



DAMASCENE FLAVOURS: BETWEEN TRADITION AND ADAPTATION



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Damascene Flavours: Between Authenticity and Adaptation

Sarah: Hello and welcome, dear listeners, to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth*. I'm 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. Our theme today is *Damascene Flavours: Between Authenticity and Adaptation*, and I'm joined by Razan Ahmed, who is originally from Damascus and has been living in Gaziantep since 2014.

Welcome, Razan! Could you introduce yourself to our listeners?

Razan: My name is Razan, and I'm from Damascus - right from the heart of the Old City. I studied commerce and economics, specialising in accounting, and worked in the field for thirteen years.

Sarah: What are your fondest memories of Damascus?

Razan: Damascus is a city like no other - the old houses, the narrow winding streets, the cool, fresh water feeding it, and the scent of jasmine in the air. But more than anything, it's the people - their warmth, their kindness - that stays with you.

Sarah: What makes Damascene cuisine so special?

Razan: So many of our dishes are deeply rooted in tradition. Cooking isn't just about eating - it's about family. Uncles, aunts, grandparents, everyone coming together, especially during feasts, celebrations, and Ramadan. These gatherings often take place in the courtyard, with the fountain at the centre, shaded by *Nanarj* [bitter orange] trees. That courtyard, with its trees and fountain, holds generations of memories.

Sarah: Could you tell us more about the food culture in Damascus? What's a particularly famous dish?

Razan: One of the best-known dishes, popular across Syria, is *yabraq*. Originally of Turkish origin, it spread across Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan during the Ottoman period. It's a staple for special occasions, always served at celebrations. *Yabraq* is made with vine leaves stuffed with a mixture of rice, spices, minced meat, and a bit of fat, then flavoured with lemon and garlic. It's all slow cooked with pieces of meat still on the bone for extra depth of flavour. Then there's *yalangi*, which is the

vegetarian version - made with olive oil, vegetables, pomegranate molasses, and lemon.

Sarah: When is *yabraq* typically served?

Razan: Always! It's a must at family gatherings, feasts, and especially during Ramadan.

Sarah: Has the way it's made changed over time?

Razan: Not much, no. The ingredients and the method are still the same. But as life has become more expensive, some adjustments have had to be made. While some still prepare it the traditional way, others adapt - using chicken breasts instead of lamb still on the bone, or using less meat in the filling.

Sarah: What challenges did you face cooking during the war, the siege, and the shortages? How did you adapt?

Razan: Life in Damascus was hard - both financially and emotionally. But to be honest, I wasn't cooking much then because I was working full-time. The real challenge came later when I moved to Gaziantep and started my own food business. At first, I wasn't sure what to do. Then, one evening, we had a couple of friends over for dinner. They loved the food so much that they created a Facebook group for me and shared it in other online groups. Word spread, little by little, and I built a customer base. Eventually, I was able to set up my own kitchen business.

Sarah: Did you learn to cook in Damascus, or was it after you moved to Gaziantep?

Razan: In Damascus, I barely had time to cook at all, so I never really learned. But here, I suddenly found myself with plenty of free time, so I started experimenting, practising, and refining my skills. Over time, I became quite well known - sometimes, I still can't believe it myself! The kitchen business is built on dedication and quality, and that's how it earned its strong reputation, even among Turkish customers, who love our food, especially *kibbeh* and *yalangi*. The business took off, and now it's thriving.

Sarah: What's the name of your business?

Razan: *Almatbakh Alshami* [The Damascene Cuisine].

Sarah: That's a beautiful name! What inspired it?

Razan: I wanted it to reflect my homeland, *Alsham* [Damascus, as commonly referred to by locals, often with deep affection and pride], and to bring our culinary traditions here to Gaziantep. It's been well received, and interestingly, most of my customers aren't actually from Damascus - they come from all over Syria: Homs, Idlib, Aleppo, and beyond. Sometimes, I prepare dishes in their regional styles; other times, I make them my way. Either way, customers have always been appreciative and satisfied.

Sarah: Did you offer anything beyond cooked meals? For example, *mouneh* [preserved foods]?

Razan: Oh, many things - not just cooked dishes. Alongside the meals, I also prepared seasonal preserves upon request, especially in the summer. Customers tend to travel more during that time, so demand for cooked dishes is lower. Instead, I'd focus on making tomato paste, pickled vegetables, jams, pomegranate molasses, red pepper paste, and *labneh mda'baleh* [strained, thickened yoghurt hand-rolled into small balls and preserved in jars soaked in olive oil]. In the winter, I concentrated more on meal orders, catering to individuals, NGOs, and various customers, usually delivering around midday. Our reputation grew quickly, and demand for our food increased significantly.

