



# Malawah (A Sweet Flatbread)

## Somalia

### Cook - HALIMO

“We ate malawah every morning in Dadaab,” says Halimo, as she stirs flour and sugar in her sunlit East Oakland kitchen. Dadaab, the largest refugee camp in the world and home to over two hundred thousand Somali refugees like Halimo, is where she lived for 21 years before resettling to Oakland in 2011 with her three daughters, Fatuma, age 16, Suado, age 14, and Hamso, age 8.

As a single mother in Dadaab, Halimo had to support her family, so she opened a small restaurant: “Halimo’s.” The most common images of refugee camps are portraits of expansive squalor and desperation—and though this is very often the case, people had been living in Halimo’s section of Dadaab for decades and, despite severe hardship, had set roots there. Like many long-term refugee camps, Dadaab was home to a vibrant and surprising town center, with market stalls and businesses, from a basic internet shop to bars to sundry stores to restaurants like “Halimo’s.” Each day from 7:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., Halimo cooked and served camp residents who had a source of income from their own small businesses. In this traditional Muslim community, women and men ate in separate parts of the restaurant, separated by a thin, tattered curtain.

Though Halimo fed over a hundred people each day, most Dadaab residents cooked their own food with basic rations provided by the World Food Program. These rations came twice each month and included flour, salt, oil, lentils, and maize (corn) flour. Hence malawah’s popularity—all Halimo needed to procure to make this subtly sweet pancake was a few pinches of sugar, eggs, and some milk. Many Dadaab refugees made a less rich and tasty version of this dish each day with their World Food Program rations.

To make malawah, Halimo uses no measuring cups—she knows just how much flour to scoop into her two cupped hands. To crack an egg, she knocks the tip and then removes small flakes of shell, patiently and bit by bit, until the hole is large enough to drop out the yolk.

Halimo attends Refugee Transitions’ English class at Oakland International High School, where her two eldest daughters are in school, and Saturday classes at Refugee Transitions’ neighborhood program at Franklin Recreation Center. In addition, Halimo’s volunteer tutor, Anastasiya, comes over each week to practice English with her—including vocabulary for different foods and practicing English by describing how Halimo cooks. (Halimo’s milk tea recipe is also included in this book.)

“My mom wakes up at 4:30 every morning to cook and pray,” says Fatuma, who attends Refugee Transitions’ after-school tutoring program and is a regular participant at Refugee Transitions’ annual summer enrichment camp. “I don’t like food in the United States a lot, but my sister Hamso likes the cake,” says Fatuma. “She likes the vanilla kind only, not chocolate.” But the sisters agree that nothing compares to their mom’s malawah. Though they can’t get it anywhere in Oakland besides their mother’s kitchen, the girls can agree that malawah is their favorite food of all.







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*Ingredients* Serves 2-4

- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1 cup sugar
- 3 cups flour
- 3 cups milk
- 2 eggs
- 1-2 Tbsp. vegetable oil for frying
- 8" flat bottom frying pan

*Directions*

- 1 Whisk together first five ingredients until totally smooth.  
Mixture should be thin, like crepe batter.  
Add water if too thick.
- 2 Heat oil in pan for 10 minutes.  
Spoon batter into center and use back of spoon to spread batter out.  
Fry each malawah individually over medium-low heat.
- 3 Flip after bottom is browned.  
Eat for breakfast with spiced milk tea (page 75).