

ZAHLE, CITY OF GASTRONOMY

UNESCO Creative Cities Network



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1. MANAGEMENT TEAM

The idea of Zahle joining the 'Creative Cities Network' came up naturally formulated by Joseph Kreidi, Programme Officer for Culture at UNESCO-Beirut Office. Mr. Kreidi appointed Chérine Yazbeck, a local food culture specialist to fulfil the task. Zahle has been committed for over a century to the spread and recognition of traditional Lebanese food. As a long-time gastronomy leader in the region, Zahle intends to develop the cultural food heritage with ambitious projects. With its assets, Zahle aims to attract even more visitors into the region by supporting the creative local food community.

As the person responsible for the project, I have contacted the main actors of the food industry working hand in hand with the Municipality of Zahle and at its head, Mr. Joseph Maalouf. I met a substantial number of farmers, small-scale producers, foodies, restaurant owners, pastry shop owners, bakeries

owners, industrials, politicians, entrepreneurs, cultural main figures and tourism experts who expressed a great interest in joining the 'Creative Cities Network' that would put Zahle on the map and encourage the city to acquire a regional and international status of gastronomic city. The two main zahliots that helped me fulfil this project are Khalil Geha, a prominent figure of Zahle and Irène Alouf, owner of an eco-friendly organic boutique hotel in Zahle. This achievement would also connect Zahle to other cities that are already part of the global network.

The Team that will work on the follow-up of this project is composed of committed locals.

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2. VISION

In the scheme of designing the project application to integrate Zahle into 'Creative Cities Network', we would like to establish the legacy of Zahle as the heritage city for regional food. Unesco confidence and focus on the city would certainly initiate a general interest into the

story and culture of the city that lies at the crossroad of many routes. Gastronomy and Zahle are strongly connected since decades. Located in the midst of the agricultural region of the Middle East, Zahle enjoys an ideal place whereby regional cultures mingle and interact. 'Creative Cities Network' would empower the strengths of the local communities to join and improve

fair trade, exchange, know-how and diversity. Harvests, the land, the attachment to local produces, the respect of Mother Nature, the connexion to the region are elements that have been driving Zahle for centuries. Natural resources are essential assets to the city and they all end up designing a unique cultural profile. Zahle has a strong will to come

together with cities across the world to share its story and connect with many cultures as it has always proven to do throughout the centuries.

It is even more significant now that the Middle East is going through turmoil and major changes in the scope of the Arab Spring. Zahle finds itself in the middle of this (re) evolutionary process.

The aim of this application is to enable the city to push forward new diversification projects by attracting new contributors in many fields and mainly in the food sector.

Zahle wishes to encourage and unite creative small-scale farmers, artisans and producers in order to acquire the local economy based on good and fair food alongside a sustainable and reliable farming.

Residents of Zahle and to a certain extent the Bekaa residents have always been keen on safeguarding their traditions through handicrafts and the transmission of food heritage. They feel a certain pride in the preservation of this expertise.

In the event of integrating Zahle to 'Creative Cities Network', the city would boost gastronomic programs focused on the tradition linked to modern techniques. The incentive would draw the path of a renewed yet active region whereby locally produced food would be highly represented and promoted giving a serious push to local economies.



3. MISSION

Zahle wishes to apply to 'Creative Cities Network' in order to boost the local economy driven mainly by its gastronomic assets.

The city is already a main actor in the region when it comes to food heritage culture and would like to generate a global interest on the regional wealth, food.

The city would enhance food related projects as well as investments in the sustainable food production. Indeed, the city intends to develop interests in fair and organic food processes that would draw a better future to the food industry alongside a healthier and environment driven agricultural economy.

Zahle is a city with a strong rural identity. It is located at the heart of the Bekaa Plateau in a sparsely populated region. Zahle boasts a long-lasting culinary tradition with a stunning gastronomic culture based on locally produced sustainable food.

The objective of being part of 'Creative Cities Network Unesco' is to place Zahle on the global map and to raise interest in preserving its regional input.

4. GEOGRAPHY

A blessed geographical location

Zahle is 50 kilometers far from Beirut, in the heart of the country at an equal distance between the north, the south, the east and the west. Hence, it enjoys a strategic location in the most renowned fertile land. Zahle is built upon a series of

foothills of the mountain, at the Western edge of the Bekaa plateau, with Mount Sannine 2,628 metres towering above it. It is on the brow of a mountain of which there are sublime views of the extensive vale bounded on each side by lofty mountains. Zahle is built in an inlet of the mountain, on a steep ascent, surrounded with vineyards. The river Berdawni issues from a narrow

valley into the plain and waters the gardens of Zahle. Zahle has a delightful prospect of the fertile plain – once referred to as “the grain warehouse of Rome” and the surrounding outlook enhances its serene atmosphere. The hills form a narrow valley, an extension of a ravine to the northwest (“Wadi el Arayesh” or Valley of Vines). Due to its unique topography, Zahle

outskirts spread vertically on steep hill slopes, and the town features an elevation difference of more than 200 metres in a narrow geographical area. The Berdawni was at a time the town’s source of drinking water and its most prized natural emblem. The river winds through the valley, fringed with masses of foliage, in which tall and stately poplars predominate the rich vineyards clothing the whole slopes of the mountains and wild glens that furrow their sides.

Climate

Zahle enjoys a Mediterranean climate characterized by hot and dry summers and cold and chilly winters, where most of the precipitation is concentrated. However, due to its high altitude and inland location, in the rain shadow of the Lebanon mountains, its climate features some continental characteristics: summers are hotter than coastal areas, with peaks of 38°C in summer together with low humidity. Temperatures fall below 20°C at night, which makes summer particularly pleasant compared to coastal cities. On the other hand, winters are cold. The north wind in the valley is so freezing that residents refer to it as a “break nails”. In the valley, temperatures can easily plummet below -10°C.





5. COMMUNITY

Zahle is after Beirut and Tripoli in terms of size but also with respect to economic, cultural, and political influence, the third most influential city in Lebanon.

The population of about 150,000 residents is spread into 34 villages.

It is third largest city in magnitude and importance to Lebanon. Nevertheless, it has a village feel. Dwellers lie somewhere between rural and urban world. They are strongly attached to values; yet, despite this strongly rooted personality, they have developed their city in the most modern way.

together in order to celebrate a Saint, a holy feast or simply to party.

Tucked away from Lebanon's busy coastal centers, the people of Zahle have developed their own brand of individualism and way of doing things. The city's reputation for intellectual dynamism comes from a long line of writers, thinkers and poets who have contributed to Lebanon's cultural and political scene. Zahle is renowned in Lebanon for its high educational level. Many celebrities in poetry, arts, culture, literature all hail from this village-city. Among the most famous, Said Akl, Khalil Farhat, Michel Tard, Riyad Maalouf or Joseph Abitaan.

Families in Zahle own a 'karake' – a homemade arak distil. They distil arak thanks to a know-how passed down on to generations. Arak is sometimes referred to as 'arak zahlaoui' and the 'zahliot' (of Zahle) expression is well known: 'Zahle, Zahle - Zahletna wa churbe el arak adetna, wa l Berdawni mayetna' (Zahle, Zahle, our Zahle – and arak drinking is our custom, and the Berdawni is our water). This hymn drafted by Rachid el Safadi dates back to 1857. At that time, the people of Zahle had proclaimed their city an autonomous republic. The manufacturing of arak spread throughout the country, yet the Bekaa remains the region of vine growing.



6. STORY OF THE CITY

at a glance...

Zahle is the capital and largest city of the Bekaa Governorate. Lebanon was given the epithet “Switzerland of the East” by travellers that have applied to it ever since the 19th century. Zahle is located 55 km east of the capital Beirut, on the crossroads of the Beirut-Damascus junction. Over the last decades, it has sprung

up into considerable importance. Zahle lies in the Bekaa plateau, in-between Mount and Anti Lebanon. It is known as the “Bride of the Bekaa” and famed for its festivals and feasts.

The City of Wine and Poetry or ‘City of khamra and Poetry Khamra including Arak and Wine’ is celebrated throughout the region for its pleasant climate, abundant riverside restaurants and local arak. It is romantically situated on the edge of a deep ravine with the most exhilarating scenery of the far stretching verdure of the Bekaa. This



flourishing town upon the verge of the plain of the Bekaa is renowned for the utmost kindness and hospitality of its native hosts.