At first, it felt like stepping into the unknown. But as more people joined our online community, we started building a solid name for ourselves. I rarely had time to post updates on social media, mainly because I was working alone - I had no team, just my husband by my side. He supported me throughout, helping to source ingredients and packaging, accompanying me to different markets to find the best materials, as each dish requires a different presentation.

Sarah: What were your most popular dishes? And which ones were most in demand?

Razan: We offered a variety of dishes that were always available, such as *kibbeh* and *yalanji*. Each day, I would cook a main dish alongside appetisers. I also prepared frozen items in advance, like *shishbarak* [dumplings filled with minced meat and cooked in a yoghurt sauce], *sambousek* [small savoury pastries, typically filled with cheese or minced meat], and different types of *kibbeh*, all ready to be cooked upon request.

Every morning at 9 AM, I would post the day's menu in the business WhatsApp group so customers could place their orders. The working day ended at 5 PM, which was also the order deadline.

Sarah: You mentioned that your customers came from all across Syria. Did you always cook in the Damascene style, or did you adapt to different regional preferences?

Razan: The core ingredients are quite similar across Syrian regions, but each has its own variations. When I cooked dishes the Damascene way, I encouraged my customers to try them, and they often loved them. I was especially pleased when my Aleppine customers enjoyed my food, particularly the pastries, *yalangi*, and *kibbeh*.

Sarah: What are the key differences between Damascene and Aleppine cuisine?

Razan: Many dishes differ in preparation methods and specific ingredients. While we use the same basic components, the seasoning varies. In Aleppo, for example, they mix tomato paste into the stuffing along with rice, meat, salt, and pepper. In Damascus, however, we use cumin and safflower in the filling and only add tomato paste to the sauce when cooking *mhshi*. Aleppine food is delicious - I've tried dishes I really liked, while others weren't quite to my taste.

Sarah: You mentioned that you didn't cook much when you were in Damascus. So how did you learn?

Razan: I taught myself. I believe that good food comes from the care and love put into it, as well as the quality of the ingredients. My kitchen was small, with only basic equipment, but I enjoyed cooking. I've always believed that work is essential in life, and I'm grateful that I've been able to work both in Damascus and here in Gaziantep.

Sarah: When you arrived in Gaziantep, did you struggle to find the ingredients you needed compared to what was available in Damascus?

Razan: At first, yes. I couldn't find essentials like broad beans, coriander, dried beans, or the small *bamya* [okra] we use in our dishes. I would ask friends coming from Damascus to bring some for me. But over time, things changed - Syrian farmers began growing these ingredients here, and now everything is available. Even fresh coriander and the small aubergines we use for stuffing are now cultivated locally with high-quality varieties. The taste is slightly different from what we had in Syria, which is only natural

- the flavour depends on the water, soil, and climate. But what matters is that we now have access to everything we need.

Sarah: How did you adapt your cooking methods to your new environment, considering both ingredient availability and kitchen equipment?

Razan: It was challenging at first, like any new venture, especially since I had no financial support to get started. My priority was to secure ingredients, particularly meat; later, I started considering different packaging options. Over time, I was able to stock up gradually and overcome these challenges. At first, I had to buy things gradually—one week, I'd buy meat; the next, I'd get packaging materials, and so on.

Another challenge was that ingredients were scattered across different markets, so I had to go to several places to find everything I needed. Preparing preserves was incredibly demanding, as it required large quantities of produce. I would visit the bazaars or farmers' markets to select the best-quality ingredients, bring them home, and start the preservation process.

Sarah: What kept you going despite the difficulties? What motivated you to push forward and bring your ideas to life?

Razan: My love for what I do was my biggest motivation, along with the necessity of earning a living. Supporting a small family here isn't easy; consistent work is essential for survival.

Sarah: You mentioned you have two daughters. Do they enjoy Syrian food, especially Damascene dishes? What are their favourites?

Razan: They absolutely love Syrian food - it's what they've grown up with. We rarely order takeaway because I cook everything at home. I prepare grilled and fried dishes, stews, and all sorts of meals for them, and I've made sure they know how to cook as well.

My daughter, who has now moved out to study dentistry, helped me during the COVID-19 lockdown. She spent most of her time with me in the kitchen, learning and helping out. Despite the restrictions, people preferred to buy home-cooked meals from women they trusted for cleanliness rather than ordering from restaurants. So, even in those

difficult times, we found ways to keep going, adjusting to curfews and limited shopping hours.

Sarah: What are your daughters' favourite Damascene dishes?

Razan: They love everything—*yabraq*, *mahshi*, *sujuk*, and *kibbeh*, as well as many meat and vegetable dishes.

