Observations and Reflections

I would like to reiterate something we said in the introduction because it is important to stress it, which is that this book is not in any way claiming to represent Syrian food culture, or even the food cultures of the specific demographics featured in the book. The only thing we are trying to do here is to start a conversation between Syrians about the cultural specificities and differences in order to tab into the wealth of cultural diversity that we have. Therefore, we would be grateful for any comments, corrections, or additions to anything we included in this book. We also wish to stress that the choice of families visited in this research was completely dictated by logistics, so there are absolutely no intentions to prioritise certain groups of Syrian at the expense of others. We basically kept recruiting participants until we ran out of money and time! The only criteria we followed was to prioritise including families who were not going to reflect the areas always featuring on mainstream media in Syria, i.e. Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia. All the families visited live in or around Latakia for pragmatic reasons, but they come from all over Syria, mostly due to the sad circumstances of the war and internal displacement. This actually gave the project the additional value of offering the participants who no longer enjoy the comfort of home and their familiar surroundings and close social circles to relive some aspects of those lost comforts and introduce them to us and the readers with pride and joy, with the hope that soon they can have the option to go back home,

should they wish to leave Latakia. It is also worth mentioning that the majority of the participants, and the majority of displaced Syrians in general, come from rural areas, and this has given the project the unplanned privilege of contributing to better represent rural area, which is hugely and cynically under/miss-represented in Syrian mainstream culture.

We will now share some of the recurrent observations that we noticed during the research, and offer some reflections on the process overall.

- **Wheat**

Abo Ammar, the head of the Antakyan family, called bulgur 'the cornerstone of our cooking,' and this sentiment towards bulgier, and wheat in general, was recurrent and almost universal among all families. There is a popular saying by the villagers across the Latakian mountains that 'bulgur is the anchor for the knees,' and some hard core traditionalists start feeding babies bulgur from 6 months of age believing that it helps them grow healthier and stronger- an opinion which you should probably run by doctors before trying though! You must have noticed as you read through the chapters how often bulgur or wheat are used, especially in recipes that are directly associated with certain traditions and special religious/life events. This is not surprising for a country that has been growing wheat for 12000 years, according the Lebanese historian Charles Al-Hayek, whereas rice has only been grown here for few centuries[23].

[23] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEl198Nu-Lg&t=1053s

All regions of Syria agree on the centrality of wheat in their traditional cuisine, from the Northern-most to Southern-most regions, and from the borders with Iraq all the way to the Mediterranean. We have noticed, for example, there are many versions of dishes that come from the same concept of mixing and grinding bulgur with tomato/pepper paste and shaping it into fingers. The Antakyan family did it with boiled potato, in Raqqa they add raw bulgur to cooked tomato stew then turn off the heat and cover the pan so that the bulgur half-cooks by steam and is then minced by hand and shaped into fingers, In Harem they grinde it in mortar with raw meat and heavily spiced, and surely more methods of making these bulgur fingers exist.

It is worth mentioning that Syria had been an exporter of wheat for many decades until its produce started declining dangerously in the early 2000s as a result of draught and irresponsible government policies, and then in 2012 Syria imported wheat for the first time in her history[24]. Needless to say, the war escalated the problem, and Turkey's constant blockage of the Euphrates water from Syria as well, and now the country has a sever wheat shortage.

1. **<u>Syrian hospitality endangered</u>**
2. The clearest in-common feature of food culture in Syria, unfortunately, is that due to the sever economic destitution most Syrians are experiencing today after 12 years of civil war, the very renowned

[24] https://syrianobserver.com/news/78932/wheat-production-in-syria-drops-by-75.html

Syrian hospitality is disappearing. It is worth explaining here that there are two main ways in which Syrians invite each other for food, and we are focusing here on families, not individuals. Firstly, neighbours and relatives and friends who are very close and intimate with each other visit in the evenings for chats and entertainment. This is the most common way of visits, often happen without pre-agreement, and people offer drinks, nuts and seeds, and some light desserts like dates, dried figs, Siyayeel, Lazzaqiyat, etc., and maybe seasonal fruits. If such evening visits happen between two families that are not that close yet, like when two people are getting engaged and their families are meeting to get acquainted, then more elaborate desserts are often offered, mostly bought and not home-made. Secondly, there are the more formal and are usually planned as a family would invite another for lunch (the main meal in Syria), and this is where feats are laid out and families go to extremes to show their appreciation to their guests through generosity in the food laid out in front of them. Most of the meals that our participants taught us are made in such events.

