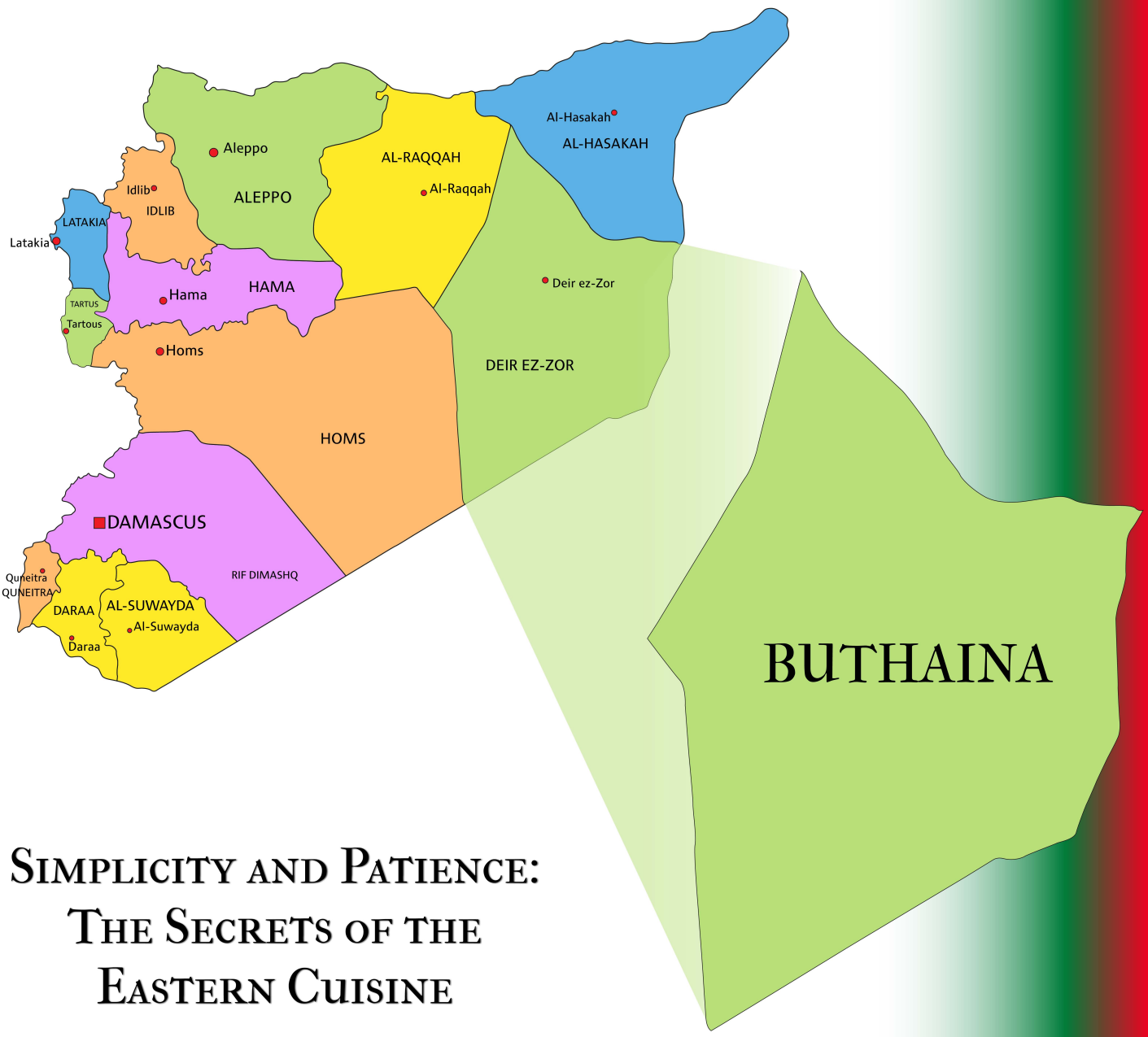

Simplicity and Patience: The Secrets of the Eastern Cuisine

Executive Producer: Mirela Barbu

Host: Sarah Burhan

Project Manager: Prof Martin Spinelli

Outreach Manager: Dr Shaher Abdullateef

Sound Engineer: Eng Zuhier Agha

Web Designer: Ruth Holroyd

Translator: Asmaa Shehadeh

This podcast series is part of the project Harvesting Hope: Integrating Technology, Heritage, and Women's Voices in Syrian Agriculture, supported by a grant from the International Development Challenges Fund (2024-25).