Zahle was founded in the early 18th century but lies in the middle of an ancient environment that goes back to five millennia. In 1622, the great Fakhreddine el-Maan set the region of el-Karak on fire at the time when Zahle surroundings used to be a large wild forest. Zahle was referred to as the Valley of the Tigers due to a huge number of tigers wandering in its whereabouts. Leopards, bears,

deer would roam freely before the 18th century.

In 1810, Zahle was part of the territory of the Druzes under the authority of Emir Bachir based in Deir el-Qamar. The inhabitants gained their subsistence partly by the cultivation of their vineyards and a few mulberry plantations and partly by their shops through the commerce of sheep and their manufacture. Many dyeing houses used indigo only to dye cloths. Cotton was bought from Nablous. They would likewise fabricate abbayas or woollen mantles. The various manufactured articles were sold to the peasantry who flock in from the mountains.

Zahle was burnt three times, in 1777, 1791, and in 1860 during a memorable conflict that opposed Christians Druzes. Zahle was a large town chiefly inhabited by Christians who paid tribute to the Emir of the Druzes. The last total destruction of the city left it miserable and in despair; nevertheless in the aftermath of this demolition, during the Mutasarafiya era, Zahle was rebuilt and thriving again. The construction of the railroad line between Beirut and Damascus in 1885 put Zahle on the map while conveying prosperity to the city as it became a freight hub on the trade route between Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. It resumed its role as a regional agricultural centre.

A hospitable city

In the 18th century, the caravanserai was a roadside inn where travelers rest and recover from the day's journey. Caravanserais supported the flow of commerce of traders of trade routes along the Silk Road. Zahle was a main intersection whereby merchants would stop over, have a meal, feed their horses and spend the night over in order to take the road the next day. One of the most popular caravanserai has been recently renovated by the Wardy family. It is composed of a stable for horses and several rooms where merchants would sleep in. Traditionally, Zahle has always been a city where travellers would meet and interact while sharing food over travel stories. At the turn of the 19th century, Zahle started establishing hotels to

accommodate tourists flocking from all over the region. In 1878, Hotel el-Soha was the first establishment to welcome tourists. Unfortunately, it didn't survive the devastating 1975-1989 war and is closed since 1981. Hotel America, Hotel Akl and Hotel Kadri played a significant role in the lodging activity of the city. Akl and Kadri are still operating now. Guesthouse such as Garda Hotel, Al Fadi Center and Saint Joseph's home cater for backpackers. Hotel Traboulsi (1913), Hotel Arabi (1978) and Monte Alberto (1990) added to the prestigious offers already operating in the city. Monte Alberto is a landmark hotel overlooking the city.

*Nowadays, a new era in hospitality has been achieved with the opening of a modern spirited auberge such as the most recent guesthouse: **Beit el***



Kroum. *Beit el Kroum ran by Irene Alouf is a family hotel serving genuine organic Zahle food. With its signature mouneh (preserved food), the owner offers homemade produce for in-house meals. Among specialties, Beit el Kroum prepares kishk (fermented yogurt) with a special torpedo-shaped kebbe dipped in Kishk soup, stuffed vine leaves, goat labne in olive oil and leyali Zahle. The latter is a milk pudding with different layers. The first layer is composed of a milk pudding, banana bites, achta (milk cream) topped with honey. Beit el Kroum boutique hotel offers charming bedrooms with a great view of the Bekaa valley and the Sannine peek. Each bedroom has its own theme, reflected in its unique furniture, colors, textures, lighting and aromas to suit one's mood.*

*Run by motivated and active Nada Hraoui, **Tanbakji** is a restaurant that perpetuates old village recipes. The setting is made of old furniture designed as a tribute to old Lebanese houses of the Bekaa plateau. The owner's aim is to safeguard old family recipes sharing them with travellers and locals. The chef in charge hails from the Bekaa and has an accurate idea about food growing and high quality produce. Most of the food is bought from neighbouring farmers and producers.*

In the region, several high-end hotels such as Park Hotel or Massabki in Chtoura offer excellent facilities together with local food.

A flag, an anthem, a feel of autonomy...

Zahle was the first independent state in the region in the 19th century, when it declared its autonomy to the Ottoman regime and had its own flag and anthem.

In 1820, during the battle of Maze, the people of Zahle created a red and green flag symbolizing the city. Red, for blood, green for life, survival and fertility atop a cross for victory.

Late 19th century, Zahle had totally recovered from several battles and conflicts and enjoys since the turn of the century a prosperous industry and economy.

Zahle is home to lofty edifices and contiguous structures, gardens and plantations, fruits and flowers, with a limpid river passing through it. Zahle offers the most bewildering mass of color, patches and strips of green and brown, dashes of red, blotches of burnt-umber and sienna.

In 1914, Jamal Pacha the Turk invaded the city and turned Hotel Kadry into a hospital for its army. He then seized grain warehouses and sheep to force the inhabitants to resilience. Zahle and the Mount Lebanon Mutassarifiyya were part of the Ottoman Empire.

In 1916, Sykes Picot convention appoints France as the mandate authority of the region. In the



aftermath of WWI after the defeat of Turkey allied to the Germans, in September 1920, General Gouraud declared Bekaa, Baalbek, Hasbaya and Rashaya official lands of the Greater Lebanon.

During the French mandate, the city prospered and developed its

commercial activities. Natives zahliots such as Chebel Dammous and Moussa Nammour contributed to the draft of the Lebanese Constitution in 1926.

In 1930, Zahle became a caza consequently the capital of the

province of the Bekaa. In 1943, Lebanon was independent and Zahle, a flourishing city. From 1975 till 1989, Zahle suffered from the consequences of the War. At the end of the war, Elias el-Hrawi, a zahliot was elected President of the Republic.

Zahle, a word, three explanations...

Zahle might have been named after “zahila” referring to its great land movements. Another option would be a tribute to Zahlan, the prince of the Hilal family based in Zahle in the 7th century during Arab invasion. A more mystical explanation would be in reference to Zuhal or Saturn as Romans worshiped the God of Fertility incarnated by the planet Saturn.

William H. Rau (1903)
Zahleh of Lebanon, a prosperous Christian village of Syria.

“Zahleh is the largest village of Lebanon, containing 15,000 inhabitants. It owes its prosperity mainly to the labours of missionaries from England and the United States who have made it a center of education and Christian influence. It has numerous churches, mission schools of a high grade and manufactories of various kinds. The town has an air of comfort, cleanliness, intelligence and thrift very rare in Palestine. Here one sees women without the distinctive dress of the Mohammedan women, women of more beauty, intelligence and character, with hope in their faces and joy in their lives. The place is more western than oriental. Miles of vineyards are seen and there are many thriving manufactories”





7. RESOURCES

Lebanon is a country with a unique geographical position. However, agriculture based mainly in the Bekaa is still an artisan industry. Farmers in rural areas need capacity-building to improve their farming methods thus increasing their productivity and competitiveness. This would

contribute to the development of a more environmental friendly agricultural sector. In 2002, agriculture in Lebanon represented 6% of the GDP, and 7% of the active population, while in 1970 its contribution to the GDP was around 9% with 19% of the active population. Agricultural production has decreased by 12% between 1970 and 2008 mainly due

to the effects of the post-war (1975-1990) economical crisis, and to the economical policies favouring the tertiary sector (services) over the primary and secondary sectors. The natural advantages of the country in terms of water resources, number of sunny days, geomorphology and climate diversity would allow the development of an efficient

agricultural sector, if other socio-economic and geo-political constraints are overcome. At the household level, agriculture is mainly a part time activity, complementing other production, or service activities. Commercial agriculture is not very frequent, and when it occurs it must be complemented by other economical inputs. (T)

Table 4. Area (ha) under different crops (Source: FAOSTAT)

