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FOOD & DRINK | RECIPIES

Recipe From a Lost City: Syrian Stuffed Squash

Koosa Mahshi, the Syrian dish of squash stuffed with lamb, rice and mint, conjures memories of Aleppo and peace



SUMMER SUPPER | A long simmer in a briny, lemony broth imbues these rice-and-lamb-stuffed zucchini with bold, bright flavor and a refreshing hint of mint. **PHOTO:** LINDA XIAO FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, FOOD STYLING BY HEATHER MELDROM, PROP STYLING BY STEPHANIE HANES

By Zora O'Neill

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IN A VIDEO CLIP of a cooking class I once took, the teacher, Maria Gaspard-Samra, grabs each student's attempt at stuffed squash in turn, knocking out the meat-and-rice filling. Her hands, deftly restuffing the vegetables, show her impatience. "What did we do wrong?" a fellow student implores.

I shot the video in 2009, during my third trip to Syria, on a tour organized by cookbook author Anissa Helou. Our instructor that day was a renowned chef in the northern city of Aleppo, long regarded as Syria's culinary capital. For a couple of years, I laughed when I saw the clip: It captured both Maria's expert technique and her personality.

When our class sat down to lunch, the platter of stuffed vegetables—*mahshi*, in Arabic—were the surprise stars, their flavor both delicate and intense, transcending the few ingredients we'd used. The simplest mahshi preparation is only small vegetables, such as baby eggplants and zucchini. The filling is meat—Maria used veal at her restaurant for more delicate flavor, but lamb at home—and rice, a medium-grain variety, seasoned with salt and pepper, and maybe a pinch of allspice. The cooking broth consists of something sour, such as lemon, a bit of garlic and a shake of dried mint. Maria served a sauce of thinned and salted yogurt.

The magic, I learned, comes in the careful preparation. Syrians often use koosa, a pale-green striped squash (usually labeled gray squash in the U.S.); its bulbous ends mean you need to wield your corer attentively to create a thin, even vegetable shell. The rice should be soaked and rinsed thoroughly, so excess starch doesn't gum up the filling. As Maria so briskly reminded her students, the squash should be packed only three-quarters full so the rice has room to expand as it cooks. The broth should be aggressively sour and almost as salty as the sea. When everything's done correctly, mahshi strike the ideal balance between vegetable and meat; the mint carries the scent of early summer.

That video, and all my photos from that trip, record a lost city. Since 2011, the Syrian civil war has displaced more than half the population and killed more than a quarter of a million people. Swaths of Aleppo have been bombed and burned. I don't know when I'll be able to visit again, or where Maria is, and that video no longer makes me laugh. Now I worry.

SEE THE RECIPE

- [Koosa Mahshi \(Stuffed Squash\)](#)

I thought of that cooking class last month, when I ate koosa mahshi for the first time in years. I was in Kiel, Germany, visiting a Syrian family I'd met on the island of Lesbos in 2015. Like half a million others that year, they'd arrived on the shores of Greece in a rubber boat packed to double capacity. The trio—a single mother who was a doctor and

her two sons in their 20s—were remarkably upbeat, despite the danger of the trip and the uncertainty of the journey still to come.

Seeing them all again in Germany, safe and sound, felt like a miracle. Soon we were settled in at their provisionally furnished apartment, sipping juice and catching up on all that had transpired. They'd slept in the mud in Macedonia, then lived in a camp in Hamburg, and another in Kiel, through the winter. They'd been able to move into this apartment after one of the sons befriended a German volunteer, who'd pleaded their case with a landlord.

Around dinnertime, Ilham, the mother, stepped into the kitchen. “Koosa mahshi,” she announced, and I felt the guilt of the guest. All that coring and fussing and long simmering, for my visit? And wasn’t it a bit late in the day to be embarking on such an elaborate project? I needn’t have worried. Ilham’s mahshi wasn’t stuffed at all. She’d sliced the squash into rounds and simmered it with the ground meat until just tender. Rice was served on the side.

This shortcut version wasn’t born of their refugee status, as I first assumed. Ilham’s work as a doctor had kept her out of the house all day, she explained, so she’d never cooked like a typical Aleppo housewife. “It has the same flavors,” she said, “but it’s so much easier. Who has time for all that work?” As we relished every spoonful, the dish tasted no less of Syria, of peace, family and home.

MORE IN EATING & DRINKING

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