

REVIVING ALEPPO'S GASTRONOMIC PAST

MARCH 2017

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“The Aleppo cuisine is as modern as it is classic. Trading routes helped the Aleppian cuisine to develop in terms of techniques, flavors, spices and resources, as the city connected the trade route coming from Yemen and the Silk Road coming from India and China.”

Mohammad Orfali

Kibbeh

Aleppians speak of as many as **77** different kibbeh **dishes**

28 kibbeh **recipes** are well-known

Oldest known Aleppian recipe, quince kibbeh, dates back **800** years.

War has shattered that. Now the remaining population struggles to feed itself and the knowledge and customs have been dispersed along with the people. Bringing back Aleppo's food culture after the war will be central to restoring not just its economy but also identity and confidence.



SUMMARY

Aleppo's history as a trading city at the heart of a web of links around the world and its location in the most fertile area of Syria created the most sophisticated cuisine in the Levant. A long history, a diverse population, wealth and a great range of ingredients meant the city was a center of Middle Eastern gastronomy. War has shattered that. Now the remaining population struggles to feed itself and the knowledge and customs have been dispersed along with the people. Bringing back Aleppo's food culture after the war will be central to restoring not just its economy but also identity and confidence.

Food in Aleppo faces a number of acute threats. War has destroyed the food economy and the population is now heavily dependent on aid. The diversity and wealth of the city has been massively reduced. Restaurant culture and celebrations, aspects of life that are essential for the maintenance of a lively food culture, have mostly disappeared or been dispersed. Beyond that, the area around Aleppo has seen a decade of worsening water stress and rising temperatures. Crops that were a distinctive part of the cuisine, from Aleppo pepper to pistachios, may be under threat from climate change as well as conflict.

With the war in its current state it is hard to imagine any future for Aleppo but peace will eventually return. When it does, rebuilding the food sector is a vital step. Many aspects of it will have changed from farming to distribution to restaurants but given the economic opportunities and the centrality of food to life and culture, it will return quite quickly. What will also be important is to ensure that the richer food culture recovers to maintain the identity of the city, eventually bring back tourism and to support the large numbers of people employed in this area.

Among the ideas explored by this paper are plans to revive the Syrian Academy of Gastronomy as a center for the understanding and celebration of food as well as bringing back food festivals and other celebrations. A local Slow Food Movement could boost the promotion of this key aspect of intangible culture and help with the redevelopment of tourism. Developing rural agritourism north of the city also holds promise.

Knowledge needs to be preserved and passed down to future generations. A new museum of Aleppian cuisine would ensure that people know about the richness of their heritage in this area and how the diversity of the city contributed to that wealth.



INTRODUCTION

Aleppo is better known now for the war that has nearly destroyed it rather than the long periods of peace during which it developed its sophisticated and cosmopolitan life. Food was always at its core as the city was a center for the trade in valuable spices between Asia, the Middle East and Europe. The Ottoman conquest of the region opened up trade routes, particularly between the Dutch East Indies and Europe. Aleppo was at the heart of that with a number of countries, notably Venice, moving their trade missions and consulates there at this time.¹ Aleppo's diverse population – the city had for centuries Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities as well as populations of Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Circassians and others from across the region – contributed to its food culture.² Influences spread as far as Italy, China and India.³ From this rich mix, emerged a cuisine that is frequently ranked as the best in the Middle East and was awarded a Grand Prize of Gastronomic Culture.⁴ The interest in food goes back a long way – the oldest known recipe from the city – for quince kibbeh – dates back 800 years.⁵

Food was important during peace time and may yet be important as a driver of recovery.⁶ Food can break down barriers, link communities and express identity without being too political or sectarian. Food and the rituals around it play an important role in peace and contribute greatly to a successful economy.

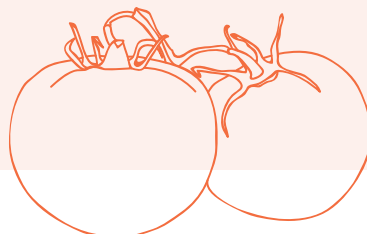
WHAT MAKES ALEPPO DISTINCTIVE?

Food, from growing it to cooking, serving and eating, is a core part of any local knowledge and culture.⁷ Aleppo's food had a number of aspects that made it distinct, even within Syria. One was the complexity and sophistication. Kibbeh, small balls of meat and bulgar wheat can be found across the region but there are dozens of variants in Aleppo.⁸ The Lebanese food writer and cook Anous Helou described a variant of kibbeh stuffed with lamb tail fat and Aleppo pepper, shaped into delicate little domes. Other variants typical to the city include *safarjaliyeh*, kibbeh cooked with quince in fresh pomegranate juice. Mixing sweet and sour fruits with savory tastes has been common in Aleppian cuisine. A type of kebab, for example, is cooked with sour cherries. The city has both an elite home cooking making use of the rarest products such as desert truffles and a street food enjoyed by every level of society. Aleppo is famous for its bakeries and their extensive use of pistachios in pastries and deserts.

WHY IS A FOCUS ON FOOD NEEDED?

