Nourishing Resilience: The Palestinian Kitchen Table and the Healing of Generational Trauma

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Abstract

Mary Farah, who started cooking meals for her children in a small kitchen in a remote village in Lebanon after being forcibly expelled from Jaffa in 1948, turned food into something more than just sustenance. The story of Mary Tanous-Farah and her children centers the kitchen table as a transformative space for healing trauma, fostering communal resilience and intergenerational transmission of traditions and hosting diasporic political resistance through the production of Palestinian food and the vocalization of the Palestinian cause. The Farah family centered the profound benefits of connectivity for trauma healing around the kitchen table, which stood as an ancestral refusal of colonial nomenclature and a space of belonging, acceptance, expectation, and readiness. Mary turned the kitchen table into a "remembrance environment" where memories are shared between families and communities through culinary traditions and eating practices, thereby counteracting the experience of forced displacement. The culinary heritage Mary passed down to her children now stands as a testament to the homeland – a story skillfully woven into Johnny's, Jeanette's and Suha's culinary artistry in Lebanon. The Farahs' journey weaves together the strands of "refugeedom," reclaiming Palestine from beyond borders and Israeli colonization and appropriation. The Farahs kitchen table became an epicenter of recovery and safety that allowed them and their community to reconstruct identity and belonging amid the chaos of forced displacement. The Farah family's history is therefore the story of how a meal summons a cause.

Keywords:

Palestine; food; memory; Nakba; kitchen; sumud; trauma; family coping.

As Suha Farah pours me a cup of Arabic coffee, the smell of the roasted beans wins, while cardamon fills the air. With a contemplative look, she shares with me the tale of her quest for a new coffee supplier in Beirut where she resides, confessing that her once reliable source had lost the magic touch in roasting that had captivated her senses for years. The mood takes a somber turn as Suha reveals a sleepless night, the weight of Israel's genocide in Gaza since 7 October 2023 keeping her awake. In these moments, the personal toll of events unfolding in Palestine becomes starkly evident, highlighting the profound impact that the Israeli violence can have on the everyday lives of individuals like Suha. Gaza, under continuous Israeli attacks, where Suha's ancestors lay, is a space that produces a perpetual state of distress and intergenerational trauma for her and her family who were expelled to Lebanon from Palestine in 1948.

Figure 1. Hanna Farah and Philomena Knesevich in the early years of their marriage, c. late 1880s. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Anton Farah, Suha's father, was born in Gaza in 1899. His parents, Suha's grandparents, Hanna and Philomena, were natives of Gaza as well. Hanna Farah, born in 1869, joined in matrimony with

Philomena Knesevich, born in Gaza in 1877, at the Saint Porphyrius Orthodox Church in 1884. The Farah family enjoyed a relatively comfortable life in Gaza, where they welcomed their eight children into the world.

The Farahs are part of Gaza's Christian community, constituting one of the oldest Christian communities in the world, dating back to the first century. The number of Christians in Gaza dwindled to a little over a thousand in 2022, with roughly fifty thousand more in the West Bank and Jerusalem and around two hundred thousand in the state of Israel.[1] Gaza's Muslim and Christian communities have historically been united in resisting their collective entrapment in what has been called the world's largest open-air prison. Just as Muslims have been denied permits to visit Jerusalem's al-Aqsa Mosque, Christians have also been unable to visit sacred places in Jerusalem or Bethlehem, revered as the birthplace of Jesus. These restrictive policies have forced Palestinian Christians into exile, where they participate in a broader construction of Palestinian identity marked by exile and dispossession.[2]

Suha was five years old when she and her family were displaced from their home in Jaffa's Jabal al-'Araqtinji in al-Nuzha neighborhood, as Zionist militia forces intensified mass killings of Palestinians during their colonial conquest of Palestine. But this was not the Farah family's first displacement. Until World War I, Hanna Farah, Suha's grandfather, worked as a customs officer in Gaza, where the family had had a quiet life. From March 1917 until November 1917, British forces attacked Gaza City, then under Ottoman rule. The British conducted massive artillery bombardment, together with air strikes and naval shelling, eventually leading to the devastation and fall of Gaza. The Farah family, like many other families, fled Gaza. Hanna and Philomena Farah and some of their children fled Gaza for Jerusalem. Anton Farah, Suha's father, settled in Jaffa until the Nakba of 1948. "My father, Anton," Suha recounts, "was a public health official for the British Mandate government. Born in Gaza, he worked in Jaffa and stayed there until 1948. This is where he met and married my mother, Mary Tanous. My siblings and I, all six of us, were born in Jaffa."