Simplicity and Patience: The Secrets of the Eastern Cuisine

Sarah: Peace be upon you all, dear listeners, and welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth*, presented by me, Sarah Burhan. This episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye, in collaboration with the University of Sussex in the UK.

This time, we explore ***Simplicity and Patience: The Secrets of the Eastern Cuisine***. Our guest is Buthaina Mohammed, originally from Palmyra and Der Ezzor, who has been living in Gaziantep since 2015. It's a pleasure to have you with us, Buthaina - welcome!

Buthaina: Peace be upon you. I'm Buthaina Mohammed from Der Ezzor. My roots are in Palmyra, but I spent half my life in Der Ezzor, so I feel deeply connected to both places. My father is from Palmyra, while my maternal family is from Der Ezzor. I consider myself a rural woman - having spent my early years in Palmyra and the rest in Der Ezzor. I lived in Der Ezzor throughout my childhood until the age of 17, and later moved back to Palmyra after getting married and settling there.

I absorbed the rhythms of rural life - the warmth of its people, the way they speak, the air, and the customs. The spirit of Der Ezzor and the heritage of Palmyra shaped me in different ways. I carry something from both my mother's side and my father's.

Sarah: Since your roots are spread between Palmyra and Der Ezzor, could you share some of your fondest memories from these two places?

Buthaina: I have a deep passion for Der Ezzor - perhaps even more than for my birthplace. There's something special about it - the fresh air, the Euphrates River, the vast fields, and the expanse of wheat that I call fields of gold. The people are warm and kind, and the river, which Palmyra lacks, makes the whole feel of Der Ezzor different.

Palmyra, on the other hand, has an undeniable allure. Though it is a desert, it is still a desert of the East - a place of ancient ruins, towering palm trees, rich dates, and strong olive groves. The olive tree, in particular, holds a deep meaning for me. I see myself in it - steadfast, deeply rooted, and unyielding, despite the years.

Palmyra's charm is entirely distinct from that of Der Ezzor. Both are captivating, each in its own way, but my heart longs for Der Ezzor more. Palmyra's beauty is undeniable - its landscapes, history, and the land where my ancestors and family lived. I spent years working in the fields, which is why I have so many memories tied to the date palms and olive trees - I tended to them myself from planting to harvest.

Life was simple; we would go out into the countryside, which is locally referred to as *tchoul* in Der Ezzor, while in Palmyra, they called it *al-bariya* [wilderness]. We would see flocks of sheep, modest tents, and a way of life that was both peaceful and deeply connected to nature. Those days are still so clear in my mind as if I had just been there.

Sarah: It's clear that even in the way you live, you're like the olive tree. Since Der Ezzor is known for its wheat, land, and water, what makes its cuisine special? What are the most well-known dishes?

Buthaina: The cuisine of Der Ezzor stands out for many reasons, but before talking about the food itself, it's the women who keep the kitchen and cuisine alive.

There are several well-known dishes, including *tharoud* and okra. In the past, rice wasn't commonly cooked; people relied on bread for most of their meals. There are also dishes like *mahashi* [stuffed vegetables] and okra.

One of the most famous treats from Der Ezzor is *kileija*, known across Syria. Whenever someone visits from Damascus or Homs, they always ask for Der Ezzor's *kileija* - nothing else will do!

Another distinctive dish is *mshahmiyya*, made by mixing flour and minced meat into a dough, kneading it thoroughly, and cooking it on a *saj* [concave metal griddle] rather than on a gas stove, as firewood was traditionally used. There's also *muhammara* [spiced red pepper spread on thin dough cooked on a *saj*], a dish Der Ezzor is known for, along with its distinctive tomatoes.

Der Ezzor is incredibly rich in *molokhia* [jute mallow] thanks to its location along the Euphrates. The soil is fertile, so vegetables are always fresh, and the food has a distinct flavour. In this sense, it's very different from Palmyra, which relies more on legumes and grains.

Sarah: When is okra typically served? Are there specific occasions when it's prepared? And is it always cooked in the same way? Also, regarding *muhammara* and *kileija*, could you explain when they are served and any special ingredients they include?

