



BLENDING FLAVOURS AND GENEROSITY



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Bending Flavours and Generosity

Sarah: Peace be upon you all, dear listeners, and welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth*. I'm your host, Sarah Burhan.

Today's episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye in collaboration with the University of Sussex in the UK. The theme and title of today's episode are ***Blending Flavours and Generosity***. Our guest today is Bisan Ammar from Damascus, who has lived in Gaziantep since 2015.

Welcome, Bisan! Could you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Bisan: Peace be upon you. I'm Bisan Ammar, originally from the Shaghour neighbourhood in Damascus. I grew up there among my family and relatives—both my maternal and paternal sides are from the heart of the city. But I also have relatives from Deir Atiyah and Daraya, so I was raised surrounded by a mix of family connections.

I'm married and have three children, two boys and a girl. My husband is from Homs, and our families are distantly related.

Sarah: What are some of your fondest memories from Damascus and Homs?

Bisan: Damascus is beautiful in every way. During Eid, for example, the whole family would gather. We'd start preparing *ma'amoul* two or three days in advance— we'd bake trays together, then share them with neighbours, who always brought some in return. On Eid day, we'd visit relatives, collect *idiya* (gift money for children), and go to amusement parks. In the evening, we'd head to Midan for *shawarma*, then stroll through Souq Al-Hamidiya.

One of my clearest memories is visiting the Umayyad Mosque. Back then, I didn't wear the hijab, so I had to wear an *abaya* to be allowed inside. The feeling was indescribable—I loved it so much. Even now, I can picture it like it was yesterday.

And, of course, a visit to Souq Al-Hamidiya wouldn't be complete without stopping by Bakdash for *booza* (Arabic ice cream). So many little moments like these have stayed with me.

I moved to Homs after I got married. I used to visit Khalid Ibn Al-Walid Mosque, but it never felt the same as the Umayyad Mosque- which has been dear to my heart since childhood.

Sarah: Since you've lived in both Damascus and Homs, how would you compare their cuisines? What makes each of them distinct?

Bisan: The dishes are mostly similar, though the way they're prepared differs. Take *mahshi* (stuffed vegetables), for example. In Damascus, we season it with cumin and saffron, but in Homs, they don't use either.

Another example is *Asheh* (sheep intestines stuffed with rice and minced meat). In Damascus, we buy it already cleaned, but in Homs, we clean it ourselves and add chickpeas to the stuffing. The ingredients are the same, but the method varies.

Sarah: And which style do you personally prefer?

Bisan: I enjoy whatever the people around me prefer. When I'm with my family, I eat the way they do, and when I'm with my in-laws, I follow their style. Thankfully, my children have come to love both.

Sarah: Is there a signature dish from Homs?

Bisan: *Mansaf* is a must for celebrations. During Eid and special occasions, we prepare a whole lamb, cut it up, and boil it. We serve it with *frikeh* (roasted green wheat) and rice, then top it with almonds, nuts, and meat.

We also have *kama* (desert truffles), which come from the steppe regions. We boil and fry them, then use them as a garnish for *mansaf*, along with peas and nuts.

Sarah: When do you usually prepare *mansaf*?

Bisan: We make it for Eid and special occasions, like weddings or even funerals. It's a dish for both joyful and solemn gatherings.

Sarah: And what about Damascus? What's a signature dish there?

Bisan: Damascus has so many! One of the most popular is *harra' osba'ou*. When we had girls' gatherings, each of us would bring a dish, and this one was always there.

It's made with lentils, tamarind, bread, and Swiss chard. The dough is kneaded and cooked along with the lentils. We'd make it for picnics, taking different dishes along with us.

Another dish from my mother's side, originally from Daraya, is *maghtot*. My grandmother, who was from Deir Atiyah, also used to make it. It's a mix of bulgur soaked in tomato paste and pomegranate molasses, combined with lettuce and parsley. My mum still makes it, and I've tried learning from her. It's a lot like Turkish *çiğ köfte*.

Sarah: So it's eaten wrapped in lettuce, like *çiğ köfte*?

Bisan: Exactly!

Sarah: You mentioned *harra' osba'ou* - is there a story behind its name?

Bisan: It's just a dish we always made for gatherings - whether among friends or family. Whenever we planned an outing, someone would bring it. It was a comfort dish everyone loved, and each family had its own twist.

Sarah: Do your kids like it?

Bisan: They love it!

Sarah: You and your family had to flee Homs and eventually settle in Türkiye. Can you briefly share your journey?

Bisan: We first went to a small village called Hmeimeh, not far from Homs city. We were housed in a school along with many other displaced families. Around the village, there were Bedouins, and I used to see them making dairy products - churning milk, making *qishta* [clotted cream], and clarifying butter. They also baked bread from scratch.

I was fascinated by their techniques and started learning from them. Later, when I moved to Gaziantep, I used those skills to make *labneh* [strained yoghurt] and *qishta* at home. I even tried baking bread - it worked well, though here, the *Saj* [concave metal griddle] is electric, unlike the traditional fire-heated ones in Syria.

