

Safeguarding Memory: Aleppian Cuisine

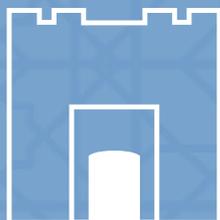
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Aleppian family in Germany gather for lunch: kibbeh. Credit: the Aleppo Project

THE ALEPPO PROJECT



مشروع حلب

Aleppo has been known for centuries for its food. Like many gastronomic centers, the city was blessed with a set of circumstances: a location on key trading routes, a diverse population, a prosperous middle class, and a place amidst the most fertile farms in Syria.¹ This created a diverse cuisine that blended elements from its various ethnic and religious groups. Unfortunately, war has put all of this at risk. Much agricultural land is cut off, restaurants are closed, food is in short supply, and destruction has nearly halted food production. With many of its people scattered around the world, there is a risk of the loss of knowledge and skills. Not only is there a need to preserve food ways, but Aleppian cuisine is an important aspect of identity that once bound people together and might do so again.

Aleppian food is distinct in many ways. It uses a wider variety of spices than most Levantine cooking, in part because of its long history as a stop on the spice routes between Asia and Europe, the spice trade that was a key source of wealth in the middle Ages when Aleppo was a key entrepôt. Fruits are often combined with savory flavors, as they are in Persian-influenced foods. Aleppo pepper adds a gently spicy note to many dishes while pistachios—known in Arabic as Aleppian nuts (fustok halabi) bring their richness and beautiful bright green color.

With up to 60% of the city destroyed, much of its heritage damaged, and many of its people driven into exile. There is a real danger that the centuries-old food heritage may well be lost. Aleppian food culture existed in homes and in many food establishments from cafes, bakeries, through to expensive restaurants. It was a unifying force in the city before the conflict, and even today, amid a terrible war, bakeries, urban gardens, and markets are at the center of life.

There are real threats to the production of foods around the city. It will be important not only to safeguard agricultural production but also to find ways to support it in the midst of the conflict through supporting urban farms and assisting farmers outside the city. As people are dispersed, it will be important to preserve food culture in places such as refugee camps by training new generations of farmers and cooks, and ensuring that knowledge is not lost.²

Food also has an important place in the eventual reconciliation processes which is essential for the city's recovery since it crosses boundaries of ethnicity, religion and creates common memories of cosmopolitan urban life. Therefore, enterprises associated with food should be supported with access to credit to help them rebuild.

Food has only recently been taken seriously as part of the intangible culture that shapes our identity. Several countries—although not Syria—have listed their cuisines in the UNESCO intangible heritage program. Aleppian cuisine should be listed and classified as heritage at risk, deserving of equivalent attention as the architecture and art that also makes up the city's heritage.

In February 2016, the World Food Program began distributing food parcels to tens of thousands of people fleeing fighting in northern Aleppo.³ The packages contained enough rice, flour, pasta, lentils, white beans, bulgur wheat, sugar, and cooking oil to feed a family for a month. These are just the basics when it comes to cooking in Syria and particularly in Aleppo, a city known for the richness and diversity of its cuisine. That so many should now be dependent on food aid in what was the bread basket of the region illustrates the enormous harm that has come to the city in five years of war.

War has a profound impact on identity, heightening differences between rival groups and fostering the darkest sense of each other. It also erodes those aspects of life that connect us. Although the western part of Aleppo came under the regime control in December 2016, the social fabric has been divided between those who stayed in the city and those forced out of it, as well as by privileges attained or lost because of ideology, class or mere geography.

The pre-war identity of Aleppo as a trading city, a cosmopolitan home to a diverse population, and a sophisticated place of culture and *joie de vivre* has been shattered. A crucial part of that identity was once food. Aleppo's wealth and diversity along with its position at the heart of Syria's richest agricultural zone sustained a culinary culture that was the pride of the city.

Aleppians have a long history of merging their foods and bringing in influences from around the world. The kebabs cooked with sour cherries show the influence of Persia, the spice rack illustrates the influence of India and Turkey, while pistachios are a particularly Aleppian feature of savory and sweet dishes alike.

As a British citizen of Aleppian decent, Aleppo's food culture helped shape my identity. Every Friday night, my family and I have Aleppian food. As we are Jewish, we could only imagine going back to Aleppo and experience the rich and unique culture that has helped define me and my family.

