

Ep. 16 - Anissa Helou

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, cookbook author, Anissa Helou.

ANISSA HELOU:

The reason why I do it, apart from wanting to produce beautiful food and helping other people produce beautiful food, is preserving the culinary lore that might, if not disappear completely, but some of it be lost.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Anissa has always loved food - I mean, who doesn't. But she didn't like to cook. And above all else, she didn't want to feel like she had to. But, somehow, accidentally, Anissa Helou is one of the best known chefs and food writers in the world. She has introduced bonafide foodies, and the most reluctant cooks too, to a slice of home, and a dose of joy in the kitchen. Anissa grew up in Lebanon and spent summers in Syria where fresh vegetables from the garden were plentiful. Her mom and grandmother would make fresh bread and butter at home -- everything from scratch. But she also craved a different life for herself, and set out to leave home as soon as she could so she could chart her own course. And that's what she's done. Her books, like *Lebanese Cuisine* and *Mediterranean Street Food*, have won awards and praise from major newspapers like the *LA Times* and the *New York Times*. Her latest book, *Feast: Food of the Islamic World*, became a fixture in my pandemic cooking arsenal. At a different time, we might have been having this conversation over an extravagant, rich meal, followed by a tea, or in my case, a coffee. But we settled on a Zoom date to talk about her love affair with food, where she feels at home, and her lifetime of defying conventions.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa Helou, welcome to *This Being Human*.

ANISSA HELOU:

Thank you. Thank you for such a wonderful introduction.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa, you know, you've said that you've always loved food but didn't want to cook it yourself. Tell me about that, that paradox.

ANISSA HELOU:

Well, when I was a teenager, I was a very avid reader and I was French educated. So I discovered the French existentialists and in particular Simone de Beauvoir, who became my heroine. I wanted to become an intellectual. I definitely didn't want to marry and have children like I was expected to. And from when I was 16, my idea was to leave Beirut and to lead my own life, a bit like Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre. All these people, you know, kind of going to the cafe, discussing world matters, et cetera. And writing, of course. And I remember, you know, in those days people, you know, like they had arranged marriages. And there was a guy who wanted to marry me and he came with his mother to the house. I was 16, or 16 and a half. And, you know, they came to ask for my hand and I was looking at them and thinking, *I don't know*. Then his mother asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I said to her very frankly and very boldly: "lots of things, but not get married," and my mother was absolutely horrified and she was even more horrified and she took her son and went away and I was relieved.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You say you wanted to leave Beirut and chart your course elsewhere. How did you do that and what course did you chart?

ANISSA HELOU:

Well, it was very difficult because my father would not send me to study abroad alone. So, you know, a girl from a good family was not supposed to go and live alone in Europe. I tried my best to convince him, but it didn't work. And then I said to him, "I'm not going to university in Lebanon," thinking that might work. But it didn't work either. Then I acquired a boyfriend who had a travel agency. And somehow we were talking and he asked me if I wanted to become an air hostess. I didn't really know much about, you know, the job. But I immediately clicked that it might be the way for me to leave the Lebanon, you know, kind of lying. So I went to my father and said, I was 18 or 19, just 19. And I said, "well, you know, I have this chance to become an air hostess." My father, being a very strict Arab man, said, "what? A maid on a plane?" And I said, "well, it's not, it's very glamorous." He looked at me and he said "no." So I waited until he went on a business trip. And my mother was much easier than my father. So I went to my mother with my contract and I said, "mom, please, you know, I'm going to have such a wonderful life traveling. I'll bring you wonderful presents." [Laughs] And my mother, being quite angelic, kind of signed the contract and said, "okay, if you want to do it, do it." My father was absolutely furious. By then he couldn't do anything, because I was hired. And two weeks later I realized he was right, I was a maid on a plane, but - but I stuck it out because I was saving my money to go.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Then, as Anissa tells it, something both very fortunate, but also very scary and downright dangerous - happened. Her boyfriend at the time, realizing that Anissa might soon flee from Lebanon, and from him, went to rather desperate measures to try to keep her by his side. It backfired for him, but for her, it was a chaotic, unexpected ticket to the independent life she wanted to live.

