



FLAVOURS OF THE COAST AND STORIES OF EXILE



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Flavours of the Coast and Stories of Exile

Sarah: A warm welcome to all our listeners, and thank you for joining us for 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 episode is titled ***Flavours of the Coast and Stories of Exile***, and our guest today is Zainab Maghribi. Originally from Baniyas, she has been living in Mersin since 2018.

Welcome, Zainab, and thank you for being here. Let's start with an introduction - who is Zainab?

Zainab: My name is Zainab Maghribi, and I'm originally from the coastal city of Jableh, though I spent much of my life in Baniyas. I'm a mother of three and studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Damascus University. My work has always been centred around handmade crafts - some for practical use, others purely decorative. I also paint and have created many artworks, some of which I exhibited at the Cultural Centre in Baniyas.

Sarah: Tell me about your memories of Jableh in Latakia and Baniyas.

Zainab: There are so many, especially the times spent by the sea, whether with family or friends. We would visit historical sites like Marqab Castle in Baniyas, stroll along Jableh's beautiful corniche, and explore its lively markets. These places hold countless cherished memories - moments I will never forget.

Sarah: Both Jableh and Baniyas are coastal cities. What defines the cuisine of this region, particularly in Baniyas and Jableh?

Zainab: The cuisine here is deeply tied to the sea, with seafood playing a central role. One of the most famous dishes is *sayadiyah* - a delicious combination of rice and fish. We marinate the fish in a special mix of spices, olive oil, garlic, and lemon, letting it sit for two hours before frying. The rice is cooked with the same spice blend then we mix it with stir-fried onions. When serving, we layer the rice with the fish and garnish it with *birista*, crispy fried onion slices, and nuts.

Sarah: Is *sayadiyah* reserved for special occasions?

Zainab: Not necessarily - we make it both on ordinary days and for feasts. I remember inviting some friends from Latakia to try it here in Mersin, and they absolutely loved it. It's a dish that carries deep cultural significance.

Sarah: Is *sayadiyah* unique to Baniyas, or is it popular across the entire coastal region?

Zainab: It's a well-known dish across the coastal region, and we all prepare it in a similar way, using olive oil and essential spices such as cumin and coriander. However, each city adds its own touch. In Latakia, for example, they sometimes mix *dibs al-filfil* [a thick red pepper paste] into the rice. Such variations depend on personal preference and vary from one city to another.

Sarah: So fish is a key ingredient in coastal cuisine, setting it apart from other regions of Syria. Besides *sayadiyah*, are there other popular fish-based dishes?

Zainab: Yes, though we also cook with meat and chicken, the region is particularly famous for its seafood, given its proximity to the sea. One of our signature dishes in Baniyas is *samaka harra* [spicy fish]. The fish is marinated in a bold spice mix with plenty of chilli and then roasted in the oven. We also have a variety of grilled and fried fish dishes, each prepared with distinctive coastal flavours.

Sarah: What are some other well-known dishes from the coastal region, especially from Baniyas and Jableh?

Zainab: One of the most well-known dishes in Baniyas is *kibbat al-silik* [Swiss chard kibbeh]. We make a dough from soaked bulgur and flour, season it with a blend of spices, and shape it into small balls. These are then cooked with boiled lentils and Swiss chard, served with pomegranate molasses; it's absolutely delicious.

In Latakia, they prepare a similar dish but without the Swiss chard. Instead, the *kibbeh* balls are boiled and added to one of two sauces: either a tangy mix of pomegranate molasses, parsley, onions, and spices, or a creamy blend of tahini, garlic, and lemon. Each version has its own unique appeal.

Sarah: What's your favourite dish?

Zainab: I love *mansaf kabsa*, and I'd say I've mastered making it. I've combined techniques from different countries to create my own unique version.

Sarah: How do you prepare it?

Zainab: The dish is traditionally made with basmati rice, topped with grilled chicken and nuts. But I like to add my own touch by including peas and carrots and spicing the rice with peppers. I also use the same smoking technique as *mandi* [a Yemeni rice and chicken dish of a smoky flavour slow-cooked in an underground tandoor oven], which infuses it with a deep, smoky flavour. This way, the dish blends the best of both *kabsa* [a Saudi spiced rice and chicken dish, cooked in a pot] and *mandi*, making it absolutely delicious.

