

# Nadeem Mansour wrote a love letter to his mom in the form of 120 Jordanian recipes

GAYLE MACDONALD

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Author Nadeem Mansour and his mother cooking together in the kitchen.

In the Middle East, every name means something. Thuraya, for example, refers to a cluster of stars known as the Pleiades, and in ancient Arabic mythology they symbolize fertility, abundance and protection.

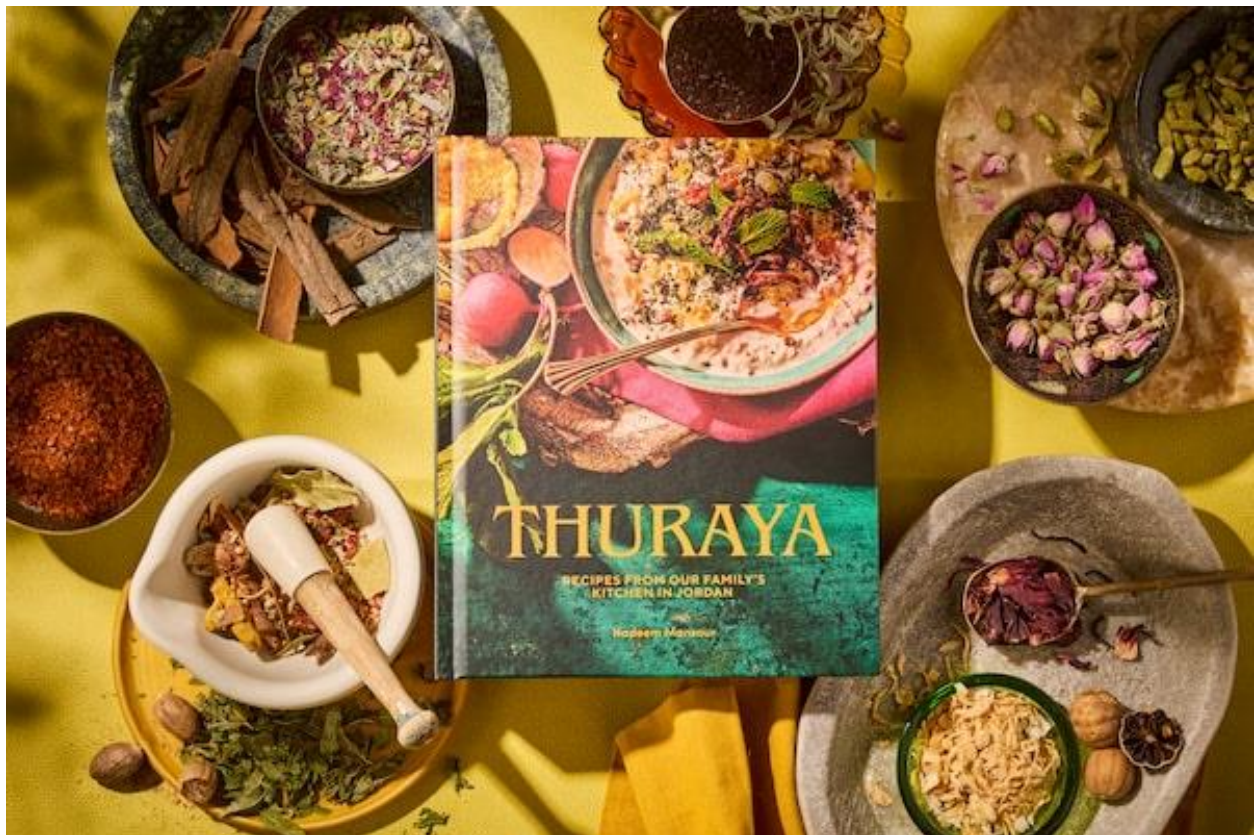
Thuraya also happens to be the name of Toronto-based cookbook author Nadeem Mansour's mother, a whiz in the kitchen from whom he inherited his deep love of Levantine and Jordanian cuisine. So, when he finally completed his first cookbook, filled with 120 recipes he grew up eating in his mom's aroma-filled kitchen in Amman, he knew her name would grace the cover.

"Just like her name means a constellation that can be seen from afar, bright and guiding, my mom has been that to me throughout my life: a source of warmth and wisdom," says Mansour, who moved to Canada in 2004. "She literally lit my path and continues to do so."

Thuraya: Recipes from our Family's Kitchen in Jordan is, at its heart, a love letter from a son to his mom. And, as cookbooks go, it is unique. Part travelogue, part memoir and part culinary diary, it is gorgeous to flip through, filled with images of mouth-watering dishes, cultural landmarks (Wadi Rum, Amman Citadel, Petra), vibrant streetscapes and souks, and photographs of his family, usually gathered around his mother's table.

Mansour's path to writing this cookbook – which has been shortlisted as a 2025 finalist at the prestigious Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in three major categories, Best of the Best, Family and Mediterranean – began as a hobby so that he and his sister, Hania, had a record of some of their mom's favourite recipes, which she made off the top of her head. Along the way, it morphed into a passion project that dramatically changed – and ultimately enriched – Mansour's life.

"I started this 10 years ago to preserve recipes passed down through generations in my family," says the self-taught cook, who has worked more than 30 years as an executive with companies such as Weston Group and Loblaw Companies Ltd. "I wanted a record of them so that my sister, Hania, and I could make them for our own children."



