



THE FLAVOUR OF HERITAGE AND THE BUILDING OF HOPE



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

The Flavour of Heritage and the Building of Hope

Sarah: Peace be upon you, dear listeners, and welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth*, with me, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is presented by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye, in partnership with the University of Sussex in the UK. Our episode is titled ***The Flavour of Heritage and the Building of Hope***. Our guest today is Nabihah Qasim, originally from Palmyra and now living in Gaziantep since 2015. Nabihah, it's a pleasure to have you with us. Thank you for being here. Could you tell us a little about yourself?

Nabihah: Peace be upon you. I'm Nabihah Qasim, a Syrian from Palmyra. I have seven children; two of them lost their lives due to the regime's shelling. I now live in Gaziantep in Türkiye.

Sarah: Palmyra is famous for its history and remarkable ruins. What are some of your fondest memories of your hometown?

Nabihah: Palmyra is widely known as the Pride of the Desert. It lies in an arid region and has long been a crossroads between the eastern and western parts of the country. It's renowned for its archaeological sites, orchards, and rich natural resources. What ties me most to Palmyra is its deep-rooted heritage, especially the traditional dishes.

Sarah: What foods is Palmyra known for? What is its signature dish?

Nabihah: One of its most famous dishes is *burma*, a traditional wheat-based dish. It's a heritage dish prepared for special occasions like celebrations, weddings, or when hosting an important guest.

Sarah: What other well-known dishes are there in Palmyra besides *burma*?

Nabihah: Apart from *burma*, Palmyra is known for its olives, *tannour* bread, and *hannaniyya*. There are also many wheat-based dishes, like bulgur with chickpeas or bulgur with vermicelli.

Sarah: You mentioned *hannaniyya*. What is that?

Nabihah: *Hannaniyya* is a dish made with dates cooked in *samin arabi* [clarified butter ghee]. The dates are pitted, cooked and served with *tannour* bread. It's a favourite

snack in the late afternoon, between *asr* and *maghrib* prayers - when farmers typically take a break from work. During this break, *hannaniyya* is often prepared right after gathering fresh dates from the palm trees.

Sarah: You said that *burma* is made from wheat and that many other traditional dishes rely on bulgur rather than rice. Why is that?

Nabiha: Palmyra was never an industrial city; people lived off the land. We ate what we grew. There are different types of wheat - some white, some reddish. The white wheat was used for *burma*, while the rest was milled into bulgur, *muraisha*, *jreesh*, semolina, and flour. Palmyra was also known for its olives and pomegranates.

The region is especially famous for *kamaa* [desert truffles]. In an area called Al-Hammad, *kamaa* would grow naturally. Our ancestors used to say, “*The first harvest is qatiya, and the last is shayoukhiyya.*” The season would start in mid-February and last until late March. Finding *kamaa* was like discovering buried treasure. After the rain, when the sun came out, the soil would crack slightly, forming little domes. We would use a stick or a stone to gently lift the earth and uncover the *kamaa*.

We also had many date palms in our orchards - every household had at least twenty trees. And we used more than just the dates. The fronds were woven into mats, brooms, and baskets. The baskets stored bread, and large mats helped keep dishes cool. We even got the *miswak* [traditional chewing stick] from the palm twigs.

As for pomegranates, we made *dibs rumman* [pomegranate molasses] and fresh pomegranate juice. After juicing, the dried seeds were added to *za'atar* [thyme-based herb and spice blend] to enhance its flavour.

Sarah: Before we started recording, you mentioned that there are special rituals involved in preparing *burma*. Could you tell us about them?

Nabiha: *Burma* isn't just a dish - it's part of special occasions like weddings or the visit of an important guest. Making it brings family and neighbours together. If my cousin or a neighbour's son was getting married, I would take part. Weddings weren't just about serving meat; *burma* was the centrepiece of our feasts.

