



## ALEPPO'S FLAVOURS OF KIBBEH: TALES OF LOVE AND RESILIENCE



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## Aleppo's Flavours of Kibbeh: Tales of Love and Resilience

**Sarah:** Hello and welcome, dear listeners! We're delighted to have you with 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 today is ***Aleppo's Flavours of Kibbeh: Tales of Love and Resilience***. Our guest is Mirvet Qasem, originally from Aleppo and currently residing in Gaziantep. Welcome, Mirvet, and thank you for joining us.

To begin, could you introduce yourself?

**Mirvet:** I'm Mirvet Qasem, a proud Syrian, from the historic city of Aleppo - an ancient place rich in culture and history, known for its heroism and achievements, both past and present. It has exceptional people, industry, and craftsmanship, especially in textiles, laurel soap, and olive oil. Of course, it's also famous for its diverse cuisine.

I am married and a mother of three. Early on, I faced many challenges because my husband and I come from different provinces. We had differences in dialect, customs, traditions, and even food preferences.

**Sarah:** Do you miss Aleppo a lot?

**Mirvet:** Tremendously.

**Sarah:** What fond memories do you have of Aleppo?

**Mirvet:** The Citadel! We often visited the Citadel and the adjacent park. My late mother would take us there, and I have many cherished photos with my sisters from those outings.

**Sarah:** What makes Aleppan cuisine stand out?

**Mirvet:** In my family, rich, hearty meals were a must. For example, when we made *yabraq* [rolled vine leaves stuffed with minced meat and rice], it had to include lamb fat and meat; otherwise, we wouldn't consider it a proper dish. My husband's family preferred it with lean meat and plenty of vegetables, which in Aleppo we call *Yalanji* - usually as an evening snack.

I also love *kibbeh* in all its varieties. When I first made it the way my mother did, my husband found it too rich and asked for a lighter version, so I stopped adding lamb fat and used only lean meat instead. For me, though, it never tasted quite the same.

**Sarah:** Could you tell us more about the different types of Aleppan *kibbeh*? When are they usually prepared and served, and what are the traditions around them?

**Mirvet:** Aleppo offers an incredible variety of *kibbeh* [bulgur-and-meat dumplings] - *kibbeh meshwiyyeh* [grilled patties], *kibbeh mikliye* [Deep-fried stuffed bulgur shells], and several styles of fried, such as *darawish* [elongated, crunchy fried kibbeh], *kibbeh mozat* [banana-shaped kibbeh with a rich filling of lean meat and nuts]. We also have *saj kibbeh* [large saj-grilled patties], and *samakiyya* [tangy sumac kibbeh stew], *safarjaliyya* [quince-flavoured kibbeh stew], and *kibbeh nayyeh* [seasoned bulgur-raw meat mix], which has many varieties as well; bulgur can be replaced by lentil.

Aleppo is often called the mother of stuffed dishes and kibbeh. No gathering is complete without it, whether a special occasion, a family visit, or a women's gathering. Some people serve a different type of *kibbeh* every day for the first 12 days of Ramadan. My late mother used to do this, and by the end, we'd beg her for something else!

I left Aleppo in 2005, so I've been away for 20 years. Despite that, we've held onto our customs. In Homs, where I spent time, I saw many differences in wedding traditions. In Aleppo, for instance, we prepare a groom's breakfast and have a *henna* night before the wedding, which doesn't exist in Homs. When my brother-in-law got married, I introduced some Aleppan traditions, and the bride's family loved them. We also had a *taftila* [pre-wedding gathering] and celebrated the bride's *trousseau* preparation day. Another cherished tradition was the *hammam* day for the bride. I remember going with my aunts when their daughters got married; it was a special day of pampering and celebration.

**Sarah:** Returning to *kibbeh*, could you describe some of the different types and when each is typically served?

**Mirvet:** My favourite is *kibbeh meshwiyyeh*. The shell mixture uses a 2:1 ratio of bulgur to lean meat, preferably veal, with added onion, salt, cumin, and red pepper. Traditionally, it's pounded in a stone mortar, but here in Türkiye, we use an electric or

manual grinder. The mixture is ground three times for a smooth texture. The filling is minced lamb with fat, suet, nuts, mint, pomegranate molasses, and red pepper.

In Homs, they don't add mint or red pepper, which was a challenge for me. I ended up making two versions - one for my husband's taste, one for mine. For fried kibbeh, the filling is similar, but you can't use lamb fat or the shells will break in hot oil. The frying oil must be very hot, fully submerging the kibbeh so it cooks properly.

There's also *kibbeh labaniyyeh* [kibbeh in yoghurt sauce], *saj kibbeh*, similar to the grilled version but larger and with less fat. *Kibbeh mabroumeh* [rolled, pistachio-filled kibbeh] which is similar to the *mabroumeh* dessert [rolled kunafa with rich pistachios filling, soaked in sugar syrup, and then sliced into cylindrical pieces]. *Somakiyya* required sumac, pomegranate molasses, and chunks of meat, while *Safarjaliyya* is prepared with quince fruit. Each type has its distinct preparation and ingredients.

**Sarah:** When do you typically serve these dishes? Are there specific occasions?

**Mirvet:** Kibbeh features prominently at weddings, special gatherings, and family get-togethers. Sometimes we simply make it at home because men in our region love a hearty meal, and my husband is no exception.

