YEMENI SOUP AND OTHER RECIPES

Ayelet Tsabari

UGAT SHMARIM

My mother prepares a cake that makes people forget. They forget their troubles, their diets, and their calorie count. They forget they only came by for a minute—they had other plans, places to go—and then they forget they promised themselves they would only have one slice.

Ugat shmarim—literally translated as yeast cake—looks like a braided Danish, or a Jewish-style *babka*, Eastern European delicacies that made their way into Israeli cuisine and into my mother's Jewish-Yemeni kitchen. Every Friday, before Shabbat, my mother mixes flour, eggs, sugar, lemon rind, and yeast. She throws in a package of margarine: that way the cake is *parve*, not dairy, and can be consumed after a meaty dinner. While the dough rises, she beats cocoa and sugar with margarine, vanilla, and egg white for the chocolate filling. She flattens the dough on a flour-dusted table, applies a generous helping of chocolate, and braids it into a strudel. For thirty minutes, the house smells so sweet you want to devour the air. When the cake is done right, the inside is moist and dense, the top is crisp, glossy with brushed yolk, and every slice presents a chocolate swirl that makes you dizzy with desire.

Relatives and friends who ask for the recipe often come back scowling. "It didn't turn out like yours," they say. "What's the secret?" Secret, as in key ingredient, as in: what have you left out?

"Secret!" My mother scoffs. "You think I'd hide something from you?"

Whenever I fly back to Canada, I smuggle the contraband cake past customs agents, wrapped in foil and tucked between my socks. I eat some right away and freeze the rest for when I'm craving a taste of home. When I reheat it, the smell permeates my house, drapes over me like a comfort blanket. It pulls me back and away. It's a cake that makes me remember.

My Canadian friends who share it with me ask, "Do you know the recipe?"

"Oh, no. I could *never* make it," I say. "It's way too complicated. I wouldn't know where to begin."

When I was nine, I found a cookbook in our house. *Children Cooking* had a bright yellow cover and pictures of children in chefs' hats, making smiley faces on toast with julienne red pepper for a mouth and sliced cucumbers for eyes. Their aprons were spotless and their kitchen immaculate. The recipes had names like Smiling Eggs, Moses in the Cradle, and Boat Sandwiches. During my mother's siesta I decided to try my hand at a recipe, imagining how pleased she would be that I'd made something for her for once. I chose chocolate balls dusted with coconut flakes, an Israeli staple dessert popular at children's birthday parties. My mother had never made it; for our birthdays she baked intricate cakes with frosting, layered with *filo*, and topped with shaved chocolate. I found all of the ingredients in her pantry, except for the coconut flakes, and decided it would do.

I climbed onto the counter to fetch a bowl, then hopped off, letting the cupboard door slam. "*Sheket*!" my mother yelled from her bedroom. I flinched. Every day between two and four, we tiptoed around the house, speaking in hushed voices. Sometimes, I imagined her lying there, stiff and alert with her eyes closed; that would explain why she never seemed rested.

I crushed biscuits, mixed them with cocoa, sugar, milk, vanilla, and margarine. I dipped my finger in the bowl, amazed to discover I'd created something yummier than the sum of its parts, the way I felt the first time I wrote words that joined into a sentence. I rolled the paste between my palms, forming muddy-looking balls.

I'd just finished the last ball and was admiring my creation when my mother walked in. She stood at the door in her gown, squinting. She ignored the plate heaped with chocolate balls on the table and headed straight to the counter.

"What's this?" She grimaced at the splashes of milk. "And this?" She pointed at the dishes in the sink.

"I was going to clean it," I said.

She started wiping the counter with rapid, urgent motions.

"I wanted to surprise you."

She looked at me and sighed. My shirt was smeared with chocolate. I wasn't wearing an apron.

That day the line was drawn. I abandoned my cooking aspirations. For the next few years, my contribution in the kitchen was restricted to dishwashing. Sometimes, my mother asked me to cut the tips off the okra, a tedious task I hated, since they coated my fingers with sticky little hairs and sent me into an itching frenzy.

I call my mother. It's Friday, dinnertime in Israel. She shouts orders as she speaks to me, "Turn off the oven. Why with your hands? Use a fork!"

"You're busy," I say.

"No, not busy. What is it?"