Buthaina: Okra is traditionally cooked fresh in summer. It is also dried and stored for winter use, but the taste is never quite the same. It is preferred in the summer mainly because tomatoes, a key ingredient for making okra, are at their best - plump, juicy, and full of flavour. Fresh okra is picked straight from the field, cooked immediately, and served with *tharoud*, which is traditional *tannour* bread torn into small pieces and soaked in the dish. In winter, dried okra is used instead, but since the tomatoes are preserved in paste form, the taste is different. That's why people eagerly wait for summer to enjoy it at its best.

There's another well-known dish in Der Ezzor called *fawra*, which has its own special traditions when it's prepared. *Fawra* is a special dish made from *aween* [cowpeas/black-eyed peas] and *kishk* [fermented bulgur and yoghurt, shaped into discs then dried till solid]. It is prepared exclusively for Eid. On the first morning of Eid, after visiting the graves of loved ones, we return home to find a large pot of *fawra* already cooking. The preparations start the night before, soaking the *kishk* in water to soften it. The *aween* is also quite firm, so it is boiled separately. Then, everything is combined and simmered until the peas are fully cooked.

And, of course, no dish is complete without *samen arabi* [clarified butter ghee], the kind you'd find in any Deri kitchen; other types of ghee are rarely - if ever - used in Der Ezzor. It's locally prepared, as most people in Der Ezzor raise their sheep and livestock. Once the *fawra* is ready, finely chopped onions are fried in *samen arabi* and poured over the dish.

Fawra isn't just special because of how it's made - it's also about how it's served. It's never made in small portions. It's always cooked in large quantities - enough to share among many families in the neighbourhood. It would be unheard of for a single family to eat *fawra* on their own; it's meant to be shared. Even if they've already cooked *fawra*, we'll still send them some of ours - and they'll send us theirs too. Eid wouldn't feel right if we didn't share it so everyone could have a taste.

Kileija [thick, buttery biscuit, sometimes filled with dates or spiced nuts, with hand-carved designs on top] has its own special traditions during Eid too. Eid just wouldn't feel the same without *kileija* in Der Ezzor. The streets fill with its scent - warm spices and buttery pastry baking in every home. That's when you know it's Eid. It's the sweet treat that brings families together as they make it. Even guests stop by just to taste the *kileija*, because every household has its own special touch.

Kileija is a Deri tradition, but each family has its own unique pattern. In every neighbourhood, the women have their signature designs - you can tell which house made it just by looking. We don't use moulds - we shape the patterns by hand with whatever we have. It might be a fork, a knife, a *khashouqa* [spoon] - that's what we call it in Der Ezzor - or even the cap of a bottle to make circular designs. Every family's *kileija* looks different. I could see a piece of *kileija* and immediately know it came from my uncle's house, just by the pattern.

In Der Ezzor, we eagerly wait for *kileija*, and if it's missing, it doesn't feel like Eid. When the dough is prepared, five, six, sometimes seven women gather the night before, staying up until morning as they knead, shape, and decorate the pastries. The whole time, they sing Eid songs and joyful chants. We call this *al-qashoush*, it is when eldest grandmother, the *habbouba*, keeps the energy going, encouraging the younger women. The night is filled with singing, *zaghareet* [traditional ululation], and laughter as we prepare the *kileija* for the next day. Then, we carefully arrange them - almost like placing a vase on a table - on the finest plates we have, ready to serve our guests.

Sarah: What about you - what's your favourite dish? Your favourite Deri dish?

Buthaina: I love all the delicious dishes of Der Ezzor! But if I had to choose, I'd say *qaren yaruq*. It's made with aubergines and meat mixed with tomatoes, peppers, parsley, and garlic, preparing it almost like a salad. A bit of *liyeh* [lamb fat] goes in, too, for extra flavour.

We peel the aubergines in strips, so they have a striped look, then lightly fry them and set them aside. After that, we stuff them with the meat and vegetable mixture, arranging them neatly in a tray in beautiful circular patterns, alongside stuffed tomatoes and peppers. We blend fresh tomatoes, strain them until thick, and pour the sauce over the aubergines before baking. It's served with white rice on the side.

This dish is one of my favourites, and I even introduced it to Palmyra - they didn't know it there. They had a similar dish called *al-manzala*, but when I made *qaren yaruq* for them, they asked, *"What's this dish?"* I told them, *"It's a well-known dish from Der Ezzor."* And over time, my family and my husband's family started making it too!

Sarah: What are the key characteristics of Palmyrene cuisine? And how does it differ from Deri cuisine?

