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4. From Bedouin Dish to National Symbol: Mansaf and the Making of Jordanian Identity

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Abstract

[EN] This article examines how food heritage, tourism, commodification and globalisation intersect in northern and north-eastern Jordan, focusing on mansaf and Bedouin culinary practices. The study is based on ethnographic participant observation and about 30 semi-structured interviews, for a total of 30 hours of recorded speech. These recordings include oral narratives and life stories collected between 2018 and 2025 in the governorates of al-Mafraq and Irbid. The research sites include a dozen villages along the Syrian border (Sama as-Sirḥān, Zumla as-Sirḥān, Muġayyir as-Sirḥān, Umm al-Guṭṭēn, al-Kōm al-Aḥmar, aṣ-Ṣāliḥiyya, al-Ašrafiyye, al-Bāʿiğ, Ḥakama, Maru, Saḥam and al-ʿIšše), and interlocutors represent Bedouin tribes, the Druze minority and rural farming communities. Data were collected in local Arabic dialects, fully transcribed, translated into English and analysed through thematic coding and triangulation with official and promotional media (UNESCO, Ministry of Culture, tourism boards) and commercial sources (restaurant menus, online travel agencies, food delivery services). The study traces how everyday foodways have been reconfigured by state discourse, media representation, and tourist demand. Drawing on the concepts of gastronationalism (DESOUCEY 2010), heritage commodification, and staged authenticity (MACCANNELL 1973), the article examines how mansaf has been consolidated as Jordan's national dish (MASSAD 2001; ALOBEIDAT 2016), asking who gets excluded in the process. Since mansaf's UNESCO listing in 2022 and ongoing promotion, it has shifted from a regional Bedouin feast to a national symbol, one that official narratives depict as a unifying symbol of Jordanian identity and social cohesion. An analysis of tourism marketing, OTA listings, and curated "Bedouin dinners" reveals front-stage performances designed to satisfy outsiders' expectations of desert life (zarb

ovens, desert camp dinners, and stargazing activities). At the same time, the back regions of everyday culinary practice, such as regional variants and farmers' and household cuisines, remain unseen and sidelined. Commercial actors and cultural intermediaries (hotels, heritage nonprofits, restaurants) mobilise Bedouin signifiers and mansaf's simplicity to craft visceral place-based experiences for tourists, often commodifying identity in ways that reinforce existing social hierarchies. Field data highlight local continuities and resistances: many Bedouin informants assert pride in their culinary heritage and retain traditional dishes (*rašūf, lazzagiyyāt*), while Druze and rural communities emphasise agricultural cuisines and distinct dishes (*al-əmraššah, kashkeel, makmūra*). Concurrently, globalisation and migration have pluralised everyday diets: Palestinian, Syrian, Gulf and Turkish dishes (*falafel, hummus, kabsa, mandi, ouzi*) circulate widely, aided by food delivery platforms and restaurant hybridisation. The article concludes that mansaf's nationalisation exemplifies selective heritage politics: food becomes both an instrument of cultural cohesion and a vehicle for elite economic and symbolic gains, marginalising less marketable regional foodways. Policy implications call for broadening what is recognised and marketed as heritage cuisine: restaurants and tourist facilities could introduce a wider variety of regional dishes alongside their local origins, while international institutions could extend heritage listings to minority and farmers' cuisines.

Keywords: *Food Heritage, Jordan, Bedouin Cuisine, Gastronationalism, Heritage Politics.*

1. Introduction

Food plays a vital role in human culture. It helps societies strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of community, often becoming a key part of festive celebrations.

The literature describes food as having a dual nature, both material and symbolic, thus making it a tool for both state and non-state actors (APPADURAI 1988; BERGER 2013). Consequently, food plays a significant role in shaping identity, as it can be used and elevated to serve as tangible heritage imbued with symbolic meaning. As the French politician Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, known for his culinary reflections on the science of food preparation and the art of eating, put it, «Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are».

Research on food and identity, as well as cuisine as a symbol of elite privilege (MATTA 2013), often examines how states defend national food identities from external global influences, a process DeSoucey (2010) calls gastronationalism. This concept helps explain the connection between food and politics, emphasising the role of state actors and international organisations. Additionally, studies have shown how ordinary individuals unconsciously express national identity through daily food practices (FOX & MILLER-IDRISS 2008). Further research has explored populist nation-building in Argentina (MILANESIO 2010), disputes over Cyprus' halloumi (WELZ 2013), and the negotiation of authentic traditions in South Korea (KIM 2010). Other work points out that international organisations like UNESCO, despite promoting peace and mutual understanding, often end up reinforcing the nation-state framework they aim to challenge (ICHIJO 2017; 2020).

Yet how nationalising a dish reshapes hierarchies among domestic food producers and communities, rather than just external threats, remains underexplored.

