



THE FLAVOURS OF HERITAGE AND THE BUILDING OF HOPE



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The Flavours of Homs' Heritage and the Resilience of Motherhood

Sarah: Hello, and welcome to another episode of *From Heart to Hearth*. I'm your host, Sarah Burhan. This episode is presented in partnership with the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye and the University of Sussex in the UK. Today, we explore ***The Flavours of Homs' Heritage and the Resilience of Motherhood***. Our guest today is Nariman Ahmed, originally from the *Khalidiya* neighbourhood in Homs, now living in Gaziantep since 2015.

Welcome, Nariman, and thank you for joining us. Could you tell us about yourself?

Nariman: My name is Nariman Ahmed, and I am from Homs. I'm a mother of four daughters and one son. I take immense pride in being from Homs al-Adiya - the resilient city, known for its steadfastness and pursuit of freedom. It's where I was raised, shaping me into who I am.

Sarah: Could you describe your memories of Homs?

Nariman: I remember family gatherings, the warmth of family and loved ones, and the home where I grew up and studied. Leaving home left a wound that never fully healed, but I still hope we'll return one day.

Sarah: What do you remember most about those family gatherings?

Nariman: We would all come together, sharing meals and special moments. Sadly, none of my family members are here with me - they're still in Syria, some in Damascus, others in Homs.

Sarah: Since you mentioned that food was central to these gatherings, could you tell me about the dishes Homs is known for?

Nariman: Homs has many popular dishes, especially its various forms of *kibbeh* - like *kibbeh labaniyyeh* [kibbeh cooked in yoghurt sauce] and *kibbeh b-hamod* [a tangy kibbeh dish made with pomegranate molasses]. We also have stuffed carrots, *shanklish* [aged, spiced cheese], and desserts such as *al-mughtuta* and *halawet al-jibn* [a semolina-and-cheese dessert filled with cream and drizzled with syrup]. *Halawet al-jibn* originated in Homs, though Hama later became well-known for it. There's also *al-khubziyeh*, a well-known dessert often coloured pink and white.

Sarah: Could you explain the different kinds of *kibbeh*?

Nariman: We have *kibbeh b-hamod*, *kibbeh labaniyyeh*, and *kibbeh al-mhabaleh*. All use *jreesh* [cracked wheat], but the preparation differs. *Kibbeh labaniyyeh* is cooked in yoghurt with a bit of rice added for texture. *Kibbeh b-hamod* is cooked in a broth of water, pomegranate molasses, and tomato paste. *Kibbeh al-mhabaleh* is boiled in water, drained and seasoned with salt and pepper before being topped with hot oil.

As for stuffed carrots, we hollow them out, soak them in hot water, then stuff and simmer them in *tahini*, a sauce made of water, pomegranate molasses, and plenty of coriander and garlic.

Halawet al-jibn is a sweet dish I still make. It takes time to prepare, but in Syria I made it weekly because we always had the ingredients on hand. The same goes for *kibbeh* and other desserts like *khubziyeh*. Another speciality is *al-mughtuta*, famous in Homs - especially at *Jaljabji* shops. You could buy it ready-made or prepare it at home. It's mostly made of milk: you boil the milk, pour it into trays, and leave it overnight so a thick layer of cream forms on top. Small *tannour* bread rounds are placed on it to absorb the cream before being flipped. We used to eat it early in the morning, sweetened with sugar - usually after *al-Fajr* prayer at around five o'clock - together with grandparents, uncles, and aunts who lived in the same area.

Sarah: Did you eat *al-mughtuta* every morning?

Nariman: No, we usually had it once a month or sometimes weekly, depending on our mood and the occasion.

Sarah: You also mentioned the red-and-white *halawe khubziyeh*.

Nariman: We often made it on Thursdays, which is why it's also called *Halawet al-Khameesiyyeh* [Thursday's dessert].

Sarah: What's special about Thursdays?

Nariman: In Homs, we have *Eid al-Arba'a* [Wednesday's festival], known as *Eid al-Hamasneh*. Wednesdays are a big tradition for people from Homs - we celebrate with *derbakeh* [goblet drum] music, singing, and dancing. The next day, we gather again and enjoy this dessert, which is why it became known as *Halawet al-Khamees* [Thursday's dessert].

Sarah: Are there any specific dishes associated with *Eid al-Hamasneh*?

Nariman: Not particularly, but it's a time of celebration with family. On Thursdays, we often prepare *Halawet al-Khamees*. If I visited my parents, for example, they would always serve it.