"I was just wondering...how come I never learned to cook growing up?"

"How come?" She raises her voice. "You weren't interested in cooking!"

I hear my sister in the background say, "That's because you didn't want us in your kitchen."

"Not true!" My mother is practically yelling. "You never asked."

My family calls her to sit down, join them, stop hovering between the stove and the table. "The salad isn't dressed yet," she cries. "Stop picking!"

"Go." I swallow. "We'll talk later."

CHOPPED SALAD

My mother serves salad with lunch, dinner, and on Saturday mornings, with our traditional Yemeni breakfast of *jichnoon* and brown eggs. Tomatoes, cucumbers, and a few slivers of white onion, generously dressed with fresh lemon, olive oil, and rock salt. As with most of her recipes, it only sounds simple.

Every Thursday, my mother drives to the *shuk* at the edge of our city, a labyrinth of intersecting alleys lined with produce stands. She marches up and down the market, fondling peaches, stroking avocados, and tasting grapes, carefully selecting the freshest cilantro, firmest tomatoes, and sweetest apples. Watermelons are the only gamble. Despite the shopkeepers' promises, you can't tell a sweet, juicy watermelon by the sound it makes when you knock on it.

She takes note of the best produce and its corresponding vendor, mapping it in her mind as if formulating a strategic battle plan, then returns to the winning vendors and buys kilos of everything, making a couple of runs to fill the trunk with baskets.

As a kid, I trailed behind—grimacing at the stench of rotten vegetables, the slippery bits of lettuce and smashed fruit, the slimy tread of my sneakers—while my mom haggled with the vendors.

"Your parsley looks tired today." She crinkled her nose at a vendor. "Why so expensive?" she complained to another.

"Especially for you: five shekels." The vendor winked. "Because you're so beautiful."

She waved a bill, frowning. "Should you be talking to women like that? You're wearing a yarmulke."

Making the salad was the one food preparation activity we were encouraged to engage in. We struggled to dice the vegetables as small as possible, competing for our mother's final approval. A coarsely chopped salad was referred to in contempt as an "elephant's salad," a finely chopped salad earned the much sought-after label of a "mice salad," but none of us could do it as well as our mother, who was so skilled with the knife that she sliced the vegetables without using a cutting board. She cupped a tomato in her hand and in a series of quick motions slashed it up and down and side to side like an apron-wearing Jedi master. She then opened her palm as if releasing a dove to let the tiny pieces drop into the bowl.

"I've never seen anybody do that," I told her when I grew to appreciate her rare talent.

"I saw a French chef on TV do it once." She smiled.

SCHNITZEL

Every day, when my father came home from the office for siesta, we ate lunch as a family. I was thrilled whenever my mom made schnitzel. This Austrian dish, brought to Israel by European Jews, was a national favourite, adopted into the mishmash national cuisine alongside shish-kabob, couscous, and pizza. My mother adapted the original recipe to make it her own. She never hammered the chicken breast, cutting it instead into long, fat strips. She added garlic to the beaten eggs, then dipped a chicken strip in, dredged it in bread crumbs, and dropped it into hot oil until it was golden and crispy on the outside, moist and tender on the inside.

The one time my mother visited me in Vancouver, she walked through our kitchen, arms crossed, nodding like an art collector at a gallery. She ran her hand along our stove, our IKEA island, eyed the steel pans hanging on the wall.

"Do you have chicken breasts?" She gazed into my freezer. "Potatoes?"

My boyfriend Sean and I had planned elaborate meals to impress her but she wouldn't have any of that. She was happiest when she could cook for us. I watched her move between the stove, the sink, the fridge, training her body for a new dance routine, marking her space. She was at home when she cooked. It didn't matter that she was half a world away from her comfort zone. Kitchens were pockets of solace in every house, a neutral territory, a gastronomic Switzerland.

After my father passed away, my mother spent most of her days in the kitchen. She didn't speak much, rarely looked at us, but she cooked endlessly, with furious, careless motions. When she dug in the drawers for a pan, she'd bang the pots against each other in a high-pitched cacophony. She chopped vegetables with homicidal intent, and when she tossed schnitzel into the sizzling oil, it made a sound like a scream. She disappeared into the kitchen, became one with the appliances. Food replaced her words. Cooking became her currency.