Crops	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Wheat	40 000	43 600	43 500	45 808	46 620	49 500	52 900	52 800	49 900	50 000
Barley	8 700	7 000	11 500	13 911	12 590	14 500	15 900	15 750	14 500	16 000
Chick pea	2 600	2 000	2 921	1 989	1 810	1 900	2 030	1 800	1 900	2 000
Maize	900	879	846	930	550	900	1 050	900	900	1 000
Pulses	9 447	8 738	11 165	9 814	8 503	8 839	9 096	8 527	8 913	7 439
Vegetables	28 487	26 632	28 705	27 298	27 301	26 553	26 401	25 737	27 222	27 213
Fruit	70 661	70 981	69 868	71 900	71 571	69 733	70 605	70 800	71 780	73 886
Citrus Fruits	15 205	15 292	15 155	16 426	16 890	16 500	17 113	16 763	16 810	17 091
Root Crops	12 945	11 942	16 940	19 201	19 564	19 738	19 934	20 132	20 136	20 535
Vetches	4 400	4 500	4 400	4 350	4 400	4 574	4 601	4 300	4 496	3 014
Sorghum	900	750	700	600	591	642	691	687	646	645
Sugar Beet	7 027	270	0	0	1 156	1 100	500	430	700	700
Coarse Grain	10 850	8 929	13 296	15 713	13 999	16 333	17 954	17 648	16 338	17 954
Olives	55 646	56 834	57 570	57 564	58 531	58 524	59 100	58 600	56 000	57 000

Fragmentation and small sizes of farms are characteristic of the mountains and the South while they are a little larger in the Bekaa. Only 5% of holdings are larger than 4 ha, with 49% of the total Utilized Agricultural Area (UAA), while 30% of the UAA are larger than 10 ha and concentrated in the Bekaa. The legal status and land tenures of the holdings are distributed as follows:

92% of agricultural holders are single holdings operating their lands individually
 7% of agricultural holders are operating their lands in a partnership with others
 83% of holders own their lands (corresponding to 68% of total UAA)
 8% of holders are still in a transitory (heritage) process (corresponding to 7% of total UAA)
 6% lands are operated through rental (corresponding to 18% of total UAA)

The Bekaa plain offers large areas of arable lands planted mainly with cereals and sugar beet. Grape growing is very important in the central Bekaa, thanks to the contribution of large investments and the application of modern production, transformation and marketing techniques allowing the development of an important wine industry. Olive production is very important in Koura, in South Lebanon and in Hasbaya. While apricots are one of the main specialties of northern Bekaa; fruit trees (apples, cherries, peaches) are concentrated on the western slopes of the Mount-Lebanon chain.

Animal production is mainly concentrated in the Bekaa Plateau and concerns ovine and caprine livelihood. Sheep production is almost exclusive to the Bekaa, historical birthplace of the local “Awassi” breed. Goats are found almost everywhere, feeding in



the woodlands and high altitude formations. Ovine production is not well developed, although some investors are trying to put a milk value-chain into operation.

The production of ruminants is secondary in Lebanese agriculture, with less than one agricultural holding in 8 being involved in animal husbandry. Cattle are mainly raised for milk production with the majority of the stock in large farms of the Holstein breed. Sheep and goats have always been an integral part of the rural mosaic in Lebanon. Sheep are mainly of the regional Awassi breed with local characteristics, and goats are mainly of the local Baladi breed, and the Damascus or Shami breed. Both sheep and goats are managed under nomadic and semi-nomadic systems, feeding on native pastures, woodland species and crop residues. They are distributed all over Lebanon with a high concentration in the Bekaa Valley. The economic and heritage importance of these breeds, both at the community and national levels contribute to their conservation, and reduce the risk of losing them through breeding or replacement programs. The wild goat that used to roam in the Lebanese mountains has disappeared and is thought to be extinct.

Changes in land use practices, the shifting from rural to urban

livelihoods and the severe fragmentation that woodlands, rangelands and pasture lands are witnessing because of the urban sprawl, has seen herds (goats and sheep) decrease in number and pastoralism is no longer an important part of the rural mosaic. In some parts of the country, mismanagement practices and overgrazing have led to the deterioration of pastures and woodlands.

In 2003, dairy cattle, sheep and goat milk production represented 7.2% of the total value of the agricultural production; while meat production did not exceed 3.9%. Despite this production being secondary, it remains very important, mainly when it comes to goats and sheep largely because of their strong ability to utilize pasture and fallow lands within the holdings or at the landscape level.

The local production of sheep and goat meat suits the requirements of the traditional Lebanese diet. However, despite the important contribution to the Lebanese diet and cuisine, the demand on sheep and goat meat has been decreasing during the past few decades, mainly because of the development of malls and supermarkets and the availability of cheaper imported meat. The demand has witnessed a slight increase again (particularly

for goat meat) after the global crisis related to the mad cow disease and the new trends in food habits favouring local and organic products.

Some large investments have been put into the dairy products value chain level. Some are private with several new dairy plants delivering fresh and UHT milk to the Lebanese market. Other investments are public, mainly through the IFAD project on the rehabilitation of the small livestock producers in the Bekaa. After the 2006 war, the dairy sector has suffered important losses, but the private sector has managed to recover and rehabilitate the affected plants. Nowadays, in integrated circuits, milk is commercialized through three main channels: independent milk-men (the hallabas), milk-men appointed by the dairy plants and collection centres, both public, currently facing financial and technical problems while private plants are functioning well.

Cattle meat production remains very limited, with livestock imported from different countries (mainly EU) and slaughtered in Lebanon. Such production provided around 60% of the bovine meat in 2002. High quality meat is mainly imported chilled or frozen. The number of sheep is estimated 330,000 in 2009 and the number of goats reached 450,000 in 2009.

Goat production suffers from imports even though the demand for goat meat and milk products remains large and some 10,000 families have this production as their major source of income.

All the sheep and/or goat farmers in the regions surveyed are transhumant, sharing their time between high mountain zones in spring and summer (from April-May till October-November) looking for good quality pastures. The nomadic system allows the children to join schools during winter, when the families move the herds to lower altitudes. During the spring and summer, at the end of the school years, sons and daughters help their parents in the different tasks related to their herds and small farms. Even teenagers and young adults stay with their families and frequently inherit the job from their parents. The nomadic way of living and the freedom of the wilderness run in the blood and cannot be easily changed into a sedentary way of living. The provision of the bare necessities and a slight improvement in the quality of livelihoods would certainly preserve this family structure and this traditional system.



8. CULTURE & TRADITION

The city's culture has long revolved around its signature crop, the grape, and its products, wine and arak. Arak, in particular, has traditionally been served in cafés any time of the day. Together with the town's gorgeous natural settings, it might have provided with inspiration many of the fifty poets and writers who were born Zahle over the past century, leading to its reputation as "the City of Wine and Poetry". A graceful personification of this nickname stands at the town's entrance: a statue of Erato, the Muse of love poetry, holding a bunch of grapes.

Artisans: handicrafts gems



Rosine Zahlaoui has been struggling for decades to compile a list of local artisans pursuing an artwork that is authentic and rooted in the region. Among the many artists that have their workshop in the city, Murano glass artisans and weavers make their way through collective exhibitions and fairs. Nadim & Bianca Tahtouh are Murano glass specialists. The tradition of Murano glass making is a heritage from Italy. Indeed, in Fakhr ad Din II times, Mount Lebanon had strong ties with Italy explaining in some ways the.

Fakhr ad Din II enhanced Lebanon's military and economic development with the objective of liberating the country. He was remarkably tolerant and tried to amalgamate the different religious groups into a united Lebanese community. For the sake of independence, he concluded a secret agreement with Ferdinand I, Duke of Tuscany in Italy, with the two parties pledging to support each other against the Ottomans. Fakhr ad Din II initiated many strategies to modernize the country by inviting architects, irrigation engineers and agricultural experts from Italy to work in Lebanon.

Murano glass artisans refined technologies such as crystalline glass, enameled glass (smalto), glass with threads of gold (aventurine), multicolored glass (millefiori),

milk glass (lattimo), and imitation gemstones made of glass. Murano Island has been a commercial port as far back as the 7th century. Over the decades, Murano glassblowers and artisans have moved and setup shop elsewhere, such as Zahle that boasts a local production.



Silk mills...