ANISSA HELOU:

That first boyfriend wanted to marry me, but I didn't want to marry him. And I said to him that I was planning to leave the Lebanon, with my savings. And he kidnapped me in front of my mother. He came to our house, pulled out a gun and said, "I'm taking her and I'm marrying her." And of course, my mother being not feeble but kind of accommodating, didn't really do anything. And my father wasn't at home, I think he was on another business trip. And so I went to his parents' house with him and I was thinking, *how am I going to get out of this?* So I tried to reason with him. And then finally I said to him, "I'm in love with somebody else and I'm going to go and live with him in London," at which point he lunged at me. But instead of hitting me, he hit the sofa and hurt himself. And I took him to the hospital, dumped him there and went to my parents and said, "he's going to kill me if I don't leave the Lebanon." Which wasn't true, I mean, so I kind of worked them up to worry about me. And within I think a few days I was, I was in London.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

That dramatic escape from Beirut kicked off the beginning of Anissa's life on her own terms. And for the first couple of years in London, Anissa still didn't cook. She remembers the exact incident that changed her mind.

ANISSA HELOU:

I refused to cook, basically. I mean, I lived with a man, but I told him that I wouldn't be sewing buttons, I wouldn't be cooking, I wouldn't be doing any any of the things a man expects of a woman in those days. But then, then he invited this very glamorous friend of his. And when he asked me what was for dinner, I said, "open the fridge, see what's in the fridge, and there will be dinner." And she cooked for him. And I was looking at them, at both of them and thinking, well, it's true that the cliché is, you know, food is a way to a man's heart and maybe I should make an effort and cook. So on a whim, I decided to invite all our friends, about 30 people, to a Lebanese dinner. It was the middle of the Lebanese civil war. There was no communication at that time. And so I couldn't call my mother. London was a culinary desert, so there weren't very many ingredients available. But I managed to get everything I needed, like fresh parsley, bulgur, olive oil, you know, zigzagging through London to find the plate because certainly not at the supermarket. And I cooked from memory. And that's when I realized that I actually knew how to cook, because, I mean, I don't know how good the dinner was, but I was able to produce a dinner for quite a few people, that they enjoyed.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

It's not like Anissa had an epiphany at that point and said, "aha, I'm going to write cookbooks." It came slowly -- and kind of accidentally.

ANISSA HELOU:

I acquired a literary agent and she introduced me to a Lebanese friend of hers, and at that dinner they discussed cookbooks. I was listening to them and I was thinking, *there isn't a good Lebanese cookbook on the market, especially for those who didn't know the cuisine*. So I said, you know, very nonchalant like this, I said, "well, why don't I write it?" You know, a Lebanese cookbook. I don't know if you know the book by Rayess, but the chicken recipes start, "catch your chicken, kill it, pluck it," and whatever, you know. So, I mean, definitely not definitely not a cookbook for the 90s. And my agent said, "oh, well, I've got a publisher who's looking for somebody to write a book on Lebanese food." And I said, "well, I'm your person." Except that I knew nothing about cookbooks. I didn't have any regard, I mean, any respect for cookbooks because they were not a literary genre that I believed in or even that I looked at. I mean, I looked at cookbooks as manuals. Then I discovered that actually food was culture and that writing about food, you know, before it was all hedonistic, you know, I loved kind of great food, beautiful markets, wonderful ingredients. But, you know, it was essential for me, you know, it was a pleasure, not an intellectual pursuit or even a kind of historical or knowledgeable or whatever. But as I started writing the cookbook and collecting my mother's recipes and her knowledge, because she knew a lot, I realized that there was a lot more to food than I had given it credit for. And that's how I started.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa, how do you go about capturing precisely those recipes of your childhood? I've cooked with my mom and my aunts, and for me, it's a nightmare because it's a pinch of this, it's a bit of that, it's -- and it's a lot of love. How did you make it work in a cookbook?