When she wasn't cooking, she cleaned. I woke to the sounds of furniture dragged across the floor, rugs beaten, appliances wheeled. Cleaning was my mother's form of meditation. It was also the one thing she could control. Her world may have fallen apart but at least she had clean surfaces, laundered clothes, food on the table.

Even when we couldn't afford brand-name jeans or pocket money, our fridge was always full. My mother found ways to prepare meals on a tight budget, simple recipes that called for basic ingredients. She calculated her garlic usage for a whole year and bought dozens of bulbs when they were cheap. She ground them all, put the pulp in jars and froze them, two rows lining the shelves of the freezer door like teeth. For a whole week, the smell of garlic floated through our house. It stuck to our clothes and hid in the toothpaste, clinging to our hair like campfire smoke.

My mother fed me, did my laundry, cleaned my room, but it wasn't enough. I followed her around as she worked, trying to engage her in conversation. When that failed, I found more effective ways to get her attention.

We fought about everything: my performance at school, my fashion sense, my messy room, my friends. I screamed that I hated her, stomped my feet, and slammed doors. She told me I was ungrateful, that one day I'd have a daughter just like me. Our relationship became so strained that once she passed me by on the street and didn't even acknowledge me.

"The problem," my brother once said, "is that you're too much alike."

I snorted. "We're nothing alike."

I became a fickle eater. I hated cilantro, which she sprinkled over everything, despised tomatoes, detested eggplants. I began spending more time outside the house, subsisting on hot dogs at the stand outside my high school, burgers and fries at MacDavid, the kosher fast-food chain that predated McDonald's in Israel. Then I discovered restaurants, charging my workplace, a teen magazine I'd begun writing for, with the expenses.

My family never went to restaurants. My mother thought paying for food was foolish, considering that her cooking was the best out there and came for free. For my mother, eating out meant standing on the sidewalk in front of Falafel Nadav in downtown Petah Tikva, lit by a broken neon sign, and biting into our bursting pita pockets, bowing to keep *tahini* from dripping over our clothes.

Now I was ordering shrimp, calamari, cheeseburgers with bacon, things my kosher mother would never touch. Sometimes, I even ordered schnitzel. Maybe it was the thin slices, the lack of garlic, or my guilt that soured it, but it was never as good as hers.

CHICKEN LIVERS

My first apartment in Tel Aviv was a two-bedroom on Dizzengof Street I shared with my best friend, Elsin. It was in an old, graceless building streaked by rain, with dark, musty stairways and a backyard strewn with garbage.

My mother donated her entire selection of cleaning supplies, and Elsin and I scoured the apartment for two days straight. When we finished, I walked barefoot on the tile floor, its touch as tantalizing as a chilled bottle of beer to a sweaty hand. My feet felt lighter, my head clearer. I never knew cleaning could feel so good. I never knew it was such hard work either; growing up I'd been reluctant to help my mother with the housework.

"Wow." Elsin admired my work. "You should do this for money."

The next day I made a few handwritten ads: *A young energetic housekeeper for hire.* I hung them on telephone poles and bulletin boards, my phone number hanging in detachable fringes. I was now, like my mother and grandmother before me, a housekeeper. In Israel's early days, most housekeepers were Yemeni women, working for the rich Ashkenazi. Back then, the term "Yemeni" in its female form was synonymous with housekeeper.

My first two homes were my two brothers' bachelor apartments. Over Friday dinner at my mother's house, one of them said, "Ayelet does an excellent cleaning job."

"She does?" My mother's face stretched in astonishment.

"Why is it so hard to believe?" I bit into a piece of *challah*.

For dinner, Elsin and I made pasta with sauce out of jars, pizza on pita bread, tossed salads with store-bought dressing. One day, Elsin came home from her mother's with a tray of chicken livers and suggested we prepare it the following

evening. Chicken livers were a staple food we had both grown up eating. My mother made them regularly, fried with caramelized onions. It was a cheap source of iron, one of the many ways my mother fed an entire family on a limited income.

The next evening, I was late from work and by the time I came home, Elsin had cooked her portion. I stared at the smooth-skinned livers in the bowl.

"I didn't know when you'd be coming," she said. "You just have to fry them."

I chopped onions and garlic and tossed them into an oily pan, leaning backwards, away from the splattering oil. I added the livers, which sizzled loudly. "It's burning!" I yelled.