As the number of silk mills in the region increased up through 1885, Lebanon began to gain half of its gross national product from the silk trade and was therefore able to purchase two-thirds of the bulgur, flour, dried legumes, and dairy products its peasants consumed from Syria, Turkey, and even North African countries. All this required the planting of large areas of mulberry trees, thereby displacing

the traditional food farming systems, with the result that wheat and other foods had to be imported and were sold to the very farmers who had once grown them as staples.

With both the Ottoman War and World War I taking their tolls, the silk-for-food trade network came unravelled. The resulting tragedy of food insecurity is the reason that some fifteen million people of Lebanese descent now live beyond Lebanon's borders, and only five million Lebanese remain in their native land.

In November 1914, the Ottoman Empire participated in World War I alongside with Germany, disrupting the trade of silk to France and leading the Ottomans to mandate that every Lebanese farmer who could carry a gun join the army. Hundreds of thousands of Lebanese men and boys were forced to leave the mulberry groves and remnant grain fields, though roughly a fifth of them deserted their compulsory military service and fled the country. The shortage of silk leaf harvesters alone would have thrown the country into an economic crisis, but blockades also prevented the women who worked in the silk factories from getting their products to high-end French markets, and the silk trade collapsed. With a locust plague devastating the remaining cereal fields in the summer of 1915 and no

money to purchase staple foods from Syria or Africa, the food security of the Lebanese peasantry evaporated before their eyes. They were left with only locust-damaged mulberry leaves, which silkworms can eat but humans cannot. The mulberries themselves had little market, and their food value did not sustain many local families.

Lebanon has a long tradition of silk weaving. In Zahle, artisans work specific designs that are passed down for generations. Artisan Weavers is the revival of that family tradition, infusing it with new life, new designs and modern manufacturing techniques.

Around 4000 BC, the Canaanites lived in Lebanon. The Greeks named the Phoenicians “red” referring to the purple dye extracted from murex seashells, a hallmark of the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were skilled people who developed the first phonetic alphabet. They were accomplished sailors who travelled widely, trading local goods such as cedar timber and murex with Egypt and other Mediterranean countries, including those of Europe. The Phoenicians established strong ties with Egypt where tribute in the form of precious cedar wood was paid to the Pharaohs. The Phoenicians dominated the Mediterranean Sea trade for over 500 years excelling in the production of textiles, carved

ivory, glass, jewelry and metal work. Tyre was a flourishing commercial center famed for its purple dye extracted from the mollusc murex, a marine snail still living along Tyre’s shores. Tyre produced also rich silken garments that were exported throughout the Mediterranean Basin.

Painting Zahle for decades

Georgette Zaatar just like many local painters is found of her city that she depicts so beautifully in her artwork.



Old houses, red rooftops, stone mansions, green hills overlooking Berdwani river, all architectural elements of the city are enhanced in her stunning paintings. Georgette works also ‘for the memory of my city and to pass down to generations our cultural and architectural heritage so it doesn’t get lost’.

The traditional rural Lebanese house consists of three rooms: a dar (living-room), the khazneh or beyt el mouneh (food stocking chamber)

and a cowshed below or adjoined to the house, the animals’ shelter.

Georgette Zaatar’s goal is to pay tribute to the rural house that is built with a mixture of clay and straw. The wet mixture is poured into a mould to obtain a sun-dried brick. The earth serves as a mortar sealing. The latter is used as the first filler to walls. The second filler is made of marl and straw. A coat of lime with salt and oil fixes the color and removes insects.

Heritage Museum – Feyrouz Chamoun

In the outskirts, a family run museum gathers a collection of traditional objects and elements of Zahle's lifestyle. This museum located on the ground floor of a private house, is open to the public and the grandson of the owner tours visitors and students explaining them the purpose of the museum as well the significance of the objects exhibited. Chamoun's father was a famous Zahle painter. The family has dedicated generations to arts and opened up this private museum in order to display food utensils from Lebanese heritage, Ottoman arms, old paintings depicting the story of the region as well as rare manuscripts gathered through the generations.

Noah's Tomb

The tomb of Noah is a long structure seemingly part of an aqueduct. It extends about sixty feet the stature of Noah according to Oriental tradition.

It consists of a tombstone. At the time of the ottomans, Turks pretended that Noah is really buried there. Nebbi-Noah is the sepulchre of the great patriarch.

In the Old Testament, Genesis 9, there is a clear reference to wine. Noah's tomb established in Zahle

is in perfect harmony with its environment, vineyards and a green plateau.

'20. Noah, a man of the soil, proceeded to plant a vineyard. 21. When he drank some of its wine, he became drunk and lay uncovered inside his tent. 22. Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father naked and told his two brothers outside. 23. But Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it across their shoulders; then they walked in backward and covered their father's naked body. Their faces were turned the other way so that they would not see their father naked.' (Genesis 9, Old Testament).

The most impressive Acropolis in the world: Baalbek Temples

Perched atop a high point in the fertile Bekaa valley with an expansive view over the plateau, the temple complex of Baalbek is arguably the most enigmatic holy place of ancient times. The sprawling complex is a profusion of temples and platforms filled with a stunning line of fallen columns and sculptures, and stone dimensions that puzzle archaeologists and engineers even today. The Phoenician temple of Baalbek dates back to 2000 B.C. and is dedicated to Sun-God Shamash-Baal-Haddad later known as Helios and Jupiter (Aramean deity of lightning and thunder). It was an important city at the time at the crossroads of the

Silk Road. There are several temples to visit within the complex: The Temple of Baal/Jupiter situated upon the massive stone blocks known as the Trilithon, the Temple of Bacchus and the circular temple of Venus. On a nearby hill, lies a fourth temple dedicated to Mercury. The golden age of Roman building at Baalbek began in 15 B.C. when Octavianus Augustus (27 B.C-14 A.D) settled a legion. The sloping terrain involved the construction of retaining walls that are built with monoliths of 400 tons. The western, tallest retaining wall has a second course of monoliths with the famous "trilithon"; a row of three stones each weighing 1000 tons, the largest cut-

stones from the ancient world. As the vast temple complex expanded throughout Roman times, the Temple of Bacchus (Dionysus for the Greeks), the God of wine and a patron deity of agriculture and theater, was constructed in the middle of the 2nd century BC. The 2484 square meter temple is the world's best-preserved Roman temple. The Arabs changed the name of the fortified city to al-Qala' (the fort) before a second bloody sack took place in 748. In 1759, the city was badly shaken by an earthquake that led to the irreversible destruction of parts of the Roman complex.



Anjar, a commercial city at crossroads of the Silk Road...

Anjar is one of the most recent archaeological sites in Lebanon and covers one period of the country's history: The Umayyad. Anjar was an important commercial center under, the Umayyads, one of the most important Muslim dynasties, who ruled between 660 and 750 A.D. Their reign was short lived (pushed by the Abbasids, they relocated to Spain) yet they left in Anjar some impressive ruins, only recently discovered.

Aside for its commercial status, the vicinity of spurting springs, coming



from the Litani river have made Anjar and its surroundings, the most fertile place in the country, The sources are also what gave the city its name. "Anjar", comes from "Ain Gerrha," "the source of Gerrha", the name of an ancient city founded during Hellenistic times.

The site features two palaces, a mosque and a standard designed public bath consisting of a square-hall vestibule supported by two arcades made of three arches each, and three separate rooms for steam baths.

Anjar is a perfect example of the typical Umayyad architecture consisting of a triple arcade window on the upper façade and masonry with alternating layer of stone and brick-tile. The mosque's design indicates that the Caliph had his own private access while two distinct entrances are public. A second palace is composed of a square courtyard and five rooms.

In 744 A.D, the city was destroyed by Marwan II after defeating Ibrahim, Al-Walid's son. Anjar was sacked and fell into oblivion. Later on, the area was covered by vast swamps and it was not until the country's Independence that the General Direction of Antiquities decided to restore and unveil its forgotten treasures. Lebanon recovered a significant part of its history and a masterpiece of Umayyad architecture.



