



THE RICHNESS OF HAMAS' TABLE AND THE LONGING FOR IDENTITY



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Sarah: Peace be upon you all, dear listeners. I hope your day is filled with goodness. Welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth*, brought to you by your host, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye, in collaboration with the University of Sussex in the UK. The title of today's episode is ***The Richness of Hama's Table and the Longing for Identity***. Our guest today is Noor Abdulrazzaq from Hama, currently living in Gaziantep. Noor, welcome to *From Heart to Hearth*!

Noor: Thank you, Sarah! It's a pleasure to be here.

Sarah: Let's start by getting to know you. Could you please tell us a bit about yourself?

Noor: My name is Noor. I'm originally from Hama, but after the war in February 1982, my grandfather moved to Homs, and that's where the family settled. But no matter where we lived, our roots were always in Hama.

Sarah: What are some of your fondest memories of Hama?

Noor: Hama is a beautiful city, full of warm-hearted people. My memories are tied to its streets, the *nawaeer* [traditional wooden water wheels], the Orontes River, my grandparents, and my relatives.

Anyone who visits Hama never forgets it. There's even a saying that people who were stationed there for work often missed it when they returned home. The kindness of Hama's people, the generosity of its land, the mild climate, and the city's natural abundance make it truly special. Hama is at the heart of Syria; once you know it, it's hard to leave.

Sarah: That's so true! Hama is known as the city of *nawaeer*, and of course, it's famous for *halawet el-jibn*, right?

Noor: *Halawet el-jibn*? Absolutely! There's always been a friendly rivalry between Homs and Hama over where it came from, but let's settle this once and for all - Hama is the birthplace of *halawet el-jibn*! [laughs] If you look it up online, just do a Google search, you'll see that its origins trace back to Hama. The people of Homs just borrowed it from us.

Sarah: Since you grew up in Homs, does this *halawet el-jibn* debate come up often?

Noor: Oh, all the time! It is a serious debate and often turns into a tense discussion. But we don't push it too much - out of respect for our hosts in Homs. Still, facts are facts - *halawet el-jibn* is originally from Hama!

Sarah: Besides *halawet el-jibn*, what else makes Hamawi cuisine unique?

Noor: First and foremost, the people of Hama are passionate about food. And I don't just mean they enjoy it - it's almost an obsession! For many, food is more important than furniture or anything else.

Hama's cuisine is known for its richness and indulgence. The city is full of butchers - you'll find them on every street! And Hamawis have a very particular food. One of the well-known stories about Hamwis is that a Damascene butcher was once asked if he could tell where his customers were from. He replied, "*One thing's for sure - I'd never mistake a Hamwi! They always stand there watching closely as I prepare their meat.*" Hamwis love their meat so much that they insist on seeing it freshly cut before they buy it!

Sarah: What are some signature dishes from Hama?

Noor: We've already mentioned *halawet el-jibn*. What makes Hama's version stand out is the high-quality *qeshta* [thick clotted cream], the delicate dough, and the generous layer of crushed pistachios on top.

In addition to sweets, Hama is home to many unique dishes. There's *waraq enab* [stuffed vine leaves] and *sakhtoura* [also called *karsha*, stuffed tripe]. But the most iconic dish of all is *batersh*. *Batersh* is similar to *muttabal* [aubergine-based dip] found in other Syrian cities, but Hama's version has its own special twist. It's these extra touches that set it apart.

Sarah: What are the ingredients of *batersh*?

Noor: *Batersh* is made with grilled aubergine, tahini, yoghurt, garlic, salt, lemon juice, and a sprinkle of red pepper. These ingredients are common across Syria - it's essentially *muttabal*. But what makes our version unique is the topping: a generous portion of finely minced meat cooked in a rich tomato sauce, layered on top, then finished with a sprinkle of nuts and, optionally, a touch of parsley. Some people even

garnish it with a few pomegranate arils. That's what makes it different. You see how even in a simple dish like *muttabal*, we've added meat, richness, and nuts!

Sarah: Is there another dish you love and consider a signature of Hama?

Noor: I love *waraq enab* [stuffed vine leaves]. In Hama, it's incredibly rich and indulgent. *Sakhtoura* is another well-known dish in Hama.

Sarah: What makes Hamawi *waraq enab* different from other regions? And what exactly is *sakhtoura*?

Noor: *Waraq enab* is a very rich dish for us. We add minced meat to the stuffing and we also place meat at the bottom of the pot before layering the vine leaves on top. As for *sakhtoura*, it's also called *karsha* [stuffed tripe]. It's a dish packed with flavour. I really hope you visit Hama one day and try these dishes!

Sarah: When your mother used to cook, and later, when you started cooking, how did you merge Hamawi and Homs cuisines?

