



THE TASTE OF AFRIN: BALANCING HERITAGE AND RESILIENCE



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Sarah: Hello and welcome, dear listeners! We're so glad you're joining us for another episode of *"From Heart to Hearth,"* hosted by me, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise team in Türkiye in partnership with the University of Sussex in the UK.

This episode, *The Taste of Afrin: Balancing Heritage and Resilience*, features our guest, Amani Zallouh. Amani is a Kurdish woman from Afrin who has lived in Gaziantep since 2013. A very warm welcome to you, Amani!

Amani: Thank you! It's a pleasure to be here.

Sarah: Let's start by introducing you to our audience. Could you tell us a little about yourself, Amani?

Amani: I am Amani, originally from Afrin and of Kurdish descent. I'm married and have four children. I got married and moved from the countryside to the city where my husband lives.

Sarah: Could you share some fond memories of your hometown, Afrin?

Amani: Every aspect of my upbringing holds beautiful memories. Life in the countryside was deeply tied to nature and tradition. For example, olive trees have always been a significant part of my life - they bridge the past and the present. I cherished spending summer days under their shade, surrounded by our family's grove, which included various kinds of trees such as olive, fig, and almond trees. I would often sit under the trees, admiring their leaves, carving my initials into a branch, or just reflecting. Even now, whenever I visit the village, I find myself drawn to those same trees.

Sarah: What's your favourite type of tree?

Amani: The olive tree - it's my favourite. I admire its evergreen nature, with leaves that stay vibrant all year round. I love it very much. To me, olive trees are truly remarkable.

Sarah: Afrin is well-known for its olive oil. How does this product influence Kurdish cuisine in Afrin?

Amani: Olive oil is absolutely essential in Afrin's cuisine. In fact, it's so integral to our identity that someone from Afrin without olive oil in their home would seem out of place! It's a staple in every household, particularly for Kurdish families.

Sarah: Can you tell us about a signature dish from Afrin?

Amani: We've lots of dishes that may be famous in other cuisines, but in the Kurdish cuisine, they have special qualities. One of the most iconic dishes is called *Kitawiyeh*. It's deeply rooted in our culinary heritage, passed down through generations. To make it, we begin by washing and hand-grinding wheat, then soaking and boiling it with lamb meat on bones. It is cooked until the meat falls off the bones. The bones are then removed, leaving a rich, viscous broth. It's similar in texture to porridge. You eat it with a spoon, savouring its smooth texture, delightful flavour, and wholesome ingredients. It is served with almonds toasted in butter, or other toppings can be added to suit individual preferences.

Sarah: When is *Kitawiyeh* usually served?

Amani: It's most commonly prepared for festive events like weddings and religious celebrations. It takes time to cook, so families usually start preparing well in advance. It's also a popular dish during winter because it's nice when cooked over low heat.

Sarah: Is there another dish you enjoy more than *Kitawiyeh*?

Amani: There are many! For example, we have *Boraniyeh* and also *Kulki*. It consists of lentils, bulgur, and vegetables like zucchini, eggplant, and tomatoes, all cooked with olive oil. Olive oil is the common denominator in these recipes, as no dish truly feels authentic without it.

Sarah: It seems that Afrin's cuisine relies heavily on what the land provides. Would you say that's a defining characteristic?

Amani: Absolutely. Whatever the land produces, we use. It's a sustainable and meaningful connection between us and nature.

Sarah: What's your personal connection to the land?

Amani: It's a strong and enduring bond. When you heartily cultivate the land, it provides for you in return. For example, we grow chickpeas and lentils, harvest them, and store them as winter provisions. There's a special joy in serving food you've grown and prepared yourself—it's deeply fulfilling and strengthens your relationship with both the land and your family.

Sarah: Are *Boraniyeh* and *Kitawiyeh* served regularly or mainly on special occasions?

Amani: *Boraniyeh* is usually an everyday dish, whereas *Kitawiyeh* is most commonly served on special occasions. Over time, we've started blending traditional dishes with modern ones, ensuring that heritage is always present at

our table. For instance, *Kitawiyeh* often accompanies more contemporary meals during events.

Sarah: You mentioned that traditional dishes are now served alongside modern ones. Has the preparation of these traditional dishes changed over time?