Buthaina: Deri and Palmyrene cuisines each have their own character. The cuisine of Der Ezzor feels like a work of art - everything is there, fresh vegetables, vibrant colours, a full spread of flavours. But in Palmyra, you don't have that same variety. The food there is much simpler, mostly based on bulgur and wheat.

They would cook meat with wheat or serve bulgur alongside a *khafqiya khather* [a bowl of thick yoghurt]. There wasn't much variation in colour or ingredients - it always felt like a plain, muted painting to me. Palmyra really is a desert, and the dining table reflects that arid nature.

But Palmyra is famous for its signature dish: *burma*. It's a traditional dish made from whole *wheat* grains. First, we pick through the *wheat*, removing any debris. Then, we put it in a *stone mortar* and pound it until the husk separates. After that, we rub the grains, winnow them, and wash them thoroughly. Then comes the meat - we cut and wash it well before adding onions and preparing the firewood.

In Palmyra, we would go down to the orchards to collect firewood, and we start cooking at five in the morning because it takes hours to cook properly. We use a *qidriya* [huge cooking pot], and before placing it over the fire, we coat it in clay to make cleaning easier later - clay helps trap heat and insulate the pot. We cover the entire exterior with clay, place it over the fire, and add the wheat and meat, submerging everything in water. As it starts to boil, we skim off any foam that rises to the top.

When stirring the *burma*, we use an *aseeb al-nakhl* [palm frond], stripping the leaves off so just the green stem remains. It has to be fresh, or it won't work properly. We take turns stirring while singing traditional songs and chants. My aunt, my grandmother, and everyone would gather around because *burma* in Palmyra is a dish that's always shared. Family, uncles, aunts - typically, at least thirty people are gathered. *Burma* simply isn't prepared for just one person.

We would take turns stirring for three to four hours, swapping out when one of us got tired - my cousin would take over, then my sister, and so on. The whole time, we kept singing and cheering, and those were some of the most beautiful days.

When it was finally ready, we would serve it in traditional, hand-carved *mansaf* platters - decorated wooden serving bowls that we still use today. Using them gives us a deep sense of heritage, connecting us to our ancestors, our land, and our roots.

Once the *burma mansaf* was plated, we would prepare the *samen arabi* [clarified butter ghee] and pour it into *khafqiyas* [yoghurt bowls] placed inside the *mansaf* platter. The heat from the *burma mansaf* would melt the *samen* - no need to warm it beforehand.

In Palmyra, we never used nuts like cashews the way people do now. Back then, we only used pepper and cumin - the meat itself was rich enough in flavour.

Burma was a staple dish in Palmyra, especially for Eid, special occasions, and large gatherings. It was a sign of abundance - if someone invited guests over, they would say, "*I'm making burma*," and that alone meant there was a feast. It was a symbol of Palmyrene hospitality and generosity.

The difference between the two cuisines is very noticeable - Der Ezzor's food is like a vibrant painting, rich with colours, flavours, and variety, while Palmyrene cuisine is earthy, simple, and deeply tied to the desert landscape.

Sarah: Buthaina, you're so creative with your kitchen analogies! Your description of Deri cuisine as a colourful painting and Palmyrene cuisine as a silent painting was wonderful and truly expressive. Now, I'd like us to talk about what happened after you had to leave your home - the displacement you and your family went through. Could you explain how that journey unfolded until you arrived in Türkiye? How did it affect you, and how did it influence cooking and food preservation, especially with no electricity?

Buthaina: I had been settled in Palmyra, but after the war broke out - and as you know, Palmyra was heavily bombed - I lost two of my sons there. We were forced to flee Palmyra; I left feeling broken-hearted, especially because we left right after that shock of losing my sons; we couldn't even wait until morning; we set out for Raqqa on the same night we buried my sons. Raqqa is near Der Ezzor, but we couldn't go to Der

Ezzor because it was under regime control at the time, so Raqqa was our only option. That was the first of many stops in my journey of displacement.

When we arrived in Raqqa, we took shelter in a hotel, but it wasn't a private hotel we paid for - rather, it was an abandoned building. We left Palmyra with nothing but the clothes we were wearing. In Palmyra, we weren't well-off or from the upper class; we were from the countryside. In the countryside, owning a home feels like having everything. We had no gold or savings; we just lived off what the land gave us and whatever my husband earned. We never thought about putting money aside for the future. Our life was simple, and we were content with that.

