



MLEIHI AND CULINARY LEGACY OF SWEIDA



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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.

Our topic for today is ***Mleihi and Culinary Legacy of Sweida***. Our guest is Ghaimana Ali, originally from Sweida and currently residing in Gaziantep since 2017. Welcome, Ghaimana, and thank you for joining us today. Could you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Ghaimana: I am Ghaimana Ali, from Jabal al-Arab, specifically from Sweida. I am Druze, married, and a mother to a little girl, Sham, who brings me hope and joy every day. I studied Primary Education in Syria, but after relocating, I struggled to find work in my field, which led me to pursue a passion for cooking.

Sarah: Could you share with us some fond memories that connect you to Sweida?

Ghaimana: Just hearing the name Sweida fills me with pride. My fondest memories are of family gatherings - being with my siblings, sharing laughter, and enjoying time with friends. I have fond memories of the apple orchards, spending days harvesting apples and making grape molasses in the vineyards. One of my favourite memories is sharing meals with family - especially enjoying grape molasses mixed with tahini, a simple but special treat.

Sarah: What makes the cuisine of Sweida unique? Could you tell us about the traditions and heritage surrounding food in your city?

Ghaimana: Hospitality is at the heart of life in Sweida. One of the most important parts of our homes is the *madafa* [a large guest room with its own entrance, separate from the main house]. Serving Arabic coffee is a must in our traditions. It is served in beautifully adorned *dallah* [a traditional Arabic coffee pot, usually made of brass or copper, with a long spout, ornate handle, and hinged lid] and traditional Arabic coffee cups [small handleless porcelain cups, often decorated with gold or floral patterns]. As soon as a guest steps in, we greet them with Arabic coffee - it's a sign of warm

hospitality. Before long, we prepare *Mansaf Mleihi*, a dish that reflects our generosity. It's made with bulgur wheat, lamb, yoghurt, nuts, and traditional *tannour* bread.

Making *Mleihi* is a team effort - all the women in the house get involved. We put on our traditional headscarves before we begin. Large pots are placed over the fire, and we begin by boiling the lamb, adding only essential seasonings such as onions and bay leaves to enhance the flavour. Meanwhile, the yoghurt is stirred and blended with some of the lamb broth to achieve a smooth consistency. Once the lamb is cooked, it is transferred into the yoghurt mixture, ensuring it remains intact.

Simultaneously, we prepare Arabic butter and cook bulgur and rice with lamb broth. For serving, the dish is presented on large *mansaf* platters with handles lined with *tannour* bread, followed by layers of bulgur. The lamb is arranged on top, and the yoghurt mixture is poured over it before finishing with a garnish of nuts and a drizzle of Arabic butter, and we cover the *mansaf* with *tannour* bread. The men carry the platter to serve the guests, while the women celebrate with traditional ululations.

Sarah: You said there is a traditional way to eat *Mleihi*. Can you share that with us?

Ghaimana: Sure! Traditionally, you eat it by hand while sitting cross-legged on the floor. The proper way is to take a piece of bread, scoop up some bulgur and lamb with the palm of the hand - not just the fingertips - and eat it.

Sarah: Aside from *Mleihi*, are there other well-known dishes in Sweida? What about traditional desserts?

Ghaimana: Yes, apart from *Mleihi*, another well-known dish is *Shishbarak* [tiny dumplings filled with minced meat and cooked in a yoghurt-based sauce]. Our traditional dessert is *Lazzakiyat*, which differs from how it is prepared in Damascus or other cities. We use very thin *tannour* bread, layering it with butter and sugar, repeating this process over seven layers. Finally, the dessert is topped with Arabic butter, sugar, and, if available, crushed pistachios. *Lazzakiyat* is served on all special occasions—whether weddings, religious celebrations, or even casual gatherings.

Sarah: Do you still make *Mleihi* and *Lazzakiyat* since moving to Türkiye?

Ghaimana: Yes, I still make *Mleihi*, despite the initial challenges of sourcing the right ingredients. It remains a staple dish for my daughter and husband.

Sarah: Does your daughter eat it by hand, the traditional way?

Ghaimana: At first, she wasn't keen and wanted to use a spoon, but I made sure she learned to eat it the traditional way. That's part of our heritage, and I want her to embrace it.

Sarah: What about *Lazzakiyat*? Are you able to make it with *tannour* bread, or have you found an alternative?

Ghaimana: I haven't found a suitable alternative. However, sometimes I bake *saj* bread on the rooftop. Since my home is quite small, I can't bake indoors.

Sarah: What challenges did you face preparing *Mleihi* in Türkiye?

Ghaimana: The biggest challenge was finding *tannour* bread, so I had to make do with a similar flatbread. Also, the yoghurt we traditionally use is homemade, so I had to adapt by thickening cow's milk yoghurt with starch. Additionally, lamb is not always affordable, so at times, I substitute it with chicken, though the dish is traditionally made with lamb.

Cooking wasn't the only challenge - there was the language barrier, housing issues, and so much more. When we moved into a different home, it was another adjustment. Back home, houses were spacious, and so were the kitchen utensils we used. Here, the pots were small, whereas back home, they were large. Here, I would need three pots instead of one. Therefore, I usually boil the meat in the pot, then transfer it to another container so that I can use the pot to cook the rice.

Another thing we missed was the gathering of family. Back in Syria, we always made it together - my mum, my sisters, and me. Everything felt more joyful with them around. Now, I miss them here. True, when my daughter joins me in the kitchen, she gives me hope and happiness, but nothing compares to the warmth of a big family gathering. It makes the food taste different; the cooking experience itself feels different. But despite all these challenges, I am grateful and excited that I can still make it.