Amani: Definitely.

Sarah: What has changed?

Amani: In the past, people relied on whatever available at home and showed a lot of patience. Now, everything can be purchased easily. For instance, we used to cook on wood fires in copper pots, which gave dishes a unique flavour. Copper pots were essential for certain recipes and if you don't have one, you borrow it from your neighbours. However, now, we use gas stoves and stainless-steel cookware.

Sarah: You've experienced life in both the countryside and the city. How do they compare, particularly in terms of food preparation?

Amani: There's a significant difference between life in the city and the countryside. In the countryside, you're bound by what's available locally. In the city, however, everything is at your fingertips—restaurants, shops, and markets overflowing with options. But in the countryside, even transportation is a challenge; when I lived in the suburbs, I'd visit the city only once a week or so.

The rural life I experienced was truly special. To this day, I cherish those memories and wish I could return to being a village girl. Everything we consumed in the winter was prepared during the summer, all from the bounty of nature—planted, harvested, and enjoyed by our own hands. That bond to the land brought a sense of fulfilment and pride.

We prepared everything ourselves: chickpeas, lentils, wheat, bulgur, olive oil, olives, labneh—our pantry was entirely homemade. The air in the countryside was unbelievably fresh and invigorating. Waking up in the morning, even as late as 8 in the morning felt luxurious there. My mother would say, "*Wake up! It's already noon!*" In the city, people might just be heading to bed at that time.

There's something special about waking up to the sunlight creeping through the window, the fresh morning air, and the sound of birds singing outside. It's a feeling that's hard to put into words. Sometimes, I really think about going back to the village for good.

There's a significant difference. In the countryside, everything was handmade and seasonal - we worked with what was available. In the city, everything is accessible year-round, but it feels less personal. I cherish my rural upbringing and often long for its simplicity and authenticity.

Sarah: Speaking of preparing food, you mentioned the tradition of making your own provisions in the countryside. You also told me that during the revolution, when the bombings and violence intensified, you were forced to leave Aleppo for Afrin. How was life there, and how did you manage to prepare food in those circumstances?

Amani: At first, it was tough. The village was nearly empty, and even the basics - bread, wheat - were hard to come by. The villagers had their own supplies, but as displaced people, we had only limited stock, which ran out quickly. Even getting bread meant waiting four or five hours at the bakery for just a few loaves.

That's when my sister came up with an idea: "*Why don't we grind wheat ourselves and bake our own bread?*" It wasn't easy, but we made it work. Fresh vegetables and fruit were nowhere to be found, so we had to get creative to feed the children.

We ended up going back to old traditions, the way earlier generations cooked and baked. In the past, after baking bread, people would spread butter or ghee on it, sprinkle a little sugar, and enjoy it as a simple treat. We did the same, and the children were over the moon.

We relied heavily on the provisions we had brought with us, but there were still days when hunger became overwhelming. I remember my daughter, who was only a year and a half at the time, struggling because we had nothing suitable for her to eat. I had recently weaned her and ended up feeding her a small spoonful of jam just to keep her full. There was no milk, no eggs - what could she have if we didn't have our homemade jam?

Those were terribly difficult days. At first, we didn't even have a proper house; we built something from scratch to provide safety for our family. When we couldn't give the children sweets, we'd mix molasses with tahini, fry the mixture, and serve it as a substitute. It was simple, but the kids enjoyed it, and it tasted delicious.

Life in the village teaches you to be resourceful. Even with nothing, you find ways to make do. Before I got married, I remember how we'd host unexpected guests at night. My mother would say, "*Serve whatever we have, don't worry about it.*"

We'd head to the pantry and take out anything we could find: molasses, homemade ghee, preserved meat - whatever was available. We'd prepare something and take pride in serving it. It wasn't about luxury but about generosity and creativity.

As the saying goes, "*Necessity is the mother of invention.*" When resources are scarce, you innovate. My father, may Allah have mercy on him, always told us, "*Generosity is giving from whatever you have, even if it's little.*" That wisdom

stayed with me. It taught me to make do with what I have, even when I didn't have much. I learned to give wholeheartedly, even if it was just a simple plate of soup.