Sarah: What desserts are popular in your region?

Zainab: Baniyas is especially known for *ka'k bi haleeb* [milk biscuits], a sweet treat we prepare for festive occasions. We also make *ma'moul* - delicate pastries filled with dates, walnuts, or pistachios, which are popular in Jableh as well. Jableh has its own specialities, like *ka'k bi summac* [sumac biscuits] and *jazariyeh*, both of which are sold in markets during festive seasons and throughout the year.

Sarah: *Jazariyeh* - this is the first time I've heard of it!

Zainab: It's quite famous in Jableh! We start by partially boiling carrots, then mashing them with fine sugar, walnuts, and other nuts, depending on preference. The result is a rich, sweet, and nutty treat.

Sarah: The coastal region is also well known for *maté* [a caffeine-rich herbal tea made from the leaves of the yerba mate plant].

Zainab: Yes! *Maté* is a natural herb, and drinking it is a social ritual, especially during gatherings with family and friends. We can have it more than five times a day! It's our preferred drink over tea or coffee.

Sarah: Do you still drink it after moving to Türkiye?

Zainab: Absolutely! Syrian shops here import it, so we still buy and enjoy it, especially during get-togethers.

Sarah: Let's talk about how the war affected food preparation in Baniyas and Jableh, especially after the revolution and the escalation of violence across Syria.

Zainab: It had a huge impact, particularly on how we cooked. Gas shortage was severe - we could only get a gas cylinder once every two months, so we often had to cook on diesel heaters. When diesel became scarce, too, we resorted to wood stoves. If electricity was available, we sometimes used laser stoves.

Food supplies were another major struggle. Before the war, we had our own agricultural land, growing olives and vegetables, which provided both food and income. But after our land was seized, we - despite being landowners - were forced to buy everything at excessive prices. And even then, we couldn't always find what we needed.

Sarah: What did you do when certain ingredients were unavailable?

Zainab: We had to adapt; for example instead of whole chicken, we used chicken gizzards because they were cheaper and still rich in protein. We would substitute them in dishes like *kabsa*. Meat became a luxury - we could afford it only once a month, and sometimes we left it out entirely, replacing it with chickpeas for protein and nutrients.

Sarah: And when you moved to Türkiye, did you face challenges with cooking?

Zainab: Of course. The biggest challenge at first was the language barrier - I didn't know the names of ingredients in Turkish, so I often had to ask someone who spoke Turkish or try searching online. Some ingredients were simply unavailable, like *molokhia* [Jew's mallow stew], *maté*, and certain spices that are essential in Syrian cuisine but hard to find in Türkiye because Turks do not commonly use them. It only got easier when Syrian shops started opening and stocking them.

Sarah: Many Syrians say that fruits and vegetables taste different in Türkiye compared to Syria. Do you feel the same? What do you think causes the difference?

Zainab: Some vegetables taste the same, but others are noticeably different - especially cucumbers, which have a completely different flavour here. Aubergines, too.

Sarah: What's different about them?

Zainab: Aubergines grown in Türkiye tend to absorb a lot of oil when fried, unlike the varieties we have in Syria, which stay crispier and have a richer flavour. Back home, we also have different types - large aubergines used for *mutabbal* [aubergine dip],

which are hard to find here, and very small aubergines, which are only available in Türkiye during certain seasons.

The difference in taste comes down to the soil and climate. Syria's coastal region has high humidity and abundant rainfall, giving vegetables a deeper, more intense flavour than Turkish varieties.

Sarah: Despite the challenges of finding the perfect ingredients, what keeps you motivated to continue preparing traditional dishes in Baniyas?

Zainab: My main motivation is that I want my children to learn our traditions, our customs, and the heritage of our cuisine - because food is a key part of who we are, both as Syrians and as people of the coastal region. Just as I inherited these traditions from my mother, who inherited them from hers, I want my children to carry them forward and be raised with the same values I grew up with.

Sarah: You're now living in a very different environment from the one you knew in Syria. What helped you adapt? And have you changed any of your cooking habits since moving here?