Author Nadeem Mansour's book, *Thuraya: Recipes From Our Family's Kitchen in Jordan*, which offers an intimate glimpse into the flavors and traditions of Middle Eastern home cooking.

Like his mother, Mansour loves to entertain. Before hosting dinner parties in Toronto – where he liked to showcase recipes he grew up eating like galayet bandora (a simple tomato stew), fattet baitenjan (eggplant on flatbread) or batata mahshieh (fried



potatoes stuffed with spiced ground beef, which was his father's favourite) – he would call his mom in Jordan. “She would say to me, ‘Put in a sprinkle of this, and a smidge of that,’” he says. “My dishes would turn out pretty good, but not ‘mom good.’”

For several years, he coaxed the recipes from his mother in this informal way. Then four years ago, everything changed when his father, Michael, died at the age of 80. “I was heartbroken, and I thought, ‘God forbid something happens to my mom without this book being published. I’ll never forgive myself.’” He phoned her up and said, “Mom, I’m jumping on this and getting this book done.”

He flew his mother to Toronto, and for 29 days, they made, and remade, the 120 recipes contained in this 360-page book. He hired a professional photographer, an editor, a book stylist. He kept testing and retesting the recipes. “I gained weight. I filled all my friend’s freezers up with food.” Slowly, it came together. Last year, Mansour quit his job at Loblaws and devoted himself full-time to promoting his book, which he self-published.

When he finally had copies of the hardcover in his hands, he flew to Jordan to show his mom. Seeing the finished project, she burst into tears. “I was overwhelmed with emotion,” his mother said in an e-mail interview. “I never imagined the simple meals I cooked for my children would one day be bound in a book that travelled beyond our kitchen.”



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Last July, Mansour threw a launch party for his cookbook in Amman, at the Four Seasons Hotel, with 350 guests, including the Canadian ambassador to Jordan. While he received accolades for a job well done – including from Queen Rania, who thanked him for “showing the world all the love and flavours that Jordanian kitchens have to offer” – it was his mother who was the undisputed star. “My mother has been on television and done many interviews,” he says. “She is quite famous in Jordan now, way more than I am.”

In June, he will travel to Lisbon where the Gourmand winners will be announced. Regardless of whether *Thuraya: Recipes from our Family’s Kitchen in Jordan* wins, or not, Mansour says he is thrilled to have a seat at the table. “I was so fortunate to grow up in a home where food was central to everything we did,” he says. “To see these recipes honoured, on an international stage, is moving. It is a tribute not only to my family but to the countless families across Canada who keep their cultures alive through food.”

His mother, who is 85, calls it a blessing she did not expect at this stage of life. “Food was never just food, to me,” she says. “It was how I expressed love, how I comforted, celebrated and even grieved. It was how I stayed connected to my roots.

“I always believed a good dish begins with intention. I hope I taught my children to cook with heart, to feed people generously, and to understand that food is memory, hospitality, and identity all in one.”



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## Galayet Bandora

Note from Nadeem: “Tomato season is around the corner—use the freshest you can find. Galayet bandora pairs beautifully with BBQ meats and chicken, served warm or as a dip.”

This tomato stew is as simple as it is delicious, a true Jordanian staple that reminds me of both Nana and my eldest uncle, Ayed, who adores this dish. It is also said to be one of King Abdullah II of Jordan’s favourite dishes.

Made of affordable ingredients and eaten with pita or shrak bread, or served over a bed of rice, galayet bandora is considered a working person’s food.

Although we often prepared the vegetarian version of this stew, you can add beef or lamb. While onion is not traditionally found in this recipe, I find it adds another dimension of flavour.

## INGREDIENTS

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- 7 tbsp olive oil, divided
- 1 small onion, finely chopped (optional)
- 1 serrano pepper, whole or roughly chopped (optional)
- 8 large cloves garlic (4 cloves roughly chopped; 4 cloves crushed)
- 11 Roma tomatoes, cut into a medium dice (approx. 900 g)
- 300 g beef or lamb tenderloin, cut into ½-inch strips (optional)
- 1¼ tsp salt, divided
- ½ tsp freshly ground black pepper, divided
- 2 tbsp pine nuts
- Pita or shrak bread, for serving

## PREPARATION

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In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat 4 tbsp of the oil until it shimmers. Add the onion and serrano pepper (if using), and cook, stirring constantly, for 3 minutes. Add the garlic and cook for 1 to 2 minutes, until fragrant.

Increase the heat to high, and then add the tomatoes. Cook, stirring frequently, until the tomatoes start to break down, 5 to 6 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until the liquid has reduced and the stew has thickened, about 25 minutes. Add 1 tsp of salt and ¼ tsp of pepper, and mix well.

Skip this step if you want a vegetarian dish: Meanwhile, in a skillet over medium heat, heat 2 tbsp of the oil until it shimmers. Add the beef (if using), season with the remaining salt and pepper, and brown on all sides, 4 to 5 minutes. Set aside.

In a small skillet over medium heat, heat the remaining oil until it shimmers. Add the pine nuts, and cook, stirring constantly, until golden brown, about 3 minutes. Transfer to a plate until ready to use.

Pour the cooked tomatoes into a serving bowl. Top with the cooked beef (if using) and pan-fried pine nuts. Serve warm or at room temperature with warm pita or shrak bread.

Photograph from Thuraya: Recipes From Our Family's Kitchen in Jordan/Supplied