

BOOK REVIEW

What Mum Taught Us: Valuable Lessons and Outstanding Hospitality, Including Precious Mesopotamian Recipes

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This book, wrapped in gastronomy, reflects a family's love for their mother, Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa. Her five children with love pay their mom respect and homage in this book and make sure that her work and pilgrimage through this world remains for posterity.

The words bring to life the smell of sweets and delicious snacks as well as the dedication of a mother whose life's efforts and soul reflect her desire to love and entertain relatives and guests with recipes worth admiring. One soon discovers that behind this dedication there is more than love of food or a desire to entertain, but a way of life, a faith in a God which gave everything out of love for humankind. This conviction plays a fundamental role on what she did and how she did it. **The Issa family, mother and children, teach us in these pages how food can be more than just a human need for survival.** Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa made of her cooking a legacy, a means to generate bonds and build community but most of all to share something greater, her faith. Her work in the kitchen and at the table find deeper meaning in the way she conceives her spiritual life and relationships with others.

This book, by opening a door to a family's home, will not only teach what are the best delicacies of Mesopotamian cuisine but also how to care for people and the produce that comes from nature. It is in its essence a lesson in respect of nature, hospitality, coexistence and a faith which gives foundation to them.

One soon discovers that behind this dedication there was not only a love for food, but also a way of life. Food is more than a means of survival, as the Issa family teaches us. Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa made a legacy of her cooking, a means to generate bonds and build community but most of all to share something greater, her faith.

While I visited Australia for academic purposes had the opportunity to witness this special way the Issa have to share and communicate when I was honored to dine in their home in Perth. This allowed me to be part of their most intimate moments in the heart of an academic relation and truly marked a very special moment of my stay in Australia. I remember how comfortable they made me feel and what they taught me as a family. They remain for me as an absolute example of hospitality which allowed me to experience the fading of boundaries between academic and personal lives while enjoying

delicacies fondly prepared by their mother. **A proud mother of her children and more than happy to receive her friends and colleagues at home.**

When I received the book her children had written, I again experienced what I felt when I was visiting the Issas. I asked my brother, Eduardo, to also read the book and help me write these words I am reviewing here. I found it would be appropriate for two siblings to review together the work other siblings dedicated to their mother. In addition, I must say that both of us are similarly passionate about cooking and enjoy cooking for others, something we also learned from our own mother.

This book is divided into **eleven chapters** that I will try to summarize below:

The *first chapter* is an introduction that helps the reader understand the meaning of the book when it says, "this book comes as an attempt to keep the memory of our Mother Bathqyomo Marine Khoury-Issa". This book is the result of a dream come true, with the motivation of a mother who always "encouraged her family to pursue their dreams." It reflects the homage of a family to their beloved mother.

Bathqyomo is presented in the *second chapter*, "Who is our mum and what she meant to us and others", as a "spirited, courageous, righteous, virtuous, moral, honorable, honest respectable and very decent woman". She represents, for her children, the biblical book of Proverbs, in which they find a way to describe her as a diligent mother and lover of her family. This chapter shares a series of "quotes", letters and emails that reflect the emotions caused after the death of their mother. Through these reflections, it comes to light the lasting impact Bathqyomo made on her larger family and in those who knew her.

The *third chapter* describes "valuable lessons learnt from our mum". In a Mediterranean-style family, mothers are bearers and communicators of values and life lessons. But not all families are able to pay homage in this way, putting the invisible into writing, so that it becomes visible. As one reads the pieces of advice and lessons given by Bathqyomo to their children, it can be understood why the Issa family is welcoming, respectful, trustworthy, responsible, generous, etc. I have personally observed and experienced these values in my relationship with them. The roots of their behavior can be traced to their mother who understood and was able to transmit the message of God's love and the love of neighbor contained in the Bible.

The value to tradition and customs and the empathy of Bathqyomo are the main focus of the *fourth chapter*: "Hospitality - an art mastered by our mum". It tells how the family's motto is: Being generous and sharing as you do not know the situation that the people you host are overcoming. This book presents multiple teachings that are applicable to life, but it does not stop just in those values or in the beauty of the human

being. The book also talks about other aspects of Bathqyomo that her children miss every day: smiles, enthusiasm, their meals and their beauty. These types of memories are kept in aromas, landscapes, music, melodies ... brief and ephemeral moments of happiness and nostalgia).

The *fifth chapter*, "our mum's way of serving others", focuses on the most practical aspects of why Bathqyomo was so helpful. In this chapter one can find clues and life lessons through which this extraordinary woman of extraordinary faith continues today helping others: to be assertive and positive, to manage their emotions effectively, to care for others and be forgiving, to feel unique and safe, etc.

Throughout the book, her children make continuous references to the Bathqyomo's smile, so special was that they dedicate the *sixth chapter* to "Our mum's miraculous way of facing life with a smile". Of course the smile is one of the most effective mechanisms that humans have to communicate with others, a smile communicates empathy and can even appease moods and establish closeness. It was Bathqyomo's most powerful weapon, her light, and she was able to smile constantly because she was certain of God's love so much that she used to say to herself and to others "Do not worry. God is always on time - TRUST HIM".

"Historical background of mesopotamian food" is the *seventh chapter*, which begins the most culinary part of the book. The way in which Bathqyomo served others through food has a historical evolution that appears in the book. It is thorough a descriptive study of the characteristics of Mesopotamia, its people and its diet what reflects the educated and scientific background of the Issa family. This is the most descriptive and less personal or spiritual chapter of all previous ones. It remains though a necessary part of the book if one wants to fully understand the family history and roots and how these became tools which Bathqyomo mastered to served others.

Once the characteristics of Mesopotamia's food have already been described, the *eighth chapter* called: "Preserving from the garden - an art mastered by our Mum" brings our attention to other set of Bathqyomo's skills. In a world in which the sustainable development goals are so important. Bathqyomo was a pioneer woman by remaining faithful and maintaining traditions alive which gave value to the work of human hands and the gifts that nature offered making good use of well-preserved and selected fruits and produce from the garden. We are what we eat and if we take care of what we are, we take care of what we eat. The value given to nature and the food we received from it are clearly shown in this chapter. Personally, all the advice related to the use of plants such as oregano, Rosemary, bay leaves and mint are very close to me but at the same time worthy of a botanic treaty.

The *ninth and tenth chapter*: "Meals for diverse occasions by our mum" and "Traditional and contemporary sweets by our mum" offer an infinite number of traditional recipes ideal for different occasions, a way to involve friends and family

members in our kitchen. Bathqyomo can no longer cook for us, but through this book, the Issa family allows many of us to experience the delight of their cuisine (we personally want to share that I very much enjoyed their “Apple and spinach with orange salad”).

Finally, I would like to thank each of the members of the Issa family, but especially Theodora and Thomayess, because if they had not asked me for this review, I would not have read this wonderful book. Without their beautiful request, I would have certainly missed significant life lessons, the example of their mother's life, her love for her children, her delicious recipes but most of all, I would have missed the opportunity to share with the Issa siblings and my own brother a learning experience for life and the kitchen.

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