Sarah: So, over time, you combined different cooking styles - Damascene, Homs, and even Bedouin methods. What happened after you left that village?

Bisan: We first went to Reyhanlı, but life there was extremely difficult. Eventually, we made our way to Gaziantep, and I had to start working immediately. My husband had recently undergone surgery, and so had my daughter - she had heart surgery in Adana. We were struggling financially, and I had no choice but to find work.

I got a job in a factory, leaving home at 7 in the morning and working long hours until I returned at 7 in the evening.

I would come home, cook for my children, help them with their studies - I was exhausted. But eventually, thank God, my husband got better, found a job, and I was able to start working from home. I needed to contribute - after all, it takes teamwork to keep a household running.

Life here was tough, and I also had travel commitments. Thank God, I managed to work from home. I started hollowing out courgettes and aubergines, drying *mulukhiyah* [jute leaves], rolling *yabraq* [stuffed grape leaves], making *labneh* [strained yogurt] and *qishta* [clotted cream], chopping parsley—basically everything you can think of. Everything women here needed. I even made *kibbeh maqliyah* [fried kibbeh - bulgur shells stuffed with spiced meat] for shops and restaurants. I would take on any order, whatever was needed. Thank God, I was able to cover my own expenses and support my children.

I also enrolled my kids in an institute and focused on their studies because, for years, they had struggled with both Arabic and Turkish. I hadn't been able to give them the attention they needed, and I regretted it. But thank God, I made up for it, and now they're excelling at school.

Sarah: That's wonderful. When you were running your home kitchen and selling food to women in Gaziantep, did you prepare meals the Damascene way, the Homsy way, or according to the customer's request?

Bisan: It was always based on the customer's request. Some wanted Homsy-style food, others preferred Damascene, and I tailored everything to their preferences. Some people wanted Idlibi-style dishes, others Homsy, and some preferred Damascene-style cooking.

It also depended on what restaurants and households wanted. As I told you, people from Damascus season *mahshi* [stuffed vegetables] with cumin and saffron, but in

Homs, they don't use those spices - my husband's family, for example, doesn't like it that way.

Some customers wanted only part of the preparation done - I would hollow out the vegetables, and they would do the stuffing themselves. Others asked for pre-chopped parsley or lettuce, while some wanted grape leaves rolled but preferred to cook them at home. There were also those who wanted fully prepared dishes, ready to serve. I adapted to whatever they needed. Everything had its price, of course, and thank God, I was productive. I even made pastries. Whatever people needed, I made it, and , it worked out well.

Sarah: That's incredible, Bisan. You've truly excelled and managed to turn your cooking into a source of income - something that allowed you to meet your family's daily needs while also educating your children. I'd like to go back a little. You told me that you were first displaced to a village in Syria before coming to Türkiye. You mentioned that your daughter was ill and that you faced serious financial difficulties, meaning your situation was unstable even before you arrived in Türkiye. Then you came to a new country, with a new language and different circumstances. How did you manage to cook under all these conditions? Were ingredients difficult to find?

Bisan: At first, I had to adjust. There were so many things I couldn't afford, so I had to find alternatives. For example, in Syria, we made *mansaf* with lamb meat, but here in Gaziantep, I couldn't afford lamb, so I started making it with chicken instead.

Life was tough at the beginning. When we first arrived, a worker's wage was around 100–150 Turkish liras, but a kilo of meat cost 250 liras. If I had bought meat, I would have had to cut back on many other things for my children. So I made do—I would buy a chicken, cook half of it, and save the other half for another meal. I'd stretch ingredients as much as possible, using rice and nuts to make the dish more filling.

Back in Syria, there wasn't the same pressure - we didn't have to think about rent, transportation, or expensive medical care. But here, my main priority was my daughter's treatment. I had to make sure she got to her appointments, so I had no choice but to manage with what I had. Thank God, I found ways to make it work.

Sarah: You mentioned that you were working outside the house or even from home while also taking care of your daughter. How did you manage to balance everything? How did you find time to prepare meals?

Bisan: I had to be really organised. I would prepare a lot of things in the evening to save time for the next day. For example, I'd hollow out courgettes and aubergines at night. I'd also trim okra, crush tomatoes, and get everything ready for the next meal so that when I came home from work, I could just put it on the stove and continue with my other tasks.

When I got back, I put the food on, helped my kids with their studies, and cleaned up around the house. By the time dinner was ready, we would eat together; then I'd go back to studying with the kids and tidying up. Before bed, I'd start prepping for the next day's meals.

Sarah: Were you able to continue making traditional dishes like *harra' osba'ou* or *mansaf* the way you used to in Syria, or did you have to change the way you cooked?

Bisan: No, I kept making them exactly the same way. Thankfully, everything I needed was available here. I even made *harra' osba'ou* for many customers, and they loved it. So yes, I still make it like I did back home.

Sarah: Were there differences in the ingredients you found in Türkiye compared to Syria?

Bisan: Yes, there were definitely differences. The same ingredients are available, but the taste isn't always the same.

Sarah: Why do you think that is?