This embodies the spirit of rural life: making do with whatever is available, even if it means improvising solutions.

Sarah: During the war, while you were displaced in Afrin, aside from the scarcity of food and bread, what other challenges related to eating and drinking did you face?

Amani: There were many challenges, honestly. Even water became a major issue. The entire village's water supply was cut off. For about a month, we had to rely on water from artesian wells. The water wasn't clean - it had worms, dust, and dirt. We would strain it using a piece of cloth, filtering it as best we could before drink it.

You do what you can for your family, even if it means drinking water that isn't fit for consumption. We faced these hardships, but thank God, we endured them. Fetching water wasn't easy either. We had to walk several kilometres from our home to fill buckets and jerrycans, carrying them back to use for drinking, cooking, and other daily needs. It was a daily struggle, and for large families, the need for water was immense.

Sarah: How long did you stay displaced in Afrin?

Amani: We stayed for about six months.

Sarah: Where did you go after that?

Amani: We fled to Türkiye. Financially, we had no other option. There was no income or support. My husband couldn't find work, so we worked together in the harvest fields, toiling as labourers for 10 to 15 days just to earn enough money to survive. If you had land of your own, you could rely on it, but without that, you had to work tirelessly just to make ends meet. Life wasn't sustainable in Afrin, so we left due to financial hardship.

Sarah: How was life for you in Türkiye?

Amani: At first, it was very difficult. When my husband and I arrived, he couldn't find a job immediately. We stayed with his sister for about two or three weeks before he eventually found a job for only 125 liras per day. Out of that, we had to save as much as we could to send money back to my in-laws so they could survive. Whatever remained, we had to stretch to cover our own expenses.

It was a constant struggle. There were days when I had to tell my children, "*No, we can't have that now - maybe tomorrow or the day after.*" It was heartbreaking.

We lived in an old, crumbling house with just two rooms. To be honest, it was more like a cave. It had no windows, just a single door. The room was dark, with no natural light. We lived in that house for two years, sleeping on the floor. The blanket we used was ancient - so old it could have been a hundred years old, patched over and over again. I'll never forget it. Our Turkish neighbours gave it to us, and we laid it on the ground for me, my husband, and our children to sleep on.

Bit by bit, we started to climb out of that hardship. I remember working to save enough to buy a proper blanket, then some pillows. I made two pillows at first, then two more later. Little by little, we improved our situation, but it wasn't easy. You can't escape difficult times easily; you have to be stronger than the challenges you face.

Sarah: Regarding cooking, what challenges did you face in Türkiye, in terms of ingredients, cooking methods, etc.?

Amani: At first, we didn't have the basic tools or supplies we needed. For example, a neighbour gave us a small pot, but it wasn't large enough to prepare meals for the family. We had to borrow things constantly. We also didn't have a proper gas stove and had to rely on a small portable one. Some traditional Kurdish dishes, like stuffed zucchini, were difficult to prepare because the vegetables available were oversized, filled with seeds, which ruined the flavour and texture of the dish.

I remember one time, about six or seven months after arriving in Türkiye, my children had gone that long without tasting *Mahshi*. So, I decided to make it for them. My sister-in-law and I carved the massive zucchini, stuffed them, and cooked them outdoors over a wood fire using a tin container. The Turkish neighbours were curious and even joined us, sharing the meal. Despite the hardships, their compliments on the food made it all worthwhile. It brought joy to see others enjoy what we made with so much effort. Watching the children enjoy this dish they had missed for so long was truly touching.

Sarah: It sounds like you poured your heart into making it.

Amani: Of course! When you put your heart into something, the result will be great. Seeing others enjoy and appreciate it makes all the effort worthwhile.

Sarah: That's wonderful, Amani. It's clear that no matter where you were - whether in Afrin during your displacement or after moving to Turkey - you always found creative solutions to difficult problems, even when they seemed impossible. You've also followed your father's wisdom, that "*generosity is giving from whatever you have,*" which is such an inspiring mindset. You talked earlier about challenges with ingredients, like the size of the zucchini and the

vegetables not being the same. Are those challenges still present, or has the situation improved?

