



WITH A KIND HEART,
THE STORY BEGINS



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With a Kind Heart, the Story Begins

Sarah: Hello and welcome to a new episode of *From Heart to Hearth* with me, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is brought to you in collaboration with the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye and the University of Sussex in the UK. Our episode is titled ***With a Kind Heart, the Story Begins***, and I'm delighted to have Samar Mohammed with us. Originally from Qamishli, she spent most of her life in Homs and has been living in Gaziantep since 2015.

Welcome, Samar. Could you introduce yourself?

Samar: I'm originally from Qamishli, but I grew up in Homs from a young age. I'm a simple woman who loves helping others. I'm a mother of two sons and two daughters, and I cherish a peaceful family life.

Sarah: Tell us about your memories of Qamishli and Homs. Since you were born in Qamishli but raised in Homs, and your husband is from there too, how have these two places shaped your story?

Samar: I never actually lived in Qamishli; I only know about it through my family's stories. My real memories are in Homs - vivid and unforgettable. I remember the bustling covered market, especially during Eid and Ramadan, when the streets were packed with people. I have a special love for Ramadan in Homs, and the Khalid ibn al-Walid Mosque is deeply embedded in the city's heritage.

Sarah: Since you mentioned Ramadan and Eid, what were your family meals like during those times? Did your cooking lean more towards Qamishli or Homs-style cuisine?

Samar: Our meals were a mix of both. Qamishli's Ramadan dishes tend to be light and suited for fasting, like lentil soup with toasted bread, bulgur with chickpeas, or bulgur cooked in homemade ghee, often served with *yakhni* - a stew of potatoes, chickpeas, and either meat or chicken. One dish my children and I love, common to both Homs and Qamishli, is made with toasted bread soaked in meat or chicken broth, then layered with cooked rice, nuts, and either meat or chicken. It's served with a sauce made from yoghurt, tahini, lemon, and garlic.

My mother had a tradition of starting Ramadan with a 'white dish' [yoghurt-based], perhaps as a symbol of good luck - such as *sajiyah* or *shakriya*, a yoghurt-based dish with meat, served alongside rice or bulgur.

Sarah: What are the most distinctive dishes of Qamishli, and when are they usually prepared? Do you have any personal favourites from both places?

Samar: Qamishli has many well-known dishes. *Mansaf* is one of the most special, served to honour guests. It's a must when welcoming a dear visitor. It's made with *saj* bread topped with cooked bulgur, boiled chickpeas, lamb on the bone, and sometimes nuts if available. Bulgur is central to our cuisine, as wheat is a key crop in the region and is locally processed into various staple ingredients.

Another signature dish is *kubaybat*, made with fine bulgur that's soaked and kneaded by hand - or in a grinder, if available - then stuffed with minced meat and onions before being boiled in either water or dried yoghurt, which we call *haqt*.

Sarah: When are these dishes typically served?

Samar: These are costly dishes, so they're mostly prepared for special occasions - when guests visit or for large family gatherings. *Mansaf* is always made in large quantities. It's also a staple at festive celebrations like Eid. At weddings, for example, I served *mansaf* for family, neighbours, friends, and guests at my son's wedding. These traditional dishes require time and effort, but they always taste better when shared.

One of my personal favourites is *juwayqat*, made from the innards of a slaughtered animal, usually prepared during Eid. It is customary to sacrifice an animal at Eid, and this is when we usually make this dish. The innards are cleaned thoroughly, stuffed with seasoned rice and minced meat, then cooked. It's typically served with fried bread and a sauce made from yoghurt, tahini, and garlic, finished with a drizzle of ghee. The effort that goes into preparing it makes it all the more special, and seeing loved ones enjoy it makes all the hard work worthwhile.

Sarah: What is your absolute favourite dish?

Samar: I love cooked yoghurt with meat, served with rice and bulgur. It's an old dish that reminds me of my late mother. She used to cook rice and bulgur together in one

pot, which was often done for weddings in a style called *karmah* - a term meaning to honour someone. For example, the food served at a wedding would be *karmah*, prepared in the honour of the bride or groom. My mother, however, used to cook *karmah* on ordinary days. It's a delicious meal that brings people together.

