
QATAYEF PIECES FOR PEACE

ELEYAN SAWAFTA



Summer and Greenhouse and agricultural lands in Tubas, captured by Eleyan Sawafta on June 7, 2023.

Food is not simply a means of sustenance for humans. It is intricately intertwined with our lives, and we interact with it on a daily basis. As someone who was born and brought up in a small village in the northern part of the West Bank, food holds a special meaning for me. It represents resilience, resistance, love, respect, and peace. My village, Tubas, located in the west of the Jordan Valley, is known as the basket of vegetables of Palestine due to its fertile agricultural lands. My grandparents lived on a farm, and all their food came from the land. Similarly, my father is also a farmer and cultivates the same lands his parents did (below is a picture of me on my father's farm). As a result, I have a deep sense of connection with the land and the food it produces. This connection is shared by many in Palestine, including teachers, doctors, engineers, and other professionals who work their land after their regular jobs in the afternoon.

In this article, I would like to share my perspective on the relationship between food and peace in Palestine. Many people in Palestine struggle to get even a single meal each day



Mountains in Tubas were captured by Eleyan Sawafta on Feb 15, 2021.

since the Israeli colonial domination controls the lands, and lands are the basic source of food. The struggle to get food is not a unique situation -but the root of the problem- as there are numerous ongoing food crises worldwide, many of which are caused or influenced by conflicts and wars. These conflicts often result in the loss of farmland, irrigation systems, and other agricultural infrastructure, which significantly impacts food security. The displacement of communities and widespread famine caused by armed conflicts also negatively affect the food security of affected regions. This can create a dangerous cycle of violence and hunger, where chronic food insecurity contributes to the prolongation or intensification of violent disputes. As a result of conflict, households may be forced to consume less preferred foods for an extended period, which can limit the variety and portion sizes of their meals. Additionally, production inputs and revenue may be reduced, exacerbating the situation even further. Studies have examined how conflict affects several food security measures (such as the Food Consumption Score and the Food Insecurity Experience Scale), but more must be done to investigate the connections between these measures and how they relate to agricultural, political, and economic issues. So, once again, food promotes peace, and peace sustains food security while minimizing scarcity.

I will not be writing a typical academic article in this piece. Instead, I will share a collection of short stories and photographs I have taken in Palestine over the past decade. I hope to provide insight into the region's relationship between food and peace through these snapshots.



Eleyan Sawafta is pictured on June 23, 2023, at his father's farm in Tubas, in the West Bank, Palestine.

Qatayef Ramadan

Qatayef, also referred to as Atayef or Katayef, is a beloved dessert in Palestine, particularly during the sacred month of Ramadan. These delectable pancakes are filled with either nuts or cheese, fried until they attain a golden hue, and then soaked in a thick and luscious simple syrup. Alternatively, as seen in the image, they can be eaten with chocolate or cream sans frying. Qatayef is a crunchy and sweet Middle Eastern delicacy that graces dessert tables and is savored by many. I fondly recall the day I prepared Qatayef perfectly. It was during Ramadan, a unique month for Muslims that offers a space for peace and spiritual contemplation. During this time, people invite each other to Iftar, the fast-breaking evening meal of Muslims in Ramadan. They come together to dine and converse peacefully on various topics. In my culture, people prepare homemade food and exchange dishes with their neighbors as a way to express love and care.



Qatayef before frying." - Source: Eleyan Sawafta, May 26, 2018.

There is some debate regarding the roots of Qatayef, a beloved dessert in Arab gastronomy. Some say that Qatayef's history dates back to the Abbasi Caliphate, 566-653 AD, despite some attributing its creation to the Fatimid Dynasty (Roya, 2018). Nonetheless, the prevailing consensus indicates that it can be traced back to the Umayyad period during the reign of the seventh Umayyad caliph, Sulayman ibn Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (674-717 AD). The story goes that Qatayef was served to the ruler and his companions, who relished it so much that they promptly devoured it all. As a result, it earned the name Qatayef, derived from the Arabic verb "qataf," meaning "to pluck" (Case, 2021).



Qatayef after frying- Source: The Highlander (2022).

Qatayef is a delectable dessert crafted from a blend of flour, milk, a touch of salt, baking soda, and yogurt. The dough requires careful kneading until a soft and uniform consistency is achieved. Next, the mixture can be poured onto a heated plate, creating circular disks approximately the size of one's palm. The batter is then cooked on a single side. During the holy month of Ramadan, it is essential for Muslims to seek peace and harmony, and Qatayef provides a delightful beginning to that journey through equalization between various people.