"Lower the heat," Elsin answered from her room.

"There's almost no oil left."

"Add some oil."

"Wouldn't it splash all over me?"

"Should be fine."

When the livers began to brown, I gingerly flipped them onto their sides. After a few minutes, I hollered, "How do you know when it's ready?"

"I don't know," Elsin said. "Intuition?"

I stared at the pan. "Well, can you get your intuition over here and tell me if it's ready?"

Elsin walked into the kitchen and looked at me in a new way. "My God. You have a kitchen phobia."

My face reddened. "I just...I never really learned to cook."

She stirred the livers. "But your mom is an amazing cook."

I shrugged.

"It's never too late." She turned off the gas.

JICHNOON

Israelis like to ask each other, "What's your background?" since most families are originally from somewhere else. Once they know your heritage, they can conjure the smell of your parents' kitchen: couscous or gefilte fish, rice or potatoes, spicy or bland. When Israelis discover that I'm Yemeni their eyes often glaze in envy.

"Does your mother make *jichnoon* every Saturday?"

"Yes," I say.

"How about *malawach*?"

"Yes," I say. In fact, my mother prepares dough for *malawach*, flattens it

between sheets of parchment paper and stacks it in the freezer, so at any given time, I can throw one in a pan. I don't tell them that. It would just be cruel.

In a country riddled with cultural prejudice, the stereotypes associated with Yemenis are mostly complimentary. People love us, but in a parental, condescending way, as if we're the nation's pets. Yemenis are "happy people," I've been told. We are also known to be good cooks. *Jichnoon* and *malawach* have made it into the "national comfort food" hall of fame. *Malawach* is made of thin layers of puff pastry, like a crispy pancake. *Jichnoon*, Yemeni Shabbat bread, is rolled into croissant-like shapes, layered and baked overnight in a special pot with a tight lid.

Friends invited for *jichnoon* on Saturday morning often look over the table and quietly ask for a fork and knife.

"You hear that?" we sneer. "She wants cutlery!"

A few years ago, my cousin moved to Vancouver with her Canadian husband, and rented the apartment downstairs from Sean and me. At that point, I was no longer afraid of the kitchen. Since I'd moved to Canada, away from my mother's watchful eye, I started cooking, mostly recipes I'd found on the internet or borrowed from friends. I became good at Indian and Thai curries, shopping at speciality stores for obscure ingredients, and grinding fresh spices.

Soon after my cousin's arrival in the city, she invited us for a traditional Yemeni Shabbat breakfast. "It's not like your mother's," she warned.

Late Friday night, the smell of *jichnoon* started creeping through the house, and by the time I woke up on Saturday, it hovered in our apartment, thick as fog. Downstairs, my cousin served brown eggs, tomatoes grated to a pulp, and spicy *bisbas*. I ripped a piece of moist *jichnoon* and it emitted a swirl of steam.

Sean grabbed an egg and examined it. "I always wondered what makes the eggs go brown."

"They're in the oven all night with the *jichnoon*." I laid a spoonful of *bisbas* on my plate.

"Do you cook them first?"

I shrugged.

"How come you don't know that? I know how to make *my* mom's food."

"It's complicated," I said. "It takes a whole day—"

"You don't even know how to make *bisbas*. That can't be complicated."

"Seriously?" my cousin said. "You never made *bisbas*?"

"My mother never taught me," I protested.

"Why not?"

I shifted in my chair. "Maybe she didn't like sharing the spotlight."

Sean and my cousin exchanged glances.

"Maybe you should have asked," Sean said, yanking a piece of *jichnoon* and dipping it in tomato.

BISBAS

The first time I tried *bisbas*, it bit my tongue like a bee sting. My mouth turned hot and numb, and my eyes started watering. It tasted like danger. It didn't help that my mother sometimes threatened to put it in my mouth if I was bad.

Bisbas, a green paste made of cilantro and garlic, and sprinkled red with chillies, is an essential condiment in our house, served with every meal. At twenty-three, after my first backpacking trip to India, I returned to Israel with a newfound appreciation for Yemeni cuisine, a fondness for fenugreek, cilantro, and turmeric, and a higher tolerance for spiciness. The first time I grabbed the jar of *bisbas* and spooned some onto my plate, my mother and sister paused from eating and stared at me.