Among more modern dishes, I love *maqluba* [a layered rice dish with meat and vegetables, mainly aubergines] and all kinds of *mahashi* [stuffed vegetables].

Sarah: And what about Homs? Do you have any favourite dishes from there?

Samar: I love *kousa b'leben* - courgettes hollowed out, fried, and stuffed with minced meat or chicken when meat isn't available, then cooked in yoghurt. Many traditional dishes use meat, but when it's unaffordable, we often substitute chicken. I also enjoy rice with peas, *kibbeh*, and the famous *maqluba* of Homs.

Sarah: You said you never lived in Qamishli, yet you know its traditional cuisine so well. How did you learn it?

Samar: My mother made sure to share her memories and stories of her childhood in Qamishli and taught us everything she had learned from her mother. She never stopped preparing the dishes she grew up with, and she passed that love for our traditions - including our culinary heritage - down to us.

Sarah: Earlier, before we started recording, you mentioned how displacement has changed cooking habits, especially in terms of ingredients. How has this affected you?

Samar: During the war, as the bombardment of Homs intensified, it became unbearable. Like many others, we decided to leave and fled to Palmyra, our first stop in displacement. The people there were kind and helped us despite having little themselves. We stayed for a while, but as the situation worsened, we moved to Raqqa. Life was incredibly difficult financially.

We struggled to find an affordable house, and when we did, we stayed there for three months. We barely had enough to eat. My daughter was 18 months old at the time, and she would cry all night from hunger. I had nothing to feed her. I remember one night when all I had was some spoiled pasta, and I tried to clean it as much as possible just to give her something to eat.

Then the situation escalated. The bombings and massacres intensified. I remember the Mansoura massacre vividly - when schools sheltering displaced families were targeted, wiping out entire families, including relatives and friends of mine. We lost loved ones in an instant. It was unbearable.

Sarah: How was life in Türkiye? How did you manage to cook and provide the basics?

Samar: We arrived in Türkiye with just 150 liras. At first, I stayed with my sister in Reyhanlı for a month, while my husband left a week after our arrival to work in the fields in Hatay and İskenderun. Syrians helped each other find work and referred one another. My husband worked hard to provide for us and eventually rented a small house.

Staying with my sister, no matter how close we were, wasn't a long-term solution. When we moved to our own place, my husband's asthma worsened due to the cold and stress of displacement, and he spent most days in hospital. That was when I realised I had to work. I had young children to care for, and someone needed to provide for them. Other women were already working in the fields, but my husband was initially against the idea of me working. However, we had no other choice. I insisted. I had never had a job before, never worked in agriculture, and never even set foot in the fields - but I had to try.

At first, it was terrifying. We were taken to remote mountain areas to pick olives. The roads were too narrow for the car to take us all the way, so we were dropped off at the end of the paved road and had to walk the rest of the way. I also harvested oranges and lemons - anything to earn an honest living. I couldn't let my children go hungry. It was difficult at first, but I adjusted over time, and things slowly improved.

Sarah: Were you still able to cook your traditional dishes in Türkiye, like *mansaf*? What challenges did you face?

Samar: The ingredients were available, but affording them was difficult. For example, I couldn't buy basmati rice for *mansaf*, so I used bulgur instead, even though my children preferred it with rice. I also replaced meat with chicken, swapped almonds for pistachios, and used a cheaper alternative to the butter or ghee we used to cook with. The most important thing was making sure my children didn't feel deprived of the dishes they loved.

Even after working all day, I would still cook for them. They could see how exhausted I was, yet they always appreciated my effort - regardless of the food itself. They still loved my cooking because I cooked with a full heart and followed the same steps my mother had taught me.