This article turns to Jordan as a case study, where food remains one of the few enduring symbols of identity, signifying memory and belonging and marking social differences, such as those between nomadic and sedentary rural populations, in the ways it is prepared and consumed (PALMER 2002). Against this backdrop, the questions arise as to whether media and official discourse use food to strengthen a national identity narrative in Jordan, and whether Bedouin food practices are staged and marketed as authentic tourist experiences. This study argues that the transformation of a Bedouin

dish into a national heritage symbol, driven by state and tourism actors, does not simply unify Jordanian identity but actively produces new hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion among domestic culinary practitioners. Building on Matta's (2013) account of cuisine as a vehicle of elite privilege, it shows that this process of nationalisation favours a staged authenticity that serves state and tourism interests while marginalising rural and other regional foodways.
To address the research questions, the article will be structured as follows: after outlining the methodology, the dataset, and the theoretical framework, a section will present the selected Jordanian communities (the Bedouin, the Druze, and the rural communities) and their accounts of food and identity. This will be followed by a section on Jordanian cuisine and its interaction with a globalised world, culminating in a tripartite discussion of:

(1) the media and the nationalisation of mansaf;

(2) tourism and staged authenticity;

(3) power, commodification, and inequality, ending with conclusions.

2. Methodology

This study draws on ethnographic participant observation and an extensive corpus of oral interviews gathered during several fieldwork campaigns in the Jordanian governorates of al-Mafraq and Irbid between 2018 and 2025. Research was conducted in a dozen villages along the Syrian border (Sama as-Sirḥān, Zumla as-Sirḥān, Muġayyir as-Sirḥān, Umm al-Guṭṭēn, al-Kōm al-Aḥmar, aṣ-Ṣāliḥiyya, al-Ašrafiyye, al-Baij, Ḥakama, Maru, Saḥam, and al-ʿIšše). Interviews were semi-structured and phenomenological, designed as long, in-depth conversations to elicit life stories and narratives. Interviewees included members of local Bedouin tribes, the Druze community in Umm al-Guṭṭēn, and families from rural farming backgrounds in the Irbid governorate. They ranged in age from 26 to 90 years and were of both genders.
In total, approximately 30 interviews were conducted, amounting to 30 hours of recorded oral narratives and life stories. Data were collected in the local Arabic dialect, transcribed and translated into English, and handled

in accordance with ethical approval and consent procedures. To protect participants' confidentiality, interviewees are identified by gender, age, and tribal affiliation (e.g., Woman, 38 [Sirḥān]) rather than by personal name, minimising the risk of identification.

As a researcher of mixed Italian and Jordanian heritage, my positionality was dual, and its effects varied by community. Within the rural community, my own background gave me emic access to unguarded views, including critical opinions about the other groups[1]. Among Bedouin interviewees, however, my outsider status made no appreciable difference: recordings made by insider community members closely matched my own interviews in content and register. This asymmetry informed my reflexive approach throughout the analysis.

Although fieldwork spanned a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Gaza, which led to a decline in tourist flows, no substantial changes were observed in participants' accounts of food practices, suggesting stability in these narratives despite broader instability.

In addition to the oral corpus, the study includes multiple categories of tourism material collected between 2024 and 2026. These sources incorporate five official institutional websites, four restaurant menus, a food delivery service, and four OTAs and tour operator materials, selected to represent the different levels of staged authenticity. Institutional, commercial, and grassroots sources that shaped the construction and circulation of the identity discourse were purposively sampled to complement the narratives emerging from fieldwork. Menus were chosen from tourist-oriented restaurants as well as those frequented by locals, while heritage restaurants represent a hybrid of commercial and culturally representative voices; OTAs and tour operators were selected based on their prominence in online searches for «Jordanian Bedouin food». This material was analysed using thematic coding to identify recurring patterns of staged authenticity and selective heritage recognition across sources. Visitor-generated reviews were excluded from this study, as it focuses on self-representation by institutional, commercial and local actors rather than external tourist reception[2].

[1] This unguarded register was most evident when recording close family members, rather than being a general feature of rural community interviews.

[2] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for encouraging me to reflect further on the methodology.

3. Theoretical framework

This article draws on interrelated approaches to analyse the relationship between food and national identity in Jordan.

First, scholarship views food as having material and symbolic qualities, with culinary practices sustaining everyday life and communicating belonging, memory, and cultural and ecological differences (APPADURAI 1988; BERGER 2013). Furthermore, this study employs the notion of gastronationalism (DESOUCEY 2010), understood as a defence mechanism against external forces threatening the cultural value of food. In the case of Jordan, however, the state and the national tourism board use food to construct a Bedouin dish as a national symbol, thereby creating internal exclusion of other regional cuisines, and, at a symbolic level, reinforcing a boundary against Palestinian culinary claims, even where Palestinian dishes are materially integrated into everyday Jordanian diets.

