



## JAFAR: SWEET AND SOUR

Julie Trassard

*When you have left your homeland, food provides a way of keeping it alive. It is also a means of integration. Jafar, a political refugee, runs the only Iraqi restaurant in Paris, l'Aigre-Doux [Sweet and Sour].*

It was 17<sup>th</sup> January 1973 precisely. Jafar remembers it perfectly. To all intents and purposes, a morning just like any other in Baghdad. Except that this was the day he was leaving. Forever. *"I had spent the previous day with my friends and the day before that with my family. I'd been knocking back the alcohol all night. I was drunk... I wanted to hold on to that feeling of inebriation so that I didn't go back on my decision..."* A sad, nostalgic smile flickers across his round face. He turns away with emotion. He picks up his duster and starts wiping the counter.

Jafar was twenty-two and a student and wood varnisher. He was also a militant Iraqi Communist Party member, a detail that meant his life was under threat. Contrary to popular belief, the ICP was a democratic party. But Saddam Hussein's Iraq was not. *"I got out before the situation really deteriorated,"* he says. *"But we were already in danger."* The young idealist chose to abandon his country rather than his convictions. Thanks to a contact in the French Embassy, he was able to fly to Paris on a tourist visa. *"My family were at the airport..."* Once more his face clouds over. *"Well, not my mother, she couldn't face it. My cousins were there, though, and my brothers and sisters... They understood that I had to get out..."*

Jafar already knew that he might never see them again. But he still kept his hopes up. *"We were hoping for change... The country is used to sudden changes because it attracts the super powers."* But the change never came about. Not prior to 2003 anyway. 2003 and the war. Now his parents are dead, before Jafar had a chance to see them again or even really to talk to them. Under Saddam Hussein, phone conversations were tapped. On the rare occasions they did speak, they could not say anything. The collapse of the regime has therefore had positive repercussions: Jafar can now call his six brothers and three sisters once a week. *"But I would have preferred the change to come from the people. I was anti-war... The Americans went in because of the petrol, not in order to save us."*

Since then, he has distanced himself from his Socialist ideals. *"Communism was a significant and necessary stage in the development of political thought but I'm no longer a believer."* Ultimately he abandoned everything for the sake of ideas he has since lost. Beneath the reserve one can sense his bitterness. Jafar is sweet and sour, just like his appositely named Iraqi restaurant, the only one in Paris. Emotions surge beneath the cold, aloof veneer. *"I'm a loner and a homebody"* he admits. *"I haven't been out of France once since I arrived. I hate traveling. When I leave a place, I break away and never turn back..."* It's easy enough to understand when one knows that for him traveling equates to separation. But despite appearances, he has not entirely severed the ties. He spends his free time surfing Arab websites so that he can follow Iraqi news and listen to music from his homeland. Iraq features in every aspect of his life. When asked if he misses it, his sad smile provides the answer. *"Of course..."* Silence.

His Iraqi background is so alive in him that he was able to create the dishes he serves his clients every day from memory. Even though he had never cooked before. But the wafting smells and flavors that imbued his childhood have left an indelible mark on him. *"I've been given a few recipe books but it's not the same. I've created everything through olfactory memory. That's the trick if you want perfect results."*

He did not actually choose the restaurant trade, however. When he arrived in France in 1979, he went straight to Montpellier on the advice of his friend at the Embassy, who told him that he would *"be less cold"* there. He knew absolutely no one and

only spoke Arabic and English. Ironically, it was an American who took him under his wing. Jafar enrolled at the university to learn French, which he now speaks perfectly. He adores Sartre and Camus. *“Literature reflects the soul of a country. I was deeply affected by Camus’ ‘Letter to a German Friend’, an account of friendship in the face of all the fighting... Actually I had already read it in Arabic when I was still in Iraq and it was one of the reasons that led me to choose France.”*

Despite his intelligence and culture, Jafar had to resort to odd jobs when his passport expired in 1976. He led the life of an illegal immigrant until the Left came to power in 1981, when he obtained refugee status. *“When you’ve got no papers you don’t pick and choose. I was ready to do anything, anything that brought in a bit of money.”* That was how he discovered cooking, when working as a dishwasher in restaurants and holiday camps. One day the chef fell ill. Jafar stepped in and never looked back. In 1990, when two friends suggested he open a restaurant in Paris, he accepted without a moment’s hesitation.

Nineteen years on, he’s still there, toiling alone in the Aigre-Doux kitchens. He spends each and every day there. He has a son and daughter by a French woman but they live in the provinces. (Attn. : le texte français met “vivent en Province”. Il y a donc confusion entre province et Provence. Rectifier le texte anglais si nécessaire.) So he remains on his own in the restaurant. He likes France but doesn’t feel French. He hasn’t filed for naturalization; *“I haven’t even thought about it”* he admits. He is fond of the *“country of human rights”* but has a critical view of it. *“What bothers me is that there’s a double standard. We’re not all equal in the eyes of the law...”* He has lived through a change in the way Iraqis are viewed in France. When he arrived he had no problem but *“when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the situation worsened. People became suspicious of the Iraqis.”* He had done nothing, changed nothing, but the way people considered him was different. The unfairness affected him.

He would now like to see Iraq again but has never retrieved his passport. He still needs papers he left behind in Baghdad. He could get a new passport by changing status but has never got round to it. *“Maybe some day...”* he muses. He may also be afraid of discovering a country that is no longer the country he remembers. For Jafar is actually an idealist, a poet. He used to write a lot when he was still living at home. And he is still creating today, although his art form is now culinary. By blending flavors and recipes he is recreating his own unique version of Iraq... The Delights of Baghdad, for instance, his signature dish, is his take on a combination of two traditional dishes. Meat and almond pasties, served with a handful of raisins, roasted eggplant and a subtle blend of spices and then covered in grilled cheese... A dish that encapsulates an explosion of flavors, an emotional journey which epitomizes in a single mouthful the taste of the land Jafar has never stopped loving.