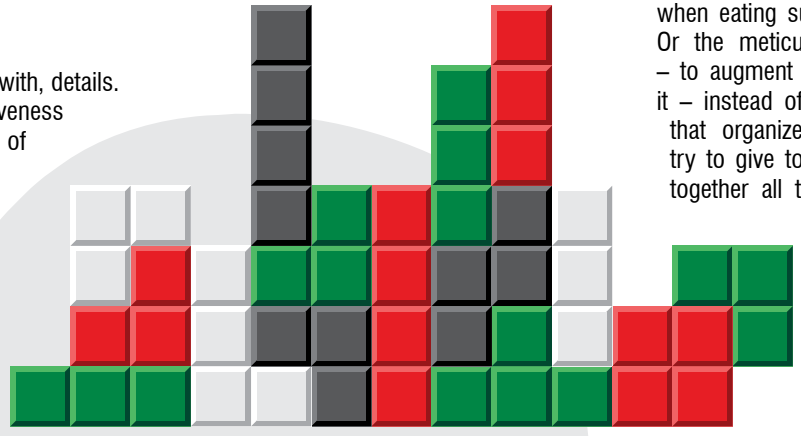
The Perfect Cut

By Sabrin Hasbun

My father has a remarkable passion for, even obsession with, details. For him, every activity must incorporate a loving attentiveness to detail: the shades of colors, the shapes and lines of forms, the lights on the surface, the perfect timing between activities. He is an artist, and I have gotten used to seeing the results of this obsession in his works. No doubt there is something mystical about it. But it's not difficult to imagine the situations that arose when we children had to apply this same obsession with detail to other spheres of our lives: from the fear of the herculean task of tidying up our rooms under his eyes, to the advantages of creating the perfect fashion outfit; from the crazy race to get ready on time – his time – to the unforeseen consequences of asking his help on a school project, but also the resulting high marks.

There is one field, however, that became the favorite kingdom of his obsession: cooking. This came as a surprise to us because, when we were children, the maximum effort my father put into cooking was to open a can of tuna and a can of beans and add some raw onions. That's it. Lunch ready in five seconds. I guess he started to feel a sort of incoherence between his behavior in the kitchen and his behavior elsewhere; so to resolve it, he decided to become the new dictator of the oven, the tyrant of seasoning, the despot of spices, but more than anything, he became the absolute supreme ruler of the art of cutting. He made us cut kilos and kilos of almonds until we achieved the flawless thickness: three cuts of the same measure along the vertical line, for perfect toasting. He lectured us on the importance of cutting meat in an overly precise version of normal minced beef for the best *roz u loz* (rice with almonds) topping. The potatoes needed to be not too thin and not too thick to find their rightful place among the meatballs of *kufta* (a dish with fried meatballs, onions, and tomatoes, baked in sesame sauce) without burning and without being undercooked. The onions had to be like that, too, and the parsley, even thinner. And if you wanted the perfect *salata bi-tahini* (salad with sesame sauce), there was just one possible way to cut the cucumbers and tomatoes: into tiny squares of 5 x 5mm. Chop chop.



My relationship with Palestinian cuisine at first traumatized my Italian-accustomed taste buds and evolved into the shock of a totalitarian cut. Only after having grown up and having moved out of my parents' house to a faraway country did I recognize the value of that food obsession. I missed the exact quantity of tahini in hummus, neither one drop less nor one drop more, when eating supermarket hummus. Or the meticulous use of sumac – to augment the flavor, not to kill it – instead of that confused taste that organizers of "Arab nights" try to give to their events, mixing together all the "exotic" cultures. I even missed the perfect cut of almonds that allows their oily core to become crisp and sharp after browning. But more than anything else I missed those little squares of tomato and cucumber, and the lemon, garlic, and tahini of *salata bi-tahini*. Now that I cannot spend my Sunday mornings smelling my father's food, listening to his singing, helping him cook, cutting the almonds, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and whatever else, I finally understand his obsession. It is only after having looked for years for the perfect cut, focusing on the details, that you get to the point where those tasks become a ritual. It's not just cooking anymore, it's not just punctiliousness or obsession, it's affection for and delight in your culture, and the desire to pass it along to the new generation as it is, to prevent getting lost in that pigswill of easy exoticism.

I remember one night, in Italy, when I was 16 or 17. My father was asked to prepare a Palestinian feast for a gathering with friends. We were all there to help, everyone doing something, under the vigilant eyes of my father. There was a woman, a friend of friends, whom we had met that night for the first time, and I was given the task of cutting the tomatoes and cucumbers with her. My father showed her his perfect cut, sharing with her his enthusiasm for a well-cooked dish. When my father left us to our task, she let go a bored snort.

"Is he always like that?" she asked me.

"What do you mean?" I answered.

Of course, I knew what she meant. She was questioning my father's obsession with details and the perfect cut. She started to mock him and cut the tomatoes in the worst way possible, on purpose, and then tried to convince me that there was no need to cut them the way he wanted, that it would make no difference, that it was just my father's way of imposing his male authority. You can imagine how, after so many years of cutting and cutting again until the perfect square was achieved, that option sounded slightly alluring. But there was something inside me that found this woman's attitude extremely offensive. At that young age, I couldn't give it a name, but now I realize that hers was a clear attitude of bigotry: the preconception that because my father was an Arab man, he couldn't but impose his power, and that I, as an Arab woman, needed to be preached to and saved. That woman, who was rebelling against my father's way of cutting those fresh tomatoes into tiny squares and trying to form a kind of women's league with me against male power, didn't sound to me rebellious or bold or clever at all. To me, she was not fighting against Arab paternal authority as she might have thought. She was being disrespectful towards and misappropriating something of immense value to me. I knew that my father could sound like an annoying know-it-all at times, and at times I was tempted, too, not to listen to him and to cut all those vegetables in a more laid-back way. But no, there is something special in the obsession that my father has with the precise details of a recipe: the love for his country's food and traditions, the desire to share the wisdom behind them, the duty to protect the importance of that perfect combination of raw ingredients, and the need to preserve that impeccable flavor that can only come from those perfectly cut pieces, from those exact shapes and measures, and from that exact quantity of oil, salt, and garlic. No less, no more. That woman's rebellious act was stupid and ignorant. She didn't realize the significance and richness of my father's actions. She only wanted to see a man who was telling her what to do. I saw a father who was trying to teach and pass on to me his love for Palestine and Palestinian food.

Sabrin Hasbun is an Italian-Palestinian transnational writer and blogger. She has always had to mediate between two cultures, and every day for her is a kind of journey across borders. Italy and Palestine are her two countries and form the focus of her writing, but in the last few years she has lived in France, Japan, and the United Kingdom and has been part of the academic worlds of the University of Pisa, the Sorbonne University of Paris, and Bath Spa University, where she is currently doing her PhD in creative writing. You can follow her experiences at www.sabrinisnothere.com.