I also learned new dishes from a kind Turkish neighbour. She used to prepare Turkish *dolma*, which is similar to our *mahashi*, and her stuffed aubergines were delicious. Even her simple way of marinating bulgur in tomato sauce without any meat made the dish incredibly tasty. She taught me little details that made a difference in flavour, and I was grateful for her companionship. Finding a supportive friend during difficult times is invaluable.

I was especially relieved that she spoke a little Arabic when we first arrived. Over time, I helped her become more fluent; she learned a lot about food from me as well. She used to make *mouneh* [preserved food for out-of-season use] to send to her sons in Cyprus, but she preserved vine leaves in a way that made them hard to transport - using salted water. I taught her how to store them without water: rolling the leaves tightly, like a cigarette, and stacking them inside a dry plastic bottle before sealing it. This way, the leaves stayed fresh for years. She was thrilled to learn the new method, and I was happy to pass on what I knew. We learned so much from each other.

Sarah: That's true - there's been a cultural exchange between Syrian and Turkish cuisine. Before we started recording, you also mentioned an experience that really proves the saying *necessity is the mother of invention* - how you managed to recreate dishes your children longed for, even ones you'd never made before. Tell us about that.

Samar: Yes, Turkish sweet shops are full of beautiful desserts, like *baklava*. My children would see and crave them when we passed by, but they were far too expensive for me to buy. I couldn't bear the thought of them longing for something I couldn't provide, so I turned to YouTube to learn how to make these sweets at home.

I watched videos to understand the ingredients and techniques, then substituted expensive ingredients with more affordable alternatives - like using a cheaper type of clarified butter instead of ghee, which is an essential component of most sweets but was beyond my budget.

At first, my attempts failed, but I didn't give up. I kept trying until I finally got it right. Eventually, I started making sweets to sell in local Syrian shops. I made *basbousa*, *ma'arouk ramadani* [a type of sweet bread traditionally filled with dates], and *kleija* [a traditional spiced biscuit].

Sometimes, I would buy the ingredients myself and sell the sweets. Other times, shop owners would provide the ingredients, and I would prepare the desserts for a fee. I also sold them to friends and acquaintances. I worked on a small scale because I didn't have the financial means to expand.

People even started requesting full meals - like *mansaf*. The results were fantastic. Once, I made *irq sous* [a traditional liquorice-based drink] and packaged it in bags to sell in a local shop. The owner told me he couldn't commit to buying it from me, but he generously let me place it in his store, selling it on my behalf without taking a commission. It turned out to be a great success.

I did everything I could to support my family. Giving up was never an option.

Sarah: Samar, you haven't just survived - you've brought joy to your family, neighbours, and friends through your generosity and the love you put into everything you make. What are your hopes for your family and community in this new chapter now that Syria has been liberated?

Samar: It was the happiest day of my life. I felt like I had returned to life after being lost in darkness. I was overwhelmed with joy. Yes, our homes are in ruins, and there are no jobs waiting for us when we return. We will have to start again from nothing - but we *will* return.

We all have a role to play in rebuilding our country. Every person must take the first step to help themselves, and when one person rises, they can lift others with them. We will return to the way we once were. Syria - Syria of Jasmine - will bloom again. No place in the world, no matter how advanced, can ever compare to Syria.

Sarah: We *will* return and rebuild. Your story is inspiring- it proves that achievement is possible, even in the most impossible circumstances. It shows the power of standing by others and finding joy despite hardship. What message would you like to share with our listeners, especially the women?

Samar: I have always been a pillar of support for my family, no matter how difficult our circumstances were. I never let them see my exhaustion; I only showed them my strength. I hope every woman finds her inner strength and becomes a source of support for her family.

A father's role is important, but a mother carries the greater responsibility - she is the one who brings the family together, uniting their hearts as one. No matter how hard life gets, it will change. Difficulties don't last forever. I hope for relief and better days for all of us.

Sarah: Women are always strong and inspiring. Thank you so much, Samar.

A heartfelt thank you to our wonderful guest, Samar Mohammed, and to all our listeners. Join us for future episodes, and feel free to connect with us through our website and social media. We welcome your messages and suggestions for topics you'd like us to cover.