The study further draws on heritage commodification, in which culinary practices are abstracted from their original contexts and repackaged as marketable cultural products, thereby reinforcing nation-state frameworks through UNESCO's intangible heritage regimes. It also examines staged authenticity (MACCANNELL 1973), alongside Baudrillard's idea of simulacra, illustrating that tourist encounters with authentic culture are strategic performances rather than genuine experiences. This applies to Bedouin dishes and Bedouin tourism in Petra and Wadi Rum (BAUDRILLARD 1994; cfr. AL TAWIL & SPITALER 2025).

Situating this framework within Jordanian food scholarship, the article builds on work that has examined mansaf's consolidation as a national dish following the 1967 territorial rupture with the West Bank (MASSAD 2001), and its socioeconomic evolution in specific localities (ALOBEIDAT 2016). Building on this scholarship, the present article integrates gastronationalism, heritage commodification, and staged authenticity to examine not only how mansaf is nationalised but also who is excluded in the process, representing a question largely absent from existing accounts.

4. The communities

4.1. The Bedouin community

Regarding the Bedouin communities, all tribes in the study area are now settled; political change and globalisation have radically transformed their lifestyles. However, they still proudly display elements of their nomadic heritage. When asked what distinguishes them from rural or urban populations, respondents often say it is their continued practice of cooking traditional Bedouin dishes, reflecting a diet shaped by what was once available to nomadic households. Despite supermarkets and ready-made foods being common now, maintaining these culinary practices remains important, even as recipes become commodified.

In the past, those leading a nomadic life would be constantly travelling and rely only on their camels' products. Those leading a semi-nomadic life relied mostly on dairy products and meat from their sheep and goats. So says a 90-year-old tribesman in Zumla as-Sirḥān, emphasising the centrality of livestock to past lifeways: «Those who had livestock[3] used to stay here with the peasant, grazing the animals; those who had camels used to travel». Right after, when asked how Bedouin life was in the past, his answer was: «A normal life: yoghurt, butter, milk, and bread; now it is different, now we have got everything».

The man's answer shows that during the first half of the last century, everything revolved around subsistence herding and dairy production. That is why, in his reply, life and food are equated.

Semi-nomadic households bartered dairy and meat products for farmers' or Druzes' vegetables and pulses. The latter, despite living in the same area, had a different diet, similar to that of the rural population, which traditionally relied on vegetables, pulses, and cereals.

In areas favourable to agriculture, for example, the Irbid area where Syrian Bedouin settled, their diets converged with those of local farmers. A 70-year-old woman (of Syrian Bedouin origin) in Al-ʿIššeh, north of Saḥam, offers a different account of life and food from that of other Bedouins living in

[3] In the original text, ḥalāl refers to sheep and goats.

the Al-Mafraq governorate. She and her family used to cultivate, and the differences in diet with the rural population are less significant. She described homemade production in detail:

«We used to eat the results of our efforts: the wheat bread we cultivated, the yoghurt we produced, the meat from our livestock, and the chicken and eggs we had. We used to cook the mansaf by hand, with the šrāk bread. Now it is cooked with rice, but back then there was no rice. Those who had sheep would make cheese, clarified butter (*samən*), and dried yoghurt (*marīs*) for when they ran out of yoghurt. What did the peasants do? They would make tomato paste, tomato molasses, dried tomatoes, and dried zucchini. Everything was homemade. There were no fridges to keep the meat fresh, so they would cook it and fry it apart with the fat. They would add salt and put it inside terracotta pots. The fat is what preserved the meat with salt» (Woman, 70, [Neʿēm]; trad. mia).

She also recalls that, for Ramadan, unlike today, typical Bedouin sweets were lazzagiyyāt, thin wheat breads on which they would spread clarified butter or butter. Not even sugar. Another woman from Umm al-Guṭṭen describes it like this: «The lazzagiyyāt are a typical popular ancient dish from the area of Umm al-Guṭṭēn, and the Bādiya region, mostly prepared in winter». Despite cooking the most typical Bedouin sweet, the woman from Al-ʿIššeh also talks about another dessert, typically rural:

«We made the *iḥṭaliyye*, a dessert made from starch and milk, using wheat starch, not like today's starch from the markets. We used to make it by hand. We would take semolina, cook it, then filter it through a sieve. When the starch settles, you cook it with milk to make *iḥṭaliyye*» (Woman, 70, [Neʿēm]; trad. mia).

Teachers (sheiks) were sometimes paid in kind, such as bread and eggs, and life's rites, such as circumcision, weddings, funerals, and childbirth, involved shared food and sacrifice. For weddings, rice and sugar were traditional gifts. During childbirth, women brought tahini and omelettes to help the mother regain strength. A woman recalls a Saudi Sheik on TV saying that, instead of flowers for a new mother, she should be given a tank of orange juice for energy.