Terbol Museum, showcasing traditional Lebanese architecture

Terbol museum is located in the Bekaa Plateau, 20 kilometers away from Zahle. The museum is an old traditional farmer house transformed into a museum in order to explain the lifestyle of the Lebanese during the 19th and early 20th century. During the Ottoman occupation (1516-1918), starting with Sultan

Selim the 1st, villagers had the ingenious idea to build a double partition with a hole at the top to hide grain. The Ottoman troops extorted the harvest causing hunger among the rural population. To survive, farmers also hid cereals in the hole that they retrieved, according to their necessities, by virtues of a hole dug at the base. Soldiers took grains of silos without suspecting that the harvest was in fact hidden within walls. Grains

were distributed to the family and neighbours. That way people endured this unfair arbitrary tax while preventing themselves from starvation. The Terbol Museum reconstitutes this cereal hole. It can be visited during summer (terbol@fnp.org.lb). In the Lebanese traditional house, the inhabitants dug in the walls 'yuk' to store furniture. The 'yuk' is a niche for mattresses, used as a bed. Other niches served for storing

objects, food and other useful elements. The 'khrestane' is a framed cupboard dug in the wall with two wooden doors.

Niha, the ancient Phoenician Temple

At 10 kms from Zahle, Niha hosts an ancient Phoenician Temple for the God Hadaraniss as well as a smaller worship for the Goddess of Water.





9. ECONOMY

Zahle gastronomy identity is strongly related to the agricultural environment of the city. Located in the middle of the Bekaa valley, Zahle has forged within decades a strong identity and has benefited from the favourable surrounding that facilitates the use of a large amount of different crops.

The dominant elements in the identity and success of Zahle's gastronomy include geography

and climate, which in turn impact agricultural products that are available. Identifiable gastronomic characteristics of Zahle condense the multiple influences of the region at the crossroads of many countries. During the 20th Century, artisan producers with traditional techniques grew fast in a demanding market. Until now and due to the resurgence in demand for quality products made by time-honoured methods, Zahle farmers have been able to maintain their culinary heritage.



Wheat...

Lebanon was the Breadbasket of the Roman Empire. Today, wheat production does not even meet the country's local demand. The salamouni (*Triticum aestivum* L. var. Salamouni) is tender wheat, the perfect flour for bread-making. The three indigenous wheat are perfect for burgul making: haramuni, salamouni and breiji. This wheat might have been cultivated for over 5000 years in Lebanon. It is the base of burgul, flour, semolina and freeke. The crop is concentrated in the Bekaa Valley and is harvested in June and July. At the end of the summer season, rooftops of Zahle are lined up with white sheets where burgul and kishk is prepared in the city for centuries. The wheat is boiled in large pots, dried in the sun and milled. Before milling process, dried seeds are moistened again and rubbed to remove the outer bran layer. The process allows transfer of vitamins and minerals from outer bran layer into the seed. The initial boiling provides biological stability to milled product allowing safe storage for long periods and shorter cooking time.

The burgul, stewed and drained wheat, then sun-dried, cleaned and crushed, is a staple ingredient of Lebanese dishes. The fine wheat is used in the preparation of two national dishes: kebbe and tabboule.

The process of burgul lasts several days.

According to a study by Slow Food Foundation for Biodiversity, Burgul might have been introduced to Lebanon by Kurdish tribes in the 12th century.

The grading of the wheat is made with a sieve to obtain coarse burgul (jachich - khichin), fine (burgul) and very fine (sraysira). It is ground to produce flour (bssise). Semolinas, named smid (coarse) and firkha (fine) made of wheat are key ingredients in the preparation of cake shops such the maamoul. The burghul does not appear in the famous writings of the Baghdadi gastronome Ibn Sayyar al-Warraq. Al-Warraq wrote in the 10th century the first known Arab cookbook 'The book of dishes' (El Kitab El Tabikh). It is only in the 11th century, that the Turkish or Persian term starts appearing in recipes. It was commonly used throughout the Ottoman Empire. In Lebanon, housewives would make it in-house. They crushed the wheat in the jaroush (two piled stones) operated by a wooden pestle.

The freeke is a green picked wheat roasted in straw fire. The term originates from 'faraka', or moving referring to the fact that grains are removed from sheaves of wheat. The wheat picked before maturity is sun-dried, mixed in the straw of barley and burnt on the ground.



The harvest depends on regions but usually takes place at the beginning of May.

Beginning in the 1860s, when Napoleon III had landed six thousand troops on the Lebanese coast to intervene in sectarian disputes on the side of Christians. The French encouraged Maronite Christians of highlands and valleys to abandon their subsistence crops in favour of growing mulberry trees for silk production. Spurred on by their own merchant class, the small shareholders in the Mount Lebanon highlands and the Bekaa Valley had planted nearly half of all their arable lands in mulberry trees, forsaking the wheat grains that had offered them bulgur for tabboule

and chickpeas from which they had made hummus over countless centuries.

The Bekaa covers an area of 428,000 hectares, 42% of Lebanon's total area. Its arable land is important for the country as mountains make up most of the country.

The Berdawni has always been of central interest for mills that would install by the river in order to ground their wheat. Indeed, thanks to water mills would produce huge amounts of flour and burgul. Nowadays, bakeries represent a large percentage of the local industry. It is strongly related to local mills that are quite influent in the city. Mills for grains, flour, burgul are a solid asset for the city.

The particularity of Zahle's economy is that it relies essentially on small businesses employing a few employees. Artisan producers, food processing family-owned companies directly benefit from locally grown products. In the region, Zahle is a major trade center with strong retail turnover. The tourism industry counting on food heritage culture and beautiful sceneries is a strong income to the city. As a main tourism and hospitable hub, Zahle supports contemporary accommodation such as artisan guesthouses and *auberges* that fit modern demand. Gastronomy is one of the elements

incorporated in a new concept of cultural heritage and cultural tourism, driven by growing trends of a well-being lifestyle, authenticity, environmental protection and the need to have a high-quality experience. Tourists that flock to Zahle have a strong desire for foods that emphasise the heritage and culture of the city stimulating the preservation of traditional forms of agriculture and cultural heritage. During Lent, Christians eat meatless dishes and at Barbara, they eat a variety of wheat-based dishes. Gastronomy, as a tourist resource, generates rural development by increasing rural revenue sources and improves income levels and employment of local labour.

Figures of Agriculture surface and revenues from agriculture

The total agriculture surface in Lebanon is 248 000 Hectares out of which 42 % are generated in the valley - 104 160 Hectares. Farming in the Bekka Valley is a lifestyle for many families and agricultural products generate considerable revenues for many.

Exports from the Bekaa Valley

Agriculture exports from Bekaa valley during 2011 is around USD 192 000 000 according to CCIAZ - Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture of Zahle and Bekaa

- statistics. The most exported commodity was potato (USD 46 000 000) followed by apple (USD 41 000 000), orange (USD 27 000 000), banana (USD 23 000 000) and grapes (USD 11 000 000). Citrus and bananas are not grown in the Bekaa, yet the main exporters work in the Bekaa region.

Agriculture revenues in total city income

Bekaa valley is Lebanon's most important farming region around 40% of households run small family farms (Global eye, 2006).

Food industries

The main concentration of food industries are located in Zahle encompassing wineries, Bakeries, dairy, poultry and meat and agro-food processing companies.

Schools, training, technical schools, universities

There are several schools and universities with a special 'food related' curriculum. At A.U.L in Chtoura, Mr Itab Awass is the head professor for the food section. In Zahle, the Catholic School of Dar El Sadaka has a food section. Université la Sagesse has a partnership with the University of Lausanne, famed for its hospitality section.

Table: type of Industries registered at the CCIIA Zahle (2010)

Segment	Number of companies	Volume
Packaging	19	8%
Printing Press	9	4%
Bakeries	53	23%
Vegetables and Fruits conservation	9	4%
SME's	23	10%
Dairy products	34	15%
Olive oil Production	18	8%
Roasters	24	10%
Eggs and poultry	6	3%
Alcohol drinks	29	13%
Water	6	3%
TOTAL	230	100%



carry an agricultural programme whereby young people are taught how to grow herbs, vegetable and fruit that are used afterwards in jams, jellies or processed food. NGOs own their workshop within their H.Q. In case of increased demand, Ayam el Raja is able to call after former people trained by the NGOs and can take on buffets and ceremonies up to 300 hosts. Both NGOs train every year around 50 young people sharing with them recipes, love for food and respect for heritage within a framework of sustainable and locavore food. As a commitment if Zahle gains recognition and becomes member of 'Creative Cities Network', the city intends to focus on the food apprenticeship together with national chefs by means of opening up a special training programmes whereby local and national food would be taught to younger generations.