Sarah: You mentioned various types of *kibbeh* and stuffed carrots. On what occasions would you typically prepare them?

Nariman: We'd make them for guests or whenever we craved them. Sometimes, my sister would ask me to make them for her if she wasn't confident preparing them herself. Also, if my brother is in the mood for it, he asks us to make it, and we do. Since we usually had the ingredients stored at home, we could make them anytime.

Sarah: Did you grow most of your ingredients in Homs or buy them?

Nariman: Most of what we ate was grown by us. Homs is known for its wheat farming, so we'd get the wheat, boil it, grind it, and turn it into *jreesh* [cracked raw wheat], which is essential for making *kibbeh*, along with bulgur. We also raised our own livestock for meat, which we would freeze or store, and we kept various preserved foods stocked at home. We rarely needed to buy anything from the market because we always had *mouneh* [homemade preserved foods stored for out-of-season use].

Sarah: What other foods did you preserve?

Nariman: A wide variety, including *makdous* [olive-oil cured aubergines stuffed with walnuts, garlic, and peppers, eaten cold], olives, *shanklish*, *labneh* [strained yoghurt], *muhammara* [spicy red pepper and walnut dip], tomato paste, and jams from apricots, cherries, and strawberries.

Sarah: What is *shanklish*?

Nariman: It's made with *qareesheh* [curdled milk or soft cheese], which we strain thoroughly in a cloth to remove excess moisture, then mix with red pepper, coriander, and salt, kneading it well. We shape it into small balls and leave them out to dry for about fifteen to twenty days. Once they harden, we store them in jars to ferment. We usually eat *shanklish* during *al-asrouniyeh* [late afternoon], along with *makdous*, olives, *muhammara*, and tomatoes. It's a snack between lunch and dinner - since we have

breakfast very early and lunch around midday, *asrouniyeh* helps us manage until dinner.

Sarah: Is *shanklish* particularly associated with Homs?

Nariman: As far as I know, Homs is where it's best known.

Sarah: You used to prepare so many preserved foods at home. What happened during the siege and shelling? Were you still able to cook and make *mouneh*? What ingredients and tools did you have to work with?

Nariman: During the siege, cooking was almost impossible. We relied on the *mouneh* we had and used firewood to boil water or make tea. There was no electricity, no gas - nothing. Neighbours and relatives would gather in a single house, each bringing whatever they had, and we shared it among us. Sometimes, we had only water, which we collected from wells or rainfall.

Ramadan was especially hard. At *iftar*, we might have only olives, *makdous*, or yoghurt - maybe just a single date or only water. Even water wasn't always available - we had to collect rainwater or fetch it from the well. Airstrikes tended to target us at *iftar* time, so instead of sitting to eat, we rushed to assist the wounded and care for children, mothers, and neighbours. We had no medical supplies, so we used our own clothes as bandages. Eventually, in 2014, it all became too much to bear, and I had no option but to leave.

Sarah: How long did you live under those circumstances?

Nariman: Two years - first in Homs, then in Raqqa, where coalition forces carried out airstrikes. I spent a year there before moving to an opposition-held area, a town called Kelly in rural Idlib, where I stayed for three months. Life was extremely difficult - no water, no electricity, and everything was far too expensive. I had no income and a large family to support - my husband, four daughters, and a young son, with no financial help.

I had to borrow money to travel to Türkiye and attempted to cross the border about fifteen times. We were caught, detained overnight, and then sent back each time. We trekked through mountains and valleys while I looked after my husband, my six-year-old son, and my four daughters - two were young adults, and two were still children. There was gunfire. It was terrifying, but in the end, we made it.

We arrived in Reyhanlı and stayed with my brother for fifteen days. When we couldn't find work there, we moved to Gaziantep, where there were more job opportunities in the factories. For the first few days, we stayed with a friend. We had nothing - no money, no belongings. My husband was in his fifties, and no one would hire him, and my son was still too young to work. That left me with no choice but to send my four daughters to work in the factories so we could afford rent.

After about a week, they managed to earn 600 TRY - just enough to rent an unfurnished flat. The place was completely empty: no cleaning supplies, no curtains, no bedding. We had to sleep on folded clothes. My daughters kept working to support us. The youngest was only 13, the others were 14, 18, and 19. To this day, they are still working and helping me.

We're still in Türkiye, but our homes in Homs - especially in Khalidiya - are destroyed and rebuilding them is beyond our means. If we go back, we'll have to start over from nothing, just as we did here. We're caught between staying and returning, unsure of what to do. Even after all these years, we still face many difficulties. I haven't mastered Turkish, which makes things even harder.