Sarah: In Syria, and especially in Sweida, food isn't just about the dish—it's about coming together around the table. The value of the meal comes from both the food and the company. Sweida is famous for its *Mansaf Al-Meliehi*, but this is also a traditional dish in Daraa and Jordan. Could you explain the differences between these three variations of Mansaf?

Ghaimana: In Sweida, it is distinct for being made with traditional Arabic yoghurt. Every region has its own way of making it. In Jordan, they make it with *jameed* (dried yoghurt), which they soak from morning until evening to soften. After that, they put it in a cloth bag, crush it, strain it, and then cook it. In Daraa, like in Jordan, they traditionally use a type of dried yogurt called *higet*. They also garnish the *mansaf* with fried kibbeh, while in Sweida, we stick to fresh yoghurt and garnish the dish with nuts.

Sarah: During the war in Syria, what challenges did you, your family, and the people around you face regarding cooking? I mean, preparing Sweida's traditional dishes, especially something like *Mleihi*?

Ghaimana: When the water supply was cut off, we had to fetch water from the canal, carrying it on our shoulders, or collect it from the spring to use for cooking. As for electricity, we never used it for cooking - we cooked on open fires, which the men would set up, and we would do the cooking. Meat was always available, but financially, it was difficult to afford. Sometimes, since we had crops, we did not necessarily need to cook *Mleihi*. Instead, we would make *Shishbarak*. We would sometimes roast the meat and store it in glass jars, which eliminated the need for refrigeration. So, instead of *Mleihi*, we would prepare *Shishbarak*. As for vegetables, we relied on what we grew. We cultivated essential crops such as tomatoes, apples, and greens like purslane.

Sarah: So, essentially, you lived off the land, growing your own food, which helped sustain you during times of scarcity?

Ghaimana: Yes, but irrigation was sometimes a challenge. I still remember a time when we had planted tomatoes, and the water supply was cut off for three days. My family needed to water the plants, so we carried water from the spring on our backs -

even as children - to help my father irrigate the crops so they would grow and provide us with food.

Sarah: Despite your young age, you tried to preserve the tradition of *Mleihi*. How did you learn to cook it, along with other dishes and desserts from Sweida?

Ghaimana: I learned from my mother. I would stand by her side in the kitchen, watching closely. My sisters and I would ask, "*Mum, what are you adding? What are you doing?*" We observed every little detail. She never formally taught us - we simply learned by watching. I also learned from my grandmother. At weddings, all the women would gather around the cooking pots, and we would watch how they prepared the food. Sometimes, we would take a perforated ladle and stir, mimicking their actions, observing how they seasoned the meat and what ingredients they used. Later, when I moved here, I learned more gradually, making use of YouTube to improve my skills.

In essence, cooking is a passion - it's not just a task. I love cooking. I was studying at university, but I had to leave in my third year. After moving here, I tried finding a job, but it was a challenge due to certification issues. Since I love cooking and enjoy making my daughter happy just as my mother did for us, I decided to work in cooking. I attempted to start a small cooking business for three months, but it didn't work out. People demanded large quantities, and I lacked the necessary equipment. If I had the right tools, I could have managed large orders, but since I didn't, I had to stop.

Sarah: What equipment did you lack?

Ghaimana: Large gas stoves, spacious kitchens, and big ladles. Cooking a small meal is not the same as preparing a large one. The most essential items were large cooking pots and gas stoves.

Sarah: So, everything here is smaller - the houses, the kitchens. In Sweida, homes and kitchens are spacious, and there is a strong sense of family and community. Now that Syria has been liberated, are you considering returning? What are your hopes for your family and your community?

Ghaimana: I came here in 2017, while my family remained in Syria. I got married and had my daughter here, and my husband is also here. My in-laws are still in Syria, but I don't have much there anymore. My parents are still there, but I can only visit - I wouldn't be able to live there permanently. My husband and I don't have a home there, and even my family's big house in Sweida is in ruins. My mother recently went to check on it and found it uninhabitable. Yet, hopefully, one day, we'll start a business, save up, buy a house in Sweida, and move back for good.

Sarah: With determination, patience, and hard work, you'll get there one day. I sincerely hope you will be able to buy your home.

To conclude, Ghaimana, you left Syria at a young age, studied alone in Damascus, then moved abroad and became a mother here. You are making great efforts to pass down the heritage of Sweida to your daughter and raise her to be the best she can be. What message would you like to share with our listeners, particularly women?

Ghaimana: To everyone listening, every beginning has an end. No matter how tough life gets, hope and goodness always remain. Always hold on to hope. Despite all the difficulties I faced, I never let go of the joy and positivity in my life. No matter the struggles, I remain resilient and hopeful. Hope, happiness, and joy are always present - for our families, our children, and those we love.

Sarah: Absolutely. Resilience and hope are fundamental to overcoming life's challenges.

Thank you so much, Ghaimana, for sharing your inspiring stories and for giving us such valuable insights into Sweida's culture and its unique dishes, including the differences between the *Mleghi Mansaf* varieties in Sweida, Daraa, and Jordan. We are truly grateful.

A special thanks also goes to our dear listeners. Stay tuned for future episodes, and we look forward to engaging with you through our website and social media channels. We warmly welcome your feedback and suggestions for topics you find important and would like us to explore in upcoming episodes.