

St Barbara's Day and Sleiqa

One of the clearest manifestations of a dish being closely associated with a specific traditional/religious event in Syria is the Sleiqa and St Barabara's Day, celebrated in December 4th in Syria and surrounding countries. To know more about St Barbara's story and the Sleiqa we visited Om Fadi in the beautiful small city of Muhardah in Hama province.

St Barbara's Day is recognised by the Vatican, but we don't know the reason behind choosing December 4th, whether it is her birthday, the day she died, or whether it was chosen to replace a former pagan holiday, as is the Vatican's common practice with pagan holidays around the world. St Barbara's day is therefore an international Christian holy day, not just in our region, but it is undeniably more known and celebrated here because this is where St Barbara comes from.

The part of the story that all iterations of it agree on is that she was the daughter of a local leader in the third century AD when the region was under Roman rule and the Romans persecuted Christians. St Barbara learned about Christianity and adopted it secretly because her father was an extreme zealot in his persecution of Christians. When a prince asked for her hand in Marriage and her father agreed, Barbara declared her Christianity and that she will dedicate her life to spreading the religion. Her father warned her to change her mind or be executed, so she escaped the palace, then her father's soldiers found

her and killed her, and in some stories he killed her with his own hands.

The first disagreement between the different accounts of the story is where exactly it happened. The Egyptian versions range between Turkey and Egypt, the Syria and Lebanese versions range between Lebanon (Baalbek in particular)¹⁶ and Turkey, and the Palestinian version says that she is from Turkey but her escape led her to the Palestinian village of Aboud where she hid in the wheat fields until the soldiers found her and killed. In fact, there is a shrine for St Barbara in Aboud where the locals believe she is buried.¹⁷ Apart from the exact locations of the story, there is an interesting feature in-common between all stories, which is the central role of wheat in all of them. We have already shared the Palestinian story and hiding in a wheat field, and in the popular story in Syria and Lebanon, which Om Fadi repeated to us, she escapes her father's palace by hiding in the wheat barrels leaving the palace. Hence, sleiqa's significance in this holyday, as it consists primarily of wheat, and Syrian christians insist on cooking this dish on this day to signify the religious symbolism of wheat.

The symbolism and significance of wheat and Sleika is not limited to Christians or religious heritage as a whole, but it is also linked to the celebration of new life. Many

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SEl198Nu-Lg&t=1053s>

¹⁷ <https://raseef22.net/article/1076456-%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%8A%D8%AD%D8%AA%D9%81%D9%84-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A9>

Syrians, Christians and Muslims, cook this dish when their baby's first tooth appears, in fact another name for this dish is 'snoniyeh' which is derived from the Syrian dialect way to say teeth. All the versions of cooking Sleiqqa that we found online are the same as the one Om Fadi taught us, except for a newer, fancy version using milk instead of water, mostly intended to show wealth.

Going back to the St Barbara Day, one of the customs of celebrating it is that kids dress up in a way intended to hide their identity, just like St Barbara hid herself in order to escape her father's cruelty. This is very similar to Halloween, but it has been historically happening in Syria and Lebanon decades before Halloween became known in the area, and over a month after it. We couldn't dig deep enough to discover whether one of the two holidays borrowed from the other or not, neither is this important. What is important though is that in recent years the practice of kids dressing up and knocking on doors to ask for sweets on St Barbara's Day in Syria and Lebanon decreased significantly, whereas doing the same thing on Halloween gained popularity. This is not to say that burrowing practices from other cultures is a problem, but the fact that the knowledge and practice of our own cultural heritage are diminishing even when these practices are very similar to others coming from the West. This is proof that further education and dissemination of knowledge about our cultural heritage is a must now or else we risk losing a lot of this heritage.

- **Sleiqa**

- **Ingredients:** 1 KG chickpeas (raw and dry), 1 KG whole wheat, 1 cup of sugar, and for decoration: walnuts, raisins, hundreds and thousands (the kids sweet), and sweet sprinkles.

- **Recipe:** we soak the chickpeas in water for 24 hours.



We soak the wheat in water for 1 hour. Boil the chickpeas then add the wheat and cook on low-medium heat for 3 hours. We drain and add sugar and mix. We put it in the serving plate and then sprinkle the walnuts, raisins, and the sweets on top as desired.