Zainab: My husband's support has been a huge help in adjusting - new people, a different language and being far from my family and friends was not easy. But when I became a mother, I had to be strong for my children, to be both a source of support and a role model for them. I wanted to raise them.

As for what has changed in my cooking, when I first started cooking here, I struggled to find many of the ingredients I was used to. But as I gradually managed to source them, I realised I had become more confident in the kitchen and began adding my own creative touches. I've even developed new dishes that have been very well received!

Sarah: Now that Syria has been liberated, what are your hopes for your family and your community?

Zainab: I hope for justice to be restored, for rights to be returned to their rightful owners, and for all Syrians to live in peace and security. I also hope we can preserve our traditions and customs, as they define us both as Syrians in general and as people of the coastal region.

Sarah: Why did you choose to settle in Mersin? Was it because it's a coastal city?

Zainab: While Mersin's coastal setting brings back memories of home, our decision to settle here was mainly driven by my husband's work. In Syria, he was an ironworker, but after we moved to Türkiye, he transitioned to agricultural work. Mersin is a major agricultural region, and most job opportunities are in this sector. Now, he primarily works in banana and tomato farming.

Sarah: What are the differences and similarities between the cuisine in Mersin and the cuisine of Syria's coastal region?

Zainab: They are as different as chalk and cheese. Even though both are coastal areas, there are significant differences. The food here is generally simpler. People in Mersin eat dishes like raw *kibbeh* with sauce, cauliflower, and they love white beans and pastries. Their food is also much spicier than ours. Surprisingly, fish dishes here are quite limited - they rely more on meat and chicken.

Sarah: Are there any similarities at all?

Zainab: We have some similar cooking methods, like making raw *kibbeh* with soaked bulgur and vegetables, but here, they make it unbelievably spicy! I also took a Turkish cooking course in Mersin, which was a great way to learn more about their cuisine. One thing we have in common is *mahashi* [stuffed vegetables] - we make it in Syria too. But in Türkiye, they often use dried vegetables, especially dried peppers, aubergines, and squash, along with vine leaves. They don't stuff courgettes as much as we do, and their *mahashi* is way spicier!

Sarah: So, do you not use chilli in your dishes at all?

Zainab: We do, but in much smaller amounts. My family isn't too keen on spicy food, so I hardly ever cook with it.

Sarah: You have an artistic side - I've seen your handmade crafts and paintings. You also mentioned taking a cooking course. After Syria is liberated, do you have a project in mind where you could use your skills?

Zainab: I'd love to start separate projects in different areas - cooking, handmade crafts, knitting, and more. But the ones I feel most drawn to are handmade crafts and pastry-making. Though they are distinct, I see a connection between them - pastry-making, in its own way, is a form of craftsmanship. I used to make all sorts of sweets,

shaping and decorating them in my own unique style. At the same time, I have a real passion for handmade crafts and a natural talent for them. Desserts aren't just about the ingredients; presentation and design play a key role, much like in handmade crafts.

Sarah: What are your hopes for your family and your community after liberation?

Zainab: My greatest hope is to get our land back and see all Syrians living in peace again. I also hope our people hold on to their heritage and traditions, keeping them alive - especially those related to food and cooking, because they're such an essential part of our identity. It's one of the traditions I'm really keen to see preserved, and I'm hopeful it won't fade away.

Sarah: Our heritage will live on as long as we have people like you, dedicated to passing it down to their children and sharing it with others around them. As we wrap up, what message would you like to share with our listeners, especially women?

Zainab: I want to tell every woman with a passion or hobby to nurture it and never stop pursuing it. Hobbies give us strength, help us face challenges, and shape who we are. A woman isn't just half of society - she's its foundation. She raises the next generation and gives them the strong roots they need to build a thriving community.

Sarah: That's so true - strong foundations sustain great structures and lead to meaningful change. Thank you so much for sharing your story.

Zainab: Thank you as well for the podcast. It provides us with a platform to share our experiences and ideas, while shining a light on our heritage.

Sarah: As we wrap up this episode, I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to our wonderful guest, Zainab Maghribi, and to you, our cherished listeners. Stay tuned for more episodes, and don't hesitate to connect with us through our website and social media. We'd also love to hear from you - feel free to send us your messages and suggestions for topics you'd like us to explore in the future.