Young girls, older women, family, and neighbours would all gather. In my parents' home, we had a *jurn* [large stone mortar with a stone pestle] specifically for pounding

wheat. First, we washed the wheat, then placed it in the *jurn* to pound it. The young women took turns sitting together and rhythmically pounding the grains. And that's when the ritual really began. It's linked to other social traditions too - if a mother was looking for a bride for her son, she'd watch how a girl pounded the wheat. If the girl could do a hundred strokes without stopping, she was seen as skilled, strong, and responsible - qualities that made her an ideal wife. If a mother spotted such a girl, she might say, "*This is who I want for my son.*"

While pounding the wheat, the women would sing. It was lively and communal. Some pounded, others sifted, and others rubbed the grains to separate them. Once the wheat was ready, it had to be cooked. Those without a *tannour* would cook it over an open fire, while those with a *tannour* would bake it in clay pots inside it.

Weddings usually took place on Thursdays and Fridays, and by midday Friday, after prayers, everyone - men and women - would be invited to the feast. Traditionally, we put the pot inside the *tannour* at dawn, just before the call to *fajr* prayer, and left it to cook slowly until after the Friday midday prayer. Every two or three hours, the *burma* had to be stirred, checked, and seasoned. We added meat, onions, and spices. Once ready, it was served on large platters, garnished with nuts, pieces of meat, and sometimes chicken, along with a pot of melted pure butter ghee. In our tradition, men served the food, while women handled the heavy work of preparing it. The singing continued throughout, not just during preparation. Traditional songs were sung, like:

*"Amid my mother's disapproving gaze / and my father's silent indifference /
The iron bridge to my beloved's house / crumbled beneath my steps."*

Or:

*"They say my beloved has gone far away / Oh, my eyes, my soul, my darling / raised
with love and care. / Oh, my beloved, you who carry water in a jar, / jar after jar, / if you
grow thirsty, I'll quench your thirst with its water, my dear."*

A young man usually sang that second one when the young woman he hoped to marry was nearby. These songs and traditions go back generations. Even now, if we come across an old *jurn*, we'll use it. God willing, we'll return home one day and use the *jurn* that's still at my parents' house.

Sarah: Do these traditions - the singing, the gathering, the pounding - still exist after displacement? Do you still make *burma* with the same rituals?

Nabiha: No, not anymore. We left all that behind when we were forced out. Back home, we'd sing while working together. Now, when I cook *burma*, I still sing those songs, even if I'm alone in the kitchen. My children ask, "Mum, what are these songs?" and I tell them, "*They're the ones we used to sing,*" and explain our traditions to them.

Sarah: That's fascinating. It feels like reading a chapter from Palmyra's history of traditions. I'm curious - are there other dishes from Palmyra that have their own special rituals?

Nabiha: Every place has its customs, and each region celebrates through food in its own way. Besides *burma*, we had a special tradition when a baby started teething. As soon as we noticed the child's first teeth, we'd boil whole wheat and share it with neighbours and relatives. It was just wheat from our land. Back then, there were no restaurants, no hotels - everything was homemade. Boiling wheat and passing it around was our way of marking that milestone as a community.

Another special dish was *kamaa* [desert truffles]. We'd cook it and serve it with *saj* bread. In the old days, our mothers baked bread in the *tannour*, and when we made *kamaa*, we cooked it with meat and served it over that fresh bread. *Kamaa* was saved for important guests - it was an honour to serve it.

We gathered *kamaa* ourselves. Women worked the fields as much as men, maybe more. Life was simple, and everything we ate came straight from nature. No preservatives, no imported goods. You learned to make something out of nothing.

Sarah: I love that idea - making something out of nothing, relying on the land. After being displaced from Palmyra, were you able to keep living that way? Did you come directly to Türkiye?

Nabiha: No, we spent some time in liberated areas first. Then, when we finally got the chance, we moved to Türkiye and became refugees. Everything changed the moment we arrived. Life got difficult in ways we'd never known. We lost everything - our homes, our jobs, even our children. We found ourselves in a foreign place where we didn't know the language or how anything worked. It felt like starting life over.

