

Daraa and its Mleihi Mansaf

The city of Daraa is the capital of Daraa governorate, which is located in the far south of Syria. It is also the historic capital of the Horan region, which includes Daraa and Suwayda governorates in addition to northern Jordan. Horan shares many customs and traditions across the borders of the governorates and the two countries, which is not surprising given that Horan was only divided administratively for the first time in the 1916 Sykes –Picot Agreement in which France and Britain carved up the historic Greater Syria into a number of states. In all the previous empires, Horan was unified under a single municipal authority (wilayat, sanjak, or mutasarrifiyah). Like the case of Antakian families inside Syria, which we touched upon in the first section, the people of Daraa also have close ties to the people of Ramtha and Irbid in Jordan, including blood relations occasionally. Indeed one of the elders of Ramtha mentioned in an interview with the Jordanian TV how he used to cross the border lines- which for him and many others an arbitrary imaginary concept detached from reality- in order to harvest the crops of his Land, which extends into the Syrian borders. This, for him and for those living on the Syrian side of the border was a normal thing despite the fact that decades have passed since he lost his legal right to that land.

One of the distinctive features of Horan, particularly Daraa, is relative financial prosperity compared to most of Syria. Many people attribute this to the fact that a very large proportion of the region's population are expatriates

in the Gulf since the 1970s. There are other factors that led to Daraa's economic prosperity though, mainly its fertile plains and the ease of agricultural investment which previously made it Syria's second most important wheat reservoir after the district of Al-Jazeera in the north-east. These expansive fertile plains also led to a richness in herds of cattle and sheep, which meant wealth for the region's small density of population. There is a proverb in Syria, particularly prevalent in Horan, which says: "If a drought occurs in Horan, Rome starves." This saying is attributed to an old Roman proverb back from when Horan was an important part of that empire. It is difficult to really link this saying to old Rome, but its connotations cannot be denied; Horan Plain has always been a food reservoir for Syria and for all the empires that have ruled her.

Horan's people are also famous for their generosity, which some may attribute to the general financial prosperity we mentioned above. I mentioned above, but a recent initiative at the beginning of 2023 confirms that this generosity is an innate nature and not just a predictable result for having many expatriates in the Gulf. This initiative is 'Da'el Appeal', which has evolved into 'Horan's Appeal'. It began when people of Da'el, with a population of 50000, decided to take control of their own circumstances in light of the dire financial situation and the deteriorating services all over Syria. They launched a big fundraising campaign to improve the living circumstances and raised a billion Syrian Liras in just its first week (over \$142000). It continued until donations reached the equivalent of a quarter of a million US dollars. This

campaign inspired the people of Abta' town to do the same initiative, and so did the towns of Sheikh-Miskin, Eastern Karak ,Gharaya, Nawa, Taseel, Kherbat Ghazala, Akraba and Nemer. Each of these cities and towns raised more than a billion Liras. As a result, dozens of artesian wells were restored, new roads were built, streets were lit, and the most destitute families were helped. Perhaps this story shows the actual source of the richness of Daraa and Horan in general, which is the will, magnanimity and mutual support among its people and their constant tendency to take initiative and make their own destiny.

Om Mousa Al-Homsi, a lady from Daraa taught us how to cook Mleihi, which is the Horanian version Mansaf, a main dish that is famous and loved in all of Syria's inlands. It is also Jordan's number one national dish, and the Jordanian Mansaf enjoys great popularity in the Arab world due to the proficiency of Jordanian investors and the Jordanian media in promoting their national dish. In addition, damascene cuisine, which does not include Mansaf. However, comparisons between Syrian and Jordanian Mansafs have started happening in Arabic media in recent years, and Syrian Mansaf is starting to assert itself. Perhaps this book will contribute slightly to increasing investment in Syrian cuisine beyond just Damascene cuisine, which has so far succeeded in establishing itself outside Syria.

Even the most famous desserts in Horan are popular and traditional in Jordan, namely the Lazzaqiuyat and the Halqoum Delights (Horian Delights).

There are two main differences between Jordanian and Syrian Mansafs. First, Syrian Mansaf relies on the bulgur while Jordanian Mansaf relies on rice. Secondly, fried Kubbeh is added on top of the Syrian Mansaf, whereas there is no Kubbeh in Jordan's Mansaf. People have always liked to compete over the origin of a dish they have in common, with each claiming their city/country is where that dish originates, and as a researcher I try not to get sucked into these competitions, especially considering how fluid food history is. However, in the case of Mansaf, the Syrian version's reliance on bulgur leaves no doubt that it is the original version of Mansaf since bulgur is as old as Syria itself whereas rice was not known before the Abbasid era, starting from Iraq then gradually reaching the rest of the region. Rice also remained extremely expensive and rarely used until the twentieth century, which makes it highly unlikely that rice Mansaf could have been the popular dish of the region for long.

Mansaf, or Mlehi Mansaf in this case, is another example of a dish that is organically connected to its environment and totally dependent on much of the ingredients available in it: local wheat to make the bulgur and the Sharak bread, and from local sheep we get the meat, ghee and Jameed, which is a condensed lamb milk dried to be used for long periods of time. This dish is traditionally cooked with lamb or mutton, but Om Mousa used chicken instead.

- **Mlehi Mansaf**

- **Ingredients:** 1 kilo of coarse bulgur- 1 kilo of jameed, or any full fat sour yogurt- Animal fat ghee- Black pepper-

Salt- Curcuma- Laurel leaves- Cinnamon- Basil- A tablespoon of starch- An onion - A chicken (traditionally made with lamb or mutton legs or shoulder)

- Instructions:

Soak the chicken meat with water and boil it with an onion, cinnamon stick, two leaves of laurel and salt. Leave them until the chicken is well- cooked. Then leave it aside. Put the jameed (or any sour yogurt) in another pot and melt the starch with water, then stir it well with the yogurt. The stirring should be continuous while the pot is on the stove. Then, put the chicken into the yogurt when it starts



to boil with a spoon of ghee. Add bulgur to the pot that contains the chicken broth, with salt added as desired. Crush the bulgur so much till it becomes mashed, adding a little bit of broth constantly. Cover the bulgur for 15 minutes then serve it on a tray with chicken above it and little amount of cooked yogurt. The

rest of the broth is offered beside the dish in a separate bowl to be added as desired.

