



TURKMEN HERITAGE AND TALES OF RESPONSIBILITY



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Sarah: Hello and welcome to another episode of *From Heart to Hearth*, brought to you by Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is presented by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye, in collaboration with the University of Sussex in Britain. Our theme today is ***Turkmen Heritage and Tales of Responsibility***, and our guest is Salma Al-Bayli, a Turkmen from Aleppo who has been living in Gaziantep since 2013.

Welcome, Salma! Could you introduce yourself?

Salma: I'm Salma Al-Bayli, originally from Aleppo, Syria. I'm a Turkmen from northern Aleppo, 27 years old, and a mother of three. When I first arrived in Türkiye, I was still single. Then, I started a new chapter here - I got married and had three children. Motherhood brought an overwhelming sense of responsibility for my children and my home and family life.

Sarah: That's a significant responsibility, especially at a young age - but from what I've seen when I visited you, you manage it very well. Let's talk about your memories of Aleppo and Al-Rai [a town in northern Aleppo]. What stands out the most?

Salma: I was still a child when we left Aleppo, but I have beautiful memories of it. Our family lived close together - everyone was in the same province, or even the same town - but displacement scattered us, some to different provinces, others to different countries. I remember most vividly our mealtime gatherings, waiting for my father to come home before eating. It was a daily tradition, and I've carried it into my own home. Even now, I never set the table until my husband arrives, and the whole family eats together. It has become our tradition.

Sarah: That's such a powerful tradition. Mealtimes truly bring families together. Since we're on the topic of food, tell us - what makes Turkmen cuisine unique?

Salma: We have a signature dish called *huluk* - it's something special to us. That's why I make it from time to time at home, so my children grow up knowing their heritage. It's made from a type of fine bulgur, which we call *semid*, mixed with flour and chickpeas, then cooked with pepper paste, tomato paste, aubergine, and fat. We soak the *semid*, shape it into small balls, and cook it with the other ingredients. It's a dish

that defines us, and I'm keen to pass it on - I want my daughter to learn how to make it, just as I did.

Sarah: Is *huluk* associated with any special occasions, or is it more of an everyday dish? How is it usually served?

Salma: It's more of an everyday meal. For gatherings, we usually prepare grains like bulgur or freekeh. But *huluk* is a simple family dish - it's not typically served for special guests or occasions. I like making it every now and then to keep the tradition alive, and I enjoy teaching my children how to prepare it.

Sarah: What dishes are usually prepared for special occasions?

Salma: Weddings, for example, are big occasions. We slaughter sheep and cook large meals in huge pots. The main dishes for these events usually include grains - bulgur and freekeh - alongside potato soup or beans cooked with tomato and pepper paste.

Older women usually prepare these meals, as they have the most experience, while younger women generally don't participate in the cooking. The wedding itself is held in the village square, with a large tent set up several days in advance. Celebrations begin with the henna night, followed by the wedding day when the food is served.

Sarah: Your cuisine seems to rely heavily on pepper paste and tomato paste. Why is that? Also, is pomegranate molasses commonly used?

Salma: As for pomegranate molasses, not really - we don't use it often. We grow peppers and tomatoes on our lands, and after harvesting, the women gather to prepare tomato and pepper pastes. The same goes for other crops - we grow and harvest them, then preserve and store them in the *beit al-mouneh* [a traditional storage space for preserved food], so they are available throughout the year.

Sarah: You mentioned earlier that *huluk* is usually eaten in the late afternoon, between *Asr* [afternoon] and *Maghrib* [sunset]?

Salma: That's right. It's a hearty dish, packed with grains and legumes, so we don't usually eat it for breakfast or dinner. It's typically served around *Maghrib* time.

Sarah: How does Turkmen cuisine differ between Homs, Latakia, and Aleppo?

Salma: In Aleppo, our traditions are closer to Turkish customs, and we've managed to preserve our language and culture because of our proximity to the Turkish border. In contrast, in Homs, for instance, Turkmens haven't maintained the language as much as we have.

We also differ from the Turkmens of Latakia in terms of agriculture - they focus more on fruit farming, whereas we primarily grow grains and vegetables.

