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Our kitchen in 1940s Baghdad

The house of my childhood in Baghdad had two courtyards, *haush*, Middle Eastern style. The larger one was the centre of the main living area, with rooms and terraces ranged around it on two levels. The smaller haush was the kitchen area, *beit al-matbakh*, with a room on one side containing a range of kerosene-fuelled rings at ground level, and in one corner a wood-burning boiler for the attached Turkish-style hammam. Beside the boiler was a *kanoun*, a square frame of stone and plaster over which pots could be placed over wood and coal burning in the middle, mostly for slow cooking when the fuel was reduced to embers and ash. This is where the Saturday *tebit* of stuffed chicken and rice was cooked overnight.

In one corner of the kitchen courtyard was a *tanour*, better known globally as *tandur*, a clay pot built into an metal oil drum (more commonly built into the wall) with an opening at the bottom where a wood fire burned heating up the clay walls. Flat rounds of dough were stuck on the walls to make *khubuz*, flat bread, *jeradiq*, thin, crisp flat bread, and *makhbouz* or *keleicha*, sweetened and buttered dough pastries, stuffed with cheese, dates or almond and sugar. Sambousak was the name of the crescent-shaped pastries stuffed with cheese or almond/sugar (distinct from the *sambousak bil-tawa*, larger folds of dough stuffed with heavily spiced and onioned mashed chick-peas, then fried in hot oil, more akin to the Indian *samousa*). *Bu`bu`* (plural, *bu`abe`*) was the round bready pastry stuffed with date paste.

Elsewhere in that courtyard more kerosene rings, chopping boards and knives, and pestle and mortars, *hawan*, of various sizes were to be found. There was no oven: domestic ovens are recent innovations in many parts of the world. Banquet dishes, of meat or fish, on large trays, were sent to neighbourhood bakers'

ovens, also a common practice elsewhere. On special occasions a lamb would be slaughtered over the drain in the courtyard and butchered there by a hired specialist.

Between the two courtyards stood a room where hessian sacks of rice, sugar and flour were stored, as well as drums of oil and various packets of other provisions. We children played in that room and were once delighted to find a large cache of chocolate bars (was it forgotten by the adults?). That was during the rationing period following the Second World War and so especially welcome. Also in that room was the ice box, and later the electric Frigidaire. The ice box was a wooden cupboard with various compartments, lined with zinc, in which a block of ice, delivered periodically from the factory, would be placed, wrapped in hessian, and food and drink distributed around it in the compartments. The arrival of the electric fridge was a delight, especially in the Baghdad summer months, with unlimited supply of cold water and sherbets, as well as the coveted ice creams previously only available from specialist shops or itinerant pedlars shouting *Eskimo!*, the trade name of the popular ice.

These were the spatial parameters of my childhood food world. It was presided over by my mother and her mother, the latter a diminutive and quiet woman who seldom left the house. In her last years in the London home of her son she was bewildered, her horizons having always been domestic and local: her grandchildren took it in turn to granny-sit. She was a good domestic cook, as was my mother. They were aided by one or two resident maids (who lodged in corner spaces around the kitchen, where mattresses were spread at night), as well as the younger women of the household, in preparation of chopping, mincing and pounding (endless, loud pounding) and in cleaning and tidying up.

Shopping and provisioning were male tasks. At one point it was an elderly maternal uncle staying in our house (thrown out, we were told, by his vicious wife) who undertook the early morning trip to the markets for meat and fresh products. My father would shop for the 'dry goods' from the main bazaar, the Shorja, on his way back from work. Meat was bought from a *kasher* butcher in the Hannouni market (largely Jewish), who had a longstanding relationship with the family. The butcher would get to know your requirements and deal as honestly as possible to keep your custom. Even then, the cooks were not always satisfied with the quality or the cuts. Meat was not sold as

specific cuts of leg or shoulder, for instance, but as lean or fat, with or without bone. Fruit and vegetables also came from that market.