In April 2016, the UN General Assembly named the next ten years as the UN Decade of Action on Nutrition.⁹ As part of the Sustainable Development Goals, the plan is to ensure better nutrition and more sustainable production of food for every age of life. It also promotes sustainable equitable, accessible and diverse food systems.¹⁰

Syria has gone from being a country that was agriculturally self-sufficient to one that has massively mismanaged its farming and environment. Not only is Syria likely to suffer almost permanent water stress but the management of its land and water has deteriorated from its already parlous state because of the war.





Rebuilding agriculture and foodways in Aleppo and the surrounding countryside will be vital to support recovery and the return of the more than two million people displaced from the region. Everything from agricultural production to water use and transport are likely to change with the severe impact of the war and the worsening of climate change in the region.¹¹

For the region to build any form of sustainable agriculture and food production, massive changes will have to take place in water consumption, irrigation, urban farming, transportation, and the variety of crops grown. Syria may have to decrease its production of the thirstiest crops such as cotton and grow more varieties suitable to drought afflicted areas. Part of this transition is underway because of the direct impact of war that has forced people to grow their own food and reduce the use of pumps and fertilizer.

Institutionalizing change across many sectors of the economy is going to require new ways to think about food, a return to some older practices and the development of new ones. In this context, education and the preservation of traditional knowledge about food is vital in terms of economic recovery and future sustainable development.¹²

Beyond food production, ensuring local production of a variety of foods and the knowledge of how to prepare them is essential to improve nutrition. Several countries have listed the Mediterranean diet as part of their intangible cultural heritage due to its quality and health benefits. Syrian food has many of those benefits and so sustaining it is vital in recovering from the damage to nutrition done by the war and ensuring that fewer people fall victim to the problems of poor diet as recovery occurs. Before the war, up to 90 per cent of Syrians made *mouneh*, naturally preserved seasonal food such as sun-dried tomatoes, jams, stuffed eggplant and cheeses, to see them through the winter. Now, only about 20 per cent can afford to do so.¹³

POLICY PROPOSALS

Much of the revival of the food culture will occur through the actions of thousands of individuals, from farmers through to cooks and café owners. When peace returns and the economy revives, food culture will return but this process could be accelerated and some of the harm reversed through the development of some institutions.

It is impossible not to be aware of the challenges ahead for Aleppo. These initiatives would have to compete with many other pressing demands in the reconstruction of a city that has seen so much of its vital medical and education facilities destroyed. We also have no idea about what political climate will emerge at the end of the conflict and how that will effect reconciliation. Certainly the experiences of near constant violence in Iraq and Afghanistan or the deep divisions remaining in Lebanon a quarter century after that war do not bode well for a successful peace in Syria.

However, it is important to consider new ways to overcome these difficulties and not be trapped either by pessimism or by failures elsewhere. It may be possible to learn from past mistakes rather than repeating them and it may be possible that Aleppians will be able to recover so much of what has been lost in war.

These policy ideas draw on ideas from around the world and have been used to promote food and tourism in other countries with some success. They are presented to stimulate ideas that might work in Aleppo given its unique history and culture and its long passionate relationship with its food.

The cultural importance of food is anchored in the moment and meanings can change often. Certain foods can come to symbolize a cultural authenticity while those same foods may have been judged old-fashioned and backward just a few years before. An example of this is the consumption of offal in many western countries. Ideas about heritage have changed considerably in Syria with for example both the countryside and the old cities of Aleppo and Damascus coming to represent a supposedly authentic identity for many. Just a generation ago, Syrians were very keen to leave behind both the countryside and the old cities in favor of a modern lifestyles and homes. Issues of authenticity and nostalgia need to be treated carefully. In short, fashions change and often quite rapidly.¹⁴ In Syria, the complexity of these issues is compounded by the heavy state control over all aspects of heritage.

The Syrian Academy of Gastronomy

The Syrian Academy of Gastronomy was founded in 2002 and registered at the Ministry of Tourism.¹⁵ The Academy, part of a global network of such groups, aimed to preserve Syrian cuisine and promote tourism relating to food. Its work has been abeyance since the start of the war as many members fled the country. It continues to hold some meetings in Lebanon¹⁶.

Before the conflict, the Academy had plans to develop a cooking school and guest house in Aleppo aimed at foreign tourists wishing to learn about the food there.¹⁷ It had also worked to spread the reputation of food, hosting Aleppian dinners in London and Paris before the war. While it is no longer fully functioning, the Academy could provide a focal point for creating sustainable food tourism in Syria and particularly in Aleppo. Studies have shown that not only does the promotion of food as a key tourist draw promote a sustainable local economy but that it also enhances local identity.¹⁸

Food Festivals

Before the war, festivals were an important part of life in Aleppo and often centered around food. The restarting of these events after the conflict will be an important way to recover the normal rhythms of life and perhaps to bring communities back into contact.¹⁹ The war has destroyed public spaces in the city – literally in many cases through bombing but also because insecurity has meant people lead very constrained lives.