Sarah: You arrived in Türkiye at fifteen, got married young, and became a mother early on - all while carrying great responsibilities. How did you learn the fundamentals of cooking and Turkmen cuisine?

Salma: I was determined to preserve our traditions and culture. Whenever I came across a dish I didn't know, I would ask my mother and mother-in-law about its ingredients and how to prepare it, then follow their instructions carefully.

For example, I learned to make *huluk* from them. Back in Syria, women in the family and neighbourhood would gather over coffee and help prepare it. Rolling the tiny bulgur balls takes time and effort, so it was always a communal task.

But when I moved to Türkiye, got married, and took on the responsibility of my own home, I had to do it alone. Even though language wasn't a barrier for me, I still felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness without my family. Every time I make *huluk*, I think back to those gatherings with my family and neighbours in Syria. It's a bittersweet feeling - there's sadness in being alone, but also warmth in remembering those moments.

Sarah: What is it about *huluk* that made you choose it over other Turkmen dishes to keep making for your family?

Salma: Turkmens in general love it, and so do my children. My son asks for it all the time - he'd say, "*I want the food with the little balls.*"

But beyond that, it's tied to my memories of preparing it back in Syria. Making it always brings me joy and a sense of connection.

Sarah: Before we started recording, you mentioned that most Turkmens in Aleppo are farmers who rely on agriculture for their livelihood, using their crops to prepare *mouneh*

[food preserved for out-of-season use] for both summer and winter. How has this shaped Turkmen cuisine? And how did you prepare your winter stores?

Salma: In summer, we harvest essential legumes like wheat, lentils, and chickpeas - these are the staples of our diet. We store them in the *beit al-mouna*, which stays naturally cool because of the straw used in its construction. This *mouneh* is especially important when we have guests or host large gatherings like weddings.

We also preserve meat. In autumn, we slaughter sheep, butcher them, cook the meat, and store it in jars for later use. Nothing goes to waste; even the sheep's hide is used. We salt and dry it under the sun to make *girba*, which we use to shake yoghurt to make *ayran*, thus getting the natural fat which we use in cooking.

Sarah: Which legumes make up the largest portion of your provisions?

Salma: Black and red lentils, chickpeas, fava beans, and, of course, bulgur. We grind the bulgur by hand to produce a fine grain called *semid*, which we use in many dishes, like *kibbeh nayyeh* and *huluk*. In summer, we also prepare and store tomato paste and pepper paste to last us through the winter.

Sarah: You mentioned earlier that Aleppo's Turkmen cuisine shares many similarities with Turkish cuisine. What similarities and differences did you notice? Did this cultural closeness help you when preparing your dishes, especially since you speak Turkish? What challenges did you face?

Salma: There are definitely similarities, but also some key differences. One of the biggest differences is the seasoning - we tend to use more spices than in Turkish cuisine, and even their tomato paste and pepper paste are prepared slightly differently from ours.

Another major difference is the way of life. Many Turkmens in Türkiye are livestock herders, spending summers in tents on the plains while their sheep graze, then returning home for the winter. In Aleppo and Syria, more generally, Turkmens were primarily farmers, living in their homes year-round and tending to their fields every season. As for the food, while the dishes are similar, our cooking is often heartier, with more fat and richer seasoning. Our spice blends are also slightly different from those commonly used in Türkiye.

Sarah: Did you learn how to prepare *mouneh* yourself?

Salma: Yes, I did. But the challenge is that back home, preparing *mouneh* was a collective effort - families and neighbours would come together to process large quantities. It's not really practical to make *mouneh* in small amounts.

Here, I'm alone, and my family is small, so I only make small batches - just enough for us - of pickles, olives, tomato paste, and pepper paste. I prepare these myself. If what I've made isn't enough, we simply buy more from the market when needed.

Sarah: Now that Syria has been liberated, do you plan to go back?

Salma: Yes, I do want to go back. My children don't have Syrian nationality, and I want them to obtain it. Syria is my home - it's where I was born, where I grew up, and where I was educated. I lived there happily, surrounded by my family, who are still in Syria.

Here, even though I speak Turkish, living in Türkiye has had its challenges. So, I do want to return, but only after I establish my own project here. My goal is to expand it to reach women in Syria - supporting and empowering them while also providing me with an income so I can better provide for my children.

