



THE CUISINE OF HAURAN: TRADITIONS AND LIFE LESSONS



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The Cuisine of Hauran: Traditions and Life Lessons

Sarah: Hello and welcome, dear listeners! We're so glad to have you join us for another episode of *From Heart to Hearth*, hosted by me, Sarah Burhan. Today's episode is brought to you by the Syrian Academic Expertise Team in Türkiye in partnership with the University of Sussex in the UK. Our topic for today is ***The Cuisine of Hauran: Traditions and Life Lessons***.

Our guest today is Shahla Hourani, originally from Daraa, currently residing in Gaziantep since 2015. Welcome, Shahla, and thank you for joining us. Could you introduce yourself to our audience?

Shahla: I'm Shahla Hourani from Daraa, Hauran. I'm a mother of three. I got married in Daraa just a few months before we were displaced. While I only spent a short time there after my wedding, I grew up there and have many cherished memories from my childhood.

Sarah: Could you share some of these cherished memories in Daraa?

Shahla: Daraa holds some of the most precious memories of my life. It's where I spent my childhood, surrounded by my family and relatives. We lived through days filled with love, trust, and joy. It's the place where we were raised as children, learning about happiness, traditions, and the values passed down through generations. I was fortunate to experience the warmth of family gatherings, the kindness of neighbours, and the simple pleasures of outings and celebrations. Daraa is truly a beautiful place.

Sarah: What is the signature dish of Daraa?

Shahla: Daraa is famous for *Mlehi*, a dish made with bulgur, meat, and *jameed* [dried yoghurt]. It's a traditional meal prepared for festive occasions and large gatherings.

The cooking process is quite special. The *jameed* is soaked overnight to soften. We start by boiling the meat and setting it aside. The bulgur is toasted in local ghee before being cooked. It is placed in a tray and thoroughly pounded to achieve a smooth texture. Then, the *jameed* is gradually added, mixed, and pressed until the bulgur absorbs the flavour completely. During cooking, it turns into a thick broth.

We serve it in a *mansaf*, a large traditional platter with handles for easy carrying - this is part of our customs. The *mansaf* is then topped with meat, garnished with nuts, and traditionally accompanied by *kibbeh* [deep-fried bulgur shells stuffed with minced meat], arranged around the platter as a final, essential touch.

A respected elder performs the final ritual of pouring melted pure butter ghee over the *mansaf* platter in front of the guests. This ritual is deeply rooted in our traditions; serving *Mlehi* in Daraa is not just about the food but about honouring our heritage and customs.

Sarah: When is *Mlehi* typically served?

Shahla: It's made on special occasions - weddings, celebrations, and joyful family gatherings. Even when visiting my family, my sisters and I make sure it's a big occasion; we can't prepare *Mlehi* for just a few people. It has to be part of a large gathering, filled with happiness and the traditions passed down by our ancestors.

Sarah: You mentioned something interesting about the attire worn when preparing *Mlehi*. Could you share more about this tradition?

Shahla: This is something passed down from our grandmothers to our mothers, and from our mothers to us. Cooking *Mlehi* is not just about preparing a meal; it's about embracing the spirit of joy and celebration.

Before stepping into the kitchen, I make sure to be in good spirits, as my mother always taught me. Whenever I prepare *Mlehi*, it's a special occasion in our home, especially for my children. They turn it into a little festivity, excitedly shouting, "*Mum's making Mlehi! It's going to be great!*"

We also have a unique tradition when it comes to dressing. We tie golden-embroidered scarves around our heads. The *Daraa-style* earrings, which are large, ornate, and dangle elegantly, are a must. These are called *dandash* earrings. They're meant to be visible, making a statement.

While cooking, we sing - not necessarily traditional songs, but anything that lifts the spirit. It's all about bringing happiness into the process because when food is made with joy, it tastes even better. This meal is prepared for our loved ones, so it must be made with love, joy, and tradition.

The attire, singing, and rituals we follow in the kitchen are all part of our heritage. Even if we don't wear gold, we always wear something that represents our traditions - whether it's a headscarf, earrings, or simply how we present ourselves. Cherishing these traditions keeps us connected to our roots.

Sarah: Has the way you prepare *Mlehi* changed after displacement, both during your internal displacement within Syria and later after seeking refuge in Türkiye?