Fish, an occasional treat, was always bought live from a fisherman on the nearby corniche of the Tigris. *Shabbout*, a kind of barbell, was the fish of choice (now largely fished out, after being monopolised by Saddam Hussein and his entourage), or slices of a very large fish called *bizz*. A large Shabbout was a banquet dish, cooked in domestic imitation of the iconic *mazgouf*, barbecued, typically by river bank eateries or fishermen, much prized in Iraq and considered a 'national' dish.

The fish would be opened flat, like a kipper, by cutting it along the backbone and gutting it at the belly. It would then be skewered on twigs, the twigs stuck into the sandy ground, so that the fish stood vertically to face the fire ignited by its side, thus grilled on the open side, it was then laid flat with the skin side on the hot ashes and embers of the fire. It was served seasoned with strong spices, sometimes curry powder or chilli, with tomatoes and onions in the middle, enriched with the inevitable *`anba*, mango pickle.

The domestic version followed this closely, except that the cooking was done in a neighbouring baker's oven. This would also be the centrepiece of dinner parties to which we were invited in non-Jewish homes, the thoughtful hosts mindful of Jewish abstention from non-kasher meats. The *bizz* pieces would be cooked as a *salona*, braised with onions, tomatoes and spices, with slightly sweet and sour flavouring. Fish was always special, not an everyday food.

Milk would be delivered from dairy farms on the outskirts of Baghdad. The quality and purity of the milk was a matter of constant concern, for good reasons. At one time we acquired a share in a cow, and the milkman would bring us our portion of the milk in an urn carried on a donkey. Did he, at one point, actually bring the cow itself and milk it on our doorstep, or is that a trick of memory? In any case I detested milk, which I was pressured to drink, largely because it had to be boiled, and the smell and taste of that boiled milk was repugnant to me. While adults drank their breakfast tea plain, with sugar, or with a drop of milk, English style, we children were required to drink boiled milk with a hint of strong tea. Condensed milk, in tins, was a boon.

Yoghurt was mostly made at home, sometimes drained in linen bags. Occasionally we bought rich, thick, buffalo milk yoghurt, as well as *gaimer*, thick clotted cream (the word being the Iraqi corruption of the Turkish *kaymak*, known elsewhere in the Arab world as *qishta*) from the Bedouin women who kept water buffalos in the shantytown of rural migrants from the Marshes in the south. The *gaimer*, combined with *dibis*, date syrup, on fresh, hot *khubuz*, flat bread, washed down with strong tea (no milk), made a dreamy breakfast, the stuff of nostalgia. I, alongside some other Iraqis in London, try occasionally to reproduce this taste with English clotted cream and imported date syrup, on flat bread: good, but not quite the same.

After dinner of an evening, my grandmother and mother would discuss forthcoming menus and specify their shopping requirements, noted by my father and whoever was detailed to do the markets.

On schooldays we kids arrived at lunch time, hungry, and would walk directly to the kitchen house to see what was cooking. Almost every day, the pervasive aroma was that of chopped onions frying in pungent sesame oil. This was the final step in cooking rice. The rice would be picked over for small stones and other impurities in large trays with a servant sifting and throwing the grains from one side to the other. It was then washed and soaked, drained and thrown into a pot of boiling water, drained when nearly ready and put back in the pan. Finally, the fried onions would be poured over the rice, then covered and allowed to steam. With an aromatic, native variety of rice called *`anbar*, amber, it made for a fragrant, nutty taste.

This rice was a feature of almost every lunch and sometimes dinner. With it would be served a stew, typically of lamb or chicken with various vegetables and condiments, and sometimes with dumplings of rice and meat called *kibbah*. The simplest would be lamb, in pieces on the bone, with beans, green or white/dried, *fasoulia*. Our favourite was the lunch made every Friday, a *bamia*/okra stew with lamb and kibbah. This was called *hamidh*, sour, which was half the story, as this was sweet and sour, many families appreciating ultra-sweet tastes, achieved with sugar or date syrup. The sour would be lemon, vinegar, and/or dried limes, *noumi basra*, whole or ground. The dumplings/kibbah were made by pounding rice and a little meat or chicken in a mortar, then shaping portions into little balls stuffed with a mixture of ground meat, onion and herbs, which were cooked in the sauce. This sauce was the meat juice with tomato paste, sweet and sour agents, mint or pennyroyal and garlic. The meat for this dish

would be typically fatty, usually ribs. The very characteristic aromas of bamia, mint and garlic, would assail the Jewish neighbourhoods of Baghdad every Friday at midday.

