

Spoonful

A GUIDE TO HOME GATHERINGS

WHEN WE GATHER: Holding Syria Close in Philadelphia

by JENN HALL 12 MAY 2017



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In this column, contributor Jenn Hall drops in on one family's dinner to observe traditions, listen to stories, and learn about the pathways by which ingredients and recipes travel across maps and generations.

When Hanaa Al Atmah gathered her four children and walked to the Jordanian border from Daraa, their home city in southwestern Syria where the conflict began, her youngest son Alaa was just an infant. That was back in 2012. By then, war had been raging for some time, eventually finding its way to the family's doorstep.

As for so many, life in Syria had grown too dangerous. There was no choice but to go.

Hanaa's husband Luai fled first, having been imprisoned and tortured by the government for reasons that remain unclear. Searching for him, government forces set fire to the family home and detained their eldest son, Mohammed, for two days—only releasing him when elders intervened. Hanaa and the children then followed. Their journey was risky, at one point interrupted by gunfire. As families scattered into night,

Hanaa lost track of her three eldest. Mohammed, now 18, can still recall the sound of his mother's voice searching for them come daybreak.

After several years in Jordan, all of this, improbably, would lead the Al Atmahs to a Northeast Philadelphia apartment. In August of 2016, the Nationalities Service Center (NSC)—the city's largest refugee resettlement agency—welcomed the family to their new home. Since November 2015, roughly 250 Syrians have found sanctuary in the city.

Day by day, the family is now shifting their focus toward the future. "God finally opened a door for us to come to Philadelphia," Luai says via our translator for the evening, Nasr Saradar—an NSC Employment Specialist from Damascus. "Life is a lot better now."



The three older children—Mohammed; Samaneh, 13; Ahmad, 12—can still draw to mind the rhythms of home as they were before the conflict. There was the chatter of neighbors, a constant backdrop. There were the sounds of mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen, recipes handed down through direct experience. Then there were the massive celebrations for which Daraa is justly famous. Incredible wedding feasts might include 5,000 guests or more. "Preparing for this feast is more important than the jewelry," Luai explains. "Everyone is invited. Everyone, big and small. If you have 5,000 people, everyone will eat."

Hanaa worries that young Alaa, now five, won't remember these traditions the way his siblings do. To look in on their home, however, is to find optimism. Each day, when the

family sits around the table, the spirit of their country is kept alive.

Hanaa recalls vividly the early meals she prepared here, dishes chosen to keep Syria near. “The first thing I did was kubbeh,” she says with a gentle smile. It was a recipe she perfected while cooking alongside her beloved mother-in-law. As a young bride, she completed her culinary training in her husband’s family home, a memory she cherishes. Now, her daughter Samaneh joins her in the kitchen, learning the very same dishes.

For this kind of kubbeh—and there are many—ground meat is stuffed inside a meat and wheat exterior, and then fried until golden. Back home, Nasr recalls, women would come together to make it over the course of a weekend, grandmothers, daughters, and young girls each claiming part of the recipe. “This dish is very old,” Hanaa explains. Most important is to cook it with love. “If every part of you is involved in a recipe, it will show in the end result,” she says.



Now, as new refugees arrive, the Al Atmabs make time to visit, or to invite them over for meals. Sometimes it might be freekeh or maqlubeh, an upside-down dish of eggplant, chicken, and rice. Other times it might be ouzi, a preparation of rice and green peas. Always, it’s a way of recreating a richness of community dearly missed. To Syrians, the American habit of remaining strangers is mystifying. “In Syria, sometimes neighborhood relationships are slightly more important than family relationships even—because your neighbor, door-to-door, will know your concerns even before your brother, who might be far away,” Luai explains.

“Faith recommends you to be aware of your seventh neighbor,” Nasr adds. “This means strong relationships. Strong connections. You ask about them. You greet them warmly

as brothers.” As each successive household forges these bonds, the fabric of a community is created.

Whether cooking for others or for her family, Hanaa is an expert in the cuisine of Syria and the Levant, which emphasizes fresh ingredients and gentle spices evocative of the region’s location along the historic Spice Road. “We are careful that the spices don’t

overcome the taste and flavor of the natural ingredients in the cuisine. It’s all light,” Hanaa explains. Nothing in their new city quite compares. “This food is not available outside,” Luai says. “It is imperative for us to serve it, and to have the family gather around these dishes.”



Word has gotten out. Her cooking is so popular that other Syrian families have started to place catering orders.

Evenings at home with guests begin with Arabic coffee, tinged with cardamom and boiled several times over. Offered by the head of the household, it is a

sign of hospitality, and sometimes everyone will drink from one cup. Yet there is more to it than that, Luai says, holding up a golden coffee pot that the family carried with them from Syria to Jordan to Philly. When there were problems between family clans in Daraa, representatives would come together to solve them over cups of the strong, fragrant brew.

To offer it, and for it be accepted, is to say that the issue in question is solved.



"As complicated as the problem is, it's resolved by a cup of coffee," Luai says. "This still exists to this day in southern parts of Syria. This coffee pot is a symbol for unity, for community." Should you be offered a cup, know that it will be refilled generously. Once you have had your fill, simply shake it gently to say: "no more."