Religious practice and reputation also shaped intergroup perceptions. A special topic is the behaviour of some tribespeople in the past who did not observe the fasting rule of Ramadan. For this reason, they were considered

and labelled as backward and ignorant by sedentary populations, or by the Bedouin themselves who had settled closer to the city. This is how some members of the Sirḥān tribe define the Ahl al-Ǧabal confederation and the tribes in Ruwaished:

> «There was no religious culture. I was once teaching in Ruwaished in the 90s, and during Ramadan, I once went to some people in the desert. They used to celebrate weddings and put food out on the street during Ramadan! I mean, they were Muslim, but they were naïve» (Man, 50, [Sirḥān]; trad. mia).

Seasonality and scarcity shaped staple foods. Another testimony from the region, from the village of Umm al-Guṭṭēn, says that they had no eggs, only dairy products, bread, and dates.

A man, aged 56, from the village of Sama as-Sirḥān, adds that:

> «During Ramadan, we would cook rašūf and mansaf. In the past, we had neither tomatoes nor potatoes. Vegetables were very rare unless you went to the city market and came back with potatoes, tomatoes, and other vegetables. I am, of course, talking about our ancestors. We used to cultivate the land with cereals such as wheat and pulses like lentils, but we are mostly known for wheat and barley. In the past, we used to barter wheat and barley for salt, but now we have developed. Now, whoever has a piece of land cultivates it for seasonal farming. We, in al-Mafraq, are second, after the Ghor, in agriculture and the cultivation of fruits and vegetables» (Man, 56, [Sirḥān]; trad. mia).

Many informants among the Bedouin tribes in these regions of Jordan highlighted the rašūf as a dish that distinguishes them from the rest of the country and even from other Bedouins. Women in Umm al-Guṭṭēn (in their 60s) said that this dish is the most commonly cooked and most often made on cold days, even more than once a week.

In an interview in aṣ-Ṣāliḥiyya, a woman explained the recipe and preparation:

> «Whoever had the means would slaughter an animal, and they would prepare the rašūf, which is made of chickpeas, lentils, yoghurt, chopped onions and clarified butter on top. You would first put a bit of water and a bit of yoghurt, the wheat, then a bit of lentils and chickpeas, a pinch of salt, and cumin and then you add two onions when it boils» (Woman, 60, [ʿAḍamāt]; trad. mia).

4.2. The Druze community

Among the Druze community in Umm al-Guṭṭēn, when respondents were asked what sets them apart from the neighbouring Bedouin community, they pointed to their dishes. Typical dishes include *al-əmraššah* (dried green wheat grains and lentils, which they colour yellow) and shish barak, which community members identify as Druze.

As one of the speakers described in an interview, the typical dishes among the Druze community emerged from circumstances rather than choice: lacking livestock, Druze households turned to agriculture in Umm al-Guṭṭēn and al-Azraq (the latter known for its water reserves), growing fruits, vegetables, cereals and pulses. A peculiarity that sets al-Azraq's mansaf apart from others is the use of bulgur. Another peculiar dish in al-Azraq is *kashkeel*, a simple boiled wheat-flour pasta mixed with dried yoghurt powder, spices and olive oil.

4.3. The rural community

Rural residents in the villages of the governorate of Irbid distinguish themselves from the Bedouin neighbours, frequently doing so through food. That is why they often mock and make fun of Bedouin dishes, whose names they associate with backwardness[4] or ridiculosity[5]. One informant recalled a Bedouin visitor

[4] At the same time, farmers, who used to supply the Bedouin with cereals and pulses, were scorned by the Bedouin.

[5] An example is the word lazzagiyyāt, meaning 'those that get sticky', whose explanation is

from the al-Mafraq region describing the rašūf and lazzagiyyāt, which were before that unknown to the speaker, who describes them like this:

> «When one of the Bedouin women came to visit us, she told us about the rašūf. Do you know what it is? It is made with rice and chickpeas, then yoghurt is added on top. It was the first time I had heard of it; I did not know it, and I never made it. She said it is a common Bedouin dish. And another woman told us about the lazzagiyyāt, but different from what we make. They just add clarified butter and sugar on top» (Woman, 63, [Baṭāyneh]; trad. mia).

When discussing local cuisine from the rural region, they emphasise mansaf as the main dish and makmūra as the typical dish of Irbid's northern region.

Apart from those, they also mention *farīče* (freekeh), consisting of roasted wheat prepared as a warm thick soup with chicken broth, and *ǧarīše*, (coarsely crushed wheat or barley, formerly ground with a quern). On top of these dishes, they also mention *aḍān aš-šāyib* and the *grāṣ al-ʿīd*. Historically, rural populations have placed greater emphasis on wheat and barley, along with dairy, which formed the core of their daily diet. *Farīče* gave way to rice as diets changed amid technological and market shifts, thereby making it possible to incorporate chicken as well (PALMER 2002: 174).