But when we reached Raqqa, we faced real hardship because we had nothing. We stayed in that abandoned hotel with no water or electricity. Even though we had a home in Palmyra, we'd always lived a rural life, and countryside people adapt to whatever comes their way. We were used to living off the land, getting through the heat and cold. I think that's what helped us survive the displacement.

We lived in that hotel for about eight months. Being near the Euphrates River meant we had access to water, but electricity was scarce because of the war. There were no fridges, no fans - life was tough, especially when it came to securing food. We cooked just enough for the day, as anything left over would go to waste without a fridge to store it. We were on the outskirts of Raqqa; transportation was scarce, making trips to the city for groceries was a real challenge.

Despite the sorrow of losing my sons, at some point I told myself, "*I still have children who are alive and need me. I can't let grief consume me - I must be strong for those who are still here*." So, I pulled myself together and carried on.

Despite the hardship, the hotel was by the Euphrates, and there was a certain tranquillity in that place. The river had a soothing presence that, at times, eased our grief. Sadness never truly fades, but watching the water flow seemed to soften it, sometimes even making us forget that we were hungry.

We tried to make the most of our time there. We couldn't get to the market easily to buy vegetables, but we realised the land around us was fertile, so we could plant our own. My husband thought about it, and I said, "*Instead of going to the market every day and paying for transport, why don't we grow what we need ourselves?"*

It was winter - the season for planting spinach, Swiss chard, radishes, garden cress, parsley, and spring onions. My husband bought seeds, and we planted them in the nearby land, watering them with water from the Euphrates, just as we had once tended to olive trees in Palmyra. In a way, it felt like we were carrying on the same life, only now in Raqqa.

We barely had enough bread for ourselves, but when others in the hotel came asking, I couldn't turn them away - we were all struggling. I was determined to find a way to improve our situation, so I decided to start baking. My husband looked at me funny when I asked him to bring a sack of flour, but he got it. Using whatever I could find around the hotel, I set up a *saj* [a concave metal griddle] over a fire fuelled by firewood, and I began baking fresh bread.

Before long, other women in the hotel took notice. Women from al-Qaryatayn, Homs, and Damascus began learning from me, and soon, we were taking turns baking - when I finished a batch, someone else would start theirs. It was the same with planting; each woman tended her own small patch of land. Despite the hardships, life started to feel a little more normal again, because we were in it together, supporting one another.

When the spinach and chard sprouted, it felt like the sun had returned to my life. Every morning, I would check on them, watching them grow day by day, waiting for them to be big enough to pick and cook for my children. We ate spinach for a whole week at a time, but I made a variety of spinach-based dishes so the kids wouldn't get bored - sometimes in pastries, sometimes as a stew with rice, sometimes simply chopped with onions and lemon. I made the most of the same basic ingredients, ensuring my children never felt like we were living through a crisis.

When we first arrived in Raqqa, we had no money at all. Buying meat wasn't even an option, but that didn't bother us. At the time, all we could think about was how grateful we were to be safe, away from the shelling, and to have bread - or any food at all. Meat or anything beyond the essentials never even crossed our minds.

We stayed there for nine years, though not all of them were the same. Over time, my husband found work and bought a motorbike, which made it a little easier to secure what we needed. For a while, it felt as if we were finally finding our footing again.

However, as the bombing of Raqqa started, the trauma and pain resurfaced. I had already lived through this once before, and I wasn't willing to go through it again - or risk losing another loved one.

I knew we had to leave Raqqa for Rukban, an arid remote area. My sister tried to talk me out of it, but my mind was made up. After losing my sons, I couldn't bear the thought of losing anyone else. All I wanted was safety, even if it meant starting over in the middle of the desert.

We rented a car and set off for Rukban, but the roads were blocked with clashes and checkpoints - we couldn't get through and had no choice but to turn back. Back at the hotel, we came across a lorry packed with people, split into two sections - men crammed on top while women were squeezed into the lower compartment, packed in like livestock. The smugglers running it wouldn't take anyone out unless they paid. We gave them everything we had, leaving behind whatever was left, including the tent we'd bought, which we handed to a friend, and with nowhere else to go, we set our sights on Idlib instead.

Sarah: Buthaina, I'd like to move to your experience after you had to leave your home - when you and your family were displaced. How did that journey affect you until you finally reached Türkiye?

Buthaina: We set out at two in the morning, and by three, the smugglers dropped us off in what we at first thought was Idlib, only to realise we were still far from our destination. We had no choice but to walk the rest of the way. It was all part of the smugglers' scheme - we had paid them to take us to Idlib, yet they threatened to abandon us in the middle of nowhere if we didn't obey their orders. They assigned us a guide, and we kept moving, terrified - for ourselves and our children - knowing the land was littered with mines.

