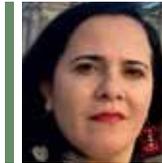


# Food and My Family



## Traditional Palestinian Dishes



By Diana Mardi Atari

Translated from Arabic by Rania Filfil

I never thought that I would be so interested in food. But, in all honesty, food has preoccupied every single woman in my family, mostly because a woman is judged based on her culinary skills. The ability to create perfect rice – *mufalal* (cooked well but not sticky) – is the barometer against which a woman's talent as a *muaadallah* (cordon bleu chef) is measured. When I cooked for the first time, it was because I had to not because I wanted to. My mother went to hospital to deliver my third sibling and was going to be away for three days. I had to prove that I was up to the responsibility so I decided to make *moloukhiyeh*, a dish that I love, for my siblings. Everything was perfect, even the rice. Unfortunately, the meal lacked some salt, but this was not a problem since those who wanted more salt could just add it to their plates. The most important aspect of the meal, though, was the rice. On that day, I earned the title of *muaadallah*, but I had to prove that I could make other more difficult dishes as well.

The women in my family – my grandmother and her sisters-in-law, my aunts, and my female cousins – would meet on various formal or informal occasions, usually around a meal. They would often prepare homemade tomato paste while we, the younger girls, helped them with the tasks that do not require special ingredients or measurements. We would wash, slice, and press the tomatoes to hand over to the more experienced women to cook on a wooden stove, stirring it just right and adding the exact amount of salt needed to preserve it before pouring it into jars.

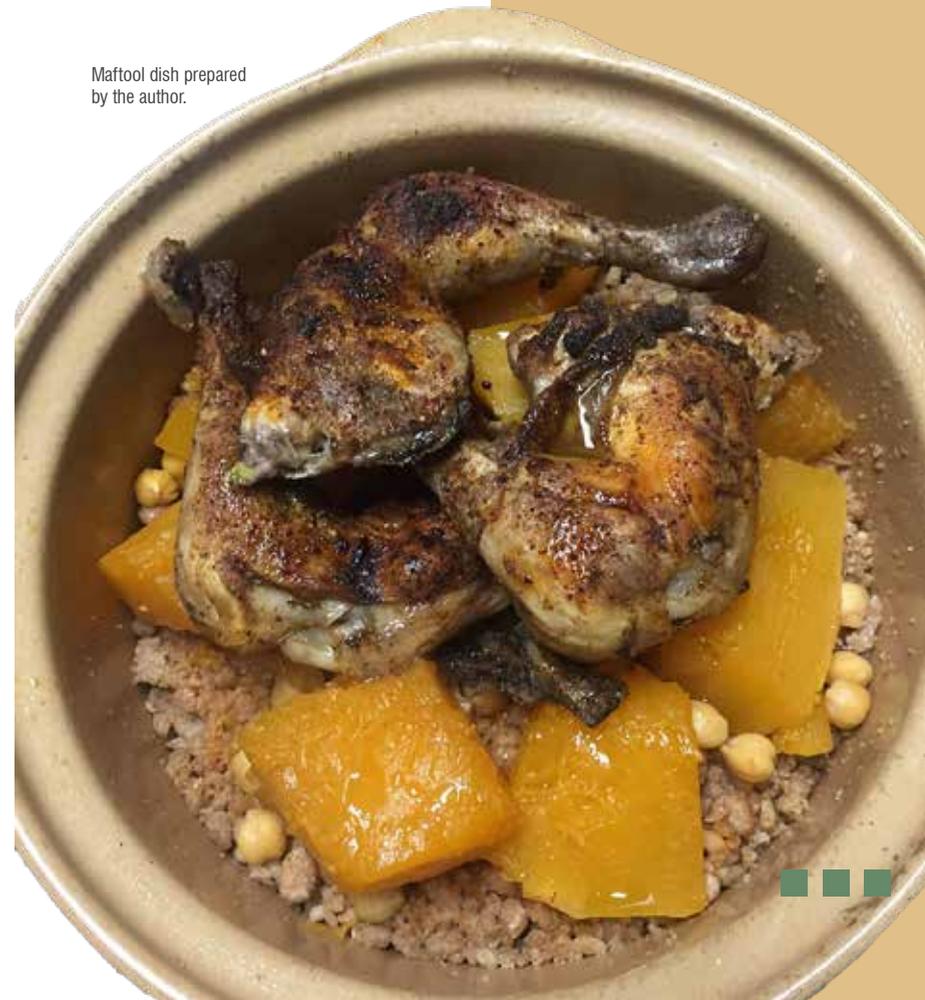
I used to sometimes watch my grandmother making a big ball of dough, yet another way to measure a woman's mastery of cooking. I hoped that one day she would let me try to make the dough, but that remained a mere dream because I was never allowed to touch the food due to my grandmother's obsession with hygiene. But the image of the dough stayed in my memory and in my dreams for the future.