Two outstanding NGOs, Ayam el Raja founded by Fadia Abou Dib and Rayon d'Espoir work with disabled youngsters. They have developed a full range of preserved items and freshly prepared food stored in freezer and sold at premises and in supermarkets. Recipes are traditional Lebanese cuisine and young people are taught how to prepare this food in order to pass down onto them this tradition and to train them to work in restaurants or at catering shops. Both NGOs

Restaurant activities and how much it impacts on the local economy

According to the Ministry of Tourism, the figures in 2012 of restaurants and snacks in Zahle reach 200 establishments in the city itself. Venues with a surface of less than 20 sqm are not taken into account. The figure is considered as large for a city located hinterland, not coastal. These 200 restaurants and snacks

employ approximately in high season some 40 people, cooks, waiters etc...

City restaurants and snacks buy locally produced food and try as much as possible to source in the perimeter of the city. The advantages are low cost transport, fresh produce and also the sustainability of the food chain maintaining income for small farmers and little-know producers. In many restaurants, there is a search for a direct contact with farmers, bakers, producers and a strong will to create a network in the region in order to establish a solid business network based on respect and good quality products. From bread to hommos, wine and arak to poultry, restaurant food purchasers work with local suppliers and promote the region's food with a locavore feel of being useful to the community and spreading out the agricultural and cultural food heritage to customers, local or international.

Unfortunately, not all ingredients mandatory to produce local and international food is available in the Bekaa and to a bigger extent in Lebanon.

These restaurants, whose income figures are impossible to get from all institutions, contribute widely to the local economy of the city by ensuring work to all actors in the agricultural and hospitality sector. Establishments smaller than 20 sqm are numerous and tiny snacks

attract daily a reasonable number of customers.

Trout Culture

Freshwater aquaculture has been practiced since the 1930s with over 90% dedicated to rainbow trout, *Onchorhynchus mykiss*. They were grown in semi-intensive growing systems introduced in 1958. There are currently about 150 local fish farms. Tilapia farming was recently tried out through several private initiatives. Aquaculture is mainly practiced in the Bekaa plateau. In 1960 the Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) established the Anjar Center for Aquaculture in the Bekaa area to develop the sector and a new center was established in Hermel for trout production. The Center started as a hatchery service producing rainbow trout fingerlings and distributing them free of charge to growers to encourage intensive and semi intensive growing of the species.

Aquaculture production in 2003 was 600 tonnes, in 2010 estimation was 1, 100 tonnes. In 2003, the total amount of imported fish, alive, fresh or frozen (including crustaceans and molluscs) amounted to about 12, 000 tonnes at an approximate value of USD 30 million. This indicates that there is a strong potential for development in the aquaculture sector.

The oldest farm was established in 1965 in the Hermel area. However,



most of the farms (about 41%) were established during the years 1985-1990, mainly in the Anjar and Hermel areas and a few in Zahle. The industry accounts for 150 farms distributed mainly in the Bekaa area along the river Assi with some smaller ones along the northern coast.

The production system used is mostly semi-intensive. The average annual production of trout is around 1,100 tonnes produced by 150 farms,

80% are in Hermel-North Bekaa, at a total value of USD 3.7 million and an estimated average yield of 10-12 tonnes. Most of the farms are artisan family-owned businesses, small to medium in size. 47% are small-scale farms (surface area less than 500 m²), 38% are medium sized (501 – 1 500 m²) and 15% are large (over 1 500 m²). Most farmers own their raceways or ponds.

The total fish production (capture and aquaculture) accounts for less than 27% of local consumption. Aquaculture contributes about 10% of local production and 3% of local fish consumption. There are around 30 restaurant owners who invest in their aquaculture enterprise and depend on it for their living.

Lebanon has 15 permanent short flowing rivers. Only Nahr Il-Kabir Al Janoubi is a relatively long river (571 km). Three flowing rivers (Assi 46 km, Litani 160 km, and Hasbani 21 km) are in the interior planes limited by Mount Lebanon from west side and by Anti-Lebanon on the east side. As a result, there are five hydrographical regions where aquaculture is practiced.

In addition to endemic trouts, other species have been introduced such as brown trout (*Salmo trutta fario*), brook trout (*Salvelinus fontinalis*), common carp (*Cyprinus carpio*), mosquito fish (*Gambusia affinis*), silver carp

(*Hypophthalmichthys molitrix*), mangrove red snapper (*Lutjanus argentimaculatus*), nomadic jellyfish (*Rhopilema nomadica*), narrow-barred Spanish mackerel (*Scomberomorus commerson*) and obtuse barracuda (*Sphyraena obtusata*). Some were introduced from other countries/regions such as the Red Sea (*Rhopilema nomadica*, *Scomberomorus commerson*). Others were introduced for sports purposes in addition to aquaculture (*Salvelinus fontinalis*). Other species were introduced to control different pests, for example snails (*Cyprinus carpio*), mosquitoes (*Gambusia affinis*) and weed (*Hypophthalmichthys molitrix*).

Contribution to local economy

After crop production, aquaculture is the second main economic activity of the Hermel, Yammoune and Anjar areas and constitutes an income generating activity linked especially with restaurants and tourism in the areas. Restaurants usually serve trout at the table at a price of USD 10/kg. Trout cooking and meals are considered a specialty for the Hermel and Anjar communities. However, this source of fish is growing and is increasingly becoming known to the Lebanese consumer. It represents

a good potential and an additional food source if higher production can be attained. This must be coupled with marketing strategies and advertising. This is particularly the case compared with the volume of imported meat quantities in general and fish in particular.

Several restaurants, particularly in the Bekaa Valley, have live tout holding raceways, so customers can select the fish that is then prepared. Around 60 restaurants in Anjar and Hermel areas serve fresh trout on their menus. Anjar is considered a tourist area where visitors from nearby villages, Beirut and other cities come for trout meals and enjoy the area with its landscape and water sites.

Recent investments have been made in the Anjar and Hermel areas to support for tourist activities such as the emergence of new hotels (2 hotels, one in Anjar and one in Hermel area) and enlarging and maintaining existing restaurants.





10. GASTRONOMY

Zahle is located in the midst of one of the most fertile valleys in the Middle East. The agricultural activities impact positively on the gastronomy of the city. Hence, the rich production provides the raw material to a cuisine made of natural and fresh ingredients combined together into tasty dishes. In addition to vineyards, cherry, pomegranate, plum and mulberry

orchards dot the town's upper hillsides, while potatoes and leafy vegetables are cultivated in the plain. Livestock is also an important resource, with trout fisheries on the upper course of the Berdawni river and poultry farms on the surrounding hills. It only opens when spring announces its warm days. The gorge or Wadi el Arayesh offers a refreshing break in its many restaurants of outdoor terraces by the Berdawni riverbanks.

From Sannine Mountain, the river gushes out and reaches the city of Zahle in the Bekaa plain. A pleasant atmosphere of running water, poetry and the scent of baked bread have made Wadi el Arayesh a legendary place. Surprisingly, few restaurants are called casinos, not that there're gambling rooms but because they are by the water! It's said that one hundred years ago, there were cafés by the river under the tall shading trees. At the same time, the Wadi

was the right place for picnics when the sun of the Bekaa is at its peak. The simple cafés were transformed into restaurants where the meze or starters are a prelude to a main course of grilled tender meat. All that is accompanied by the refreshing local wine or arak: the strong alcoholic drink made of grapes and a hint of anise seeds at distillation. When the meal is over, plates of the best season's fruits are offered on the table.



The entrance of the Wadi is through an open-air alley along the Berdawni River where souvenir shops and children's gadgets as well as small recreational space are found. But the unique Zahle specialty is the variety of nougat and caramelized nuts. They are displayed inside vendors' cars protected by a glass looking so irresistible!

Before leaving the Wadi, a local ice cream is always a must. The Wadi is overwhelming with its culinary tradition and cool atmosphere.

