

Mary's Assumption Day, Hareesa, and Syrian Armenians

It is widely believed, mistakenly, that the Armenian presence in Syria began with the great Armenian exodus to Syria during World War I, following the genocide committed by the Ottoman Empire. The reality, however, is that the Armenians have a very ancient historical association with Syria and the region. To begin with, the Kingdom of Greater Armenia existed between the fourth century BC and the fifth century AD. It spanned over a large area, including most of today's Turkey and Iraq, and all of Syria. However, this Armenian political and military presence was short and intermittent. The continuous presence that has lasted until now began when many Armenian Christian pilgrims settled in the holy lands in Palestine and founded their own patriarchy in Jerusalem in the third century AD, and St. Jacob Cathedral, which is one of the oldest in Jerusalem today.¹⁸ Starting from that point, they established a continuous presence, albeit in small numbers, in the rest of Greater Syria and Iraq, which resulted in a great cultural, civilizational and religious influence. However, there is no doubt that the Armenian genocide of 1915-1923 caused the single biggest wave of Armenian migration to Syria, escaping Ottoman massacres against them inside of Turkey and in Armenia as well.

¹⁸ https://info.wafa.ps/ar_page.aspx?id=5049

Another misconception is that the Armenians in Syria are citizens of the Republic of Armenia who reside in Syria. Actually, the Armenians in Syria are Syrian citizens with full citizenship and rights since 1924 when the Syrian Nationality Law No. 2825 was issued, and Armenians have had representation in the parliament and the government since 1928. Moreover, the Republic of Armenia did not allow its citizens to have multiple nationalities before 2005, meaning that all Syrian Armenians were exclusively Syrians for eight decades before some of them chose to obtain Armenian citizenship alongside the Syrian, an option that many of them understandably took after the start of the war in Syria.

Armenians are found in most Syrian provinces, although they have a heavy presence in specific areas, including the town of Kasab in Latakia's mountains. Kasab is a coastal mountainous town adjacent to the Turkish border with scenic landscapes that are famous throughout Syria, especially following the huge popularity of a Syrian comedy series called "Deya'a Daya'a" (the Lost Village) that was filmed there. In Kasab, Mrs. Sona Ghazarian hosted us on the Day of the Assumption of Mary and introduced us to the rites of celebrating this day, specifically eating Hareesa.

Armenian cuisine has a strong, tangible impact on the Syrian and Levantine cuisines, with Armenian food becoming an integral part of it like the Armenian Sfiha, of sujuc, qawerma, pastrami and rosto. Armenians are known for their use dried fruits and grape molasses in

making their sweets, such as the dessert Mrs. Ghazarian made us along with Hareesa.

According to the Christian faith, Assumption Day commemorates the day Virgin Mary is believed to have died and her body was assumed into heaven. It is often considered the third most important Christian holiday in Syria after Christmas and Easter, and its popular name in Syria is the Lady's Day rather than Assumption Day. Christians mark the holiday by fasting from the first of August until the Assumption Day. On this day, churches in many Syrian cities organise religious parades during which statues of the Virgin Mary are carried and paraded through the streets. Marmarita Carnival, the most famous carnival in Syria, is basically the celebration of Wadi Al-Nasara region on Assumption Day, although it has become a major tourist event in which religious rituals are hardly noticeable.

The Armenians in Kasab celebrate this holiday with great passion. According to Mrs. Ghazarian, many Armenians from different regions of Syria come to Kasab to participate in the celebrations, to the extent that some of them do not find a place to sleep and spend the night sleeping rough under the trees. The numbers of those going to kassab to celebrate the Lady's Day have decreased though since the start of the war. She adds that the preparation for the celebrations begins at dawn or perhaps from the night before, when the priest blesses the sheep that are going to be sacrificed by feeding them salt with his hand and praying over them before they are slaughtered. After that, the meat is cooked slowly for

hours. Meanwhile, the young men responsible for slaughtering, skinning, gutting, cleaning and cooking the sheep entertain themselves by grilling the pluck.

A lot of dishes are cooked on Assumption Day, but the main course is Hareesa, which consists mainly of wheat. Syrian Armenians cook it on other saints' days as well, which is another example of wheat's association with the traditional and religious heritage of the Syrians. Wheat has a great symbolic importance for the Armenians in Armenia as well, and this can be seen on the wall paintings in the historical churches of Armenia with pictures of the tools used in harvesting wheat.¹⁹

- **Hareesa**

- **Ingredients:** Chicken pieces (or a kilo of thigh pieces) washed well with cold water, a kilo of wheat soaked in hot water for at least 8 hours, a quarter of a kilo of finely chopped fatty meat, ghee, and salt.

- **Instructions:** In a large pot, put first the chicken pieces (making sure that the pieces are washed more than once with cold water) and the soaked wheat. Add water till covering the ingredients with a tablespoon of salt, and wait for it to boil. Cover the pot and let it boil for two or three hours at a low temperature without stirring. Watch the wheat from time to time to make sure whether adding boiling water is necessary. When the wheat starts to become done and the water's color changes (after two or three hours), start a process of continuous stirring for about ten minutes. While stirring, start to remove the skin

¹⁹ <https://www.noonpost.com/content/22781>

and bones. It is possible to take the chicken pieces out of the pot before starting to stir, remove the skin and bones, then put them back in the pot and start stirring until the mixture becomes thick. In a small frying pan, heat 3-4



tablespoons of ghee, then add to the pot and continue stirring for additional five to ten minutes until the texture feels good. It should not be like soup at all, rather it should be cohesive and thick. Most of the wheat grains are mashed and the chicken is mixed with it.



The last step is to stir-fry the fatty meat in a small frying pan without adding any oil or ghee. Then, add two tablespoons of ghee to it and fry it

more. This meat is added on top of the Hareesa in the serving dish, and not mixed with it during cooking.

- **Grape molasses sweet**



Heat 4
tablespoons of oil
and add a cup of
brown flour to it,
or white flour can
be used if brown is
not available. Stir
continuously over
medium heat until
the flour turns

brown. Start adding grape molasses gradually, stirring until it reaches a texture similar to the texture of the dough, empty it in a plate, leave it to cool, then start forming it into the shape of fingers for serving.