Sarah: What is your project?

Salma: I'm working on recycling a specific type of glass tube into drinking glasses. It's both an environmental and financial initiative - benefiting both me and the women who will be involved. As far as I know, no one has done this in Türkiye yet. My plan is to start here and then expand the work into Syria.

Sarah: What are your hopes for yourself, your family, and your community in the future?

Salma: Turkmens primarily learn Arabic through formal education, so my hope is that my children will learn Arabic properly. I also hope they will obtain Syrian citizenship.

On a personal level, I dream of returning to my village and reconnecting with family and relatives I haven't seen in years. I hope to establish a business or a project that benefits both me and other women.

Sarah: You've mentioned that after becoming a mother, you started working, and more recently, you've resumed your studies. Now, you're also planning your own project.

Family is clearly very important to you - you cook every day, prepare some types of *mouneh*, etc. How do you balance all of these responsibilities - your family, your studies, and your business plans - while still cooking every day?

Salma: I start my day by getting my children ready for school. Then, I focus on my studies while also helping my children with theirs. I have worked in various jobs in the past, but now, I'm fully focused on establishing my own business.

I start cooking before my children return from school, always keeping our traditions in mind. Most of my dishes include tomato paste, like pasta, because my children love it and are used to it. Sometimes, I make it with yoghurt instead, depending on what they ask for. This generation is different from ours - they have their own preferences and often request dishes they see in YouTube videos. In our time, we simply ate whatever was available, which was mostly legume-based meals.

Sarah: How much time do you typically spend cooking?

Salma: It depends on the dish. Some meals are more complex and take time to prepare, and since I'm doing everything on my own, I might spend several hours cooking - sometimes even 4 or 5 hours. If I'm particularly tired or short on time, I opt for simpler meals that take around two hours. But regardless of the effort involved, what matters most to me is ensuring there's always something on the table that brings us together as a family.

Sarah: The essence of cooking isn't just about preparing food - it's about doing it with love for the people you care about. That, in itself, is a responsibility and a noble act. Salma, you've done an incredible job handling all these responsibilities. You were young when you moved to Türkiye and got married, yet you were committed to learning Turkmen cuisine from your mother, mother-in-law, and other women in your community. You also learned how to prepare *mouneh*, which is such an essential practice in every Syrian home. What message would you like to leave for our listeners, especially for women?

Salma: My message is simple: you are strong. You can achieve anything you set your mind to. You can work, study, raise your children, and still prepare food for your family. I believe that feeding one's family is one of a woman's most important responsibilities. Women are strong, and they can achieve whatever they want.

Salma [speaks in Turkish]: *A woman can achieve anything if she wants to. She is a mother and a homemaker, managing many responsibilities. I believe a woman is the foundation of society. Without women, nothing can exist. Women are strong; if they want to, they can do anything.*

Sarah: Could you translate that for us?

Salma: I mean that women are the foundation of society. They are strong and capable. They can work, study, cook for their families, and prepare provisions - all while holding everything together.

Sarah: That is such an inspiring message. Women truly are strong, and their strength is amplified when they are surrounded by supportive, inspiring women like yourself—women who openly share their real-life experiences and the challenges they have overcome.

Salma: I'd like to add that in the past, Turkmen women worked in weaving, using manual looms to create rugs and *kilim* [a flat-woven rug, typically colourful, small-sized, with symmetrical geometric patterns]. They also crafted delicate lacework and other handmade pieces. Here in Türkiye, I haven't been able to continue this Turkmen tradition, especially since I don't have access to the necessary tools, and I find these crafts difficult to do. So instead, I developed my own project - something new and different. I believe I will be one of the first to work in this field here in Türkiye.

Sarah: Such projects - ones that preserve our cultural heritage - are incredibly valuable. Not only do they keep traditions alive, but they can also be quite profitable and useful in tourism. I truly wish you great success in your project.

As we conclude this episode, I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to our guest, Salma Al-Bayli, and to our dear listeners. We look forward to having you join us in upcoming episodes. Stay connected with us through our website and social media channels, and feel free to reach out with your messages and suggestions for topics you'd like us to cover in future episodes.