ANISSA HELOU:

Well, it was exactly that. So my mother wrote her recipes, all 200 or 250 of them, which were in the first book, in Arabic. And of course, it was a pinch of this, a coffee cup of that, a handful of this. And then the worst was cook until done, (in Arabic) *tatbakh hataa tundaj*. And I would say, "mom, what does it mean, you know, like half an hour, an hour or two hours, what is this, you know, cook until done?" So, luckily, she was in London because of the Civil War, and I cooked with her, her recipes, I tested them with her, but with measurements. And we had tons of arguments because she couldn't understand why I wanted to be so precise. And I said, "mom, I'm not writing for you or for anybody else. I'm writing for people who don't know the food." So that's how it, you know, for seven months, eight months, I was arguing endlessly with my mother about how to translate her fabulous recipes into recipes that others could reproduce.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What's coming to me, as you're speaking, is a vision -- that you had a real vision for this book that you were producing, especially about introducing Lebanese cooking to those who weren't already the seasoned pros. Do you feel you accomplished that?

ANISSA HELOU:

I did, actually, because mainly from testimonies, I mean, a lot of Arab-Americans or Arabs, Lebanese abroad loved my book because it gave them possibility to cook like their grandmothers or mothers with recipes that work. I mean, authentic is a loaded word, you know, when I cook for other Lebanese friends they say, “oh, yeah, your *kibbeh bil sanieh* is really nice, but my mother does it like this.” But on the whole, I produced a collection of traditional recipes from the mountains of Lebanon, because I wasn't really going regional in those days, and that were classical, well thought-out, tested and that people could use, even foreigners. And that's when I knew that my book was actually a success from the point of view, exactly how I wanted it to be.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER::

Will you help the Aga Khan Museum make *This Being Human* even better? Take five minutes to fill out a short survey and tell us what you think. By providing your feedback, you'll help us measure our impact and reach more people with extraordinary stories from some of the most interesting artists, thinkers, and leaders on the kaleidoscope of Muslim experience. To participate, go to agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey. And thank you for listening to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Well, Anissa, I have to thank you for your latest book, *Feast: Food of the Islamic World*. I've found myself coming back to it a lot. One thing that's occurred to me as I've read it and reread it is that it's a bit of an audacious project, it's really ambitious to try and capture in one amazingly detailed volume the food of an entire, quote unquote, “Muslim world,” which spans everywhere from Africa to Eastern Europe to Asia to North America, frankly. Do you feel like you got it all?

ANISSA HELOU:

No, I'm sure I didn't. If I wanted to get it all, I would have needed like three volumes or more. I think what I managed to do is give a good overview of the culture, of the history. Because basically why I wanted to do this book is to give a positive image of Islam and Muslims, given, you know, the negative connotations and the connection with terrorism. And you know, when I was thinking about doing a comprehensive book, you know, it came to me that it was a great way to present the religion and its people in a positive form through food. And so I wanted it to be comprehensive. I mean, some people say it's encyclopedic, but obviously it's not, because if you want it to be encyclopedic, you would have written - I mean, I would have researched more, I would have traveled more, I would have written more, I would have included more recipes. But, you know, I think it's a very appealing book because it's beautifully produced. It has gorgeous photographs, enough photographs of great dishes, and very good recipes. And that's, you know, it's a great introduction to the foods of Islam. If I may say so.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Is there something that you know is missing? What would you include for sure in the next edition?

ANISSA HELOU:

I think there are some recipes that are missing, you know, like musakhan, more Palestinian recipes, I would go to Malaysia. I would try to go to African countries that I was not able to go to because of the situation, you know, like Algeria, Mali, Burkina Faso. I mean, it's big enough and heavy enough. When I gave a copy to my mother, she said, "why did you have to write such a big book?" [Laughs] You expect your mother to be, like, very complimentary, but mine is not. So I would, yeah, I would add recipes and countries if I had to redo it, but maybe in an extra volume so that it doesn't have to be such an enormous brick, you know, of a book.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You now have over a dozen books under your belt. What drives your explorations of food?