The importance attributed to cultivation largely depends on seasonal and environmental factors, which have always been favourable for rain-fed agriculture (in the 19th and 20th centuries, the Hawran plain of northern Jordan supplied Damascus and, after the construction of the Hijazi railway, even Europe via northern Palestine). These conditions shaped livelihoods and foodways: families prioritised early marriage and sons for labour, and olive tree cultivation remained important.

A woman from the little village of Hakama describes the life of her male relatives as such in the 60s and in the 70s:

considered hilarious.

> «Back then, they used to cultivate vegetables such as okra, tomatoes, green beans, courgettes, and squash, all with rainwater; there was no irrigation system. They would cultivate wheat and bake bread from it. We would make everything ourselves and get food from our own work. We would buy nothing from the markets» (Woman, 75, [Baṭāyneh]; trad. mia).

Despite these changes, agricultural practices and the cultivation world continue to play a significant role in northern Jordanian identity, as evidenced by its folklore and proverbs, which often feature lentils and other crops (as a famous proverb says, «who knows, knows, and who does not know tells a bunch of lentils»).
Notably, despite mansaf's current national prominence, it appears rarely in rural oral narratives about everyday diet. One might expect it to be central when discussing typical food in the past, given that it is the dish prepared for guests and during weekly family meetings. In reality, however, its absence in these oral narratives reflects production patterns and is easily explained: rural households cooked what they produced, and meat was probably reserved for special occasions or obtained from Bedouins or markets rather than for daily consumption.

5. Jordanian cuisine in a globalised world

Nowadays, in northern and north-eastern Jordan, Bedouin and non-Bedouin diets overlap considerably. Local differences have evened out as communities adopted each other's dishes and incorporated a variety of dishes from neighbouring cuisines (Saudi, Syrian, Palestinian, Turkish).
In addition to the typical dishes, Jordanians commonly eat kabsa, ouzi, mandi, magluba, and musakhan. Some were introduced or popularised locally after Palestinian migration, while others entered via regional flows and food delivery services like Talabat (launched in 2015)[6], which make ouzi, mandi, and kabsa easily available for busy people, offering alternatives to traditional dishes.

[6] Talabat, https://www.talabat.com/jordan (last accessed: 31/08/2026).

Kabsa is a favourite in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, while ouzi, considered Iraqi but with Turkish and Persian roots, is now widespread across Southwest Asia. Mandi, a Yemeni dish, is popular throughout the Arabian Peninsula, and magluba and musakhan are considered typical Palestinian dishes.

Street food (shawarma) and Turkish mezze restaurants serving a wide variety of cold and hot appetisers are widespread. Palestinian dishes such as falafel, ḥummus, babaghannush, mutabbal, and the like have been integral to Jordanian urban diets since mid-20th-century migration.

An emblematic example is the traditional and popular restaurant Hashem in downtown Amman. The owner is, in fact, a Palestinian man from Jaffa. The original restaurant was allegedly founded in 1910 by the grandparents in Palestine. In 1956, Hashem at-Turk opened a new restaurant in Amman to continue his family's journey, adding that he adapted the food to modern times and applied modern technology to the food industry. Hashem's menu offers typical rural and urban Palestinian dishes such as hummus, falafel, beans, fatteh salad, alongside other traditional Palestinian dishes[7]. These were also consumed by the Jordanian population, who consider them part of their daily diet. The Royal Jordanian website advertises Hashem as a must-see in Amman, the most authentic falafel place in the Kingdom, visited by celebrities, diplomats, and even the royal family[8]. Some food bloggers define it as the perfect place to try typical Jordanian street food.

A similar story, though less popular, is Ahmad Al Falafel in Irbid, also run by a Palestinian man who moved to Jordan[9]. Such venues illustrate how migrant foodways become absorbed into national practice and public imaginaries.

Official and nonprofit actors also shape culinary narratives. If we look at how the media and the official discourse portray Jordan and its culinary heritage, it is possible to notice a constructed narrative that privileges the idea of a Bedouin nation, whose typical national dish is the mansaf (often depicted with lamb, rice and jameed, a sundried yoghurt, served on top). Interestingly, this has been reduced to a symbol of the entire nation for the simplicity of its representation.

Non-profit companies like Jordanian Heritage (JH), established in Amman

[7] Hashem, https://hashemrestaurants.com/sa/en/ (last accessed: 18/06/2026).

[8] Royal Jordanian, «Hashem», https://www.rj.com/it/explore-jordan/taste-of-jordan/fine-dining/hashem (last accessed: 31/08/2026).