I moved to Türkiye in 2016 and struggled at first. I didn't speak Turkish or have citizenship, so teaching wasn't an option. However, I noticed similarities between Turkish and Aleppan cuisine—the same ingredients but slightly different preparations. I decided to cook from home, alongside my husband, and we supplied factories with food. Turkish clients requested *çiğ köfte* [spiced raw-bulgur mixture], which reminded me of Aleppan *kibbeh nayyeh* but with extra spices. I managed to improve the recipe after a few tries, and it was well received, though the pay didn't match the effort. I then worked in elderly and disability care for four years.

As my children grew, I realised I needed to prioritise my family. Working from 8 AM to 5 PM distanced me from them; I lost track of their experiences, influences, and emotional well-being. When I finally stayed home, I saw how much they had changed - restless, disobedient, and detached. With patience and encouragement, we rebuilt our bond. Now, our home feels warm again, and I'm grateful for that. My family has always been my priority.

**Sarah:** How did you manage the challenges of adapting to life in a new country?

**Mirvet:** Even in Syria, I often felt a sense of displacement. I moved to Homs in 2005 to study, graduated, got married, and then relocated to Palmyra. I taught while continuing my studies in the Faculty of Education and later returned to Homs. Wherever I went, I managed to adapt, build friendships, and forge a sense of community; however, when I moved again, I'd lose all of that. Türkiye posed a bigger challenge because of the language barrier. I had to push myself to go out, meet people, and integrate. My time in Palmyra also shaped me. I learned about their local cuisine, including *burma*, which is some sort of *kibbeh musluqa* [boiled Kibbeh] that uses cracked wheat instead of bulgur, and I loved it.

I also experienced a remarkable sense of solidarity there in A Palmyra, unlike Homs and Aleppo. In Palmyra, if a neighbour passed away, the entire neighbourhood would mourn, cancel celebrations, and postpone weddings. It was a close-knit community. I lived there for four years, formed strong friendships, and we remained in touch.

Love truly works miracles. I met my husband while studying in Homs; we fell in love and got married. The displacement, loss, and uncertainty I've faced make me feel much older than I am. I am only 33 years old, but I feel I am much older.

**Sarah:** These experiences have clearly shaped who you are, including your connection to Aleppan culinary traditions. You mentioned similarities between Aleppo and Gaziantep. Do you think this is due to the Ottoman influence, proximity, or both? Also, do you still make these *kibbeh* varieties in Türkiye, or have you had to adapt?

**Mirvet:** Aleppo is geographically close to Türkiye, sharing long borders, so proximity matters and the Ottoman influence has also played a part. In Hatay, for instance, Turkish and Syrian families have intermarried for generations, creating deep cultural exchange.

Also, it helped that familiar ingredients - legumes, grains, and meats - were available here. I saw Turkish people making *kibbeh* in various forms, though not usually the grilled variety. I once made grilled *kibbeh* for a neighbour in Gaziantep, who loved it and asked me to teach her. However, I don't make it frequently because authentic preparation can be costly.

Fortunately, I found a small community of Aleppan women. We revived our culinary traditions by meeting to cook *yabraq*, *baba ghanoush* [chunky roasted aubergine dip

with chopped vegetables and pomegranate seeds], *kibbeh nayyeh*, and more. These gatherings helped us maintain our heritage while abroad. However, now after Syria has been liberated, many of us feared losing this bond if we all returned to our hometowns.

**Sarah:** Now that Syria has been liberated, what are your hopes for your family and community moving forward?

**Mirvet:** Thank God we're free from the oppression that suffocated us. My greatest hope is to give my son a childhood unlike mine, free from fear, repression, and injustice. We were scared to speak openly, even at school. Now, I want my children to have the freedom to make their own choices without intimidation. I want them to experience open discussions and to feel safe expressing their thoughts.

**Sarah:** Will the cultural influences you've absorbed shape any future projects once you return to Syria?

**Mirvet:** If we decide to go back, we'll settle in Homs, my husband's hometown. My priority is providing a decent life for my children. I want to start working again; I still like to work in Education, but also I'd love to start my own business - maybe a restaurant offering Turkish dishes. Türkiye took nearly a decade of my life, but it also enriched me with new skills and culinary knowledge. I see a chance to blend Turkish flavours into Syrian cuisine to promote growth and adaptation.

**Sarah:** So you're planning to merge Aleppan and Turkish cuisine?

**Mirvet:** Yes, and even Homs and Palmyrene cuisine!

**Sarah:** You also mentioned eating habits and traditions. Will you bring those into your restaurant?

**Mirvet:** Absolutely. If someone orders *kibbeh* for example, I can customise it. Some like it stuffed with lamb fat, others use chicken or lean cuts, and some avoid meat altogether. This is what I did in Türkiye; customising the dish to meet preferences of clients. I plan to offer Aleppan, Homs, and Palmyrene variations of *kibbeh*, along with appetisers and salads. Satisfying the customer's preference is vital.

**Sarah:** Finally, what would you like to share with our listeners, especially women?

**Mirvet:** Thank you for having me - I truly enjoyed our conversation. My message is simple: with resilience, love, and determination, nothing is impossible. A woman can create something out of nothing. She can be a nurturing mother, a successful teacher, and a role model in her community. Women have a crucial role in all parts of society. Islam has honoured women, giving them an essential place in history, education, and even battles. My advice is never to lose hope. With love and determination, anything is possible.

**Sarah:** Thank you so much, Mirvet, for sharing your story with us. This has been an inspiring conversation, exploring love as a source of resilience, the importance of adapting to new environments, and how food - especially *kibbeh* - remains central to Aleppan culture. Even if an Aleppan woman marries outside her city, *kibbeh* never leaves her table!

A special thank you to our listeners. Stay tuned for upcoming episodes, and feel free to connect with us through our website and social media channels. We welcome your feedback and suggestions for topics you'd like us to explore in future episodes.