In 1948, the siblings Suhail, Ayda, Michel, Suha, and the twins Johnny and Jeanette found themselves with their parents, Anton and Mary Farah, and some neighbors rushing to Jaffa's seaport to escape the Zionist massacres unfolding as part of the Zionist effort to take control over Palestinian land while expelling the population in anticipation of the end of the British Mandate. Ironically, they fled on the boat of Tawfiq Gargour et Fils (TGF), a shipping and logistics agency established in 1928 in Jaffa by the late Tawfiq Gargour. In its nascent stages, TGF was primarily a trading company, initiating operations in the export of Jaffa oranges. By 1933, TGF established contact with Mercedes-Benz in Germany, arranging the exchange of automobiles for shiploads of Jaffa oranges. Raja Gargour, Tawfiq's grandson, reports that a Mercedes-170 was exchanged for a consignment equivalent to five hundred boxes of Jaffa oranges.

Figure 2. Palestinians aboard a ship at Jaffa, bound for Lebanon, April 1948. U.S. National Archives.

Sustaining Community in Exile

From early on, the Farah children were exposed to extreme violence. Like all Palestinians who survive Israel's regular massacres, whether in Gaza at present or during the Nakba of 1948, the Farahs carry traumatic memories that leave deep unexpressed psychological wounds. When the Farah family arrived in Beirut, they were advised to find their way to Bayt Shabab, a mountain village twenty-four kilometers north of Beirut. Johnny Farah, Suha's younger brother, recalls that Bayt Shabab was all they could afford: "Beirut was too expensive, we had limited resources, after losing everything in Palestine." The Farahs arrived there with three other Palestinian families displaced from Jaffa, the Saraphims, Sayeghs, and Beiroutis. The hospitality of Bayt Shabab's community still warms Ayda and Johnny's hearts until this day: "They were very generous with us, they would offer services without taking any money, they would share what they had with us, they made us feel welcome and they helped us settle in our new home."

Wartime conditions made life hard, but Bayt Shabab offered them the building blocks for a renewed life, despite the fractured continuity that their displacement caused. Reflecting on these times, Johnny acknowledges that this region, the Levant, has always been multireligious and plural by nature: "We are by default, as Arabs, very different from the Zionist ethno-religious nationalist European project that came to settle in our midst." Mary Tanous, his mother, played a crucial role not only in keeping her family together, but also caring for other displaced Palestinian families. Together, they went through the same estrangements, uprooting, the profound amalgamation of grief and dislocation, and the arduous task of reconstructing a sense of identity

and belonging amid the chaos of forced displacement. Mary was able to collect what remained of herself and safeguard the prosperity of her children. Their kitchen table became the epicenter of recovery and safety.

The story of Mary Tanous-Farah and her children is one that centers the kitchen table as a transformative space for trauma healing for the Farah family and their community, focusing on its role in fostering communal resilience and intergenerational transmission of traditions and as a site of diasporic political resistance through the production of Palestinian food and the vocalization of the Palestinian cause. Their story does not claim to be representative in the structural sense of Palestinian diaspora society. As Edward Said points out: "There are many different kinds of Palestinian experience, which cannot all be assembled into one. One would therefore have to write parallel histories of the communities in Lebanon, the occupied territories, and so on. That is the central problem. It is almost impossible to imagine a single narrative."[3] Therefore, the story of the Farah family is part of a broader examination of how familial spaces provide a richer understanding of coping mechanisms and the potential for healing within Palestinian exile.