For two full days, we walked through the bitter winter cold. My husband carried our daughter, Khawla, on his shoulders, while I carried nothing from our home. We had left with nothing - just some bread, food for the children, and a tiny bottle of water. We hadn't even been prepared for such a journey; had I known we'd have to walk this far, I would have at least brought more water.

We kept going without stopping; even a moment's rest would have meant collapsing from exhaustion, so it was easier to push forward. The rain poured relentlessly, and there were nearly a hundred of us walking together. My children's shoes became so caked in mud that they eventually gave up and walked barefoot all the way to Idlib. In that freezing cold and thick mud, there was no other choice - fall behind, and you'd be left behind.

My mother, may she rest in peace, had been with us, but when the smugglers abandoned us and we were forced to walk the rest of the way, we had to leave her behind with my younger brother. She was too weak to continue, suffering from heart problems after multiple strokes. My brother stayed with her there in the wilderness. There was no way for us to go back without a smuggler to guide the road, nor could she endure the journey ahead. I had to say my last goodbye and ask for her forgiveness before moving on.

At dawn, just as we entered Idlib's outskirts, we were faced with a Free Army patrol. We approached cautiously, raising our hands to show we were civilians and meant no harm—otherwise, they might have suspected us of being infiltrators from other factions. They stopped us and carried out searches, fearing potential bomb attacks.

Once they were done, the Free Army arranged cars to transport people to villages in Idlib, starting with the elderly women and their families. Many elderly women were with us; some men had been carrying their mothers on their backs, refusing to leave them behind.

The rest of us - mostly younger families with children - were told to wait in a wide-open area, where we remained for about five hours. It was freezing, but we barely felt it - we had already been through worse. Eventually, it was our turn. Cars arrived to take us on yet another long journey, this time lasting two days. In total, we had spent a gruelling week, either crammed into vehicles or walking on foot, before finally reaching somewhere safe.

In Idlib, we met people who were kind and others who tried to take advantage of us - just as often happens in wartime. I can't really blame those who weren't sympathetic; they were struggling too and needed to charge rent for their homes.

We ended up taking shelter with a family from Idlib, old acquaintances of my sister's husband. It felt like a blessing. The man welcomed twenty-five of us into his home, many of whom had never met before. We were simply grateful to have arrived safely. We stayed there for a week, sharing food and expenses. Those who had money bought groceries, but shared them with everyone.

After about a week, a grain merchant visited and spoke with my husband, asking where we were from. My husband explained our situation, and the man suggested renting us a house. The problem was, we had no money for rent. Still, he offered us a place in his own village for ten thousand lira per month - a huge sum for us, and we didn't even have enough to furnish it. Then, out of kindness, he proposed paying two months' rent in advance on our behalf, as long as my husband found work to support us. My husband gratefully accepted, and we moved into the house.

When we arrived, it was completely empty - but just having four walls and a door felt like a blessing. There was no furniture at all, yet the simple act of closing a door behind us felt incredible. It was a single room next to a livestock pen. When I opened the window, I could see the sheep and smell them, but that hardly mattered.

The next day, the merchant returned with a foam mattress, a pillow, a blanket for each of us, a box of food, and a woven mat to sit on. It was cold, but that mat was better than nothing - he had truly been kind to us.

The following day, my husband went out to explore the area and look for work. He found a job at a local car wash - the same kind of work he had done back home - earning a hundred dollars a month. When he returned, he could barely contain his joy; he dropped to his knees, tears in his eyes, and said, "*God will never abandon us*." Then, he told me everything. I was overjoyed, and so were the children. The first thing they asked for was sweets and grilled chicken - treats they hadn't had in what felt like forever. To them, it was a dream come true. That was all a child could wish for.

Once our situation improved, I decided to enrol the children in school. But two months later, when schools in Idlib started getting bombed, I withdrew them for their safety.

I got to know the local women in the village. The single room we lived in had no electricity; people there paid for *amperat* [private generator subscriptions] to get about two hours of power a day. I didn't need much electricity, so one of my neighbours kindly

offered to share her line so I could light the room with a single bulb. When I offered to pay her, she refused - she simply stretched a cable over to my room. I will never forget her kindness; if I ever go back there, I will definitely visit her.