"What?" I said.

It was a pale February in Israel when Sean and I arrived for a visit, hungry from the moment we stepped into my mother's house, ready to be fattened up. After Friday night dinner, Sean cornered my mother in her kitchen.

"I want to learn how to make *bisbas*," he said.

"You do?" She laughed.

"You do?" I said, choking on the water I'd just sipped.

He looked at me. "You okay?"

The next day, my mother invited Sean into her kitchen. I was shocked by how easy it was. I tagged along, a few steps behind, still feeling like a trespasser. I hid behind my camera, snapping shots of my mother stuffing cilantro into a meat grinder with garlic, chillies, and cumin. When strings of green spewed from the other end, they smelled like freshly-cut grass. Sean wrote notes while my mother explained every step with the meticulousness of a television chef. She then filled little jars with *bisbas* and froze them, putting a few aside to give away to her sister, her mother, her sons.

"Can I watch when you make *tsli*?" Sean asked.

My mother beamed.

TSLI

My mother's *tsli* is her signature dish, the main event at Friday dinners. Over the years, she has tried replacing it with other recipes and has been faced with overwhelming dissent. The *tsli* is a five-ingredient wonder—chicken, potatoes, onions, oil, salt—yet somehow it makes the most satisfying, flavourful arrangement. Some days, when I miss home, it translates into a craving for my mother's *tsli* that nothing else can satisfy.

The first time I made *tsli*, the potatoes turned to mush and the chicken fell off the bone. The second time, the chicken and potatoes were tinted an unappealing yellow. Other times I added too much water, burnt the onions. It seems so simple, yet I find it impossible to perfect. It's a recipe that makes me humble.

My mother cooks by intuition and memory, the way a musician plays an instrument without reading notes. She owns no measuring cups, no cookbooks. Her recipes call for a bit of this and a bit of that and the addition of spices according to taste. Sometimes they're just a list of ingredients you have to rearrange like an anagram.

"You're sure the *tsli* has only salt?" I asked her after my first failed attempt. "How does it get brown out of nothing?"

"It's the onions," she said. "You have to caramelize them, then add the chicken, keep turning until it's brown on all sides. Add potatoes and water. Easy."

One Friday morning, on a visit to Israel, I woke up to the smell of fried onions and stewed chicken tickling my nose. When I stepped into my mother's kitchen, I found all four burners at work, three covered pots, and one plump eggplant lying in the blue flame. The kitchen table was covered with steaming Pyrex. At any given time, there was enough food in my mother's kitchen to feed a small village. Relatives and friends often showed up unannounced at lunchtime.

"There are only five of us tonight," my mother said. "We're having a small dinner."

A small Friday night dinner was still an elaborate affair: an assortment of appetizers—fried cauliflower, roasted yams with rosemary, chopped salad doused with lemon and olive oil—followed by *tsli*, Yemeni soup, and *ugat shmarim* for dessert.

The eggplant whistled, shrivelled and blackened, thin chimneys of smoke shooting from its cracks, as from lit cigarettes. My mother poked the eggplant with a fork and it released a sigh. She stripped off the flaky skin, letting the

meaty guts spill onto a plate. She cleaned up the burnt bits, mashed it with a fork, and added *tahini*, lemon, salt, and a pinch of minced garlic from a jar.

"My eggplant salad never tastes like yours," I said.

"Do you burn the eggplant? You have to burn it until it's black."

"I have an electric stove."

"That's okay," she said. "Just put it on a pan. And use a fork. No blender."

I always thought she didn't want to reveal her secrets because she needed to be indispensable. We all had our creative outlets: my siblings and I drew, painted, made music, and wrote. Cooking was her gift, her genius. If she shared that with us, then what would she have left?

I was wrong to think I wasn't welcome in her kitchen. She did want me there—keeping her company, praising her, asking for advice. Without me, without an audience, the pleasure of cooking would go stale.

YEMENI SOUP

At thirty-five, I learned how to make Yemeni soup.

It was winter in Vancouver, dreary and cold, and my naturopath advised me to eat more soups.

