Togetherness around Mansaf

Amal Fana

People need food to survive, but society needs the togetherness of a shared meal to connect people to their culture. Food is the bridge that connects people together. It helps them deepen their roots and reminds them of their home countries. I’ve learned from my family that the best way to welcome my guests is by cooking for them the richest meal, which reflects my feeling of happiness that we are together.

Mansaf is one of my favorite meals to cook for my beloved ones. It is a Palestinian dish that I used to eat when I was growing up. I used to wait for my father to come back from the butcher shop holding a bag with big chunks of lamb. He was so excited to call my mother and me to help him.

My mother and I started cooking. Once the meat was half way cooked, we poured rich yogurt syrup onto the meat with a variety of spices. My youngest brother ran to the old-fashioned wood-burning oven to get the bread. I spread out thin layers of fresh Arabic flat bread called “shrik.” Oh, how great the bread looked, especially after the yogurt syrup was poured over it.

Then we placed hot rice in the shape of a plateau on top of the shrik. On top of the rice, we arranged all the pieces of lamb. My mother told me to place the head of the lamb in the center. Finally, I garnished it with crunchy fried pine nuts and almonds and some minced parsley for added flavor. We ate it with a spoon or we used our fingers to scoop it into a ball and pop it into the mouth.

As a goodbye party, my family made this meal for me before I came to America. I was so blessed to sit down with my extended family and eat from the same platter. Everyone tried to give me the tenderest pieces of lamb. This delicious meal increased our love towards each other.

Now, when my husband and I invite guests into our home in Ohio, we warmly welcome them by cooking this most delicious dish to honor them and connect them to us and to our traditional culture.

AFTER YOU READ: Discuss the author’s use of the metaphor, “food is a bridge.” Explain what she means by that. Give at least two examples of how food has served as a bridge in her life. What about in your own life?

Amal Fana is a Palestinian who was born in Kuwait and lived in Jordan. She has been living with her handsome husband in North Royalton, OH, for the past three years. She studies at the Polaris Career Center in Middleburg Heights. Living in the U.S. has given her the confidence to achieve her dreams and goals.