Research on people in prolonged conflicts has primarily focused on the impact of terror, trauma, and fear on social imaginaries and representations.[4] While some studies delve into how conflict shapes broader social relations,[5] literature on Palestinian coping has traditionally concentrated on individual strategies. However, a recent study in Gaza revealed that coping with extreme forms of violence and grief is not solely an individual trait but also a structural feature shaping multiplex social networks with various functions and meanings.[6] The study identified five main coping strategies, including giving cultural and religious meaning to trauma, shifting from individualism to collectivism, normalization, belonging and acceptance, and seeking social support. The Palestinian family frequently functions as a buffer against painful experiences and contributes significantly to the development of coping strategies.[7] I argue that all of these coping strategies take place around the "family table" that has emerged as a particularly salient kind of social organization, and which accords with what one study of Palestinian coping strategies described as "the social construction of locality, i.e. how social relations torn by displacement have been reconstructed, transformed or where new forms of social organization have grown up."[8] Additionally, this article responds to the call in social sciences to integrate sensorial experiences into ethnographic observation and writing. Sensory ethnography provides a pathway to delve into the lived and practiced Palestinian experience, its food-based memory and food culture. The practices of eating and remembering are inextricably linked. Moreover, food also serves as a conduit for intergenerational and intercommunity sharing of memories and traditions of past times and places.[9] Integrating findings from studies on trauma healing with research from food studies – which has extensively explored how memory, practiced through the preparation and consumption of cultural cuisines, both influences and is influenced by the places and actors involved – provides a more comprehensive understanding of the intricate ways in which the kitchen table operates as a space for trauma healing.

The Psychological Significance of the Kitchen Table

Mary Tanous was born in Nazareth in 1913 to a middle-class Christian Palestinian family. She married Anton Farah and they lived in Jaffa with their six children until the 1948 Nakba. She was just thirty-five years old when her entire world was turned upside down. She found herself suddenly forced to run for her life with six young children to an unknown destination. Amid violence and chaos, her parenting style was shaped by the interplay between past traumas and present responsibilities, creating a complex landscape where generational trauma intersects with the art of nurturing. Once they were able to secure a safe haven in Bayt Shabab, Mary Tanous turned food and the kitchen table into something more than just sustenance – she turned it into a source of power and liberation. Gathering her six children three times a day in the kitchen of their temporary new home, she set the tone for food to become the medium for safety, for storing the past, preserving identity, and asserting her and her children's Palestinianness in a world that often threatened to forget or erase it.

Figure 3. Mary Tanous. Photo taken in Jaffa in 1947. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Figure 4. Saint Joseph's School, Jaffa, Palestine, 21 March 1948. Little Ayda Farah is the fifth from the right on the front row. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

Mary not only had to compensate for her family's displacement and the dispersal of their extended family, who were scattered in different places, but also for the absence of her children's father. Anton did not stay long with his family in Lebanon after the 1948 Nakba. To make ends meet, he joined the newly established UNRWA as a health services officer and moved back to Gaza. He was occasionally able to visit his family, taking advantage of UNRWA flights between Gaza and Beirut. These opportunities to fly to Beirut were infrequent, coming every few months, as direct commercial flights from Gaza to other countries in the Middle East were no longer possible after the creation of the Zionist state in 1948.

Figure 5. Antoine Hanna Farah's UNRWA employment form, dated 4 September 1952. UNWRA Archive, Beirut, Lebanon.

Johnny recalls how happy they would all be when their dad arrived on one of these short visits and, even more vividly, how he smelled: "He always walked through the door carrying fresh food from Gaza. He'd bring us fresh fish from Gaza, and fresh vegetables and all kinds of spices from home. He would literally walk straight into the kitchen to prepare us a meal." Gaza's fiery chili peppers, delicate dill seeds, and pungent garlic intermingled with Jaffa's sumptuous seafood traditions in the Farah home. Breaking the stigmatized gendered conception of Palestinian food preparation, memories of Anton's return and cooking also bridged the imposed geographical separation. Still, Johnny insists: "The occupation not only dispossessed us of our home and country, it dispossessed us of our father, who I had barely seen until he passed away when I was seventeen. He was an UNRWA employee living on limited income, most of which he sent to us. And when he was in Gaza, he was no longer a native, but a visitor."