[9] This restaurant appears on Google Maps with its menu and has no website.

in 2014 and specialising in heritage, digitisation and tourism, adopt a more inclusive approach to preserving and sustaining local heritage. Their declared aim is to document regional origins and map their menu to regions and minority groups (Druze, Circassians, Chechens, Badia tribes), noting local variants (e.g., Azraq mansaf with bulgur; Karak's split-wheat mansaf).
Jordan Heritage describes its mission as documenting and preserving Jordanian cultural and historical heritage and making it accessible to the broadest possible public. On their website, they state that they opened the first authentic Jordanian restaurant in Amman and Salt and claim that:

> «Jordan Heritage proudly documented 94 Jordanian dishes over a period of 5 years of extensive research, trained 75 women in 10 governorates and sources its ingredients from 42 of which, and hires from 6 governorates. Jordan Heritage Restaurant is Jordan on a plate and aims to keep improving its international-level quality as to hold a name related to Jordan. After 7 years, JHR enjoys a clientele that appreciates its bespoke authenticity, taste, and service»[10].

Their intercultural sensitivity is shown in including descriptions of each dish's geographic and cultural origins, like the mid, east, and south regions; Azraq (linked to the Druze); the Northern regions (rural heritage, vegetables, pulses, cereals, and grāṣ); Naur and Amman (Circassian culture, cheese, and pastry); the Jordanian Rift Valley (vegetables, olives, pomegranates, lemons); Irbid (Obeidat tribe, lamb-and-chicken dish with bulgur, pomegranate molasses, and cardamom); the Badia desert (Nabatean fettuccine called baziza or rgagah, made of sun-dried yeast dough in jameed with lentils and clarified butter); Amman's Armenian minority (Vartin, eggplant-and-pepper dish); aḏān aš-šāyib ('ears of the old man') linked to farming regions; Mansaf, with a regional variation in Karak using split wheat; lamb stuffed with vine leaves (Umayyad origin); makmura (Irbid); Husn (burgul dafeen with vegetables, cinnamon, bulgur); magluba (Jordanian); musakhan (Palestinian, popular in Jordan); and various desserts like lazagiyyāt, haiṭaliyye, and honey cake (Chechen), with local and regional variations.

[10] Jordan Heritage, «Jordan Heritage Restaurant», https://www.jordanheritage.jo/about-us/ (last accessed: 01/09/2026).

Notably, the menu lacks the typical Bedouin coffee, while the so-called Turkish (or sweet) coffee is present. Considering the importance of the Bedouin coffee culture and its rituals, this absence is remarkable. Coffee has been repeatedly described as more than just a drink and a form of conviviality. It is over coffee that social and economic decisions are made. Hospitality and tribal protection too are shown through the three-coffee-cup ritual. Herbal infusions, instead, appear on the menu as common beverages, though they were traditionally used for medicinal purposes to treat pain or illness.

5.1. Restaurant hybridity and transnational cues

Another interesting reflection on the gastronationalisation of mansaf and the exclusion of other dishes is evident in the menu of the Restaurant Grand Omaya in Irbid[11]. This restaurant describes itself as having been active since 1983 and portrays itself as «a symbol of authenticity and rich eastern flavours». For this place too, the keywords are generosity and hospitality, the most central values in Jordanian Bedouin society.

Unlike Jordanian Heritage's restaurant, this does not have the claim to showcase only typical Jordanian dishes. It is quite international, offering Italian, seafood, and Middle Eastern dishes inspired by Lebanese, Syrian, and Turkish cuisines.

Alongside typical Levantine appetisers (mezze), the menu features Mom's Food section with traditional dishes like mansaf, musakhan, *farīče* (freekeh), jaajil, and rural Irbid specialties. It includes shishbarak and mahshi (stuffed vegetables with minced meat). The grilled meat list highlights cities linked to dishes, e.g., Aleppo for spicy lamb skewers and Adana for minced lamb with peppers. Other items like kafta, taouk, and sujuk are common in Lebanon, Syria, and originally Turkey. Kenafeh appears among desserts, though likely not served at Jordan Heritage, as it's Palestinian from Nablus but popular across Jordan.

[11] Grand Omaya, https://omayarestaurants.com/#about.

6. Discussion

6.1. State and Media Construction of mansaf: Selective Heritage and Marginalised Cuisines

This study examines whether media and official discourse use food to reinforce national identity, and if mansaf and Bedouin food practices are staged for tourism. Evidence affirms both: mansaf is used in state and media narratives to create national meaning, while Bedouin practices are marketed to tourists. In 2022, mansaf was added to UNESCO's list of intangible cultural heritage. Official descriptions portray it as a festive dish central to Jordanian culture, symbolising identity and social cohesion, with preparation seen as a social event. It is traditionally eaten with the right hand but is sometimes eaten with utensils now. A Jordanian Ministry of Culture video published on UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage website[12] links mansaf to social unity, depicting it as a bridge across social classes and a symbol of heritage, despite regional variety. Researchers and officials describe it as a key part of Jordanian identity, used historically for conflict resolution and celebrations.

