

Harem and Idlib

I have not been fortunate enough to visit Idlib before even though I have always hoped to do so. I was always curious to visit the province that competed with Latakia, my home city, for the title of the best olives in Syria! The province is known as Idlib the Green, a title derived from its vast green fields, which are the result of the abundance of fresh water in the area as well as its high elevation and relative proximity to the Mediterranean meaning a lot of rain as well. Idlib is adjacent to Iskenderun from one side, and Aleppo from the other. This has greatly influenced the culture of the province as its folkloric songs are very similar to those of Aleppo, while their traditional costumes are similar to those of Antakya and southern Turkey. As for folk dances, Idlib has two distinct ones. The first dance is Sheikhani, in which a sword and a shield are used, similar to the famous Damascene 'Arada' but clearly distinct from it. The second is Qawsar, which is the Idlib version of the 'Arab Dabkeh,' a very popular dabkeh across Syria, from Latakia in the west to Al Bukamal in the east, and from Harem in the north to Daraa in the south.

I have personally enjoyed studying the cuisines of all Syrian provinces, but looking closely at Idlib's food culture was a very special treat for a foodie like me! Idlib's people have a special kind of passion and connection to their food and local produce that is very apparent in some unique dishes and food practices associated with some of their unique dishes like Jerneh, Chili Dakkah (mashed pepper), Zannaneh, and Aqras Al-zawba'a. Jerneh and Chili Dakkah

are very similar in their ingredients, and in the fact they are usually made by pounding their ingredients in a large jern (and jern is a very large mortar and pestle). Moreover, the people of Idlib like to eat these two savoury dishes while on a picnic, often on their own land as it is easy to prepare them in the shade of the trees using ingredients that are readily available around them. The Jerneh is prepared by finely cutting some onions, tomatoes, and red peppers. Salt and olive oil are added to the mixture, which is then pounded in the jern until the ingredients are completely mixed. Grilled eggplants are then added and pounded with the rest of the ingredients.¹² Chili Dakkah also contains tomatoes, onions and red peppers, but it is often more spicy than Jerneh. Walnuts, salt, oil and cumin are also added, and the ingredients are pounded in the jern. There is no eggplant in the Chili Dakkah itself, although fried eggplants are very common as a side dish.¹³ Aqras Al-Zawba'a is pastry with a lot of chilli paste and Zawbaa plant, which is a special type of thyme that Idlib is famous for and is now being grown for export in recent years in Hama. It is a crop that generates huge income for its investors due to its health benefits.

It is clear from most of the popular dishes of Idlib that the people of Idlib use chilli paste so much that one of the women of the village of Salqin said, half-jokingly, in a television interview that the immunity of the people of

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRWxy-9IxsM>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvgpbRLQXDoQ>

Salqin was strong because of how much hot pepper they eat, and that, in her opinion, is why the Corona Virus spread in the surrounding areas, but not in Salqin.¹⁴ A medical theory that many doctors will dispute, we are sure!

Perhaps the most unusual and distinctive savory dish in Idlib, if not in all of Syria, is Zannaneh, which is more of a celebratory social tradition during the olive picking season than actually a savory dish. Zannaneh consists of saj bread, peeled whole cloves of garlic, pomegranate, mint, and so much olive oil that the ingredients swim in it, and then people dip their hands into the mix and enjoy it.¹⁵ I find it the strangest and most distinctive dish because the people of Idlib like to eat it in the olive oil press where they prepare it with the oil coming directly from the oil separator (the machine from which the oil comes out in the last stage of its production). It is well-known that olive oil is very bitter and spicy when it is newly produced, and people usually wait a week or two for it to sweeten slightly before they use it. I believe the main idea of this dish is to celebrate the olive picking season, which Idlib is particularly distinguished for, and therefore the incredible practice of eating the olive oil in excessive abundance and the second it is produced is an emotional ingredient of this recipe more than a gastronomical one.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmRK0dGxw9s>

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRWxy-9IxsM>

Our hostess this time is Om Imad from Harem, a city in the far north of Idlib on the border with Turkey. She taught us the recipe of Kibbeh Nayyeh (raw Kibbeh). The city of Harem may be the most important reason behind giving the province the title of Idlib the Green as it is very rich in water and was known for having 7 water springs, but some have dried out. Nevertheless, the city is still very rich with fresh water. One of its still active springs comes from inside the hill on which Harim Castle was built, and the famous ancient Harem Mosque was built on the course of the river that flows from this particular spring, and the worshipers perform ablution using this fresh water that flows from the mosque's taps throughout the day.

Kibbeh Nayyeh is the most popular dish in Idlib and has a special status in the province's cuisine. Om Imad confirms this and says it is the must-have dish for both pleasant and sad occasions. It is even a daily dish in Ramadan for her family, and her children would always ask for it at Iftar. As mentioned earlier about people of Idlib having their own food rites, Om Imad used to source and prepare the ingredients for Kibbeh Nayyeh herself from scratch before leaving home in Harem. She used to dry the hot peppers, making her family's whole year supply during chili pepper season, she used to make bulgur from her land's wheat, and her oil from the olives on her land. She usually grinds and mix the spices using the jern and pounder to grind peppers and meat. However, because she now lives in a multi-story building in Latakia, she sometimes has to use the electric food processor instead because jern and pounder are too loud for the neighbors.

- **Kibbeh Nayyeh**

- **Ingredients:** 1 kilo of brown bulgur, an ounce of dried whole peppers, half a kilo of lean meat, an ounce of fat, an onion, a teaspoon of seven spices, a teaspoon of salt, and a teaspoon of cumin.

- **Instructions:** pound the meat in the jern until it becomes soft and fine, add a teaspoon of the spices and a teaspoon of salt. Mix the dry peppers and the onion with the blender. Pound the fat with the mixture of the peppers and the onion in the jern.

Soak the brown bulgur in warm water (3 cups) for two hours.

Rub the bulgur with hands until turning into a paste, then add the rest of the ingredients and rub the mixture well. Some water can be sprinkled for easy rubbing.



Form the mixture into the shape of fingers and brush them with ground peppers and onions

Serve with oil, yogurt and parsley.