Shahla: When we were forced to flee our home in Daraa, we first moved to Raqqa. We stayed there for about four or five months, and during that entire time, I never cooked *Mlehi*. In fact, I didn't cook at all. We had nothing, no cooking utensils, no ingredients - nothing to prepare a proper meal. Instead, we relied entirely on relief kitchens in Raqqa for food.

At that time, I was seven months pregnant and living with my in-laws - both elderly and in need of assistance to walk. Those first months were extremely difficult; we had no means of securing food or water on our own. We would go to the relief kitchens twice a day - once for breakfast and once for lunch - grateful to receive whatever food was available.

But as the situation worsened, with increasing airstrikes and shelling, it became unbearable. Being pregnant only made it harder. I eventually gave birth in Raqqa, but the conditions were so dire that I couldn't even get proper nourishment. In our traditions, a woman recovering from childbirth is given nutritious foods - local Arabic ghee, eggs, and sweet dishes rich in energy to help her regain strength. But none of this was available. I suffered immensely, to the point where my newborn son was at serious risk due to malnutrition. The food we received from aid kitchens kept us alive, and we were thankful for it, but it wasn't enough to sustain a mother and a newborn in need of proper nourishment.

Eventually, my husband and I realised we couldn't stay any longer. My in-laws and extended family remained in Raqqa, while my mother and brother had already left for Türkiye. So, we decided to leave.

Our journey was exhausting. We arrived in Idlib and intended to settle in a small town called Maarrat Misrin. We even rented a house and signed a lease, believing it was a safe place. But just a short while after we signed the lease, an airstrike hit. Locals reassured us that the town hadn't been targeted in a long time, but I couldn't take any more risks. We immediately retrieved our deposit and left.

The journey from Idlib to Türkiye was another ordeal, taking four or five days. We crossed through rain and mud, trudging through thick sludge where we couldn't see solid ground beneath our feet. My husband was injured along the way - his leg was broken, and he could no longer walk. Thankfully, a passing vehicle picked us up and took us to Reyhanlı, where my family was residing.

Even after reaching Türkiye, life remained incredibly difficult. And yes, our way of preparing *Mlehi* changed completely. We could no longer find *jameed* [a hard, dried yoghurt used to make a tangy sauce], so we substituted it with regular yoghurt. We had to replace lamb with chicken. The nuts, once an essential garnish, became an unaffordable luxury. We had to cut back significantly on the ingredients, adapting the dish to fit our new reality.

For example, back home, *Mlehi* was always served with fried *kibbeh* arranged around the platter. But here, *kibbeh* was too expensive, so we had to do without it. Even in Daraa, *Mlehi* was already a costly dish - imagine how much harder it became in exile.

We've also adapted it by using rice instead of bulgur, because preparing it with bulgur and traditional ghee requires special equipment and specific ingredients which we no longer have. Now, we cook it with store-bought ghee instead of homemade local ghee. It's not the same, but we do what we can.

Despite everything, my husband and I refuse to give up. He constantly worries about how to provide for our children, and in Türkiye, we've had two more sons, making us a family of five. But no matter where we are, I am determined to teach my children the traditions and customs passed down by our ancestors. While we're in Türkiye now, our hearts and roots remain in Daraa.

It is essential that our children grow up knowing our heritage - our food, our customs, our way of life. Every mother must ensure that her children carry their traditions with them, no matter where life takes them. Because one day, we will return home. When we do, we must return with our identity intact.

Sarah: Has the way you prepare meals and traditional dishes from Daraa changed just for *Mlehi*, or for other dishes too?

Shahla: Everything has changed, not just *Mlehi*. The way we cook and enjoy all our traditional dishes is completely different now. Here, we've had to cut a lot of corners. There were times when I couldn't even manage to provide a full meal for the children. My husband had to take on exhausting factory work just so we could afford food, despite suffering from severe disc problems in his back and neck. Factory jobs in Türkiye are incredibly gruelling - 12 to 13-hour shifts just to ensure our children have food to eat.

I turned to learning hairdressing and skincare to support our household. I enrolled in a training centre, and my husband accompanied me for the interview. Thankfully, he later found work in a café owned by a fellow Syrian. Initially, the café only served tea and coffee. However, I encouraged my husband to expand its offerings. He proposed new ideas to the café owner, who responded positively, allowing my husband to run the place as he saw fit.