"The people of Aleppo extol the food of their city and its delicacies. They do not eat to excess but they expend inordinate effort and employ meticulous precision in the preparation of dishes." The saying goes: "If you judge the wellbeing of someone from Aleppo, uncover his pot and inspect his food,"⁴ wrote Hayim Sabato, a rabbi and novelist whose family is from the city. Besides the identity, the type of food one eats represents an indication of economic class; for example, eating meat, especially lamb meat, is a sign of wellbeing. When Aleppians talk of their city, it is often in terms of ancient architecture, classical music, and food, three areas in which Aleppo stands out not just in Syria but across the Arab world.

There is value in protecting the intangible heritage of food and certainly in the diversity of crops that have been cultivated in the area. This is a relatively new idea, developed within the UNESCO over the past several years. The cuisines of a number of countries, including France, Japan and Mexico have been recognized by the UNESCO as part of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Similarly, the “Mediterranean diet” has been recognized as part of humanity’s intangible heritage that warrants international protection.⁵ Syria has not declared any of its food as part of intangible heritage and therefore has not benefited from the UN funding and expertise.

Beyond the protection of heritage, it will be important for the reconstruction of Aleppo to consider aspects of urban identity that go beyond religion, ethnicity, or politics. Even the reconstruction of the shared heritage of Aleppo’s architecture is likely to arouse some contention when it eventually occurs. In many cases, however, food culture is something that can be shared and enjoyed by many.

“Halab, um il-mahashi wal-kibab” (Aleppo, the mother of stuffed vegetables and varieties of kibbeh)⁶

Aleppo sits along one of the greatest historic commercial routes, the Silk Road, where it became a nexus of exchange and social interaction between the East and the West. It developed the largest covered souk in the world, 13 kilometers of passages in the Old City dating back centuries.⁷

Trade and manufacturing enriched the city and it developed into one of the most influential and cosmopolitan cities of its day, bringing together an array of faiths and ethnic groups. Over time, these groups – Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Jews, Kurds, and Turks—combined elements of their own cuisine to form the Aleppian cuisine we know today. By the 20th century, Aleppo was seen as the culinary capital of the Middle East.⁸ In 1990, it was judged to be the best in the Arab world.⁹ In 2007, the International Academy of Gastronomy in France awarded the city a prize for its food.¹⁰

Aleppo was a food capital long before Paris because of its diverse communities. The city prides itself on the best cuisine in the Middle East, as the cuisine does not only have a rich variety of starters, main courses, and desserts, but attention to details, subtlety of flavors, and elegance of presentation.¹¹

Dishes such as kibbeh—stuffed ovals of wheat commonly prepared with minced onions and finely ground lean meat with spice, stuffed vegetables, and lamb, are very common in Aleppian cuisine. During the twentieth century, there were so many different types of kibbeh¹² that the city was dubbed “The City of 1001 Kibbeh.”¹³ In addition, Aleppo has 26 different versions of Kebab Halabi (Aleppian Kebab), such as kebab cooked with cherries; with aubergines, with chili, parsley and pine nuts and with truffles from the desert.¹⁴

Beyond our eating habits, food also manages comparisons of our cultural life. How food is presented, how it tastes, and how it is remembered, especially at the places where people eat (at home, restaurants, the local falafel and kebab shop and communal spaces for example), contributes not only to an individual, but most importantly to a community's oneness. This is what we see as memory.

Within memory there are two forms. On the one hand, memory can be seen as a recollection of an individual's personal past, while on the other, it can also be seen as a collective form, where more than one individual shares the same personal experience of the past. In the case of Aleppo, although collective memory can play a major role, the drive of individual memory also plays a key part in bringing Aleppo's dispersed community together.

That being said, memory leaves an imprint which can help distinguish, relate, consume and even imagine a feeling of a place which a community or even an individual can call 'home'.¹⁵ The very tastes and smells of food can also recreate an individual or even collective memory of the past, which can trigger the feeling of such a 'home'. Home itself is a place of security, comfort, but most vitally, a place of memory.