We had no choice but to figure out a way forward - necessity drove us. We were in a dire financial situation – no homes, no income, no transport, no savings at all. So I thought, “*I can cook. Why not start there?*” Our hometown is known for *burma*. I made some and shared it with my neighbour. She loved it and asked if she could place an order.

That’s how it began. We were a small group of women, each with a different skill. One knew how to pickle vegetables; another did weaving and another made preserves. At first, we were just three or four, but within six months, we were ten, then thirty, then forty. Each woman focused on what she did best.

What started as a neighbourly gathering turned into something much bigger - a project that gave us independence. Each of us could stand on our own feet, earn a living, and inspire others. We didn’t have to take factory jobs or do work that didn’t suit us.

Back in Syria, women mostly stayed home, even if they were educated. Our parents and husbands never expected us to work outside. In Türkiye, everything changed. Families weren’t together in the same way anymore. Despite this, we held on to our family ties, our traditions, our customs - we never let them go.

Sarah: What did you name your project?

Nabiha: At first, it was *Women of Tomorrow*, then *Flavours of the Town*. Eventually, we settled on *Flavours of the East*.

Sarah: Why that name?

Nabiha: Initially, it was *Flavours of the Town* because each of us made dishes from her hometown. But as time went on, I started cooking meals from different parts of Syria. One woman specialised in *yabraq* [stuffed vine leaves], another in *tharod bamyeh* [okra stew]. We weren’t just cooking Palmyrene dishes - we were bringing together flavours from all across Syria.

Sarah: How did you learn to cook dishes from other regions?

Nabiha: From the women I worked with. When we gathered, each of us taught the others her speciality. Sometimes, I already knew how to make a dish, but it wouldn’t taste the same as when made by someone from the region where that dish originated. The real flavour is in the hands of those who’ve been making it for generations.

Sarah: Back in Palmyra, you cooked whatever the land provided. But here in Türkiye, have you noticed a difference in ingredients or even in the tools you use?

Nabiha: The difference is huge. We used to grow our own food - everything was fresh and natural. Now, even the wheat comes from the market, processed by machines instead of pounded in a *jurn* [stone mortar], so it's different.

We never used artificial stock cubes or pre-mixed spices - our flavours came straight from nature. The taste has changed so much. I'd say by about fifty percent.

Sarah: Fifty percent? That's quite a difference. Is it just the ingredients, or have your cooking tools changed as well?

Nabiha: Everything changed. Back home, we used *qishan* [clay plates, often with intricate patterns] and baskets woven from palm fronds. Even something like vermicelli - we never bought it ready. We made dough, rolled it into fine strands, and let it dry for days. Now, kids ask for instant noodles. My daughter says, "Mum, I want Indomie." I tell her, "Why buy it when I can make it?" We used to roll vermicelli by hand, oiling our palms as we made it thinner and thinner, then letting it rest before rolling it again.

Sarah: Even with all this change - displacement, new ingredients, different tools - I have to say, your *burma* still tastes amazing. You told me how you sourced wheat, pounded it yourself, and even cooked it over an open fire.

Nabiha: Yes! I wanted the original flavour, so I roasted the wheat over an open flame to get that smoky taste. Then it started raining, so I had to finish cooking indoors.

Sarah: Despite everything - new tools, new surroundings - you've stayed committed to making *burma* the traditional way. Why is that so important to you?

Nabiha: Because these traditions were passed down to us by our parents and grandparents. If we don't keep them alive, they'll vanish. It's not enough to remember them - we need to actually do them, so the next generation won't forget.

Sarah: When you were in Idlib, did you cook *burma* the same way you did in Palmyra?

Nabiha: Yes, exactly the same.

Sarah: How was moving to Idlib different from moving to Türkiye?