Sadly, all the families we met confirmed that this hospitality and these invitations are happening much less in frequency, and when they happen they are nowhere near the pre-war generosity described above. Doubtless, the devastating earthquake that hit north-west Syria in February 2023 has made things even worse. According to

every single one of our participants, people are now avoiding visiting each other regularly in order not to embarrass their hosts, because if you visit someone and they do not offer you food they will feel uncomfortable, even though you are not visiting them to be offered food and drinks but just because you miss them. Indeed it has gotten so bad in Syria that many families reported worrying that if they have guests then they will lose fuel to boil water to make them tea. Lunch invitations are particularly very rare now, especially considering how rich in meat most Syrian dishes are, and meat is now a rare occurrence even for middle-class families that took it for granted and had it almost daily before the war.

What makes this even more particularly sad is how all the women we interviewed told us how cooking for guests used to be a source of pride and joy for them as hard as it always is to cook for many people. They all talked about how they grew up in families where there is a positive competition between women in how lavish their lunch invitations would be, and how creative they get in adding their touches to famous dishes. There is a very popular saying in Syria that goes 'you eat as much as you love us,' and this is a phrase that the hosts repeat happily to their guests throughout the invitation in order to encourage their guests to eat more, and they would rush ti add more food to their guest's plate when it's nearly empty. The participants reminisced about such practices that they took for granted with bitterness as they explained how they hardly ever do this anymore. Even in big events like the Eids, they described how their families would often

slaughter a number of sheep or goats or a bull, but now they would only use few chickens instead.

2. The power of memories

In the face of such depressing realities, memories function as both a coping mechanism and defence against a complete loss of identity. Happy memories of times where people carried out their cultural practices around food and hospitality with pride and purpose are a reminder that current exceptional circumstances do not limit who we are as a people and as individuals, and when we cling on as tight as we could to these memories we could revive those practices as soon as our circumstances allow. The research team felt this in the passion with which our participants talked when they recounted memories either from just before the war or from their childhood. Om Osama from Bahlouliyah is one of the oldest among our participants, and she shared stories from her childhood when the Agha (the feudal lord) of her village used to sacrifice scores of sheep and goats in the Eid, and how there would be an open invitation to everyone all the surrounding villages. Everyone would come with a plate, and the Agha would make sure to serve the children himself, filling their plates and offering them money. Street sellers and performers would come on that day knowing that there will be many people and many kids with Eid money, so the kids will take the money from their parents, relatives and the Agha, eat their food, and then go straight to spending that money on performers and candy.

Om Abdulla from Al-Qadmous told us about an older man who made sure every year on the New Year Day (the Eastern calendar New Year) he would roam her village and surrounding villages with bags of candy, and kids will run to him and receive one each. She told us that this man and his special candy (mlabbas) became a tradition for the people of Al-Qadmous.

Om Kamal from the Al-Bukamal told us how it would be considered shameful if a guest comes to their house and leaves without sharing a meal, so once they've had a guest, they will set out to prepare meal, not just drinks or nibbles. Similarly, Sona from Kassab said her parent's house was like a madafa (guest house), and she was used as a child to constantly see guests on a daily basis, with food and drinks to offer all the time. Similar stories were repeated by every single one of our participants about pre-war hospitality in their households and the households were they grew up.

From this we see an added value to this and similar projects. It is to keep this oral history alive and documented so that the new generation that are born/raised during the war realise that the current situation is the exception, not the rule. We also hope that by offering these women the opportunity to narrate and relive these memories we have offered them an opportunity to relive the pride and satisfaction associated with them, not just as an escapism, but also as an affirmation that exceptional current circumstances do not define you.

3. Food and mourning

Another positive practice in-common between most Syrians is that when someone dies, the relative/neighbours/close friends of the bereaved family make sure they cook for them for the first week or so in order to allow the family to cope with the pain of losing a loved one, and also to deal with all the duties, logistics, and paperwork associated with this death and arranging for the funeral and mourning ceremonies. It is worth mentioning here that in Syria the funeral and burial within the same day of someone dying, maybe the following day as the latest. Also, immediately after the burial, a formal 'Azaa' is organised, which is basically a mourning period of anywere between 3-7 days, where the bereaved family, supported by their closes relatives, friends/neighbours accept consolations from anyone who wishes to come and offer them; no one is invited to these but are considered as a duty for anyone who knew the deceased or their family. The mourning period for some people culminates in a massive feast where animals are sacrificed for the memory of the deceased, and there's often an open invitation for anyone who wishes to come. Here, another observation that many participants made is that this feast is historically home-cooked, but in recent years most people are ordering in from caterers. If we go back a couple of decades further back, even wedding food used to be home-cooked, or partly home-cooked, especially in the rural areas, but this has long become very rare.

4. Differences

There is a clear division between Western Syria and the rest of the country when it comes to using olive oil VS ghee in cooking. In Idlib and the Mediterranean areas, olive oil is huge and heavily used, whereas ghee (animal fat) is essential in the rest of Syria. This is linked to two things: Idlib and the Syrian Mediterranean countryside produce the overwhelming majority of the country's olives and olive oil, and they are the most mountainous areas of Syria as well. On the other hand, the other regions featured in this book have bigger farming plain lands and much bigger herds of sheep and goat, hence animal ghee is much more readily available for them. Similarly, western Syria depends mostly on cow dairy products, whereas the rest mix between cow, sheep and goat milk.