Zahle, homeland of the mezze culture

Mezze refers to the myriad hors d'oeuvres of the traditional Mediterranean diet. First coined by Genoese spice traders, Greeks, Turkish, Persians and Arabs adopted this word reflecting the multicultural origins of this inviting cuisine. The Arabic word might come from the Persian 'maza' meaning 'relish' and 'taste'.

Mezze is a selection of small dishes served as appetizer courses paired with the popular aniseed-based alcoholic drink, arak.

In Levantine cuisines and the Caucasus, cuisines of former Ottoman Empire, especially Aleppo mezze is served at the beginning of all large-scale meals. Small dishes come hot or cold, savoury, raw or cooked. The variety of ingredients

suits vegetarians and meat-eaters alike.

Zahle is famed for hosting the early days of modern 'mezze table'. In the 20s, the region's locals would gather along the Berdawni river bringing in typical dishes and sharing their food and heritage in a picnic style setting. It was only in the late 50s, that restaurants started lining along the river while serving 'mezze meals'. Mezze is usually eaten at restaurants on a day off, a housewife would rarely cook a whole set of mezze at home.

Mezze is usually an elaborate spread of fifty to sixty hors d'oeuvres, little bits of tasty treats to please the palate. People laze for hours nibbling the different dishes that are served in stages. The cold vegetable dishes, dips and salads are served first, followed by hot dishes and main raw or charcoal grilled meats. Most of dishes are generally eaten with large pita bread sometimes made on the premises on a saj (a concave oven heated over charcoal or nowadays gas fire). Fruits accompany Turkish coffee (with or without cardamom) and white coffee (boiled water sprinkled with orange blossom water).

Zahle's residents have widely contributed to develop mezze. It is the case of the Haddad brothers. Indeed, in 1936, two Zahliot



brothers, Jamil & Selim (naze) Haddad opened a delicatessen in their butchery to supply deli meat to French soldiers. They produced pork, lamb and beef based sausages for the French army stationed in the Bekaa Valley. These sujuk and makanik were then included onto the mezze table adding a new hot hors-d'oeuvre to the already extensive variety of dishes.

A basic mezze table encompasses a plate of fresh vegetables and fresh herbs, plates of fresh and mature cheeses, a dish of olives, pickles, salads – tabboule (a Lebanese staple salad made of parsley, mint, tomato, crushed wheat and onions) and fattoush (peasant salad topped with fried or baked pita crumbs), hummus, baba ghanouj (a grilled aubergine dip), fava beans, makanik

(Armenian sausages), okra in olive oil, cheese rolls, spinach patties, stuffed vine leaves, fried cauliflower, wild endive with olive oil and many more. It is traditionally followed by main courses such as mixed chicken and meat meshoui (bbq), shish taouk (cubes of garlicky chicken skewered and flame-grilled), kafta (minced lamb meat mixed with fresh parsley, onions & spices), sujuk

(Armenian spicy beef sausage) or kebbe (freshly minced lamb mixed with burgul – fine crushed wheat). The latter can be eaten raw, fried or cooked. Dessert consists of a seasonal fruit basket and at times local loukoums (Turkish delights) stuffed in biscuits.

The old popular dishes are still prepared today. This is also the case of the kharouf mehchi (stuffed lamb with rice), the mouloukhie (Jew's mallow) an Egyptian dish originally prepared by Jews in Aleppo, the bemieh bil zeit (okra), the kebbeh bil kishk, the kebbeh arnabiye (meatballs in tahina dip), the coussa bil Laban (zucchinis in yogurt) and stuffed vine leaves. The two key dishes are tabboule and the kebbe krass (meatballs mixed with burgul and stuffed with onion and pine nuts). Zahle is known for its malban, stuffed walnut nougat. The kourss bi samn, a sweet cookie prepared with samne hamawiye (butter originated from Hama – Syria).

Lebanese *terroir* remains intact is because locals and expatriates appreciate their diet more than anyone else. The variety of ingredients and the expertise pleases vegetarians and meat-eaters alike.

Dishes are exquisite in precise seasons such as yogurt-based ones for the summer and awarma (preserved lamb meat) in winter. Lebanese hospitality plays an



essential role in the preservation of this tradition. Furthermore, Lebanon, situated at the crossroads of several countries and cultures, was influenced by foreign cuisines further personalizing them by creating a subtler taste. The reputation of the Lebanese expertise in cuisine is renowned. Food lovers come from everywhere attracted to the unique Lebanese taste.

Mezze, a lifetime experience and the pride of Zahle...

Zahle is the birthplace of the mezze experience. It is in many ways, the democratization of Lebanese rural cooking; which was till the 1920s eaten in villages only. The early days of Berdawni's cafés saw the introduction of a classic array of over 60 hors d'oeuvres. Zahle was destined for such gatherings because the hospitable city is situated at important crossroads. The catalyst, the Berdawni river and its banks where restaurants started blooming. People came from everywhere in order to spend a pleasant family moment while enjoying the cool breeze of the river. Soon, Zahle became a hub for regional specialty dishes. Key dishes were hommos, moutabbal, tabboule, fattoush, fassoulia bil zeit (green beans in olive oil), the bemie bil zeit (okra), green vegetables cooked and marinated in olive oil, all sorts of kebbe, lamb barbecues

and cooked dishes such as laban immo (courgettes in yogurt), stuffed vegetables (coussa mehchi, batinjein mehchi, stuffed vine leaves, stuffed cabbage...) together with fresh and raw vegetables or in brine. In the beginning, dishes were limited, but the figure rose quickly to over 70 hors-d'oeuvres.

Zahle neighbouring villages were popular arak distilleries and walnut kebbe (kebbe bil joz). In the Lebanese mountains, during winter, baasama was the customary ice cream. Following the second snow, children would pick up some fresh snow in bowls and mix it with grape molasses, orange blossom water as well as rose water. This was the one and only frozen dessert. When electricity was introduced, this changed people's habits. Nowadays, the classic oriental ice cream is made of milk and custard apple. Custard apple is a fruit with a sweet and fragrant white flesh. Flavourful and fleshy, it is found in numerous Lebanese desserts. The ice was crushed in the mortar. In the 1920s, shopkeepers fetched snow they mixed with salt and deposited it around the central tub to cool the ice. Inside, they mixed and crushed the ingredients. The Arab ice cream consisted of fresh goat's milk, sugar, mastic, salep and orange blossom water. Ingredients were boiled over charcoal fire, crushed and cooled in the mortar. In 1948, electricity



came to Zahle and the freezer was introduced. The old way of making ice cream remained the same until the mid-1980s. Since then, electric ice cream makers have replaced the wooden tub (jurn).

The Mouneh...an essential art of food preservation

The mouneh are provisions made in autumn in preparation for winter. The objective is to transform seasonal perishable food into

durable preserved food consumed in autumn, winter and spring. Summer is the only season when fruits, vegetables and meat are eaten fresh. September 14th, the Feast of the Cross, marks the starting day for the mouneh. In 326, Saint Helen, the mother of Constantine I, went on a pilgrimage from Constantinople to Jerusalem, searching for the cross of Christ. As a way of announcing her discovery, she ordered that wood fires be lit along the route (aboule). Since the 4th century, this day marks the beginning of the mouneh in Lebanon.

Awarma, preserved lamb meat is quite popular in rural areas. Awarma is pieces of meat mixed with fat and preserved in glass jars (formerly in terracotta). Sheep is fattened up in summer and slaughtered at the beginning of autumn, during the Feast of The Cross. It is fed several times a day with barley, corn, straw, flour, vetch and bran. The male is castrated to allow the production of fat. A wise woman devotes herself to the feeding and well-being of the beloved animal. It is well fed five times a day and requires particular attention. Meals take a long time and the woman has to be patient. The relationship between the custodian and the animal is so strong that on the day of the slaughter, she leaves the house, sad. The slaughter of the sheep is a celebration in the village. Awarma



is prepared on the same day of the slaughter. Meat is first salted and soaked for several hours; it is cooked separately from the fat; then mixed altogether and reduced. In the past, awarma was preserved in jars (terracotta), a vanishing craft. Nowadays, glass is used instead of terracotta.