An occasional alternative to the bamia in the *hamidh* would be chopped beetroot. But there was always bamia, all the year round: fresh bamia in season would be threaded on strings, like necklaces, and dried for use out of season. This is done all over the Middle East and parts of Africa.

Another rice kibbah, usually of larger size and flatter shape, was put into 'sweet' stews, *helou*, as against *hamidh*, sour. This did not contain sugar or a sweetener, and was only 'sweet' in that it was not 'sour'. Typically this would be a stew of squash and/or aubergine with meat. The blandness of the stew contrasted with the sourness and spiciness of the kibbah, its meaty stuffing flavoured with ground dried lime and black pepper.

For Jewish households several days of the week were marked by dishes. Thursday evening was always *kitchri*, a spicy pulau of rice and lentils, of Indian origin. Following the Friday lunch preparations described above, Friday evening and Saturday saw Sabbath dishes, dominated by chicken. The Friday evening *qaddous* ceremony (the blessing of the vine and the bread) culminated in a dinner in which the primary dish was a chicken pulau (*plaw b-jeej*). The chicken, in pieces, was first boiled: chickens were tough, especially when freshly killed, which was the custom. Even when modern industrial chickens arrived people could not believe that you can roast or fry chicken without first boiling it. Rice would be boiled in the chicken stock, with tomato paste (red rice) and light seasoning. The chicken pieces were then fried in oil to give them colour and crisp the skin. Peeled almonds and raisins were fried in the same pan, then everything was placed over the rice and served. Each member of the family had his or her favoured piece of the chicken: mine was the drumstick. Girls were given the wings so that they would fly to their matrimonial homes!

Saturday meals revolved around chicken, but in a different form, called *tebit*, indicating 'overnight' cooking. The chicken was stuffed with rice, chopped meat and/or giblets, seasoned with salt and black pepper. To 'extend' the chicken in some households, including ours, the bird was skinned, retaining the skin, before being cut in half horizontally into breast and back, then the skin sewed

with needle and thread over each half to create two pouches, which were stuffed. The pieces were boiled in a stock mixed with tomato paste and aromatic spices: pepper, cloves, cardamom and perhaps cinnamon. When the chicken was nearly cooked a quantity of rice was added to the stock under the meat. This was done on a Friday afternoon. A wood fire was lit in the *kanoon* and reduced to embers. The large pot containing the chicken/rice was then placed over the embers, covered with old blankets and cushions and allowed to cook overnight. The embers were calculated to die slowly by morning or midday on Saturday, while the covers retained the heat. By the time it was ready to serve there was no fire so that cooks committed no ritual sin by handling fire on a Saturday. The tebit was served with portions of chicken meat and the two forms of rice: the dry, peppered stuffing rice and a pudding cake of the surrounding rice, slightly crusted at the bottom, aromatic and rich with the chicken juices.

This Saturday dish was emblematic of the Jewish household, and much admired by our Muslim and Christian neighbours, who would occasionally be sent samples.

Tebit eggs (*beidh al-tebit*), were placed on the rim of the same pan, under the covers, to cook slowly in the steam, giving the resulting hard-boiled egg a mahogany colour and a smoky flavour. These were enjoyed at breakfast, when the men returned from the synagogue and before we kids departed for the morning matinee at the cinema, an indication of the mixture of religious observance and errant secularism that prevailed amongst most Jews in those days. The eggs would be eaten with bread and salad, sometimes with aubergine slices that had been fried the day before, and the quintessential Baghdadi relish of *`anba*, mango pickle from India. This pickle was so popular amongst us kids that we even ate it in sandwiches, to the concern of adults worried about our digestive systems.

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