Bisan: I don't really know. Maybe it's because back home, everything was grown naturally - we worked the land with our own hands, and there was a certain care put into it. Here, things come packaged or processed. It's just not the same. In Syria, we would pick our vegetables fresh from the fields and cook them straight away. Food just tastes better when you've grown it yourself. Our love for the land is what makes it give back to us. And food you've worked hard to grow and make never tastes the same as something store-bought or ready-made.

Sarah: That's true - just like home-cooked meals always have more depth than fast food or pre-prepared dishes. What about *mouneh* [traditionally preserved food for out-of-season use]? Is that tradition still important to you?

Bisan: Of course! I still make *mouneh*. I prepare *makdous* [aubergines stuffed with walnuts, garlic, and peppers, fermented and preserved in olive oil, traditionally eaten cold, often for breakfast], cured olives, and even make my own cheese. I dry okra, freeze green beans, and sun-dry courgettes so that we can have them even when they're out of season.

Food is so much more expensive here, so I try to store everything while it's still affordable. For example, courgettes used to cost 20 liras a kilo, but now they're 100 liras. If I hadn't preserved some earlier, I wouldn't be able to afford them now. That's why *mouneh* is so important - it's a way to prepare for tough times.

Sarah: So, you still do everything just like you used to in Syria?

Bisan: Yes.

Sarah: Why do you think *mouneh* is such an important part of Syrian food culture?

Bisan: It's a lifesaver - it saves time, money, and effort. I love knowing that whatever I need is already in my kitchen. Sometimes, I don't feel like going out just to buy ingredients, so I just use what I have. And even when food prices go up, I don't have to worry as much because I've already stored enough. *Mouneh* is a habit I've always had, and I'll keep doing it.

Sarah: That's really impressive, Bisan.

You've been through so many difficulties - your daughter's illness, displacement, financial struggles - but you kept going. What gave you the strength to push through?

Bisan: My love for my children, my family, my husband, and my determination to stand on my own. I never wanted to depend on anyone. No matter how hard things got, I was willing to put in the effort. There were times when I had nothing, but I believed in myself.

Sarah: Now that Syria has been liberated, what are your hopes for your family and community after the liberation?

Bisan: I want to take what I've built here and bring it back home, and not start from scratch there. I want to launch a successful established business. I've learned a lot here, and recently I've started to learn how to make pastries, especially cakes that have limited costs but sell for a good price. When I go back, I want to open my own business in Homs or Damascus. I want to encourage my kids to improve their fluency in Arabic. They speak Arabic, but they did not learn the grammar. I want them to learn that, as it will be useful for them in the future.

Sarah: Given your experience blending different culinary traditions, interacted with Syrian women from different areas and backgrounds, how do you think that mix or variety will shape your business?

Bisan: I've learned from so many different cultures -Damascene, Homs, Aleppan, Turkish, even Iraqi (who cook *dolma*, but it is a way different to ours). I plan to merge all these influences into my kitchen. I've picked up a lot from friends from different backgrounds - like *zaytoun maklis* [lime-cured olives], which I learned from Aleppan families. I had never made it before, but now I do.

I also learned new cooking methods from Turkish and Iraqi families. In Iraq, for example, they prepare *dolma* differently from how we do in Damascus or Homs. I tried their method, and it turned out great. So, when I open my business back home, I'll incorporate techniques from different places inside Syria and abroad.

Sarah: Bisan, you've faced so many challenges, yet you've managed to transform your knowledge of food - from Damascene and Homs traditions to the influences you've picked up in Türkiye - into a strength. You turned your skills into a livelihood, supported your family, and never gave up. You've shown incredible resilience, and your story is truly inspiring. Before we conclude, what message would you like to share with our listeners, especially women?

Bisan: Good intentions and a kind heart shape who you are. Strength and perseverance are the foundation of everything. I want to send a message to every woman—never say, "I am nothing." You are the foundation of your community, its backbone and support. You have the power to create something out of nothing. Never say, "*I can't*" or "*I'm not capable*." You are stronger than you think. A woman is the pillar of her family and society. And to you, I say: don't dwell on the past - thank God that it's behind you. I struggled at first, but I picked myself up and moved

forward, I made it. Stand strong and keep going - perseverance is everything. Confidence, determination, purpose, and optimism should guide you so that you can move forward for yourself, your children, and your community.

Sarah: Thank you so much, Bisan, for sharing your truly inspiring story. These are principles we should always hold onto - generosity, patience, and using every skill and piece of knowledge we have to turn challenges into strength. Your experience living between Homs and Damascus, your journey through displacement and refuge, and the women you met from different Syrian regions and in Türkiye - all of these experiences became lessons. You took what you learned, turned it into strength, and built a livelihood from it. Thank you again for sharing your journey with us.

As we come to the end of this episode, I want to thank Bisan for sharing her story, and a big thank you to all our dear listeners. Stay tuned for future episodes, and we'd love to hear from you! You can reach out to us through our website and social media—we always welcome your messages and suggestions for topics you'd like us to cover. Don't forget to subscribe, and we'll see you next time!