

Eid Bulgur of the Coastal Countryside

The countryside on the Syrian coast extends over the plains surrounding the four coastal cities: Latakia, Jableh, Banias and Tartous, as well the mountains that extend parallel to the Mediterranean coast. Villages and towns in this countryside share many customs related to food, specifically food linked to religious and popular occasions. Om Osama from the village of Bahlouliyah hosted us on one of these occasions, the Festival of Al-Rabe' (which means The Fourth). She cooked for us the special Eid bulgur on wood fire while recalling her memories of such occasions from the sixties of the last century until today.

Having a special kind of food for special occasions is a common feature among many Syrians, and the rural people of the coast are no exception, specifically among the Alawites who preserve some of the old practices that have been going on for thousands of years, that is, since before the monotheistic religions. One of the dishes most closely related to special occasions for Alawites is bulgur with chickpeas cooked on wood fire with either lamb (or mutton), beef or Chicken. They prepare it for religious and non-religious occasions, on the ceremonies held after one week and after forty days of someone's death, and sometimes in family celebrations too.

Before talking about the Eid Bulgur, we need to provide an overview of the Alawites' holidays. First, the Alawites share with the rest of the Muslims that Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are the two most important religious holidays in the year and are commonly known as the Small Eid and the

Great Eid. These are followed in importance for Muslims, including Alawites, by Laylat al-Qadr, the middle of Sha'ban and the Prophet's birthday. On top of these holidays, Alawites and Shiites celebrate the occasions of Ghadir and Ashura, which are two occasions acknowledged historically by all Muslims, but not celebrated as holidays by Sunni Muslims. Finally, Alawites celebrate the occasion of Mubahala (the Prophet Mohammad's public debate with the bishop of Najran) and the occasion of Firash, which means "bed" in Arabic, and this is the day of the Prophet migrated from Mecca and his cousin, Ali bin Abi-Talib's slept in his bed to deceive Mecca's knights who gathered to kill Mohammad)

In addition to religious holidays, the Alawites are distinguished for their celebration of holidays in which the ancient heritage of Syria, from the Phoenician, Aramaic, Assyrian and Syriac civilizations, mixes with the Christian and Islamic religions. For example, Al-Qouzalli is New Year's Day on the Eastern calendar and is celebrated on the 13th of January. Interestingly, this holiday does not follow the birthday of Christ according to the Western churches on December 24, nor according to the Eastern churches on January 7-8, nor even is it January 1, which is the date of the beginning of the year according to the Gregorian Western calendar. Rather, it is on January 13, which is the date when the pre-Christian civilizations in Syria celebrated the beginning of the year according to their ancient eastern calendar. Some people get confused and mix the religious Christmas holiday with the New Year celebrations just because they are very close on the

calendar, and some Alawites extend this confusion to the Qouzalli, or the Syrian New Year in the ancient Eastern calendar. This perhaps explains the name that the people of Qadmus give for the pastry they make especially on the Syrian New Year, which is Milady Pastry (Christmassy Pastry). However, the reality remains that this holiday precedes the Christian religion by thousands of years.

The second holiday, which has roots as old as Syria, is Al-Rabe' (AKA the Zuhriyeh), which is celebrated on April 17. It is known by this name- which we pointed out earlier it means the fourth- either because it comes in the fourth month of the year or because the day of its celebration is April 4 according to Eastern calendar, which corresponds to April 17 according to the Western calendar followed in Syria. Al-Rabe' is simply the old Syrian version of the famous spring festivals in the region: Nowruz for the Persians and Kurds on March 21, Akitu or the Assyrians on April 1, and Sham El-Nessim in Egypt. The latter, which coincided this year (2023) on April 17 as well, is also a spring festival that predates Christianity by thousands of years but is now associated in Egypt with another Christian holiday, Easter.

These very ancient festivals in the region celebrate the arrival of spring when there is abundance in crops and plants and people rejoice and offer sacrifices as thanks for this season and hoping for an abundant harvest during it. They also celebrate the end of the season and the start of the rains in late October. It so happens that the date of this celebration is the same as the date of Syria's Independence Day from French colonialism. Although

some argue that this is not a coincidence and that the Alawites changed the date of the celebration after independence, we did not find any historical reference confirming the validity of this theory. It is also known that the difference between Eastern and Western calendar is 13 days, which means that the fourth of the Eastern April is indeed the seventeenth of the Western April. Unfortunately, the collective celebrations of Al-Rabe' have greatly diminished and were about to stop since the start of the war in Syria. However, individual celebrations of it within families have never stopped, and sporadic initiatives have emerged in recent years to revive it with collective celebrations as before.

As we mentioned above, the Alawites linked the festival with Islamic religious practices. For example, they celebrate it next to the religious shrines in which the important saints of the Alawite sect are buried. The traditions usually involved having a specific shrine around which people from the neighbouring regions gather to celebrate the occasion every year, and these shrines are closely related to Al-Rabe'. Moreover, some Alawites offer sacrifices, on the Islamic way, during this festival, as well as during Qouzalli, in a way that is very similar to the traditional celebrations of Eid Al-Fitr and Eid Al-Adha. This leads us to talk about a custom that is common among traditional and religious Alawite families called Rassim (pledge). In Rassim, the head of the family pledges to offer sacrifices and feed people on a specific occasion as a way of thanking God for a specific blessing, such as having a son after a long wait, recovering from a long illness, surviving

a serious accident, etc. This pledge continues throughout the life of the person who made it, and his children even inherit the pledge after that person's death. Some people take this vow very seriously to the point that they would borrow money and incur small debt on themselves just to fulfil their commitment. People often link their sacrifice to either Eid al-Fitr or al-Adha, followed by Laylat al-Qadr and the middle of Sha'ban and al-Ghadeer, and then to a lesser extent, the Qawzla and the Al-Rabe' as is the case with Om Osama's family who hosted us and taught us to cook the special bulgur. In some cases, the Rassim is for the holiday closest to the event that necessitated making the pledge.

- **Eid Bulgur**

- **Ingredients (feast quantity serving around 10 people. Adjust accordingly):** 3 chickens, cut and washed (on which a sheikh must have performed special rituals before slaughtering), a kilo of chickpeas soaked for 24 hours, and around 2-3 KGs of bulgur- exact quantity to be decided during the cooking as will be shown below.

- **Instructions:** In a large pot, put the chicken and chickpeas covered with water to boil on firewood, until cooked. Reduce the heat after boiling and leave for an hour, then add 3 tablespoons of salt. Take the chicken out of the pot, and add the bulgur to the boiling broth. Keep adding bulgur until the cooking spoon stands in the middle, and this is how we know that the quantity is correct, or for small, non-celebration quantities, we go by the rule of thumb that every cup of bulgur needs a cup and a half of water.



Boil on low fire until almost fully cooked. We then debone the cooked chicken and remove the skin and add it to the bulgur, stir and then leave until the water is gone. We take it off the fire, add olive oil to it and stir.