Unlike in other cultures, appetizers do not precede a meal here. "We don't have this tradition where you put the appetizers first. No, no, no," Luai notes. "Go to the table, you find the appetizers, the hot meal, everything." There is wisdom in the approach. When the cooking is as expertly prepared as this, it is best not to spoil the appetite.



According to Luai, there is an Arabic proverb concerning food: the eye is fed before the stomach. As she waits for everyone to gather, then, Hanaa puts her artistic stamp on each dish. Hummus is marked with patterns and garnished with olive oil, cumin, and sliced cucumbers. Chicken is arranged atop curried rice for a dish

called kabseh, fresh vegetables sliced and arranged like jewels on top. There is bright tabbouleh, and homemade yogurt. Acidic pickles refresh, while gorgeous grape leaves are stuffed with rice.

The kubbeh, perfectly fried, are just like those from Daraa. “When I came home from school and she was making them, I was so hungry,” Ahmad says. “My mom made this one for me specially.”

“We remember Syria in this,” Luai says, pointing at the table. “This is Syria in here.”

Each night, the family always waits until everyone is there to eat. The togetherness is important—critical, even. “I see other cultures where if you come even 15 minutes before your father, you just eat and leave,” Luai says. We must sit around the table together.” It was always like this for the Al Atmahs, but after such a long journey the ritual is cherished. To eat together. To celebrate in community, even in a new place. These are the things that bring hope.

Over dinner, talk turns to the upcoming Philadelphia International Unity Cup, a city-wide soccer tournament entering its second year. Luai, it turns out, has coaching experience. There is laughter and warm conversation, the music of family everywhere. When all is done, the group sits back and says “daimeh.” An evocation of hospitality, it roughly translates to: “May your meal and table be everlasting and long-living.”

After dinner, as the family recounts the story of their path from Syria, Hanaa lays out traditional desserts including hariseh, a semolina cake, and halawet el-jibn, dessert rolls filled with sweet cheese. Nasr notes the expertise with which they were made. Then talks turns toward the future.

"My family was like a small tree before," Luai says. "Now we feel like it is growing, and the fruits are beginning to yield." Mohammed has his eye on college and hopes to be a dentist. If his performance as a senior in high school this year is any indication, he is well on his way. Ahmad and Samaneh both love school, and Alaa will start next year. "The rest of the fruits are going to grow, one after another," Luai says.



Kabseh (Syrian-Style Chicken & Rice)



This is one of the dishes Hanaa learned alongside her mother-in-law. Chicken is served atop a mound of spice-infused rice stained pale yellow with curry powder and turmeric.

Serves 8-10

Recipe by Haana Al Atmah

Rice Total Cooking Time: 40 minutes

Rice Active Cooking Time: 5 minutes

Chicken Total Cooking Time: 1 hour, 25 minutes

Chicken Active Cooking Time: 25 minutes

Rice:

2 cups basmati rice
1/3 cup oil
3 ¾ cups water
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon ground cardamom
½ teaspoon ground black pepper
1 teaspoons curry powder
1 teaspoons turmeric
1 Maggi cube (substitute chicken bouillon)
1 teaspoon salt
Pepper rings, tomato slices, lemon slices, thinly sliced carrots, cucumber slices (optional)
Slivered almonds (optional)

Chicken:

2 cups white vinegar
2 cups water
4 pounds chicken thighs
12-16 cups water

2 onions, cut into six pieces
2 cinnamon sticks
20 pods whole green cardamom
8 cloves
2 bay leaves
2 tablespoon salt
4 tablespoons tomato sauce
1½ teaspoons cumin
4-6 cloves finely minced garlic
Salt

Rice: Rinse the rice thoroughly and soak it in warm water for about 10 minutes. Wash carefully. Heat the oil in a rice pot and add the spices and Maggi. Add the rice and water bring to a boil. As soon as the water boils, cover and turn the heat down to low. Cook until the water has evaporated, about 20 minutes. Let rest for five minutes uncovered. Season with salt to taste.

Chicken: Soak the chicken for about 30 minutes in a mixture of equal parts water and vinegar, plus about two tablespoons of salt. Rinse and place the chicken in a stock pot. Cover with water so that it is about an inch above the poultry. Bring to a boil. After about three minutes, foam will appear. Lower the heat and continue simmering and skimming until the foam no longer appears, about 5-7 minutes. Add the onion, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, bay leaves, and 2 tablespoons of salt. Cover the pot, and simmer on low for 30 minutes.

While the chicken is simmering, make the basting sauce. Mix the tomato sauce, cumin, and garlic. Salt to taste. Set aside.

When the chicken is halfway through its boil, preheat the oven to 350°F, placing the rack at the highest level. Remove the chicken from the water when it is done and allow it to cool enough to handle. Baste with the sauce. Bake for about 20 minutes, then broil for a minute or two more until the skin begins to caramelize.

Final Assembly: Arrange the rice in a mound on a large serving platter. Place the chicken on top, and then decorate with pepper rings, tomato slices, lemon slices, thinly sliced carrots, or cucumber slices. Sprinkle your plate with lemon juice to help the flavors pop.