search bar contains "sweet potato". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "13,700,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "sweet potato" on Google. The search bar contains "sweet potato". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "Cerca de 46,200,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "sweet potato" on YouTube. The search bar contains "sweet potato". The results show "Cerca de 786,000 resultados".</p>
Croissant	 <p>Search results for "croissant" on Bing. The search bar contains "croissant". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "12,100,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "croissant" on Google. The search bar contains "croissant". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "Cerca de 91,800,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "croissant" on YouTube. The search bar contains "croissant". The results show "Cerca de 537,000 resultados".</p>
Bento box	 <p>Search results for "bento box" on Bing. The search bar contains "bento box". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "2,160,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "bento box" on Google. The search bar contains "bento box". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Maps". The results show "Cerca de 8,760,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "bento box" on YouTube. The search bar contains "bento box". The results show "Cerca de 229,000 resultados".</p>
Rice ball	 <p>Search results for "rice ball" on Bing. The search bar contains "rice ball". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "926,000 Resultados".</p>	 <p>Search results for "rice ball" on Google. The search bar contains "rice ball". Below the search bar are tabs for "Todos" (selected), "Imágenes", and "Videos". The results show "Cerca de 1,010,000 resultados (0)".</p>	 <p>Search results for "rice ball" on YouTube. The search bar contains "rice ball". The results show "Cerca de 154,000 resultados".</p>

Figure 7: Screen shots of English language searches

	Bing	Google	YouTube
falafel	<p>فلافل</p> <p>الجميع</p> <p>301,000 النتائج</p>	<p>فلافل</p> <p>الكل صور</p> <p>حوالي ٥٦٧٠٠٠٠ م</p>	<p>فلافل</p> <p>YouTube</p> <p>حوالي 460,000 نتيجة</p>
rice	<p>أرز</p> <p>الجميع</p> <p>1,690,000 النتائج</p>	<p>أرز</p> <p>الكل صور</p> <p>حوالي ١٠٠٤٠٠٠٠٠ م</p>	<p>أرز</p> <p>YouTube</p> <p>حوالي 595,000 نتيجة</p>
bread	<p>خبز</p> <p>الجميع</p> <p>601,000 النتائج</p>	<p>خبز</p> <p>الكل صور</p> <p>حوالي ٧٢٠٢٠٠٠٠٠ م</p>	<p>خبز</p> <p>YouTube</p> <p>حوالي 703,000 نتيجة</p>
kebab	<p>كباب</p> <p>الجميع</p> <p>303,000 النتائج</p>	<p>كباب</p> <p>الكل صور</p> <p>حوالي ٢٠٦٥٠٠٠٠ م</p>	<p>كباب</p> <p>YouTube</p> <p>حوالي 625,000 نتيجة</p>
croissant	<p>كرواسون</p> <p>الجميع</p> <p>62,200 النتائج</p>	<p>كرواسون</p> <p>الكل صور</p> <p>حوالي ٤٠٥٠٠٠٠ م</p>	<p>كرواسون</p> <p>YouTube</p> <p>حوالي 63,700 نتيجة</p>

Figure 8: Screen shots of Arabic language searches