Amani: Things have certainly improved, especially with the presence of Syrians in Türkiye. Thankfully, it's now easier to find what we need. However, the flavour isn't the same. I noticed this difference even more during a visit back to Syria. I told my family, "*Everything is available, but why doesn't anything taste good anymore?*" My late father explained that the soil plays a significant role - the type of soil where the crops are grown gives them their unique flavour. For example, the taste of olive oil from trees grown in the mountains is quite different from that of trees grown in flatlands.

Sarah: Do your children like traditional Afrini dishes like *Borani*?

Amani: Absolutely! I make it for them regularly, always reminding them of our traditions.

Sarah: Do you teach them how to cook such dishes?

Amani: Of course! My teenage daughter knows how to cook just like I do. She watches me and learns by observing.

Sarah: Does she know how to cook all the Afrini dishes?

Amani: Not all of them - just the ones she enjoys the most.

Sarah: You've mentioned how important it is for you to bring the family together at the dining table.

Amani: Yes, absolutely.

Sarah: Why do you find it so important?

Amani: When you eat with your entire family present, you feel relaxed. It's comforting to see them enjoying the meal you prepared and to hear their thoughts on it. I value these moments because they strengthen the family bond.

It's also a tradition rooted in our faith. Prophet Muhammad encouraged sharing from the same dish. Sometimes, I even follow this by serving everything from one large platter, telling my family to eat together from it. It brings us closer and reminds us that we are a family, bound by love and shared responsibility. As a mother, I have my role; as a father, my husband has his. And my children, by participating in these moments, learn the importance of togetherness and gratitude.

Sarah: Amani, you have experienced the challenges of displacement and the hardship of seeking refuge in a new country with a new language. Despite these challenges, you adapted to everything, overcame all the obstacles, and truly

applied the wisdom of “necessity is the mother of invention.” You found creative solutions and provided for your family in every way possible. Now that Syria has been liberated, what are your hopes for your family and community?

Amani: Yes, Syria has been liberated, thank God. Honestly, I look forward to going back to my homeland. This is something we have all dreamed of. Every Syrian longs to return to their country and settle there. I wish to start up something for myself as a Syrian woman, something that comes from the depths of my heart, to offer to my country. I’ve always been passionate about dried food. I have a powerful desire to contribute to my country by providing dried products and preserving food in the traditional way. If I return, I would like to start a project related to this. I believe it could benefit the community. In fact, many foods are better when they are dried than canned. In the past, people rarely got sick because they had healthy, dried foods. For example, they would dry figs, almonds, walnuts, and raisins. These were all preserved in the home. I truly believe that dried foodstuff holds great health benefits. Over time, living in Türkiye, I discovered that people here also depend on dried foods. So, when I thought about it, I realised that a project like this could be remarkably successful. The dried apricots, plums, figs, raisins, and *Malban* (Turkish delight)—they’re all made by hand and are truly delicious and healthy.

Sarah: Amani, wherever you go, you seem to always try to create a blend of the past and the present, tradition and modernity, and cultures. For example, you mentioned food, from the famous traditional dishes like *Mansaf* and *Bourani* to the various dishes from Afrin. Now, you have also combined the Turkish and Syrian cultures through your work with dried foods. This is utterly amazing.

To conclude this episode, what message would you like to send to our listeners, especially women?

Amani: First of all, I want to tell them not to give up. Always challenge difficulties, and always be stronger than hardship. We’ve gone through a lot, and we’ve suffered greatly, honestly. Most Syrian women have experienced what I have gone through. We have all gone through similar struggles. I want to tell them not to weaken but to be stronger than the challenges. In order to overcome difficulties, one must be stronger than them. I also hope that any woman who desires to establish something in her life will not give up. Age is no barrier—whether you are over sixty or younger, you can still start a project and succeed.

Sarah: You are absolutely right, Amani. Your message is profoundly moving—that women should never give up, and always seek solutions, even when the world seems bleak, and the tunnel seems endless. In the end, there will always be a light shining through.

Lastly, thank you, Amani, for joining us today, and a heartfelt thank you to our dear listeners. Stay tuned for upcoming episodes, and we are happy to connect with you through our website and social media platforms. We also welcome your feedback and suggestions for topics you think we should cover in future episodes.