Mary's enduring Palestinian identity, manifested until her last days, found its roots in the collective memory and connection to her homeland, skillfully imparted to her children around the bustling kitchen table – a central hub where her children followed their mother's hand movement as she stuffed potatoes or rolled vine leaves, while they were doing their homework under her supervision or playing games. It took a lot of time and energy to chop, sauté, and bake these daily two- to four-course meals, which she insisted on making. Mary Farah carried a bag of

vegetables wherever she went. Whether meeting a friend at a café or at the beach after the children headed to school, she would elegantly produce a bag of green beans to peel or coriander to clean, all while enjoying her nargileh and chatting with her friend. When the children came home, Mary would involve them in the elaborate preparation of lunches and dinners. Preparing the meal itself became a ritual of connectivity, a social activity fostering connection and conversation among family members and friends. Johnny recalls that the few hours before actually sitting at the table were the most intimate because it involved teaching a group to collaborate to achieve a mutual goal. It was also a learning process for him to master these dishes, to learn the difference between *bamiya ghazzawiya* (okra prepared the Gazan Palestinian way) or *bamiya lubnaniyya* (okra prepared the Lebanese way). The difference was to be found in the tomatoes. When cooked, okra – valued not only for its flavor but as a source of vitamins, minerals, and fiber – becomes tender and takes on a slightly viscous texture, making it a key ingredient in stews. The Lebanese would add tomato sauce to it while the recipe from Gaza focuses on garlic, coriander, certain spices, and meat.

Johnny explains that they did not have the means to buy prepared food or go to restaurants, hence they were dependent of their mother's cooking. But "out of nothing and with basic ingredients, she would prepare incredible food." Once a month, Mary would go to Beirut to collect their allocated UNWRA food basket of essentials such as flour, rice, sugar, milk, and oil. One specific recipe that lingers in the memory of the Farah siblings is *madfunat samak*, an iconic Gazan fish and rice dish, a symbol of the seafaring tradition of Palestine's fishermen. The Gaza Strip is the only part of Palestine's coast that was not lost to Israel in 1948. Despite conquering so much of the Palestinian coastline, Zionism could not erase Palestinians' habit of preparing *sayyadiya* or *madfunat samak*, some of the few fish-based dishes from Palestine.

Mary was an excellent cook, as attested by her children, but also by her entire community, Palestinians and Lebanese. Guests naturally gravitated toward the kitchen, where the table served as a dining space but also a conduit for traditional customs. Mary turned her kitchen table into a site of refusal to relegate her attachments to Palestine – its dialects, traditions, cuisine, clothing, folklore, communal and family formations, and so on – to the past. A broader examination of familial spaces provides a richer understanding of coping mechanisms and the potential for healing within the Palestinian exile. While prior research on the "family table" has predominantly examined its nutritional and educational advantages, the Farah family centered the profound benefits of connectivity for trauma healing. The kitchen table stood as an ancestral refusal of colonial nomenclature and a space of belonging, acceptance, expectation, and readiness. Mary turned the kitchen table in a place to gather, talk, and reconnect, and it therefore functioned as a "remembrance environment" where memories are shared between families and communities through culinary traditions and eating practices.[10]

Mary's children also recall how she was adamant not only about food but also about the aesthetics of the dining table. Despite limited resources, she made sure that

when it was time to eat, the table would be set every day as if for a formal feast. The tablecloth, dinner plates, silverware, glasses, and napkins would all make their way onto the table, with the siblings elegantly setting the table under her watchful eye. She understood that the spaces we inhabit transcend mere physical settings; they constitute intricate ecosystems with a profound impact on our psychological well-being. These environments function as silent observers, bearing witness to the unfolding narratives of our lives.