Sarah: It's clear that you've faced overwhelming hardships, even life-threatening ones, and made countless sacrifices, yet you've held on to your dignity.

Nariman: Absolutely.

Sarah: Let's go back to the year you spent in Raqqa before moving to Idlib. How were you able to cook during that time?

Nariman: In Idlib, I could barely cook at all. Food was scarce and expensive. Some days, we had nothing but *za'atar* and olive oil; other days, we had nothing at all. Raqqa was a bit better. People were kind and let us stay rent-free, and we received some food aid. My daughters found work in clothing shops, which gave me the chance to cook a few traditional Homs dishes. I managed to get wheat, process it into *jreesh*, and make *kibbeh*, though I had to use chicken instead of red meat because it was more affordable.

Even here in Türkiye, I still sometimes make *kibbeh* with chicken. In the beginning, I had to juggle the costs of rent, water, electricity, and daily expenses. Things have improved a little, but life is still tough. My daughters continue to support me and my

husband; two of them are now married, and the other two are still working. My son is in school. Factory work is exhausting for my daughters; they leave at six or seven in the morning and don't return until twelve hours later, earning just enough to cover basic needs.

No matter how bad I feel, I never let it show. I stay warm and welcoming to those around me, and especially with my children, I always keep a smile and try to lift their spirits. They would sense if something was wrong, and I don't want them to carry that worry.

Sarah: It's clear that many Syrian women, especially in your neighbourhood, see you as a mother figure - someone who supports others despite your own struggles. Where do you find that strength?

Nariman: My daughters are what keeps me going. I want to provide for them and make sure they have everything they need. I wake up at dawn to prepare their meals since they can't buy food at the factory. I pack their breakfast and lunch, fill their water bottles, and send them off. After that, I take care of the house, go shopping, and cook their favourite meals. Some days, I don't finish until eight at night, but I'm grateful.

Sarah: They truly are your inspiration.

Nariman: Exactly. They've been my greatest support ever since we left Homs.

Sarah: May they be blessed for it. Factory work is certainly tough.

Nariman: It is.

Sarah: Have they learned how to cook Homs-style dishes?

Nariman: They don't. They were quite young when we fled, and their fear prevented them from learning. They also have no time now - when they return from work, they're exhausted. They only get one day off a week for errands or rest. So, I handle the cooking.

Sarah: Now that Syria is free, what do you hope for your family and community in free Syria?

Nariman: I hope we can return to our hometown; and I hope all Syrians can return to their homes, rebuild their lives together, and stand united like one big family.

Sarah: While living in Türkiye, have you picked up any Turkish dishes since arriving here?

Nariman: A little, but I don't usually cook Turkish meals. My children aren't fond of dishes with a lot of aubergines, tomatoes, or strong spices, and they don't like Turkish-style stuffed vegetables. However, they enjoy *şiş kebab* [grilled marinated skewers]; this region of Türkiye is famous for its grills. They also like *çiğ köfte* [spiced bulgur balls], which is very popular in Türkiye.

Still, they mostly prefer the flavours of Homs - *kibbeh*, *shishbarak* [small dumplings filled with spiced meat, cooked in a tangy yoghurt sauce], and other familiar dishes. Homs has a wide variety of food because it sits at the heart of Syria, bringing together flavours from Damascus, Hama, Deir ez-Zor, and other governorates.

Sarah: So, Homs truly is central - both geographically and culturally. It's the heart of Syria.

Nariman: Absolutely. Homs is also reputed for the beauty of its women! There's a saying: "*Homs is famous for its beautiful daughters, while Damascus is renowned for its delicious food*".

Sarah: Indeed! Nariman, what message would you like to share with our audience, particularly women?

Nariman: Mothers have an incredible ability to adapt and find solutions, no matter how tough life becomes. Never let hardships take away your smile - hold your head high and keep going.

Sarah: You are a true symbol of resilience - not just as a mother to your own children, but to other Syrian women around you. Thank you for sharing your story and giving us a glimpse into Homs' rich culinary traditions. You've inspired us all, especially mothers, who carry immense responsibilities and find strength in their children. Thank you for joining us for this episode.

And to our listeners, thank you for being with us. We'll be back with more episodes soon, and we'd love to hear from you. Visit our website and social media to share your thoughts and let us know which topics you'd like us to explore in future episodes. Until next time, stay well!