

The Flavors That Unite Syrians

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ISTANBUL — I was born in Atlanta and spent most of my life in Virginia, but growing up, when people asked where I was from, I'd always say Syria.

My Syrian experience was in the kitchen and at the dining table, scooping garlic and cilantro-fried broad beans with handfuls of pita bread and sneaking mouthfuls of fresh cream sweetened with orange blossom syrup. Before dinner parties, I'd taste-test every dish that came out of our kitchen — a lick of yogurt sauce to assess the level of garlic, a dollop of hummus tested for too little tahini, a bite of spiced ground beef.

When I visited Syria for the last time, in 2010 before the civil war, food was the universal language between me and the people I met, whether they were relatives I hadn't seen since I was 3 or strangers demanding I join them for at least a cup of cardamom-spiced coffee. In the years since, I've been reporting on the war in Syria and on the people it has displaced. The refugees I've interviewed always insist on feeding me, even if they live in decrepit buildings missing their roofs, or in damp apartments crammed with extended families. "There must be bread and salt between us," a woman in Istanbul told me.

For Syrians, to cook is to be at home, to commune over a meal and seal a bond of friendship. While most people will associate Syria with the death and destruction that is in the news — neighborhoods reduced to rubble by government airstrikes; diabolical Islamic State fighters in black balaclavas; babies bobbing lifeless in the sea — Syrians are so much more than this war.

Food tells Syria's history better than the volumes that chronicle rulers and wars. Syria's land was part of the Fertile Crescent, where agriculture was born. It was fought over by the ancient Sumerians, Egyptians and Babylonians (authors of what are among the world's oldest written recipes); it was ruled by Persians, Byzantines and Ottomans — and we can taste their influence.

Aleppo, once Syria's largest city and now the site of some of the war's fiercest fighting, is situated along what used to be the Silk Road. Merchants and traders from as far away as China carried with them recipes and spices, which made their way into Aleppo's cuisine in dishes like meatballs swimming in sour-cherry sauce (lahmeh bi karaz) and a stew of quince and ground lamb stuffed into shells of bulgur (kibbeh saffarjaliyya). Sultans in the Ottoman Empire's capital would supposedly send their chefs to spy on the city's latest cooking trends.

For most women, making lunch or dinner is a full-time job. “In Syria, we’d all get together in the afternoons to sort out what we’d make for dinner,” said Ibtissam Masto, a Syrian refugee I met in Beirut. I talked to Ms. Masto, a 36-year-old mother of six, as she molded cylinders of spiced ground beef for kebab hindi. It was her shift at the small kitchenette with a dozen tables where she prepared lunch for the United Nations refugee agency’s staff. “I’ve always been told I’m a great cook,” she said. “I just didn’t think I’d be doing it for a living.”

Neither did Rana Jebran before she founded a catering company, HoneyDoe, with her mother and son in Chicago. She moved to the city in 2015 from Damascus to join her kids. “We used to always have people coming and going in Damascus — they’d just show up and ring the doorbell,” she told me. Entertaining friends and family was a part of everyday life.

As Ms. Jebran pulled out a box of intricately decorated cookies she and her mother had prepared the day before, she said, “When I have these cookies in the oven, I think, ‘This is the smell of Easter.’ ” Walk through Damascus’ streets on Easter and it becomes clear where the city’s Christians have gathered, she explained. “People take trays of these spice biscuits to bake at the communal ovens,” she said, filling entire neighborhoods with their scent.

The smell of garlic and cilantro likewise reminds Ms. Jebran of her Muslim neighbors’ Ramadan celebrations. “I think of the rush of my neighbors as they make the last preparations for their iftar” — the fast-breaking meals. “It is such a great smell,” she said.

Garlic and cilantro are used to flavor many Syrian dishes, from okra stew to the nationally treasured harra bi isbaou, which translates to “burned finger.” This dish of stewed lentils and small pieces of pasta-like dough bursts with flavor from tamarind syrup combined with fried garlic, cilantro and crispy fried onions. “They say it’s called harra bi isbaou because the peasants who invented it couldn’t wait for it to cool down to eat it, so they burned their fingers,” said Umm Ali, a masterly home cook from the Aleppo suburbs who fled to Beirut with her family in 2013.

Obay al-Shihabi, a Syrian-Palestinian friend who now lives in Germany, noted how much celebrating Ramadan had changed since the conflict in Syria began. “In Syria, you never ate alone for iftar,” he recalled. There would be a rotating schedule for families: everyone gathered at the grandparents’ homes the first nights, then the eldest siblings’ and so on until the youngest sibling hosted dinner, after which people dined with neighbors and friends. “Everyone always brought something — dessert, fruit, drinks,” Obay said. “And if we didn’t fit around a table, we’d sit on the floor.”

Obay grew up in Yarmouk, the unofficial refugee camp on the outskirts of Damascus that has housed Palestinians for nearly six decades. In recent years, Yarmouk has been the scene of intense fighting between rebels and forces loyal to the Syrian government. As in other contested regions, in Yarmouk food has been used as a weapon of war; government forces prevent deliveries of food supplies to the camp to break the opposition’s will.

Hunger has also been used as a tool by the Islamic State and other jihadist and rebel groups. According to the United Nations, nearly 600,000 Syrians are under siege, and nearly nine million are “food insecure.” Even for those not under siege, everything has become more expensive: flour, cooking oil, meat. Electricity is unreliable, water is often cut off. And yet many refugees still yearn for home. “At least we were all together,” Obay said. In Germany, he and his sister are alone.

These stories, told through food, offer a far more intimate insight into Syria and its people than most news reports. By understanding the acts of everyday life — of cooking and eating, or the inability to do so — we understand all that’s been lost in Syria’s war. And just as dishes are a relic of Syria’s past, as the Syrian diaspora spreads throughout the world, the story of Syria’s present and future will be told in recipes and the way people cook and eat.