Figure 6. Ayda surrounded by her family on her wedding day, 15 August 1962. From right to left: Jeanette Farah, Suha Farah, Shehadeh Shehadeh, Anton Farah, Ayda in her wedding dress, Mary Tanous-Farah, and Johnny Farah. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

The Farahs' physical connection to Palestine was renewed in 1962 when Ayda Farah, Johnny and Suha's older sister, married Dr. Shehadeh Shehadeh, a Palestinian from Bayt Jala and the first orthopedic surgeon in Palestine. Dr. Shehadeh came to complete his medical studies at Saint Joseph University in Beirut, where he met Ayda. Around the kitchen table, the Farah siblings and Mary would hang on every word Shehadeh would tell them about Palestine, and where they, too, could share with him their story of forced displacement. In 1966, Ayda Farah and Shehadeh Shehadeh moved to Palestine, where their family home remains to this day in Bayt Jala. Mary never gave up on Palestine. She was able to visit Palestine in 1968 to see Ayda. This trip was full of emotion and trauma for her. Johnny explains that when his mother went to Palestine, it was just after the 1967 war. The entire geography of Palestine was still accessible to Palestinians that resided there:

> You could just drive across Palestine, go check on your family members, make connections with people. Palestinian returnees were seeking for their homes. There were no separation walls, no besieged enclaves, there was still a possibility to coexist but the 1967 war meant to disturb that accessibility and finalize the Zionist settler project as a project for only one people, the Jews.

In essence, the Palestinian struggle is not merely personal; it is a collective battle against racial discrimination, bearing the weight of historical injustices, and resiliently standing against forces actively seeking to erase Palestinian identity. Mary traveled to Jaffa, where she easily located her home. As she approached the front door, she could hear Arabic music coming out of the house. Johnny recalls that when she knocked on the door, the settlers who occupied it replied in Arabic. He adds:

> Our home was taken over by one or two Yemeni families. My mother said that they were as generous as Arabs, they were Arabs, and they knew the house wasn't theirs, they didn't deny it, but they wouldn't give it back. Ironically, they spoke to her in Arabic. The entire experience was shocking to her, but what remained imprinted in her mind is how poor they were.

The power of language is so loud because it carries traces of ownership, expropriation, belonging, foreignness, betrayal, culpability and rightfulness. While the voice of Palestine sprung from Mary's throat, she was facing Mizrahi Jews who could not even speak Hebrew, the language of their so-called new nation. Johnny explains that the Yemeni family was not surprised that a Palestinian family would come knocking on the door, telling them this is their home: "Palestinian returnees were a common sight in that period of time, but my mum was gutted that some of her furniture was still in the house." Suha adds:

> You must understand that all six of us were born in that house, so in reality, they were robbing my mother of much more than stones and a roof, they robbed her of her memories. I might have been five when we were expelled, but I still remember our home vividly. I see it now as I speak with you.

Johnny continues that though his mother could not demand her home back from the new settlers, it did not mean that she gave up on Palestine. Before leaving Palestine, she visited her old school, Terra Sancta, in Jerusalem and the nuns recognized her. Mary then got acquainted with members of Matzpen, the premier radical leftist anti-nationalist anti-Zionist organization in Israel in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Matzpen's political agenda was unambiguous: it demanded the de-Zionization of Israel, including erasing the Law of Return, passed in April 1952, which assured the right of citizenship to any Jew in the diaspora who arrived in Israel and stated his or her intention to immigrate. Mary smuggled Matzpen's pamphlets under her corset out of Israel and gave them to Johnny to distribute them to leftist groups in Denmark, where

he was studying. Upon her return to Lebanon, she mistakenly mentioned that she had visited Jerusalem and was imprisoned for a few days, as Lebanese law prohibits Lebanese citizens from visiting Israel. Johnny concludes: "The suffering of my family runs through our DNA. I haven't met any of my grandparents who were displaced to Jerusalem with other family members. My mother was very good at hiding her pain, as she didn't want to project and burden us with a trauma so enormous it would cripple us. She wanted to give us life and possibilities, and she did."