Noor: I took elements from both. I learned different techniques from each side. Take *molokhia* [jute leaves stew]. In Hama, we fry it all at once, but my mother-in-law from Homs used to fry it gradually, in small batches. I tried her method and found that it gave a much better texture. At the same time, I kept the Hamawi touch by adding extra richness. So, in the end, it became a fusion of both styles. And that's just one example!

Sarah: When did you leave Syria?

Noor: In 2016, during Ramadan. We left and arrived in Türkiye, reaching Reyhanlı first.

Sarah: Did you leave straight from Homs to Türkiye?

Noor: No, it was a long displacement journey. We first went to Raqqa, then to Idlib, where we stayed for a while, trying to figure things out. Eventually, we managed to reach Reyhanlı. From there, we moved to Urfa, where I lived for almost a year before settling in Gaziantep.

Sarah: How long did it take from the time you left Homs until you arrived in Türkiye?

Noor: It took months - about six months to get from Homs to Türkiye. Or maybe even longer, because we spent some time in Raqqa. In total, it was around eight or nine months.

Sarah: During that time, how did you manage to cook? How did your circumstances affect your cooking?

Noor: At first, there was no stability, so I just worked with whatever was available. But once we started settling in Raqqa, we began purchasing the ingredients and cooking more regularly. Eventually, we even started getting invited over for meals. My husband had friends in Raqqa, so we would visit them, and over time, we adapted. In the beginning, I didn't know my way around the markets, so my husband would bring home the vegetables. I had to make do with whatever we had. Sometimes, I had to substitute ingredients. For example, when making *batersh*, there were times when I couldn't find meat, so I used ground chicken instead. Even if I only had a small amount of nuts, I made sure to include them, because for me, keeping the essence of the dish was what mattered most.

Sarah: So even while displaced, you made sure to preserve Hamawi food traditions?

Noor: Of course! It's in our blood. No matter where we go or how much we adapt, we never forget where we come from.

When we moved to Türkiye, we had to adjust to so many things - like working until 7 PM, whereas in Syria, we'd finish by 3 PM. We also had to get used to how Turks live-going to bed early, keeping the house quiet in the evenings. You learn to adapt in many ways, but you never let go of your heritage. You never forget what's inside you - your love for your country, your land. You don't forget the *nawaeer* [traditional wooden water wheels]. But how do I introduce my children to the *nawaeer* when we're in Türkiye or when we were in Raqqa? Through food. I cook them the same dishes we grew up with, even if I have to tweak the ingredients depending on what's available. I tell them, "*These are the meals we had at celebrations, at family gatherings, with friends.*" I explain how we used to live, and I tell them, "*This is our culture, our identity - this is who we were in our homeland.*"

Sarah: Did *batersh* still taste the same when you moved from Homs to Raqqa and Idlib? And did the flavour change when you arrived in Türkiye?

Noor: There's something important to understand - food isn't just about ingredients. The people around you affect how a dish tastes. When certain people are no longer there, it leaves a gap, and even the experience of eating changes. Even if the ingredients are exactly the same - the same vegetables, the same meat - the taste is never quite the same when you're not surrounded by loved ones. When family gathers around the table - grandparents, parents, siblings - the meal becomes more than just food.

When we were in Raqqa, we still had some family members around us. I can't say *batersh* tasted different - it was the same dish - but what we lost was that feeling of family gathering. Then, when we moved to Türkiye, even the taste of fruit and vegetables changed. Hama has fertile land, a mild climate, and an abundance of water. All of these things affect the flavour of the produce. But in Türkiye, maybe the soil is different, maybe there isn't as much water - I don't know. But the taste of fruit and vegetables here is just not the same as in Syria.

And as I said, the gatherings changed too. Not everyone left Syria. I left, my parents left, but not all my siblings. My grandparents never left. That changes how food feels - you're eating the same dish, but something is still missing.

Sarah: In Syria, was cooking always a communal activity, with the whole family taking part?

Noor: Yes, absolutely. My mother learned from my grandmother, and I learned from my mother. I still remember the first time I made *batersh* - I added too much tahini! We all learned from one another - not just me, but my siblings too.

My mother used to say, *"Maybe you won't always be in Hama - what if you go to study somewhere else. You still need to know how to mix a salad"*. My grandmother would laugh and say, *"Just set the plates on the table!"* And my mother would remind us, *"You're all together now, but one day you'll grow up, and just being in the same place won't be so easy. So enjoy this time - don't take it for granted."*

And she was right - after the war, we were scattered. Some ended up in Europe, others in Türkiye, some in the Gulf. Everyone was displaced. But back then, she always told us, *"You're together now, and no one knows what the future holds"*. So we all took part

- my brothers too! The kitchen was always full of laughter and jokes. Those moments were so special. Now, they're gone, and we miss them terribly.

