

Al Bukamal and Deir Ez-zor

Our hostess this time is called Om Kamal from Al Bukamal, a city very close to the borders of Iraq. In fact, it is much closer to the Iraqi city of Al-Qaim than to the city of Deir Ez-zor, which is the capital city of the province to which Al Bukamal belongs. Al Bukamal is one of many cities and towns that spread along the course of the Euphrates River in Syria. When looking at the map of Syria, one can notice that along the river is a green line on which cities and villages are spread. This line is surrounded by a mostly empty desert. Like Deir Ez-zor, Raqqa, and the rest of the cities within the Syrian Euphrates region, Al Bukamal is famous for a cuisine with ingredients combining both Bedouin and urban cultures, forming together a distinctive mixture. There are other factors that contribute to the cultural mix in this region, not just in food. For example, the Ottoman Empire attempted in the second half of the nineteenth century to settle the nomadic Bedouins in stable gatherings instead of permanent movement, and that led to building Al Bukamal in 1864 as a military post (or Qeshla, which is one of the old names of Al Bukamal). It is believed that Abu Kamal, a sub-tribe of the ancient Al-Aqidat tribe, was the first to settle there, hence the name. Others believe that it was named after the commander of the first military post who was buried in a mosque there. We could not confirm which of the two stories about the

origin of the city's name was the correct one, nor the reason for previously calling it Nahama.⁹

The Euphrates region share a lot of similar traditions and cultural practices, many of which spread into Iraq as well. Hawsa is one of these artistic practices unique to the area, especially Deir Ez-zor. It is a short song that is often sung or recited in the form of a poem, and it aims mainly to motivate and arouse enthusiasm in wars or races or other exciting events, hence the name Hawsa coming from the Arabic word 'hawas', meaning 'extreme excitement.' One of the most popular stories of Hawsa is the story of a battle between Al-Buhassun tribe and the British during their short presence in the area in 1919. The sheikh of the tribe, Muhammad Al-Dandal, was killed during a battle with the British. When the martyr's mother felt that his brother, Musharraf, was reluctant to take revenge on the British because of concerns expressed by the rest of the tribe's elders, she provoked him in a poem in front of those elders not to be afraid of death and to take his revenge. Those present were also enticed and started repeating a line of the mother's poem to Musharraf, and indeed he did attack the British and won that battle. This story, and the lines of the mother's poem that people repeated after her later became a longer and famous Hawsa in Deir Ez-Zor and Iraq.¹⁰

⁹ For readers of Arabic, read Asaad Alfares' 2019 book '*Al-Boukamal in Syria.*'

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z7UEhuHghZk&list=RDCMUCTfyPFEA6EPTLrn9hS75-Cw&start_radio=1&rv=Z7UEhuHghZk&t=2&t=79

Back to our main topic, food, some of the main popular vegetables grown in Deir Ez-zor province are okra, mushrooms and eggplant. The Euphrates area is also known as the Syrian Jazira, which is known historically as Syria's food basket. It largely contributes to the country's food security as it is where most of our wheat comes from. Like other women in the countryside and small towns throughout Syria, the women of this province are experts at benefiting from the local produce and animal products, hence their heavy dependence on wheat and its by-products. For example, most of the traditional dishes of the city, from qaren yariq to okra stew, thareed and mansaf, consist mainly of tannour bread or saj bread ¹¹ that most of the women in the region bake themselves. While Syrian families in the major cities depend on the bread of public bakeries, women in Deir Ez-zor place great importance on making their own bread, so much so that our hostess, despite the small size of her apartment in Latakia (compared to her home in Al-Bukamal), still made sure she would have the large saj on her small balcony to make her family's bread herself. Om Kamal taught us how to cook Qaren Yariq, which other women in Deir ez-Zor also call Qazan Kebab. Om Kamal also baked saj bread for us so that we have an authentic Qaren Yariq eating experience.

- **Qaren Yariq**

- **Ingredients:** 2 kilos of eggplant, half a kilo of finely chopped meat, chopped tomatoes, two finely chopped

¹¹ 'Tannoor' is a clay oven, whereas 'saj' is a metal oven.

onions, one tablespoon of black spices, a chicken or beef stock, salt, two tablespoons of olive oil, and frying oil.

- **Instructions:** Peel the eggplant in a stripy way and make a cut in the peeled part with a knife. Fry the eggplants until they become golden-brown. Prepare the filling by sautéing the onions with two tablespoons of oil. Add the meat and stir. Add the spices and a teaspoon of salt. Put the filling in the holes of the eggplants. Lay the eggplants next to each other in the tray in the form of rose petals, and put half a tomato between each two.



To prepare the sauce, add a teaspoon of salt and the stock to tomato juice and boil for ten minutes. Add the mixture to the tray of the eggplants, and cook for a quarter of an hour at a high temperature.