Intergenerational Healing

Like most Palestinian refugees, the Farahs did not find stable refuge in the immediate aftermath of 1948. After a few years, they had to move from Bayt Shabab to Beirut and changed homes quite a few times in Beirut as well. When Anton Farah passed away in 1962, Johnny was seventeen years old. Despite the importance of education in the lives of Palestinians, his mother could not afford to put him through college, so Johnny decided to try his luck outside Lebanon's borders:

> I left Lebanon at the age of seventeen, because there was no possibility for higher education in Lebanon for me. I left with 150 dollars in my pocket. After a long journey through Turkey and Europe, mostly hitchhiking, I ended up in Denmark. There, I was exposed to new ways of socializing and eating. I thought I was doing fine and establishing a new life for myself, but it was only two years into my second exile that I started having physical and psychological reactions to my uprooting. I'd wake up at night having nightmares about missing my mother's food and flavors. I started writing letters extensively to my mother asking her for recipes. I'd wait eagerly for her words that felt like a tangible connection to what displacement had forced upon me.

Johnny explained how by cooking and experimenting with his mother's recipes, through food, he was able to transcend the undeniable foreignness of his guest country. But as much as his mother's cooking, he missed the essentiality and centrality of the kitchen table, where recipes were passed down and intergenerational trauma was healed through cooking, talking, and connecting. Upwardly mobile in Denmark, Johnny entered elite social circles that he nevertheless described as "poor":

> I noticed that rich people were eating relatively good food but did not understand the importance of the kitchen table and the essentiality of spending a good amount of time *together*, sitting, talking, and sharing. The kitchen table is a space of exchange, debate, expression, love. When you eat around the table, when you make it a habit, you create an unbreakable bond. When you eat everyday around the table, especially in time of need, it creates an unbreakable bond. Life around the dinner table is a big part of humanity. You make food for people you love.

Figure 7. Johnny Farah standing in his organic farm in Lebanon. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

After a life which had taken him round the world and seen him establish boutiques and restaurants from New York to Paris, and back in Lebanon, Johnny Farah now owns one of Beirut's most fashionable restaurants, Casablanca. But he remains that same three-year-old who stood on Beirut's harborside, a Palestinian refugee whose family had fled the town where he was born. The culinary heritage Mary passed down to her children now stands as a beautiful testament to her homeland – a story skillfully woven into Johnny, Jeanette, and Suha's culinary artistry in Lebanon and New York. Their culinary influences harmoniously blend the diverse influences of both Palestinian coastal cities that shape their family's history, Gaza and Jaffa. Johnny explains: "My relationship with ingredients, spices and vegetables is organic, it has been passed down to me and I can play with these flavors as much as I want, while still retaining their essential nature." But Johnny's journey into the world of food is not merely meant to provide meals for his (diaspora) friends and family to savor. It is a passionate voyage that weaves together the very essence of refugeedom and homeland. His cooking follows the same processes established by his mother. Family, friends, and acquaintances gather around a festive meal and Johnny involves them in setting the table, choosing the drinks, and indulging them in conversation. He tells me: "You won't believe how many of my Lebanese friends, some having very ardent anti-Palestinian rhetoric, I was able to convert into defenders of Palestine around this very dining table!" In the fragrant embrace of his cuisine, he orchestrates a symphony that resonates with the soul of Palestine.

This celebration of Palestinian cuisine also works to reclaim it from Israeli appropriation. Food appropriation is not just about laying claim to ingredients and mixing spices but needs to be understood as a systemic part of the many forms of

Israeli colonization of Palestine, a violent effort to take away a group's cultural identity and deny its heritage, its land, and the food it produces while manipulating its history. "Israel is a thief on all levels," Johnny concludes. By preventing Palestinians from accessing their homeland, and by controlling and limiting the movement of individuals within their own territories, Israeli authorities not only impede economic activities but also disrupt the cultural exchanges integral to culinary traditions. The confinement of people within specific areas hampers the organic evolution of food practices, inhibiting the natural flow of culinary knowledge and innovation, alongside the control of resources and destruction of agricultural land. The Farahs' kitchen table combats a broader Israeli strategy to assert dominance and reshape the sociocultural landscape. Through the Palestinian kitchen table, the Zionist project is constantly and continuously questioned and reversed. By sharing the foods, traditions, and wisdoms that are carried in generational recipes, the healing process is deeply tied to ancestry and identity.