Sarah: What's lovely is that these traditions weren't just passed down through the women in the family but also through the men.

Noor: Yes, even the men!

Sarah: So your brothers know how to cook?

Noor: Oh yes, they love it! Sometimes, they even outshine me. In our family, especially among the men, cooking is a passion. I remember when we hosted a gathering for my in-laws. It's a tradition - when I got engaged, my family was invited to my in-laws' home, and then in turn we invited them to ours. And when it was our turn to host them, my uncle was the one who did all the cooking!

Sarah: Earlier, you mentioned grilling aubergines for *batersh*. How did you do that before the war?

Noor: Before the war, we would grill aubergines at home over the gas stove or roast them in the oven. If we were making a mixed grill, we'd place them over charcoal, which gave them an incredible smoky flavour.

Now, here in Türkiye, we place the aubergines in a large tray with tomatoes and peppers and send them to the bakery ovens. When they come back, they have that deep, smoky flavour from the wood-fired oven. It's a nice touch!

Sarah: What changes have you made to *batersh* in Türkiye? Or even to other Hamawi dishes since moving here?

Noor: These changes have actually been positive, and made it evident that we are adaptable. Like I mentioned earlier, roasting aubergines in a bakery oven gives them a wonderful smoky taste. Another example is *shakriyeh* [a yoghurt-based stew] - if we don't have beef or lamb, we use ground chicken instead.

Syrian women are among the strongest in the world. Honestly, I believe that if anyone else had been through what we've endured, they might have fallen into deep depression or worse. We've lived through war, bombings, destruction - so much loss, so much pain. But through our faith in God, we've found strength. Even in the smallest details of life, like cooking, we've learned to adapt. No meat for *batersh*? No problem

- we use ground chicken. We find a way. There are other adaptations too. Take *kibbeh nayyeh* [raw kibbeh]. In Idlib, they traditionally pound it with a mortar and pestle. In Hama, we prepare it using a meat grinder. Meanwhile, in Türkiye, they knead it by hand. And honestly, the Turkish way is incredibly tasty! Turks make amazing *köfte*. And if I go back to Syria, I might even prepare it the Turkish way and tell everyone, “*I learned this in Türkiye!*” because, honestly, it’s delicious.

Sarah: You’ve touched on two very important points - first, that Syrian women are incredibly strong. What helped you get through all the hardships you faced? You must not have imagined, when you left Syria and were displaced from your home, that it would last this long - almost ten years.

Noor: At first, my husband didn’t work for an entire year because we truly believed we’d be back in Homs within weeks. We became like the Palestinians - holding onto our house keys, telling ourselves, “*Just one more month and we’ll go back. Maybe two months and we’ll return.*” But the months passed, then a year, and we kept repeating, “*We’re going back, we’re going back,*” yet we never did. That’s when reality sank in— there was no going back, at least not anytime soon. Hope never dies, and our faith is always in God. But we had to adapt. Whether it would take a year, two, or three, we couldn’t just wait. My husband started looking for work, and we had to start thinking about the future - not just for ourselves, but for our children. My husband and I had already completed our education, but our children needed to go to school, to settle into a new life. Our goal became clear: to build a future, whether in Syria or elsewhere. If Syria is liberated, we’ll return. But if not, and if this displacement lasts longer, we must stand firm and create a future for ourselves and our children, wherever we are.

Sarah: Do you teach your children how to cook?

Noor: I don’t just teach them how to cook - I teach them not to forget. Not to forget their past, their family’s past, their grandparents’ past. Our past is our heritage, and heritage isn’t just one thing. There’s food heritage, cultural heritage, and social heritage - our customs, our traditions, our way of life.

One of the ways we keep that alive is through food. I involve my children by saying, “*Come, let’s make this together,*” or “*Let’s prepare that.*” I bring them into the kitchen and teach them, even if it’s just the basics. Step by step, they learn.

People learn from their families. At first, their cooking might not turn out right - maybe they'll add too much of one ingredient or not enough of another. But that's how we all learn. And as they do, they begin to understand: "*This is what we do - we are from Hama. This is our heritage. We have the nawaeer we have the Orontes River, and we have these dishes*".

Sarah: So there's been cultural exchange between the different Syrian governorates? Or also with Türkiye?

Noor: With both. There's been a real exchange - we've taken elements from Turkish cuisine and blended them into our own dishes.

Sarah: It's amazing how this exchange has happened—not just within Syria, between different regions, but also with Türkiye. Here, many of the Turkish women I've met share food through the *Sikba* culture [the tradition of sharing home-cooked food with neighbours] and through social gatherings, where everyone brings a dish. What about *mouneh*? Syrian women are famous for their *mouneh* [the tradition of preserving food for out-of-season use].

Noor: That's true.