Nabiha: It really wasn't. I did the same things. I built a small *tannour* myself, using salt and red clay - Idlib's soil is all red. My husband and children were craving *burma*, and a friend of my husband's was visiting from Al-Qaryatayn [a village in Homs]. My husband wanted him to try *burma*, so I said, "*Alright, I'll build a tannour.*" It took two days to make and dry, and then I cooked *burma* the traditional way, just like at home. I also baked fresh bread in it.

We had an old saying: "*With bread in the house, no one sleeps hungry - whether it's family, neighbours, or a stranger at the door.*" No matter how many people there were, if we had bread, that was enough. My mother, when she baked in the *tannour*, would sing:

*"Oh, oil of Palmyra, oh, oil from the olive trees,
Oh, bread, toasted in the tannour,
Oh, tannour, burn brighter, burn strong,
I'll stoke your flames with the wood of olive trees."*

After singing, she'd take a fresh loaf, drizzle it with olive oil, sprinkle on some *za'atar*, and serve it with tea. That was our Friday custom - she'd bake enough for the entire week.

Sarah: In Idlib, you could rebuild the tools you needed, and the ingredients were still available. But in Türkiye, that wasn't the case. Is it the soil, the water, or something else?

Nabiha: It's because wheat doesn't grow the same everywhere. One seed will change depending on the climate, soil, air, and even the water.

Take *kamaa* [desert truffles]. It grows on its own, but its colour and flavour vary with the land. In Iraq, it's dark brown, nearly black. In Palmyra, it's light-coloured, almost white, which we call *sheikha*. The soil's minerals, salt levels, and climate all shape it. Even the air affects growth. Türkiye's climate isn't like Syria's. The blessings of home are unique.

Sarah: When you were in Idlib, did people there know about *burma*?

Nabiha: No, I introduced it to them. They used to cook wheat with yoghurt and meat, but I showed them the Palmyrene way. Now, at least five or six families in Idlib send me photos whenever they make it, saying, “*Look, we made Palmyrene burma today!*”

Sarah: What about here in Türkiye? Has anyone learned it?

Nabiha: Yes! A woman from Iskenderun once visited when I’d just made *burma*. She tasted it and asked to learn. The first time, it didn’t come out right, so the second time, I guided her step by step over a video call. My daughter translated because my Turkish isn’t strong. Eventually, she got it right, and now she makes it herself.

Sarah: It’s a beautiful example of sharing traditions - despite displacement, exile, losing your home, you’ve held on to part of your heritage. You said you lost everything - your house, your land, your belongings - and that you also lost two children, may they rest in peace. Through all this, what made you keep your traditions alive, especially through food?

Nabiha: My longing for home. And the decision to stay connected to it wherever I am. Traditions must never be broken. We were raised with them, and we have to pass them on. We grew up believing that a woman is the foundation of everything. She ploughs the land and plants the crops, and when it comes to cooking, she can make a meal out of nothing. Even if there’s nothing in the kitchen, she’ll go to the land and find something. That’s resilience. That’s holding onto home.

Sarah: Syria is moving toward rebuilding, and it needs its people. What are your hopes for your family and community as the country looks to the future?

Nabiha: My home was turned to rubble, and destruction is easy. Rebuilding is the real challenge. I don’t just mean putting bricks back - I mean restoring traditions, keeping families together, building a lasting future. A home isn’t just walls - it’s people, connections, a way of life.

I dream of neighbours returning to their old streets, families coming back together, weddings celebrated the traditional way, and communities supporting each other. I want life to feel like home again.

Sarah: You’re right - destruction is easy, rebuilding takes patience. You’re a wonderful example of resilience. When you came to Türkiye, you didn’t just rebuild your life, you

helped other women find their independence, too. You said that in Palmyra, women didn't often work outside the home, but here, you turned your love for Syrian cuisine into a way of earning a living, and you helped other women do the same.