This is what a community such as Aleppo's needs. The memory of food provides an important basis for a community, which can orchestrate identity claims, identifications, and of solidarity and struggle, especially with the help of clear and unambiguous identifications of compounds found within the community's cuisine.¹⁶

Food expresses the existing collective feelings of a community. It can also create new ones. Food can connect the nostalgic feeling of a homeland, but also help conjure cultural and historical boundaries. Furthermore, the thought of food can create multiple forms of cultural spaces and discourses, which can also strengthen community oneness.¹⁷

When creating this community within a war-torn city like Aleppo, the preservation of food knowledge is vital. Recipe books can bring back and re-create a world that the community has once lost, and can bring food to life, as a means to connect food, nostalgia, memory and identity. An example of this is the Aleppian Cuisine book "Aromas of Aleppo,"¹⁸ written by Poopa Dweck.¹⁹ Although the book mainly focuses on Aleppian Jewish culture, it provides a distinctive insight into the importance of food that brought together the Aleppian Jewish community that flourished in the city up until the 1950s. To Aleppian Jews, food plays a major role in their society, not only in family life but in community identity and collective pride. Another recipe book is "Flavours of Aleppo: Celebrating Syrian Cuisine." Written by Aleppians Dalal Kade-Badra and Elie Badra, the recipe book is fueled with the tastes, smells and memories of their childhood. The book has culinary knowledge inherited by their mother from their grandmother.²⁰ In addition to these recipe books, newspaper articles, blogs and journals, social media groups are also great tools to preserve food knowledge.

As food can be recognized as a communal commodity, it may provide a nostalgic feeling towards a community's uniqueness, reviving memories of why it is important to have a shared common space, which can eliminate certain hostilities and strengthen the idea and collectiveness of unity.

Having a strong community is vital. It helps sustain an identity that uniquely defines the urban and or rural landscape. Aleppo is a great example of this, where for many centuries, it has been known as distinctively cosmopolitan. However, due to the extremities of war, what once defined Aleppo for its diversity, perhaps its very meaning, has been destroyed.

The idea of food being connected with senses and memory can be seen as a contributor towards the rebuilding of a torn society and culture such as Aleppo's, especially by promoting and safeguarding its unique cuisine. Cooking food, having a touring exhibition, reopening restaurants or even presenting food in recipe books are examples of this. These examples can also be considered, through common heritage, as a way to revive the social cohesion that once existed and help establish it for a more secure future for those who have been dispersed from their homeland.

UNESCO PROTECTION

Only recently have forms of intangible heritage been regarded in the same manner as architecture, art, and archaeological relics. The 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Heritage defined its subject as: "The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage."²¹ Intangible heritage is "...constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity."²²

Food ways are unique cultural models that comprise ritual practices, age-old skills, culinary techniques and ancestral community customs and manners, and thus are considered intangible heritage. Unfortunately, it remains under-represented when it comes to the support and protection offered by listing as a key form of heritage by UNESCO. Few aspects of food culture have been included on the list: the Koreans have both listed the making of kimchi. Armenia includes the making of Lavash bread. France has listed its gastronomy in its entirety while several countries have included theirs in the Mediterranean diet. Syria has not listed any of its cuisine. Indeed, the only food item from the region is the making of Turkish coffee.

The conflict in Syria and displacement created different forms of dangers in relation to the country's food heritage. These dangers could be the transformation or modification of original recipes rather than their complete disappearance. Making an authentic Aleppian kebab in Germany could be difficult due to the unavailability of all the necessary ingredients, and here is where the modification begins. Accordingly, recipes change based on where Syrian immigrants reside. For that, original Aleppian recipes should be documented since Syrian refugees themselves could be the leading transforming force for the original recipes. A UNESCO listing is potentially important as it opens the door to funding and support for the preservation of knowledge about food.

Ways through which preservation could be supported

- Collecting recipes and oral histories from refugees outside of Aleppo. It is important to preserve knowledge that is at serious risk of loss if people no longer cook or practice their trades
- Maintaining food knowledge among refugees, particularly those in camps who may rapidly lose skills involved with farming, food production and processing and cooking. Through possibly providing training and/or engaging them with similar activities in or around these camps.
- Supporting the development of restaurants by refugees; a case study could be a number of projects in Vienna and Pittsburgh that have employed refugees in the hospitality industry and have highlighted their skills as chefs.
- Supporting anthropological and historical research into food and agriculture in Syria. Although many aspects of food production may be lost, it will be important to ensure that there is some record of its history.
- Promoting research into the impact of climate change on agriculture, food and rural life in Syria, besides educating children in different schooling levels about farming, climate change, food processing, the origins of the Syrian cuisine and gastronomy.

ENDNOTES

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