Sarah: How did you manage with *mouneh*? How was it prepared in Syria, and what changed when you moved to Türkiye?

Noor: *Mouneh* is essential - it's not just a Hamawi tradition, it's a staple in every Syrian home. Whether it's olives - green, black, and all their varieties or *makdous* [stuffed and preserved aubergines], *molokhia* [dried jute leaves used in a stew], dried aubergines, peppers, and so on. When we first arrived in Türkiye, we bought eggs, yoghurt - things that were available in grocery stores. We bought cheese. But after a few days, a few weeks, a few months, we started craving *makdous* and olives. We asked around for Syrian stores that sold *mouneh*, searching until we finally found them. At first, we bought everything we needed, convinced we wouldn't be here long - that we'd be going back soon and wouldn't have to make our own.

But as time went on, it became clear that returning wasn't happening anytime soon. After that first year, everything shifted - we started feeling less like visitors and more like we were settling in. That's when I knew I had to start preparing *mouneh* at home

again. *Mouneh* isn't just a tradition - it's a necessity in every home. You simply can't do without it.

Sarah: So now, do you make your own *mouneh*?

Noor: Yes, we do.

Sarah: Now that Syria has been liberated, going back is finally an option. There's no longer that same fear or uncertainty.

Noor: That's true.

Sarah: What are your hopes for your family and community now that returning home is a possibility?

Noor: I hope everyone will return, and that we'll once again see happiness on people's faces. But more than that, I hope we take the lessons of these years to heart. Food heritage is more than just taste or tradition - it's identity, it's connection. It ties us to our past and to each other. It was part of Syria's fabric, and in the end, it was the one thing we could take with us. You can't pack a *noria* in your suitcase, nor a market, nor a street. But you carry that heritage within you, in your heart and memory, and you pass it on. Beyond that, food became a means of survival. In the beginning, when husbands and men struggled to find work, the women came together - we cooked, we shared, and we sold our dishes. Food is something that never loses its value - it's always needed, and we saw many success stories come from it.

Sarah: Do you want to start a cooking business?

Noor: Yes. I don't know what the future holds, but I do know one thing - there will definitely be food! Not just Syrian dishes, but Turkish ones too. It will be a fusion of everything I've learned throughout my journey of displacement - from Hama to Homs, Raqqa, Idlib, and Türkiye. There will be many dishes, with new additions and variations. I truly hope to start a cooking project.

Sarah: You are a woman who has faced so many challenges, yet through it all, you've held onto hope. You've passed it on to your family, to your children. You've preserved your food and cultural heritage. And you've taught them something even greater - to always find a way, to work with whatever is available.

Because making something out of little is always better than doing nothing at all.

As we come to the end of this episode, what message would you like to share with our listeners, especially with women?

Noor: First, I want to thank everyone who has listened today. My message is simple: Syrian women are incredibly strong. I encourage all women to hold on to their ability to bring joy to their families, even in the smallest ways. There were times when I carried a storm of struggles inside me - but why should my children have to carry that burden too? We were forced to leave our country, we were displaced, but I never wanted to make things harder for them. No matter what we've been through, we must be the ones who bring smiles to the faces of our children, our families, and our husbands. We must stay strong.

And we must hold on to our heritage - our traditions, our food, our way of life. Gathering around the table, cooking together, sharing meals as a family - it's more than just food. It's identity. I remember those moments with my grandmother and mother, and I try to pass them on to my children.

I was the only girl among four brothers, and when they joined me in the kitchen, the house would be filled with laughter. Everyone had a role - one stirring a pot, another cracking jokes. That warmth, that sense of togetherness, makes life easier. It lightens the weight of our burdens. Life doesn't always give us what we hope for, but that doesn't mean we stop being the source of strength and hope for those around us.

And I truly want to thank you for this podcast. When I first heard about it, I was so happy. People always ask me about my life here in Türkiye - how I adapted, whether I've learned the language, if I have a job. But no one ever asks me how I lived in Syria, what heritage I carried with me, what it means to be from Hama, what traditions define us. This is the first time, since leaving in 2016, that someone has asked me about my past, and that means so much. Sharing my story today gave me a deep sense of pride and joy.

Sarah: Thank you, Noor. Your words have been deeply moving, and thank you for taking us on a journey through Hamawi food culture and traditions. Personally, I've learned so much today! Thank you for clarifying that *halawet el-jibn* is indeed from Hama. But most of all, thank you for being a true embodiment of strength - a woman who spreads hope wherever she goes.

And with that, we bring this episode to a close. A huge thank you to our guest, Noor Abdulrazzaq, and to you, dear listeners - thank you for tuning in. We'd love to hear from you! You can connect with us through our website and social media platforms. Share your thoughts, send us your messages, and let us know what topics you'd like us to explore in future episodes.