ANISSA HELOU:

I'm very curious, generally, and being obsessed with food, I... I mean I'm always keen to discover different cuisines or more of the cuisines that I like. Like I'm going to Korea in the autumn to explore Korean cuisine, not to write about it, but just because I love it and I love -- I'm obsessed with Korean TV series, so I want to kind of live there a bit and see whether it's true or just kind of too fictionalized. I have to say that I haven't really thought about doing another book since *Feast*. Also, *Feast* took a lot out of me and I worked really hard on it for a long time. I don't have much inspiration now, but I am still interested. Like when I travel, I'm always in markets and restaurants, street food. I'm always looking at what's, what I don't know or what I like and can compare what I've experienced.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, Anissa, just hearing you talk about your forthcoming trip to South Korea and the tenor of the life that you've lived so far, you've forged a fiercely independent life against the grain of family and cultural convention. You know, when you think back on it, how difficult was it to do that and to, and to maintain that?

ANISSA HELOU:

I don't know that it was difficult from the point of view that I'm quite fearless, so maybe I don't recognize challenges because, I kind of, you know, launch myself into projects or into adventures and -- this said, I do think about when I changed my life or like when I moved from art to food, I didn't do it overnight. I mean, I do think about things for a long time before I enact on them. I think it's difficult because, I mean, as a woman, we are still in a man's world. And so as a woman, you have more obstacles than if you're a man. In the traveling, at least in my region, it's an advantage because it allows me to go into houses and cook with women, whereas it would be more difficult for a man, for instance. Staying independent, you know, I mean, like all Arab girls I've had my mother saying, "when are you going to get married? What are you doing?" You know, "aren't we going to see a child?" And, but being kind of bolshie, I'll just say

"I'm not getting married. You won't see a grandchild." [Laughs] I never had a problem with kind of fighting against convention because it was always something that I, I mean, I meant to do it. I pursued it. And, and it's become a way of life.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

These days, Anissa splits her time between London and Sicily. She has a complicated relationship with Lebanon and Syria, the countries where her parents are from, and where she spent her childhood.

ANISSA HELOU:

Well, I consider myself as an orphan of these two countries, sadly, because both countries, as I've known them, have been destroyed. And my relationship is that I have a love-hate relationship with Lebanon because the materialistic and corrupt aspect of Lebanese society is, and politics, is something that I resent and that I've always resented and was one of the reasons I left the country as well. And a very sad relationship with Syria, because the tragedy of, you know, of Syrian art and heritage and the people is something that I, that I feel, you know, that affects me. And I am very sad that I can't go back there, because as long as that, you know, the situation is as it is, I'm not about to go back. Whereas I was going like two, three, four times a year before and leading culinary tours to Syria. So I have a kind of slightly sad relationship with both countries. I personally don't mind not belonging anywhere because actually that's a freedom, I consider that a freedom and I feel more at home in Europe than I do in Lebanon or in Syria.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa, as I read your books and particularly the stories in them, you know, so much of what you do isn't about food or ingredients or recipes, but about cultivating and facilitating hospitality and food being a kind of a, a beautiful charity and almost a spiritual charity that we share with one another. What to you is the core ingredient or emotion that guides your... guides your work?

ANISSA HELOU:

What guides my work is first, preserving culinary lore for future generations. I mean, culinary lore means recipes, history, social context. You know, in the old days, people wrote recipes and they had no context at all. So maybe you had great cookbooks with great recipes, but you didn't actually know more about the cuisine than how to prepare whatever recipes there are included in the book. For me, the reason why I do it, apart from wanting to produce beautiful food and helping other people produce beautiful food, is preserving the culinary lore that might, if not disappear completely, but some of it be lost and preserve it to future generations, to researchers, to people who want to know more about the various cuisines I write about. So that's my main goal and my work. And then the second one is producing impeccable dishes.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa Helou, what does this being human mean to you?

ANISSA HELOU:

For me, it's basically it's being a good person, and overcoming positively whatever comes to you and accepting, I mean, accepting fortune and misfortune as temporary, you know, instances, events, whatever, and leading a good life and sharing it with others.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Anissa Helou, I've had I've had the privilege of interviewing some wonderful people, but I have to say I was really fanboying about today, so I want, I want to say a special thank you for joining me on *This Being Human*. This has been so wonderful.

ANISSA HELOU:

Thank you Abdul-Rehman. It was great. I enjoyed it, too.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our Senior Producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Production assistance by Nicole Edwards. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum, go to www.agakhanmuseum.org. The Museum wishes to thank Nadir and Shabin Mohamed for their philanthropic support to develop and produce *This Being Human*.