Anthropological literature corroborates this framing: mansaf has become the national dish par excellence. Alobeidat, for example, describes it «as containing both intangible and tangible heritage as well as a strong link to Jordanian state identity. Mansaf is tied to Jordanian identity and marketed as such» (ALOBEIDAT 2016: 2). Interestingly, less recent articles defined it as the main or traditional feast dish (PALMER 2002: 184, 187), without directly addressing the national-identity focus, except for Massad's 2007 article, in which he explicitly stated the recent invention of the dish's nationhood, attributing it to the British mandate's intentions of nation-building (MASSAD 2007 in WOJNAROWSKI & WILLIAMS 2020: 163).

These sources show that mansaf shifted from a regional Bedouin practice

[12] UNESCO, Intangible Cultural Heritage, https://ich.unesco.org/en/video/62290 (last accessed: 01/09/2026).

rooted in hardship to a symbol of prestige, high values, and nationhood, exemplifying the use of food for social and economic aims (BRULOTTE & DI GIOVINE 2014).

While mansaf is national, local variations and regional dishes (such as bulgur-based mansaf in the north) are only partially recognised; farmer and household cuisines are under-recognised and mostly limited to a few restaurants, sometimes alongside new international dishes.

In Jordan, several culinary identities compete for prominence. This selective elevation narrows the public perception of Jordanian food, favouring Bedouin-derived symbols and marginalising others. Mansaf, seen as a tool of nation-building, is wrongly portrayed as a timeless relic of a pre-modern desert. In fact, it has evolved, adapting to the country's changes and history. Recently, along with tourism strategies, it has supported identity and state-building efforts by the ruling house (WOJNAROWSKI & WILLIAMS 2020).

6.2. Staging authenticity for tourism

If, as Goldman argues, «to write about food is to write about the self» (GOLDMAN 1992: 169), then narratives about mansaf also construct a national self for outsiders, producing ethnic imaginaries (APPADURAI 1988).
The official page of the Jordanian Tourism Board also advertises mansaf, once again described as the country's dish and a symbol of local hospitality and generosity[13]. While no mention is made about the Bedouin origin of the dish, zarb is deployed as an emblem of the rich Bedouin tradition. This dish consists of lamb or chicken prepared in a hole dug one metre into the ground and sealed with bricks to preserve the authentic smoky taste.
While the official narrative presents these dishes as embodying local identity, heritage, and tradition imbued with Bedouin values, for tourists, local food is part of their travel experience. Mansaf offers them a unique experience of the real Jordan, often associated with desert life, simplicity, and authenticity.

[13] Jordan Tourism Board, «Feasting in Jordan», https://international.visitjordan.com/page/13/feasting-in-jordan/ (last accessed: 01/09/2026).

As Brulotte and Di Giovine put it, a «visceral experience with the place» (BRULOTTE & DI GIOVINE 2014: 18).

As Appadurai notes, culinary travel writing and food-based heritage claims often target outsiders rather than insiders. Jordanian heritage cuisine, as shown in travel blogs and tourist websites, is addressed (mostly, though not only) to Western tourists to show what the Jordanian nation is, through a process of representation and integration (APPADURAI 1988). This heritage cuisine creates ethnic imaginaries, circulating an exotic Bedouin image that oversimplifies Jordan's internal culinary diversity.

Like Di Giovine's example of local Italian dishes, such as artichokes and ciciatelli pasta from Pietrelcina, regarded as cucina casereccia or home/farmer cooking, mansaf, once associated with scarcity and desert life, has been elevated to a prestigious festival food for visitors.

Tourism marketing and Online Travel Agencies focus on leisure and free-time activities and advertise the opportunity to enjoy an authentic Bedouin dinner at the accommodation in the desert.

What they do is commodify and stage Bedouin culinary practices. In the activity descriptions, the dinner is presented as a «freshly prepared Bedouin-style dinner cooked in the traditional zarb (underground oven), served alongside warm bread, rice, salads, and local tea»[14]. Other tourism agencies describe the Bedouin dinner as consisting of «tahini salad, Bedouin bread, babaghanoush, and a selection of Arabic starters»[15], which does not align with local accounts of everyday food and reveals a deliberate performance of front-stage authenticity (GOFFMAN 1959; MACCANNELL 1973).

Other activities include desert camps and stargazing, with stories about Bedouin life and traditions, to meet tourists' expectations of an authentic Bedouin experience[16]. The accommodation, called a camp, is a quiet place in Wadi Rum. Hosts and businesses use the Bedouin label for its exotic appeal, even when practices are adapted to modern life. This suggests that the authentic Bedouin experience is staged. The term Bedouin is often used

[14] Get Your Guide, «Wadi Rum: Bedouin Dinner and Stargazing Experience», https://www.getyourguide.com/-t1100097/ (last accessed: 22/06/2026).

[15] Badu Experiences, «Luxury Bedouin Dinner Experience & Stargazing», https://baduexperiences.com/experiences/luxury-bedouin-dinner-experience (last accessed: 27/06/2026).