That same neighbour would gather the women each morning and invite me to join them. They were curious about Palmyra - its customs, its food - since they knew very little about it. The cuisine in Idlib was quite different from ours, but I enjoyed these gatherings. They reminded me of home, of the way we used to come together in Palmyra. These women were like us - simple country people.

The buildings, though, were different. Their houses had wells for drinking water, something we didn't have in Palmyra. They also had *masateb* [built-in stone or concrete seating area in a house's courtyard], where neighbours and relatives would sit in the sunshine, facing the olive trees. I loved those *masateb*. It felt like a blessing to be in a place so similar to my hometown, surrounded by olive trees I adored - trees that held so many warm memories for me.

People there made something called *dobarka* [drained yoghurt shaped into balls and preserved in olive oil, often flavoured with herbs or spices], which I had never seen before. They boiled yoghurt until most of the liquid evaporated, strained it with spices in a cotton bag, then packed it into jars - no fridge needed. They'd spread it, fat and all, on bread, sometimes toasting it over the wood stove. They did the same with their homemade *muhammara* [spiced red pepper spread]. For them, that was a true feast - so different from the wheat-and-meat feasts we had in Palmyra and Der Ezzor.

I shared our own food traditions with them - how we made our own *samen* [clarified butter], yoghurt, *kishk*, tomato paste, and more. We exchanged parts of our cultures, learning from one another. I even made *dobarka* myself after arriving in Türkiye.

I also learned how to store food without a fridge, which made managing our meals much easier. Since we couldn't store fresh meat, we used to buy just enough for a single meal. But after learning how to preserve it, we started getting larger cuts with both lean meat and fat. I'd clean and chop it finely, then simmer it on low heat until the fat melted. After straining the clear oil through a fine-woven cloth, I'd discard the residue. Back home, I used linen for this, but in Idlib, I had to make do with whatever was available.

To keep the meat preserved, I'd cook it again in some of that clarified oil, mix everything together, and pack it into jars while still hot. I'd press it down, seal the jars tightly, and flip them to release any air. That way, the meat stayed good for over a year without a fridge. Whenever I needed it, I could take out a small portion and add it to dishes like rice with peas or spinach.

I also brought in some polystyrene boxes, filled them with soil, and placed them around the courtyard to plant different vegetables - onions, spinach, watercress, and more. That way, we could have fresh produce and a bit of greenery. My husband would buy sheep's milk, which I'd curdle and boil down until most of the liquid evaporated, then pack into jars. This was how I preserved it without a fridge; whenever I needed to use it, I'd simply add water. I could use it for dishes like *shakriya* [a yoghurt-based stew].

I also made *kishk* and showed my neighbours how to make it too. I'd take sour yoghurt, mix it with fine bulgur and a bit of flour in a big bowl, and let it ferment for a few days, stirring frequently until it foamed up. Then, I'd spread it out on cloth under the sun to dry - always keeping an eye out for cats, of course.

My neighbours helped as well. Since no one had a grinder and there was no mill nearby, we had to rub the mixture between our palms before it dried completely; otherwise, it would harden too much to grind into a fine powder. I never threw away the coarse bits; instead, I used them in a Palmyrene dish called *kishk mhabbash* [a dish made with boiled chickpeas, fava beans, lentils, and white beans, mixed with simmered *kishk*, bulgur, chopped cabbage, onions, garlic, and seasoned with salt, cumin, and pepper]. I'd share some with the neighbours who helped me, and they loved it so much that one of them suggested we start making and selling it together. People there weren't familiar with it, but she was convinced they'd like it.

She kept encouraging me, so I focused on work and had little time for shopping or socialising. I gave a sample to a shop owner - he tasted it, liked it, and agreed to sell it for me. I wouldn't get paid until it sold, but that was fine. Selling *kishk* helped cover food and essentials, while my husband's wages went toward rent, and maybe even saving a little.

Being away from home, we had to think ahead - we could be displaced again or might return at any time. I learned how people in Idlib stored their food and put that

knowledge to use, just as they learned from me. To this day, they still make and sell *kishk.*

Sarah: Despite everything, you managed to get back on your feet. You built a home, made new friendships, and learned from others while sharing your own knowledge! What happened after Idlib? How was your journey to Türkiye? And how did you adapt the culinary traditions of Der Ezzor and Palmyra to what you learned in Idlib?