At home, I began preparing marinated skewers, similar to *Shish Tawook*, which my husband then served at the café. I also learned how to make crispy fried chicken, which we introduced to the menu. Gradually, we expanded, with my husband preparing a portion at the café while I prepared another at home. Our reputation grew. I learned recipes from my neighbours - women from Aleppo, Damascus, and Homs - and supplemented my knowledge with online tutorials. I experimented with new dishes such as *Kabsa* [a spiced rice dish with meat or chicken], advertising them in advance so customers could place orders. My husband would write on the café's board: *Kabsa* will be served on a specific day, and I would prepare it at home for him to take to the café. Our business flourished. Word spread that we provided delicious, high-quality meals, and people kept coming back.

Sadly, new regulations requiring licences forced the café to close, as the Syrian owner could no longer keep it running. He advised my husband to look for another job. With no alternatives, we turned to home-based catering. By then, my husband had built a strong network, and customers started placing orders directly. To avoid waste, I only cooked upon request, and people would collect their meals from our home. No matter how difficult things got, I refused to let my husband feel defeated. I always reminded him that "*We're in this together*".

One particularly challenging moment stands out in my memory. One day, my son asked me for a sweet treat. I spent about an hour in the kitchen, knowing that I had no suitable ingredients at home, nor could I afford to buy some. Desperate, I searched

through my pantry and found a packet of pasta. At that time, all we had to eat for breakfast, lunch, and dinner was pasta. But even with such limitations, I found a way. I boiled some pasta and turned it into a type of desert known as *Awama* [deep-fried dough balls served soaked in sugar syrup]. After an hour and a half of brainstorming and struggling, I managed to present my children with a dessert they enjoyed.

Sarah: That is truly remarkable, Shahla! I would love to know - despite all the hardship, the financial strain, the challenge of adapting to a new country and language - what kept you going? What inspired you to keep creating and providing for your family?

Shahla: I often sat alone, reflecting. My husband was unable to take on physically demanding jobs due to a health condition - a herniated disk, which meant I had to be the pillar of our family. A woman must be strong - not only for herself but for her children, her husband, and her extended family. I told myself, "*If my husband cannot work, that does not mean I cannot either.*" I needed to encourage him, to lift him up rather than allowing despair to take hold.

At times, I had to borrow small sums from my family to start initiatives, but I did so with the determination to stand on my own two feet. I was determined that my family would not become dependent on others. If I had simply sat back, no one would have come forward to offer assistance. Life moves forward, and when you have children, you cannot afford to be passive. No one will offer a helping hand unless you take the first step yourself.

Sarah: Over these fourteen years of conflict, you have learned much and become a stronger version of yourself. Now, looking ahead to Syria's liberation, what are your hopes for your family and your community?

Shahla: The thought of returning to a free Syria fills me with indescribable joy. I pray that we will all stand together, hand in hand. The war has taught us valuable lessons - it has revealed who is genuine and who is not, who is honest and who is deceitful.

When we return, we will rebuild our country with our children. We have taught them throughout this war to stand united, to be generous and kind. Syrians are a people of hospitality and warmth. We will bring back the lessons we learned in Türkiye - culinary traditions, customs, and skills - and integrate them into our heritage. At the moment, I may not be able to return to Daraa itself, as our homes have been completely destroyed. We will have to start from scratch. But regardless of where we settle, what matters most is that we will be in Syria, our homeland, where we belong.

Sarah: That is a beautiful sentiment - to merge what you have learned in Türkiye with Syrian traditions, especially in the culinary world, and to contribute to preserving and enriching Daraa's cultural heritage.

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

Shahla: My message is to every woman, every young lady, everyone - let us stand together and never give up. Women are the backbone of every society. Without us, nothing would function. We must support one another and remain resilient in the face of adversity. We must push forward and strive to achieve our dreams.

Sarah: Absolutely. Taking action is essential for change, and as you have demonstrated, women play a fundamental role in shaping and sustaining society. You are a living example of resilience and strength. Thank you so much, Shahla.

Shahla: Thank you. Today, we are here in Türkiye, but tomorrow, God willing, we will be back in Syria, hand in hand.

Sarah: That wraps up this episode! A heartfelt thank you to our wonderful guest, Shahla Hourani. And to our listeners, we truly appreciate your support. Stay tuned for more episodes, and don't forget to like, share, and leave your feedback and comments. We'd love to hear your thoughts and suggestions for future topics. To get our latest, make sure to subscribe to our channel!