Ma'amoul

In my culture, we celebrate Eid al-Fitr, also known as the "Festival of Breaking Fast", after the end of Ramadan. As our main dessert, we traditionally make Ma'amoul, which is a type of date-filled cookie. Ma'amoul cookies can be made with semolina, plain flour, or a combination of both. While they can be filled with dates or nuts, dates are the most popular filling (Amira, 2020). The cookies can be shaped using specific molds and should be baked in an oven. Some people sprinkle powdered sugar on top, as shown in the picture.



Ma'amoul and a cup of Arabic coffee captured by Eleyan Sawafta on March 20, 2019

The art of making Ma'amoul is a cherished tradition that unites community members in a collective effort. My heart is filled with fond memories as I recall watching my mother, aunts, and neighbors come together to prepare this exquisite dessert. It is a beautiful way to promote cooperation among people of all genders and ages. The most valuable lesson that I learned from these gatherings is that a common goal unites diverse groups of people at the same table. This lesson is particularly useful for negotiations and mediation, and it holds immense potential for promoting peace.

Cactus Pears

During the summer season in Palestine, a popular fruit enjoyed by many is the cactus pear, also referred to as Saber. This name comes from the Arabic word for cactus, which translates to "patience." Cacti hold significant meaning for Palestinians, serving as a symbol of resilience and endurance in the face of occupation. Anthropologist Nasser Abufarha, in his book "Land of Symbols: Cactus, Poppies, Orange and Olive Trees in Palestine," explains how Palestinians draw parallels between their own lives and the characteristics of cacti (Black, 2023)



Source: Eleyan Sawafta on July 8, 2018

In my village of Tubas, our house is surrounded by cacti on the northern-eastern side. It is located right next to the street and is open to anyone who walks by. My grandfather planted them and always told us that our Saber cacti would be a symbol of hospitality for those who

passed by our house. This reminds me of a quote from Nasser Abufarha when he said, "The generosity of these plants reflects the generosity of the villagers, who were giving and kind even in difficult times" (Black, 2023).

When I visited Palestine in the summer of 2023, I observed with great sadness the gradual decline of various cactus trees in the region. My father informed me that this was a widespread problem. These trees hold immense social value for the rural people of Palestine, known as the fellahin, and serve as a vital emblem of hospitality and generosity in their culture. The disappearance of a cactus tree not only impacts the environment but also disrupts the ability to cultivate and sustain relationships, as strangers and acquaintances often pause to partake of their fruit and engage in conversation during the summer.

Khobiza

Common Mallow, also known as Khobiza, is a beloved vegetarian dish in Palestinian villages. This recipe is wonderfully simple - start by sautéing the common mallow with onion and olive oil, then sprinkle with salt and pepper. For an extra flavor boost, serve with Arabic bread and a squeeze of lemon. In rural Palestinian communities, or fellahin, Khobiza is a staple during winter and spring months. It is grown locally and requires no planting, promoting sustainability and fostering a connection between people and the land.



Back in the day, my mother would meet up with a group of ladies from the neighborhood to gather Khobiza. This was a cherished tradition for them, as it served two purposes. Firstly, it allowed them to relish the outdoors and engage in peaceful banter as they went about their Khobiza-gathering. Secondly, it was a meaningful way for them to demonstrate their affection and devotion to their loved ones among their families.

At the Khobiza-gathering in my community, I was impressed by the women's excellent organizational skills in dividing the labor. One group of one or two women was in charge of baking Arab bread for the entire group, while another group of one or two men worked tirelessly to obtain milk from the

Source: Eleyan Sawafta on February 6, 2021

cows and craft labneh balls (yogurt). Combining labneh and Khobiza not only makes for a great dish, but also helps to foster strong relationships among members of the community.



Labneh balls, the picture was taken by Eleyan Sawafta on July 2nd, 2021

To summarize, I want to underscore the significance of food in Palestinian culture. It holds the potential to steer individuals away from conflict resolution approaches like avoidance, competition, or compromise, and towards more collaborative connections. Moreover, it serves as a powerful means of promoting grassroots development, without erecting artificial barriers between the natural and cultural realms. I miss the peaceful gatherings and dinner tables in my Palestinian culture.

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