

# MASARA

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Vahe H. Apelian, 20 May 2013

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Many students became beneficiaries of this joint venture, among them Dr. Avedis Injejkian, as his son Gabriel attests. It would not surprise me that the following two were also beneficiaries of this college level preparatory school: Dr. Albert Apelian, whose 1912 dissertation about Kessab upon graduating from college in Aintab, was edited into a book by Yervant Kassouny and Rev. Bedros Apelian who is the first from Kessab to be sent to the United States, by the arrangement of Miss Effie Chambers, to study ministry in Iowa.

The other school was for girls. It was entirely supported by the ABCFM. The school's existence is telling as to how open Kessabtsis were in matters of gender and education and that over a century ago they let a foreign mission run a school to educate their daughters. Not every community in the Ottoman Empire, whether Armenian or not, would have been so open as to trust their daughters to be educated by foreigners.


Miss Chambers also noted in her letter that Kessabtsis have been supportive to her. However, she also voiced a complaint that getting the students attend school in the fall was difficult. She wrote: *"The first part of the term is greatly interrupted by gathering in the vineyard products and the making of molasses, which is a sort of general good time for everybody, makes it difficult."*

Not being Kessabtsi, Miss Chambers did not know that Kessabtsis call "making of (grape) molasses" *masara*. Then and to this day it's *"sort of general good time for everybody"*.

## What is a *masara*?

It seems impossible to find a Kessabtsi who does not know what *masara* is. And yet many among the new generation born to expatriated Kessabtsi parents may not have heard the word, let alone attended its preparation. *Masara* remains one of the major social events that bind Kessabtsis together.

*Masara* is "*making (grape) molasses*", but it is not a chore, however tedious the preparation is. It is a time for merrymaking.

The process obviously starts with the harvesting of the grapes. I would not be surprised if parents looked for the help of their agile children who would climb and reach the grapes on vines wrapped on tree branches high above. There were no vineyards then in Kessab the way we envision  vineyards these days. It would not surprise me also that the kids in turn made ample use of their parents' *masara* disposition to skip school. I would have been tempted to do the same.

The grapes are then piled and sprinkled with a clay-like material, covered and let to stand for few days until the grapes ripened for the juicing to start. Juicing consists of stepping over them bare-footed. Young men wash their feet and get into the troughs and start tramping on the grapes until the grapes are juiced. The juice flowing from the trough is collected while the remaining pulp would become a source of nutrition for the animals.

The grape juice that contains the clay-like dirt is placed in a deep container and the dirt is allowed to settle down taking with it all the insoluble components in the grape juice and leaving a clear supernatant above. The latter is collected and placed in a large shallow pot and heated on ovens specially constructed for the process. The supernatant is heated until it attains a syrupy consistency. The process, which takes hours, provides the people with time to sit by the fire, relax, converse while periodically replenishing the wood to keep the fire going and making sure that the juice is heated no longer than needed.

Once it is determined that the molasses, which Kessabtsis call *eroup*, is formed it is transferred to a holding container. That transfer is the climax of the process and all would be waiting to savor its exquisite tasting foam, *prpor*. The person who transfers the warm syrup to start its foaming breaks the stillness of the evening or the night by shouting loudly "*prpor, prpor*", inviting everyone to savor the exquisite foam. To maximize the foaming of the warm syrup it is scooped with ladle made of gourd and poured from a distance through a perforated metal plate attached to a wooden handle back into the container thus creating a yellowish thick foam over the warm syrup.

The best way to taste *prpor* – foam in Armenian -- is by scooping it with laurel (*gasli*) tree leaves. Some would simply snatch a leaf from a *gasli* branch and fold it to taste the *prpor*. Others, especially the kids, would be more inventive and shape different kinds of wooden spoons with the *gasli* leaves.

Oct. 20, 1906, the day Miss Chambers dated her letter, turns out to be a Saturday in the fall in

~~Kessab--a time when *masara* would have already commenced or would be commencing soon,~~ depending on the ripening of the grapes. The world has changed much since, especially for the Armenians who would experience the Genocide nine years later. Two-thirds of the Kessabtsis would vanish in the Genocide. Amidst all these changes, *masara* has remained the way it was then. To this day Kessabtsis hold *masara* not so much as to prepare a rich source of energy for the long winter ahead (as it was done once), nor for commercial reasons, as it was done once with the surplus. *Masaras* nowadays are done to keep the tradition and the social bonds alive among the Kessabtsis in and outside Kessab.