Another difference we have noticed is between the rural areas and small towns on one side, and big cities on the other. Many women interviewed repeated that they were surprised, living in a big city after displacement, how city people do not take hospitality as seriously as they do. This is not surprising, of course, given how the living conditions in big cities are busier and more restricted than they are in villages and small towns, which makes the readiness to host guests and lay down big meals wherever an unexpected guest shows up unrealistic, especially with a larger proportion of women in the cities work in jobs typically from 8-3, whereas village women (again typically) work in the land immediately surrounding their house. This is not to mention that families in the villages often live in detached houses that are usually surrounded by small

land where there grow some vegetables and may keep live stock and chicken. City families buy their grocery on a daily basis, so cannot be as flexible. When a visit is pre-planned though, city families are no less generous than rural families, but the spontaneity of unannounced guests where the story is inevitably different.

5. Our experience as a team

As a team, we are both Syrians who belong to the demographics we are trying to introduce in this book, and therefore our personal experience with this project has been full of contradictory feelings. On one hand, this project allowed us to know our own country better than we ever did before, learning a lot about its history and its beautifully complex civilizational fabric. On the other hand, there is bitterness in realizing the huge level of cultural incompetence that we have as a people about each other and about our own partners in the country. It is beyond sad to realise how little we invest in the cultural, ethnic, religious, linguistic richness that we have, be it in the media, in tourism, in education, or any other form of investment. There are political reasons, obviously, behind this cultural incompetence, although this is not the right space to discuss them, but there are also economic ones as well. Social and regional mobility are limited in Syria, and many Syrians are born and raised, educated, have a career and a family and die in the same are, and know very little about anywhere else that is more than an hour or so away. This is mostly because we do not have a welfare system that supports people who are out of job or looking

for one, or indeed those on low income, and therefore family is essential irreplaceable for many Syrians who keep living with their families until they have their own, and it is even a common practice to get married in the family home, or extend it slightly in rural areas.

This is of course changing gradually, partly as a natural side effect of modernity, and partly due the huge waves of internal displacements that happened since 2011. As tragic as this is, this internal displacement comes with an unintended positive side effect, which is more exchange and connections between Syrians from different regions. The project and the book are a step in this direction, opening doors for more cultural and civilizational exchange and collaboration.

The other source of bitterness is witnessing more and more how huge the toll of the war has been and is going to be on Syrian cultural heritage for many years to come. Having said that, there are many uplifting examples of the tenacity and indefectibility of Syrians surfacing every now and then. One such example is the Baghuz Palm Festival which was established just a couple of years ago to celebrate the town's unique dates and give it publicity and marketing[25]. I am giving this example because Baghuz is one of the Syrian towns most devastated during the war, and within a year of it regaining peace, the people of the town came up with this excellent idea to pump some life and trade into the town, restore its reputation, and put a smile on the faces of its inhabitant who were caught in ruthless fighting and aerial bombardment in 2019. This is

[25] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-WCg0luagw

only one of countless examples of similar initiatives, cultural, or mixing both across Syria, especially initiatives by women who lost their husbands and found themselves in a position where they had to suddenly become the main breadwinners, and many of them found creative and admirable ways to do so[26]. Food, and everything related to it, is an area where Syrians excelled inside and outside of Syria, and it is an excellent starter for conversations and for collaborations. Together with the undefeated mentality of Syrians, and with a basic sense of survival, we are sure that any support for such initiatives, even if through a humble book like this one, would benefit many Syrians and Syrian cultural heritage in general.

And now, over to you… This was only the start of this conversation, it started between us as a research team and 11 Syrian families in Syria. Now, we invite all our readers to join in the conversation and share recipes and stories that depict some aspects of your own food cultural identity. The hard copy is out already in Arabic and 1000 free copies have been distributed in a number of cities inside of Syria, and those copies ended with a number of blank pages to invite the readers to use them to have their say and share their stories. Now we ask

---

26

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1DLHJ6h22fo&list=PLR6DMB6R4QPWW58Y4zl51yjOscm0wNE1l&index=7&t=573s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1CyUHCwdPhg
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L_ov7vJoFeY
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WCQGdkqjQnI

the readers of this electronic version to do the same and email us their contributions and comments, and we will establish an online repository where the book and the contributions from readers will be added and updated regularly. Please share any recipes and stories to the following email address: **aqeel.abdulla@kcl.ac.uk**

Thank you so much for reading, and we wish you all a lot of happy cooking and eating with people you love.