I would also watch her prepare *maftoul* (couscous), a meal that we children loved to eat and to watch being made, always impatient to see the pumpkin and chickpea stew being poured over the *maftoul* to



Hisin Mardi, the author's grandmother.

Maftool dish prepared  
by the author.



make it ready to eat. We implored my grandmother to give us some of the steamed *maftoul* marinated in pure olive oil as a snack. I repeatedly asked my grandmother and the other women in my family to let me prepare the *maftoul*, but in vain. To them, this required a special skill and experience and that one could only acquire as an adult.

When I grew up and got married, I could try to prepare the *maftoul* without waiting for my grandmother's approval. I had to prove my skill even though I had never had hands-on experience. In my head, I could hear my grandmother's voice: "Use both hands to work the dough, rub it gently, without any pressure, to leave the *maftoul* free."

To prepare *maftoul*, we use soaked, coarse bulgur, spread it on a tray, add wheat flour, salt, black pepper, and cinnamon, and mix it, rubbing it gently between our hands to produce tiny round balls that are placed in a sieve on top of a pot of boiling water. The *maftoul* is steamed and then put in a pot with chopped onions

seasoned with salt, black pepper, and olive oil, to which we add pieces of pumpkin, carrots, and boiled chickpeas soaked in a tomato-based chicken stew. The chicken pieces are roasted and then placed on top.

*Maftoul* is a popular dish in my home village, Tiret al-Muthalath, also known as Tiret Bani Sa'ab. Women in my family (my grandmother, her sister-in-law and probably one or two other women) prepare *maftoul* using an experience-based task-distribution system. Some women are busy working the dough to prepare the tiny balls, while others make the soup or pumpkin stew, and a third group pours the stew to serve. To the best of my recollection, *maftoul* was usually served on sad occasions, for example, when someone died or on the fortieth-day memorial of a person's death. In any case, we children would play a specific role, delivering the plates of *maftoul* to neighbors and relatives on these sad occasions. Offering the *maftoul* to them was a way of joining in their prayers that the deceased would rest in peace.

I loved this delicious dish so much that when I heard that someone had passed away, I would dream of this tasty meal. On these sad occasions, *aseeda* (a boiled wheat dish) was also served. It is made of whole wheat grains soaked for hours and then cooked with lamb till softened. When the stew thickens, well-cooked chickpeas are added. My father's aunt would add the final touch – a dollop of sour yogurt to complement the taste of wheat. *Aseeda* is served with pieces of lamb on top.

Because this delicious dish is served on sad occasions, one of my cousins refused to eat it; she hated it and associated it with death. I, on the other hand, waited expectantly for the third day of the mourning period to get my share. This delicacy is a key part of my cuisine. In the culinary spirit I inherited from my grandmother, I add carrots, squash, and pumpkin, as well as other vegetables that increase its nutritional value and the energy it provides.

When I got older, I learned from women friends in other villages

that *maftoul* is not served on their sad occasions. Moreover, in the region of Ramallah and Al-Bireh, for instance, the *maftoul* is smaller and the stew contains only chicken and chickpeas, without any pumpkin, carrots, or tomato sauce. I also learned that *aseeda* is actually a sweet dish that does not look at all like our *aseeda*. These encounters prompted me to explore the variations of Palestinian cuisine from one town to another and from south to north. Watching my grandmother and mother preparing the most delightful dishes has equipped me with warm culinary memories. May my grandmother, who allowed me to watch and learn from her, rest in peace.

*Born and raised in Al-Tireh in northern Palestine, Diana Mardi Atari is proud of the fact that she comes from a family with Bedouin roots, specifically from the Arab Hweitat tribe who fled to Al-Tireh in 1948, coming from Al-Bassa region. Currently, Diana works as a field researcher at a human rights organization that advocates for human rights in planning. Diana is very interested in Palestinian food and would like to have her own restaurant that serves traditional Palestinian dishes. Diana is married and has three daughters.*



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