I never liked Yemeni soup as a child, hated how turmeric stained my fingers yellow, scowled at the wilted cilantro, despised *hilbe*, a ground fenugreek paste that clouded the clear soup the way water fogged Arak. *Hilbe* emanated from your pores the following day, a tang Yemenis were often mocked for. Whenever Yemeni soup was served at my grandmother's house, I sulked, refused to eat it, and left to play outside.

Yemeni soup was one of the dishes my mother had learned from her mother after she got married. It was a recipe my grandmother had learned from her aunt who raised her in Yemen, a recipe that made it through the desert and across the sea, surviving for decades, never written down.

When my mother grew up, this soup constituted their weekly serving of meat. My grandmother gave the wings to the girls so they could fly away, marry off, and the legs to the boys, so they could form the foundation of the house.

One week in November, my mother and I met in Los Angeles, where my sister and her family were living at the time.

"I'm making Yemeni soup," my mother said. "I even brought *hawayij*."

I opened the brown paper bag and sniffed it, the blend of spices instantly transporting me back to her kitchen.

This time as she prepared the soup, I got to watch, scribbling the steps on the back of a used envelope. We stood side by side, shoulders touching, gazing into the pot, waiting for the water to boil. She added chicken drumsticks and thighs and dished the excess fat out with a spoon. She dropped in a full onion, which would later disintegrate into translucent rings, and chunks of tomato, pepper, potatoes, and carrots. She sliced garlic straight into the pot, and finally, threw in an entire bouquet of cilantro. While she poured *hawayij* into the soup, I stirred the yellow into the water with a wooden spoon.

The aroma of Yemeni soup lingers in my kitchen for days after I cook it. I grew up trying to shake this smell off me. Now it lives in my house, a permanent stamp on my walls, a pungent greeting that welcomes my guests. When the *hawayij* my mother had given me in Los Angeles was finished, I started making my own, grinding cardamom, cumin, turmeric, chillies, and coriander in a mortar and pestle, the way my grandmother and great-grandmother had done before me. When I stand by my electric stove and pour *hawayij* into the pot, I'm a Jewish Yemeni woman making soup. I forget I live in a cold and strange city, ten time zones away from my family. I belong.

UGAT SHMARIM

One wintry Canadian night, I'm stunned by an intense craving for my mother's cake. It's been two years since I last made it to Israel, a year since my mother and I met in Los Angeles. It's the longest I've ever been away. I decide to call my mother for the recipe. I need to make it, this one time. I need to know how.

None of my aunts prepare it. My siblings never even tried. I always assumed it was too difficult. But I'm feeling courageous, confident in my skills. I call with the admission that we're more alike than I ever cared to admit. Cleaning gives me peace of mind. A full fridge makes me feel rich. When I'm in the kitchen, I don't like interruption. I cook by intuition, rarely follow a recipe. If anyone can make this cake, I can.

My mother is already in bed but she's delighted that I want to make the cake, eager to pass it on.

"Don't get discouraged if it doesn't work the first time," she says. "It takes practice. Keep trying."

Writing down the recipe takes a while. The measurements are different, even the settings on the stove. Some of the ingredients aren't easy to find, others

come in different packages, different sizes. And when my mother calls for four cups of flour, she doesn't mean standard cups.

"You know the narrow glasses we have at home?"

"I think so."

"Your father wouldn't drink coffee in any other cup. You know the ones?"

My father passed away twenty-six years ago.

"What's the secret?" I ask. "For the recipe?"

She laughs. "No secret."

I proudly tell her of my new invention, a vegan split-pea soup. She tells me she made a Chinese recipe from TV.

"Chinese!" she repeats in awe.

I recommend the salmon cakes I found in *Oprah* magazine.

"I don't like *salomon*," she says, pronouncing it the way many Israelis do.

We don't agree on everything. I find her beef too well done. I use less oil in my cooking, choose ingredients that are natural, organic. She sneers at my decision to use chicken broth in my Yemeni soup rather than a bouillon cube.

We've been talking for almost an hour.

Then I say, "Next time I'm in Israel, I'm going to watch you make *jichnoon*."

"It would be my pleasure." I can hear her smile.

The smell of cake lurks in the kitchen, at first nothing but a hint, then it brims over—warm, sweet, wholesome. I feel as though I'm bathing in its silky aroma.

"Do you smell it?" I clutch Sean's hand and whisper, afraid to disturb the moment. "I can't believe it's coming from my oven."