



Oum Ali makes manoushe for Brett's market lunch.



An abandoned cinema in front of Mohammad Al-Amin Mosque in downtown Beirut.

reconciliation ON A PLATE

Brett Atkinson takes his palate on a cultural journey to one of the twentieth century's fiercest hot spots and finds the hospitality is far from hostile.

WITH 18 OFFICIAL RELIGIONS, Lebanon, and its vast cultural and ethnic diversity, has historically been a recipe for civil unrest. Now, one charismatic Beirut is nurturing his country's shared love of food to promote reconciliation in the Middle East's most diverse nation.

I meet Kamal Mouzawak at Tawlet, on the edge of Beirut's Bourj Hammoud Armenian district. While gentrification is starting to take root in the city, the eatery sits amid gritty tyre repair shops and smoky wood-fired bakeries that turn out Lebanon's iconic flatbread, *manoushe*.

Mouzawak's vision to create food that transcends cultural barriers is reinforced in Tawlet's welcoming interior, which is more trendy Melbourne than troubled Middle East. Tawlet means 'kitchen table' in

and the sharing of this food that's important for the future of the country."

Every weekday a different chef from across Lebanon prepares a buffet lunch, drawing on their own history, traditions and hometown flavours. Each of Tawlet's 30 village cooks, shepherds or traditional farmers, travels to Beirut for one day a month, often bringing their meals' ingredients from their own gardens and small holdings.

Traditional flavours and local dishes, once threatened by conflict and cultural diaspora, are shared and celebrated. And the skilled cooks, whom Mouzawak calls 'producer chefs', enjoy the exposure.

"Yes, they are peasants and farmers, but they're doing something just as important as anyone else," Mouzawak says. "They get all the economic benefits and have direct access to consumers."

“It's not just the food that's important, but it's the getting together and the sharing of this food that's important for the future of the country.”

Arabic, and Mouzawak uses the universal pleasure of eating to bring people together, irrespective of their cultural, political or ethnic backgrounds.

"It's not just the food that's important," he explains. "But it's the getting together

Today's chef is Oum Ali, a Muslim mother from the South Lebanon village of Majdelzoun, near the Israel border. As her son completes his homework, Ali commandeers the open kitchen to prepare lunch. Tawlet's onsite cook

and waiters drift in and out, communicating in a cosmopolitan patois incorporating Arabic, French and even the odd English word.

Her deft culinary hands produce perfectly compact torpedoed *frakeh*, with spicy raw lamb blended with burghul wheat and spices, including cinnamon, cumin and marjoram. *Fatayer* pastries stuffed with sheep's cheese and olives form mini-mountains of golden baked goodness, and abundant salads are studded with mint, thyme and a zingy sprinkling of sumac.

Laban emmo, a succulent dish of lamb in yoghurt sauce, is prepared, and young wheat is roasted and grilled with chicken for a robust bowl of *frikeh djejj*. It's all incredibly authentic, packed with flavour and light-years from the identikit shawarma, hummus and baba ghanoush served in most Lebanese restaurants in Australia. A pale ale infused with *za'atar* – Middle Eastern herbs, including sumac, mint, sage and anise – by Beirut's 961 craft brewery is a surprising adjunct to some of south Lebanon's most traditional recipes.

Mouzawak passionately regards Tawlet as much more than a restaurant. "It's a farmers' kitchen," he gently corrects me when we first meet. The eatery follows another remarkable project he established in 2005.

Souk el Tayeb operates under the banner 'Make Food, Not War', and is Lebanon's first farmers' market, held weekly near the ritzy Beirut Souks shopping area in the city's rapidly re-emerging downtown precinct. Every Saturday morning the market brings the country to town, showcasing about 45 different stallholders from all around Lebanon. Eight years since its beginning, promoting the 'United Farmers of

Lebanon', the Souk el Tayeb is a Beirut institution, even trading through the dark days of the 2006 Lebanon-based conflict between Hezbollah and Israel.

About 90 per cent of Tawlet's chefs are also regular sellers at the market, where Palestinian, Muslim, Druze and Christian producers showcase their artisan products and traditional foods, side by side in a location that was once the epicentre of civil war.

Dressed in his traditional garb of black baggy trousers, stallholder Hussein Abu Mansour from a Druze village in the Bekaa Valley has zesty fruit *pestil* and zingy glasses of grape and pomegranate juice. Suzanne Doueihy from the Christian Maronite town of Zgharta, in northern Lebanon, is the country's acclaimed 'Queen of Kibbeh', and her baked dish of *kibbeh bi labneh* layers ground lamb with yoghurt and pine nuts.

Armenian dishes from Beirut's Sona Tikidjian include *lahme bi ajine*, a spin on *lahmacun* or Turkish pizza, while Maurice Habib's fragrant honey is from Lebanon's famed cedar forests.

I also catch up again with Oum Ali from my lunch at Tawlet a few days earlier. She's a regular at Souk el Tayeb, and her ongoing appearance at the market enables her to put her family through school.

Ali gives me a shy smile as she sits at her *saj*, a convex-shaped griddle. She scatters a robust portion of chilli-laced *labneh* cheese onto the unleavened *manoushe* wrap she's just prepared, folds it gently, and carefully presents my order wrapped in newspaper. Along with an organic espresso from an adjacent stall, it makes for a perfect brunch in a surprising city.



Ingredients for salads.



Frakeh, fatayer, and plenty of salads for lunch at Tawlet.



Fatayer, small savoury pies.

FATAYER BI SBENEH RECIPE

Fatayer are small savoury pies and can be made in different shapes and sizes, and with different fillings. This recipe uses spinach seasoned with lemon and sumac, and is known as *fatayer bi sbeneh*. They're normally served as part of a *mezze* selection with other traditional Lebanese small plates.

INGREDIENTS

- 500g of flour (white flour or a mix of half white and half whole wheat flour)
- 1 tbs salt
- 1 tsp yeast
- 1 kg spinach
- 2 onions, finely chopped
- 1 tomato, finely diced
- 2 tbs sumac
- Salt and pepper
- 1 tsp lemon juice

INSTRUCTIONS

Knead the flour with water to form a dough. Dissolve the salt and yeast in tepid water, and add to the dough. Leave to rest for one hour. To prepare the filling, finely chop the spinach and tomato. Combine the sumac and lemon

juice with the finely chopped onions and add to the spinach and tomato. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Roll the dough thinly and cut in circles around 10cm in diameter. Place a tablespoon of the filling in the centre of each circle of dough. It's important to ensure the filling is not watery. Fold the dough in from three edges to form a triangle, and put each *fatayer* on a baking tray. Bake in a hot oven until golden. Leave to cool and serve cold.

This recipe is courtesy of Kamal Mouzawak, founder of Souk el Tayeb and Tawlet.

www.soukeltayeb.com
www.tawlet.com