Resilience and Recovery around the Table

Food's relationship to memory should not be treated merely as a form of evoking nostalgia and enabling specific affect but rather as an edifice constructed out of affective building blocks.[11] The kitchen table maintained its centrality in binding families together, thereby counteracting the experience of displacement, which continued to disperse generations of Palestinian refugee families. Though Mary constructed the kitchen table to safeguard her family, one could state that Mary, in fact, needed the presence of the kitchen table as a healing space, foremost for herself, to cope with her own trauma and anchor herself. In this space, she cultivated a sense of safety through the comforting presence and embrace of her children and friends. In this vein, the therapeutic role of the kitchen table was a reciprocal process. For the Farah family, the kitchen table was turned into a common place of origin where Mary brought together – even after her passing – her children, her grandchildren, and her community to express and reformulate their common identity. The kitchen table, which was a construct (if not a material object) they could "carry" with them wherever they went, allowed them to overcome, to a certain extent, the experience of dislocation, exile, and diaspora.

When Mary's children grew up, they ended up in all corners of the planet, while she stayed in Beirut. When her children were away, she would reproduce her rituals with her friends and neighbors. There were always people around her kitchen table, and the meals always entailed extensive preparation. When she would travel to her children and grandchildren, it did not matter if they were in New York, Paris or Hamburg, she would bring Palestine to them, through language, flavors, spices, and smells. Nicole Farah, Mary's granddaughter who lives in Paris, recalls her grandmother as an exceptional woman:

> Teta [grandma] always looked good, with her lipstick, foundation, heels, and pearl necklace. She'd always wear a skirt; she also always wore a corset and she'd cook wearing it! She had a small, sweet voice, very

> sweet. She raised her six children without shouting, I have never heard her scream. You'd actually have to stop talking to hear her speak. She had the power to adapt quickly to any new situation and I think the fact that she was fluent in several languages helped her in coping with life's challenges. What was also remarkable was that she held no grudges in her heart, despite all the injustice she went through. Despite their limited resources, her children had to eat well and dress well, she sewed clothes for them and cooked the most amazing meals. It was her way of defeating Israel. Around the table, she told her children that Lebanon had given them much to be grateful for. It was through good humor and optimism that she educated her children.

When Mary passed away in 1997, her children carried on the torch. Nicole and her siblings would wait eagerly for those family reunions with Ayda, Suha, Johnny, and Jeanette in Paris. Nicole realizes today that her teta – and Palestine – is always present around the kitchen table. The Farah siblings continue their mother's legacy despite the geographical separation between them and their nephews and nieces. Dinner preparation became a deeply intimate moment; with a smaller group, it was an occasion for catching up and sharing as discussions took on a more personal tone. Nicole reminisces about these moments: "It felt like a behind-the-scenes glimpse at a theater production, we would giggle and laugh. I'd always bring my children, so they could be nourished in this tradition. My husband, who is French, he, too, would never miss our family gatherings." Once the table was elegantly set, all of them, uncles, aunts, nieces, and nephews and their friends and anyone who was homesick was welcome at Johnny's kitchen table. The connections were recreated through cooking, with new friends and new family members, even if they did not speak the same language. Johnny and his siblings kindled a fire of common humanity in the hearts of their fellow displaced souls. They gather, not just to taste, but to partake in a ritual of remembrance and renewal. Their cooking is the story of how a meal summons a cause.

Nicole explains that because her grandmother awakened her children's senses early on, Mary's children embodied the legacy of her education. The significance of large meals, characterized by conviviality, warmth, love, richness, and good humor, symbolized the essence of their family reunions. And that positivity was the magic of the kitchen table, Nicole affirms:

> If the siblings had issues or were fighting, everything had to be resolved before it was time to eat. Everything had to be forgiven and forgotten once the dishes reached the table. That was her rule. No problems, no bickering around the kitchen table. It was a safe space. She believed that food would turn into poison if we eat it while angry or upset. That marked me, because the French would gather around the family table on Sundays only to complain, share, and discuss their problems, turning the

> entire event of eating into a negative experience. That wasn't the case when we were having family meals.