Sarah: You've mentioned that Damascene cuisine is deeply traditional and shaped by Ottoman influences. Can you tell us about some of the most famous Damascene dishes and desserts and the occasions they're typically served for?

Razan: Our food is rich, full of flavour, and closely tied to tradition. One of the most well-known dishes is *ouzi*, a meal made with rice cooked with peas, meat, and nuts like pine nuts and almonds, all sautéed in *ghee*. The rice is then wrapped in *yufka* pastry and baked until golden and crisp. It's often served at both weddings and funerals. Then there are many types of *kibbeh* and *mahshi* [stuffed vegetables], which are staples not only in Damascene cuisine but also in Aleppine cuisine.

As for desserts, Syria is famous for *namoura*, a semolina cake soaked in syrup, sometimes filled with *eshta* [clotted cream]. Damascus is also known for different types of *kunefe*, such as *kunefe bil eshta* [kunefe filled with clotted cream] and *nabilskiye* [a variation of kunefe made with Akkawi cheese and topped with syrup-soaked semolina].

Sarah: Do you also prepare desserts for your business?

Razan: Not regularly - there simply isn't enough time, as I do everything myself. However, during Ramadan, I make *ma'arouk*, a sweet bread filled with dates, coconut, raisins, or *eshta*, which I sell alongside our usual *iftar* meals.

The part of my work that keeps me busiest during Ramadan is preparing *iftar sa'im* [the iftar meal of a fasting person], meals for those in-need breaking their fast. Charitable donors, individuals or foundations place large orders; on some days, I had to prepare over 50 meals before sunset, all ready for collection and distribution at the same time, either at mosques or directly to households. It's exhausting; I often run on very little sleep to get everything done- but it's also the most rewarding part of Ramadan for me.

Sarah: What do these *iftar* meals typically include?

Razan: A main dish, along with tamarind juice or *ayran* [a yoghurt-based drink], a few dates, and, when I prepare dessert, I include that as well. I make simple treats like an éclair or *ma'arouk*, adding them to the meals as a small gift for those fasting.

Sarah: It's remarkable how, despite all the challenges, you not only learned to cook but also taught your daughter and turned your knowledge of Damascene cuisine into a successful business. Now that Syria is beginning to rebuild, what are your hopes for your family and community in the future?

Razan: I hope to return home and rebuild myself there. Rebuilding will mean starting from scratch, but it's a dream I hold onto. I'd love to open a larger business or work from home alongside a group of women, developing our skills and creating something that benefits both us and our community. Be it preserved foods - vegetables, *molokhia*, *bamya*, or dried goods - or freshly prepared meals, we'll find a way.

Many Syrians in Gaziantep will likely return as well. Work has become scarce here over the past year due to rising costs and inflation - people are struggling.

Sarah: Based on your experience here, what would you take with you into a future culinary venture in Damascus?

Razan: I've learned so much here, especially how to work with different people and adapt to various expectations. I hope to expand my kitchen in Damascus - to take what started as a small venture in my tiny kitchen and turn it into something bigger, bringing other women in to join me. I'd love to work with women who want to build something of their own, develop their skills, and establish themselves within the community. I hope the business in Syria gains the same strong reputation it did here.

Sarah: I'm sure you'll make it happen - you have the creativity and resilience to adapt to any situation.

Razan: I hope so. But there's always the fear of the unknown, and the situation in Syria remains incredibly difficult.

Sarah: Do you have an idea of how people there are managing, especially with shortages of essential supplies? How are they coping with food preparation?

Razan: It's extremely tough. I keep in touch with people back home, and they tell me about their struggles. Some can only afford to cook a proper meal once a week - if at

all. Many rely on bread with simple cold dishes. Cooked meals are no longer a daily routine; for some families, cooking happens just once a week and is limited to very basic dishes like *mujaddara* [lentils with bulgur] or rice with peas, often without meat or chicken. People simply can't afford ingredients the way they used to. Even when some essentials are available at a reasonable price, they don't always have the money to buy them.

Heating and electricity are nearly non-existent - electricity in central Damascus, for example, might only be available for an hour a day.

Sarah: What message would you like to share with listeners, especially women?

Razan: Keep going, no matter how hard things get. Nothing is impossible. If you work hard and stay determined, you will succeed. That's what I always tell everyone I meet. Those who approach their work with sincerity and dedication will find a way forward. Perseverance is everything.

Sarah: Absolutely - perseverance is key. Thank you so much for joining us today.

As we wrap up this episode, I'd like to thank my guest, Razan, for sharing her experiences, insights, and advice with us. And, of course, thank you to our dear listeners for tuning in.

Join us again for future episodes, and feel free to connect with us through our website and social media. We'd love to hear your thoughts and suggestions on topics you'd like us to cover in upcoming episodes.