[16] Airbnb, «Wadi Rum Bedouin Experience incl. Dinner&breakfast», https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/32837809 (last accessed: 28/06/2026); Booking, «Khaled's Camp – Wadi Rum», https://www.booking.com/hotel/jo/khaled-39-s-camp.html (last accessed: 01/09/2026).

in marketing to evoke the exoticism of desert life rather than reflect reality, aiming to attract tourists seeking adventure and wilderness (AL TAWIL & SPITALER 2025: 228).
This staging aligns with Appadurai's (1988) and Brulotte and Di Giovine's (2014) observations that heritage cuisine is oriented toward outsiders and produces visceral place-based experiences.
Furthermore, Jordan, like Saudi Arabia, wants to portray itself not only as the land of hospitality, traditions and Bedouin values, but also as a modern, developed country. For this reason, in the media, locals are either depicted as noblemen on horseback dressed in traditional clothes (UNESCO 2020) or as modern, Euro-American-dressed small families eating mansaf with cutlery at the table (WOJNAROWSKI & WILLIAMS 2020: 162).

6.3. Power, commodification, and inequality

If the Bedouins and their tribal identity have long been used as a commercialised image of Jordan by British colonial administration and later by both the government and the private tourism sector (AL TAWIL & SPITALER 2025), the same can be said of their food.
The commodification of mansaf and Bedouin identity benefits the state, tourism operators, and certain elites by creating marketable symbols and consolidating cultural authority (MATTA 2013). As Cole pointed out, the Bedouin themselves sell their marketed identity (COLE 2003: 254).
At the same time, it flattens internal diversity and risks reinforcing existing social hierarchies by valorising one form of identity over others. The transformation of mansaf into a national brand thus participates in nation-building while obscuring class, regional, and occupational differences.
Fieldwork revealed that some performances observed or reported in tourism contexts were clearly staged, and media portrayals often show curated front regions. Food is also arranged to create a specific image in tourists' minds. Visitors access only the staged front areas, such as the area in front of their accommodation, where the oven, dug into the soil, is located. These, produced for them, do not reflect either the back regions or reality (GOFFMAN 1959). Food, just like touristic settings, undergoes staged authenticity (MACCANNELL 1973).

In order to satisfy tourists' expectations of eating food cooked in a hole dug in the soil in a wild desert, stargazing experiences are sold to reinforce a stereotype, since Bedouins nowadays are settled down and cook their meat normally on stoves and surely live a life full of the comforts their ancestors, until 40 years ago, did not always enjoy.

7. Conclusions

This study shows how mansaf has been transformed from a regional Bedouin dish, shaped by the material constraints of nomadic life, into a nationalised, commodified heritage product mobilised by state and tourism actors to craft a singular Jordanian identity. That process produces staged authenticity that satisfies tourist imaginaries while marginalising other regional foodways. State and tourism actors, together with cultural elites, largely benefit from mansaf's valorisation; farmers, minority cuisines and less-visible culinary practitioners are sidelined. Following Matta (2013), cuisine thus becomes a tool for elites to convey identity markers, adapt to changing contexts, and reaffirm privilege.

These dynamics of selective heritage-making raise important questions about their broader consequences. Elevating mansaf to the country's national dish exemplifies how gastronationalism operates through marginalisation: while mansaf is celebrated and institutionally acknowledged, other culinary traditions in the country get excluded. It is what happens to rural foodways (historically centred on legumes and cereals) as they are progressively subsumed under a supranational Bedouin identity. The consequence is a slow erosion of the intangible cultural heritage associated with rural, non-Bedouin identities, in favour of an imposed supranational narrative that flattens internal differences. This homogenisation, however, is not an end in itself: it serves to construct a clearer external boundary vis-à-vis Palestine, which is positioned as the Other from which Jordanian identity must be distanced and differentiated. Within this framework, UNESCO's heritage-making apparatus ultimately reinforces the Jordanian government's narrative, since the association of mansaf with Bedouin culture (a group more closely identified with Jordanian national

identity than with the Palestinian one) effectively forecloses Palestinian claims to the dish.

Heritage policy and tourism practice should broaden what is recognised and marketed to include farmers' and regional cuisines, and support community-led representations. Several actions could be considered to promote a more inclusive representation of local food heritage. For example, restaurants and accommodation facilities in the capital and tourist localities across the country could introduce additional local dishes, accompanied by a brief description of their regional origins. International institutions, such as those mentioned in this paper, could also include these local dishes (both minority and farmers') on their heritage lists.

Future research should trace how these dynamics shift over time and across social groups, examining who gains and who loses from culinary valorisation and how more inclusive heritage practices might be realised. It would also be valuable to examine how the dynamics examined in the paper unfold in contexts of forced displacement, such as Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan and the West Bank, and among Jordanian diasporic communities. In the latter, food heritage may function differently as a means of resistance, memory, and identity preservation.

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