Mary's kitchen table extended its hospitality beyond family, serving as an open space for friends and the community. This realization dawned on me during my time in New York, where every Saturday evening, Jeanette Farah, Johnny's twin sister, graciously hosted me for a four-course dinner in her Wall Street apartment, inviting her American neighbors as well. This weekly ritual, spanning decades, involved Jeanette's pilgrimage to Union Square's Greenmarket for fresh fish, vegetables, and fruits, where she was greeted warmly by vendors who considered her both a loyal customer and a friend. As a spectator at her kitchen table, I never dared to interfere in the delicate artistry of her cuisine, as she gently provided us with a testament of the enduring power of food as both an instrument of remembrance and an emblem of unwavering resilience. In this psychological embrace, the dinner table emerged as a cornerstone in the art of maintaining human togetherness as it reestablished the meaning of home in the local or diasporic context.[12] Around her kitchen table in New York City, Jeanette brought Palestine to us, through her food and her stirring of the memories of a homeland left behind. Even in this buzzing metropolis across the ocean, she forges connections, not just of flavor and sustenance, but of shared history and dreams.

Now visiting Beirut, I am seated at Suha's kitchen table, where I observe Johnny deftly chopping onions while Suha sprinkles salt onto rolled vine leaves simmering over a low flame. The air is thick with paralysis and disgust, as the atrocities committed by an authoritarian Israeli state and its colonial forces proceed relentlessly. Johnny looks sad and defeated:

> Every day I am seeing new images of Palestinian kids blown to bits, smashed by concrete, screaming in hospitals where they can't be adequately treated, burying their parents or siblings. Israel keeps casting a dark shadow over our region.

Once again, it is around the kitchen table that the Farah siblings, family members, and friends deal with traumatic collective pain. The live-streamed images of Israeli and American genocidal violence continuously exercised against Palestinians – mainly in Gaza, but also in the West Bank – echoes and reiterates the moment when this genocidal regime was established and expelled the Farah family from their home in Jaffa. In an uncanny and ironic way, the footage and color photographs of bombed hospitals, schools, bakeries, courthouses, residential blocks, farms, and human flesh, mutilated children, and corpses in Gaza recall the black-and-white still images taken in Palestine during the Nakba of 1948, reawakening the traumas of this family and other Palestinians.

Despite his external composure, a storm raged within Johnny, leaving scars that were invisible to the world. On 20 October 2023, the Church of Saint Porphyrius,

Gaza's oldest active church and the sacred place where Johnny's grandparents exchanged vows, faced a tragic fate. Serving as a refuge for hundreds of Muslims and Christians displaced by Israeli bombing, the church became the target of an Israeli missile. The devastating strike claimed the lives of at least twenty civilians. I shared in Palestinians' anger, and that deep visceral cry of absolute devastation and horror. After helplessly roaming the streets of Beirut, I decided to go to the Farahs' home, which has served as its own kind of sanctuary for generations of Palestinians, especially in times of fear. I knew that at the Farah home, the simple act of breaking bread together would become a bridge for my grief and pain, connecting hearts and fostering a sense of belonging in a world that was seemingly so deaf to the cries of burning children in Palestine.

Figure 8. Chilies from Johnny's organic farm in Lebanon. Photo courtesy of the personal collection of the Farah family.

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Endnotes

1 The majority of the Christian community of Palestine was expelled after the creation of the state of Israel, which displaced about eight hundred thousand Palestinians. The Gaza Strip is 140 square miles (362 square kilometers), with a population of approximately 2.1 million people, including 1.8 million refugees displaced from elsewhere in Palestine and their descendants. Israel's policy of isolating the Gaza Strip and monitoring any movement in and out of it developed gradually during the 1990s. "General closure" – the term referring to Israel's sealing of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – was imposed in 1993 and has remained in effect ever since, developing into a "total closure" of the Gaza Strip. Systematic policies of expropriation and deinstitutionalization tore up the economic, social, political, and geographical fabric of Palestinian society in the Gaza Strip, undermining any chance that Gaza could be

self-sustaining. See, for example, Sara Roy, *The Gaza Strip: The Political Economy of De-development* (Washington: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1995).

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