Buthaina: The bombing started again in Idlib, and things became even more dangerous. We had managed to save some money, but the smugglers were demanding a massive sum - far more than we had. I spoke to my sister, who tried to talk me out of it. She said we lacked experience and that I'd struggle in Türkiye, but at least in Idlib, we could support each other.

But I had reached my limit - I couldn't take the sound of planes and missiles anymore. It no longer mattered where we lived; we were already far from home and had nothing left. My sister lent me some money, I added what little I had, and we gave it to a smuggler to get us out. It was another tough journey, just like the one that had brought us to Idlib - trekking for an entire day in the rain and cold.

Later, in Türkiye, I painted a picture of that journey - a piece that means a lot to me because I feel it sums everything up. In it, I'm carrying my son on my shoulders, wrapped in a blanket against the cold, holding a small bag of bread and cheese, and in my purse, the only thing left: photos of the children I lost.

Once we crossed into Türkiye, the smuggler abandoned us on the other side of the border with nothing. My husband regretted everything we had been through, but I reminded him that we were safe now, away from the airstrikes - that was what mattered.

Using the only brick phone we had, I called my sister. She was relieved we had made it - but scolded me for ending up stranded. I didn't blame her; I knew it came from a place of care. Even as I stood there on the street, I had no regrets. Being in Türkiye felt like finally climbing out of a deep pit.

My sister gave me a contact for a relative in Reyhanlı. I introduced myself, told him where we were, and he came right away. We were drenched in rain and covered in mud. When we arrived at his place, the heater was on, dinner was ready, and there

was hot water for a bath. I washed my children and dressed them in some of his kids' bigger clothes - at least they were warm and dry. They ate and collapsed near the heater after walking for an entire day.

My husband and I thanked him, though I knew it was hard for my husband to show up at a stranger's door with nothing. I kept reassuring him that our relative didn't mind and was just happy we were safe. And he truly was - he treated us with such kindness. He told us to stay until my husband could find a job and we could manage on our own. My husband did find work, and eventually, we rented a small place in another area.

The food here was different - everything was packaged or canned. Some things I needed weren't available, so I had them sent from Reyhanlı or Urfa. That was when I decided to start making *kishk* again, drying aubergines and okra, preparing *makdous* [pickled baby aubergines stuffed with walnuts, garlic, and red pepper, then preserved in olive oil], and pickling olives like we did back in Palmyra. I held onto everything I had learned from Palmyra and Deir Ezzor, keeping those traditions alive and applying them in Türkiye.

I remembered what my mother and siblings had taught me about cooking. I made jam the way we always did - drying it under the sun instead of just boiling it. I made jam, *makdous*, and even built a small fire in my yard to boil the aubergines - and people stared. Sure, some Turks in rural areas used wood for cooking, but in the city, it probably seemed odd. Still, I wasn't embarrassed - I wanted that smoky taste. I was proud of it and determined to do things my way.

When we got to Gaziantep, my husband's job slowed down, so I started making my own *za'atar* - roasting, grinding, and selling it to local shops. I also curdled milk, and my cousins helped me sell it. That's how I kept us afloat. If I hadn't learned all this from my roots in the countryside - my parents and grandparents - I wouldn't have had these skills.

I'm proud of that, and I always tell other women to stay strong. A woman is like a young branch - she may bend, but she won't break. She should have her own plan, keep pushing forward, and stay persistent. Anyone can create something out of nothing.

Sarah: Syria is finally free now - what hopes do you have for your family and community moving forward?

Buthaina: It’s a victory for all the mothers who’ve lost children. I’m thinking about returning home to help rebuild - replant olives, palms, and wheat. Life goes on. Our children will carry on our heritage, harvest wheat, pick olives, plough the land, and bring it back to life. They’ll rebuild the country. That’s my dream for them and the generations to come. We have to raise our children to know this, especially those who grew up abroad. They need to learn that Syria cannot thrive without its people. One day, we’ll go back and rebuild. I’ll replant my family’s orchards. The olive roots are still there; with water and care, they’ll grow again. It’s up to our generation to nurture them.

Sarah: Buthaina, you’re an artist, a mother who lost two children, a homemaker, a woman who has seen death with her own eyes yet remained strong. You’re an amazing example of resilience – thank you so much.

And to our listeners, we’ve reached the end of today’s episode. I’d like to thank our guest, Buthaina Mohammed, and all of you tuning in. Stay with us for future episodes, and feel free to connect through our website and social media. We welcome your messages and suggestions for topics to discuss next time.