Nabiha: When we arrived in Türkiye, women felt so vulnerable; it was a strange situation. Yet, despite our grief and hardships, we refused to rely on anyone. Instead, we found our own way. We started with nothing and built something. One of us cooks at home, another weaves, another makes handbags. Each woman found her talent and turned it into something tangible. We became like mountains - steady and unafraid of challenges. And when we go back to Syria, we'll take this strength with us. We know how to rebuild from nothing. No matter how much has been destroyed, we'll rebuild properly, from the ground up. And we won't be alone. So many women in Syria have gone through what we did. We'll share everything we learned here in Türkiye - how we started small and how we supported each other. We'll say, "*Come, start with us. Let's rebuild Syria together.*"

We arrived in Türkiye with nothing. It's true - we lost our homes, we fled, we lost our children. But we kept going. A woman might feel pain or fear, but she's like a mountain, strong and unshakable. I know women who've been through so much, whose husbands stay home without work while they go out to earn a living, and they don't complain. They don't want to depend on anyone. They want to build something for themselves, to say, "*I made this happen.*"

A woman is half of society, not just in what she knows, but in how she raises her family, stands by her husband, and guides her children along the right path.

Sarah: Exactly. Women are the foundation, builders, caretakers, the ones who hold everything together. About rebuilding, you said you want to go back to Syria to support and inspire other women there. But given how hard it is, how do you plan to do that?

Nabiha: Just like we did when we got to Türkiye. We started because we had no choice, but going back, we'll start because we want to build. We'll come together, just like before. Each woman will bring her ideas and skills, and step by step, we'll grow. Maybe I'll focus on cooking; someone else will sew, and someone else will do preserves. It doesn't matter. What matters is that we start small and keep at it, not letting obstacles stop us. If a woman believes in herself and looks forward rather than getting stuck on what's in her way, she'll succeed.

Sarah: What do you see for your cooking project when you return?

Nabiha: God willing, I want to open a *Bayt al-Mouneh* [house of preserved foods], just like we used to have. I've learned a lot about pickling here in Türkiye. I used to make pickles at home, but now I do it without artificial preservatives.

I've always made *dibs rumman* [pomegranate molasses], and I still make it here the traditional Palmyrene way, just like our ancestors did. I sell it at a good price, cheaper than the shops, and it's helped us get by. Thank goodness we can earn a living from it.

Sarah: What would you like to tell our listeners, especially women?

Nabiha: Don't fear the road ahead, no matter how hard it looks. Even if it's lined with thorns, eventually, it will clear, and flowers will grow in their place. Keep going. Don't be afraid.

If you carry fear, leave it behind. Let your strength and resilience guide you. Be proud of what you make, of your achievements. Do it with your own hands, through your own effort. I left my fears behind and built something out of nothing.

Sarah: Before we wrap up, could you share the poem you mentioned earlier? You said you wrote it about leaving your home—it was very moving, and I'd love our listeners to hear it.

Nabiha:

I came to ask you, oh home, about the light of my eyes.

Oh, home, tell me - where have they gone?

Oh, home, I call you - where are my loved ones?

I return with longing, aching from the years apart.

Oh, home, I have not seen them for so long - where have they gone?

By "*the light of my eyes*," I mean my children, my mother, my father - may they rest in peace - and also my neighbours, friends, everyone dear to me. I long to return home, hoping to find my loved ones just as I left them, kind and pure. God willing, we will return.

Sarah: God willing, may that be soon. Thank you so much, Nabiha. This has been a powerful and inspiring conversation; I'm sure our listeners will get so much out of it.

Nabiha: Thank you for having me. I'd also like to thank *From Heart to Hearth*. It's a wonderful programme, and I wish you all the best.

Sarah: That brings us to the end of today's episode. Thank you, Nabiha, and thank you to our dear listeners. Stay tuned for upcoming episodes - we'd love to hear from you. You can reach us through our website and social media. Feel free to share your thoughts and suggest topics you'd like us to cover in future episodes. Until next time!