These festivals are also an important and proven draw for tourists, particularly if they have some focus on local food.²⁰



Aleppo Food Museum

Before the war, the Syrian Academy of Gastronomy was planning a food center and cooking school in Aleppo. This idea could be expanded to create a museum of food in the city that would also provide a wider education about food and agriculture and ensuring continuing documentation of the culture.²¹

A food museum could serve a number of roles: the focus of groups working on sustainable food production; a center for the education of children about food; a repository of knowledge about food and a way for older generations to transmit their knowledge.²²

UNESCO has put greater emphasis on intangible heritage in recent years and should support an effort like the development of a food museum along with other plans to support reconstruction in the city.²³ For many in the Syrian diaspora, such a project would satisfy their desire to help the city recover and sustain a culture they remember from the past.²⁴

A Slow Food Movement

Across Europe the development of the Slow Food Movement has been central in maintaining traditions and sustaining regional identity in the face of industrial food production. This global movement now has branches in 150 countries and has had a growing effect on promoting sustainable, ethical food production.

The Slow Food Movement has set up a branch in Lebanon that may be able to assist, particularly given the close culinary and cultural links and the fact that many leading figures of the Syrian culinary sector are now in exile in Beirut²⁵. A Slow Food Movement chapter (also known as a convivium) might be a critical way to rebuild the various identities around food in Aleppo.²⁶

Critics of the Slow Food Movement have painted it as elitist, another romanticized form of luxury consumption for the wealthy. But it is grounded in promoting local culture and the provision of environmentally sustainable food practices. An Aleppian convivium would be an important way to promote the recovery of the food sector in a way that helps maintain local identity and culture.

Agritourism and rural recovery

The countryside immediately surrounding Aleppo has been badly damaged by intense fighting. Some rural areas have been less damaged and agriculture may recover more quickly. Even before the war, agri-



culture in Syria was in a parlous state, undermined by the reductions in government subsidies for fuel and fertilizer. The country's longest lasting drought on record from 2006 to 2010 reduced water, forced farmers to over-use ground water and reduced outputs. Many people abandoned farms and left for the cities, causing the informal areas of Aleppo and other cities to swell with new populations.

Around the world rapid urbanization, loss of rural livelihoods, the expansion of agribusiness and climate change have had a severely deleterious effect on the countryside and its people. In Syria the government neglected to respond to these emerging issues, caught up as it was with the growing urban economies across the county. The neglect of the country means that any rural recovery is going to be slow and painful. There is a tendency for returning refugees to go back to cities rather than villages; jobs are more plentiful and security better in cities on the whole. Children who have grown up in refugee camps or cities abroad are raised without the knowledge or inclination to work on a farm.

There are a number of possible responses to this. Urban farming can help families with food security and potentially provide jobs for rural people who have moved to cities. Aleppians have started growing their own food due to the shortages, particularly in the east, and because of the risk of siege and enforced starvation. A number of groups have worked on a small scale to promote the use of heritage seeds (from which successive crops can be grown). Knowledge of urban farming has spread as a necessity for survival but there is no reason not to continue to make use of this ingenuity after the conflict.

Agritourism might also be able to sustain incomes for farmers as it does elsewhere in the world. This may not be easy to establish in the near term; security may be a problem and the rural population is conservative and understandably cautious. The area north of the city may offer some possibilities after the conflict. It is picturesque and grows a wide variety of crops, among them cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, gum Arabic, mastic and sesame.²⁷

Visitors who are interested in agritourism would value the history, the richness of the food culture and the traditional hospitality of the region.²⁸ Tourism was generally under-developed in Syria despite its rich heritage. The war has set it back decades but when peace comes there will be enormous potential for a country with a prime geographic location close to many growing markets for tourism.

All forms of tourism create the risk of "Disneyfication," a process of creeping artifice in which activities become simply performances for wealthy outsiders and have no relationship to everyday lives except as a way to earn money. What has been described as "rurality under glass" can be disruptive to communities.²⁹ There is no doubt as well that suspicions of outsiders remain and will doubtless have been worsened by war. But when managed through careful programs and considerable local input, tourism can be an effective way to create higher and more sustainable incomes for rural communities and to provide jobs for young people who want to move off the farm. Programs need to ensure that the poorest farmers see benefits from any programs and that the process is not dominated by urban elites expanding their reach into rural areas.³⁰





CONCLUSION

Food will be key to recovery in Aleppo. To ensure that the recovery is sustainable and equitable, it must be driven as much as possible by Aleppians themselves. But there are lessons to be learned from elsewhere as the reconstruction of the city and its life cannot simply replicate the same conditions that led to such intense conflict there. Poverty, poorly managed urbanism, environmentally and economically unsustainable agriculture and the loss of cultural diversity are all problems that are deeply woven into a political system that has proved catastrophic for the Syrian people. With half a million dead, more than half the population displaced and the economy destroyed, recovery is going to be arduous. Life in short will never be the same for Syrians.

Recovering the culture of food is as important as recovering the agriculture and foodways behind it. That culture is at the heart of sustainable processes and of identity. Rebuilding the cultural confidence of the city and its people as well as finding ways to rebuild the torn relationship between Aleppo and its rural hinterland will be essential. Far from being a luxury aimed at tourism, developing ways to preserve and honor the food of the area is vital to its eventual peace and prosperity.

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