Kishk is a regional specialty. It is a dehydrated food made by the fermentation of burgul and from one or several milk by-products. It is used in multiple preparations such as soup, manouche and stews. The burgul khichin (coarse) that absorbs

more milk is used. The preparation requires days of kneading, sun-drying, and kneading again under the hot summer sun. The technique is passed on from mother to daughter.

The clarified butter or samne is obtained by churning yoghurt. Fat is separated from whey; the butter melts over low then high heat. Previously, desserts were prepared only with fat and sugar spread on some bread. Fat (samne) is a key ingredient of many rural food. 'Debs' and concentrates (reb el banadoura' - tomato purée) are a

usual base to 'debs el kharoubé' or 'carob molasses' mixed with tahina is a popular dessert eaten with a piece of bread. Molasses include 'debs el inab' (grapes) and 'debs el remman' (pomegranate).

Vegetables preserved in salted water or vinegar (kabiss) include: turnips (lefet), carrots (jazar), cucumbers (khiar), eggplants (batinjein), cauliflowers (arnabit), hot pepper (harr) or meete (local cucumbers).

The most common jams are figs (tiin), apricots (michmouch), quinces (sfarjal) and apples (toufah). Syrups are made of fruits and sugar: 'charabs' of blackberries, oranges, ward (roses) among others ...

Damascus rose and bitter orange tree flowers are mixed with water and distilled in the still (karakheh) to make rose water and orange blossom water to be consumed all year long. Some fruits are dried: figs, apricots (a base for 'qamar el din' - apricot paste) or grapes (zbib). Dried figs are a popular preserved food in Zahle.

Olive oil is a basic ingredient in the Lebanese diet. In alternation, every other year, harvest takes place in October, after the first autumn rain. Olives are picked by hand. Olives that fall on the ground are used for soap. The day of the crop, olives are brought to the oil press (maasara) of the village. Formerly, a stone pulled by a donkey or cow operated olive

oil presses. Cold press insures an excellent conservation of the oil. Olive oil is kept in terracotta or glass jars away from light and heat. The harvested olives are preserved in jars. They are often perfumed with red hot pepper, lemon, wild thyme, rosemary or garlic. Olives and olive oil last two years, until the next harvest. Olives fallen on the ground before the harvest or darkened are used to manufacture soap (December). It is done when the oil press has completed its seasonal work. The olive tree grows on poor ground requiring no irrigation has a strong ecological value.

The local food market

Sweet tooth

While wandering in Zahle's old city, we come across several savoury and sweet shops. Among the oldest and most traditional, a line-up of tasty outlets run by families. Le Salon des Familles and Pâtisserie Saliba are two main pastry shops preparing traditional local pastries such as kaak bi halib and maamoul. The salon of the families (salon il akilat) was the popular place for cakes and coffee. In Berdawni's cafés, the only dessert was the ashta cream with honey. The ice cream was offered in three flavors: milk, ashta (milk cream) and lemon. The most successful ice-cream parlors, Khalaf and Bou Sleiman, are still open.

Malban

Malban is the chewy, walnut-stuffed treat. Malban first arrived in Lebanon during Ottoman times, spreading throughout the region and particularly taking root in the city of Zahle known for its delicious sweets. Malban is a confection made from sugar with a jelly like consistency. It was produced in the Ottoman Empire as early as the 15th century. Malban is a must when presenting a sweet tray for engagements or weddings. And the holidays just wouldn't be the same without them. Malban is a handmade delicacy. Its characteristic flavour comes from the use of gum mastic - an aromatic resin of the Mastic tree mainly native to the Island of Chios in Greece. Malban resembles fruit jelly, except it is traditionally made with grape molasses, thickened with starch and flavoured with rose water, mastic or orange blossom water stuffed with pistachios.

The process requires a lot of patience.

Malban making: Use a needle, the first step is to thread walnuts on to a rope which is about 125-200 cm in length, keeping 10 cm between each walnut. This step alone can take 15 days.

The next step is to make the liquid mixture that coats the walnuts and creates the chewy texture. The mixture is made from flour, sugar and mastic (a type of plant resin

used to make Arabic gum and other Turkish sweets), all cooked in a copper cauldron.

Once the mixture is ready, the next phase is to cover the ropes one at a time with the cooked liquid. After three days, this step is repeated again and again – usually four times in total – and then the ropes are gathered up, chopped into pieces and sold.

The hanging malban forms a beautiful mosaic, fascinating to look at while it's being made.

Armouch nougat

Armouch is a type of nougat, a mixture of sugar and gum mastic perfumed with rose water. The sweets are crunchy and usually topped by rose petals. They are much appreciated by little ones who eat it as an afternoon treat. It is sold in the alleyways of the Berdawni River and in most roasteries in Zahle and throughout Lebanon.

Sesame seeds delights, semsmiye

A very popular and genuine local delight is sesame seeds roll made with nuts such as cashew, peanuts, pistachio, almonds, sesame seeds and sometimes with red rose petals separately mixed with honey and gum mastic. On the banks of river Berdawni, for decades vendors are used to selling and adapting recipes to the taste of their clients. It's

common to stroll down the banks with the family and buy these sweets produced locally.

At the Berdawni, vendors packed their carts with a variety of caramelized nuts and sesame seeds: Zahle's favourite homemade sweets. Every year early summer when the Wadi el Berdawni reopens its restaurants by the riverbanks, vendors cut nut blocks into gram-sized portions for passers-by to taste. Toni Beaine is the third generation to make caramelized nuts, known as Semsmiye. This treat is one of the culinary attractions of Zahle's Wadi el Berdawni.

It's said that right in the heart of that narrow Wadi (valley) the people of Zahle have enjoyed their sweet and rejoicing way of life. According to Toni Beaine, people's favourite caramel is the traditional semsmiye prepared with toasted sesame seeds and sugar. But it seems that originally a man from Hama, Syria came to Berdawni to sell semsmiye to locals.

The sweet was poured on a big round yellow brass tray. The travelling vendor would carry it on his head where it rested on a small round tara, a hollowed cushion of head size, meant to reduce the tray weight. In his other hand, he carried a tall tripod on top of which he used to put down the tray. Many Zahliots knew Mansour, a Lebanese semsmiye vendor. They still vividly

remember him travelling in the old city streets carrying the brass tray on his head.

Today, Toni Beaine has added to the mixture honey as well as a variety of caramelized kernel, walnuts, nougat, chocolate with hazel nuts, pistachio, almonds, etc. Among all that selection, there are two traditional flavours.

Berdawni celebrated restaurants

Several restaurants have established their venues by the Berdawni river. The Berdawni refers both to the restaurants and the location in itself. These institutions have a strongly rooted reputation of delivering the best traditional local food in the region. Casino Arabi, Casino Nmeir, Casino Koraytem and Casino Mhanna are some names of the Berdawni's restaurants. The latter, Casino Mhanna is one of the oldest and fanciest. The Mhanna family hails from Zahle. Micheal Mhanna founded the restaurant business in 1880. His sons Jean Georges and Joseph took over, and later the third generation with Michel and Elie expanded the business and moved to Beirut where they opened their second Lebanese restaurant in Antelias and a third branch by the sea in Amchit, a Lebanese and seafood restaurant. Nayla and Jean are the fourth generation in the family business, following the

footsteps of their forefathers. The Berdawni river has always been a place to visit in Lebanon, it has been an attraction for both Lebanese citizens and tourists coming from all over the world and that's why my family choose it to settle its restaurant. Casino Mhanna serves a variety of Lebanese dishes. An extended menu with over 65 dishes in addition to different kinds of main dishes such as grilled meat, shish taouk, kafta, frogs, birds, etc... There's no one single speciality of our restaurant, but we are known to have the best raw platters as well as the best birds and not to forget the Kebbe zehlawiye.

The Berdawni river has evolved a lot since the last 50 decades, it still has its traditional atmosphere but a lot of things has been renewed and renovated in it. The municipality

of Zahle runs maintenance works every year before the summer season as well as the restaurants and cafes owners also renovate and maintain their restaurants on their own. The Berdawni river is a historical place, it has always been a major tourist and culinary site due to its traditional atmosphere. It attracts everyone, families, teenagers, tourists, couples, everyone enjoys the nature, have lunch or dinner in one of the restaurants by the river followed by a traditional ice cream in one of the cafes, have a walk in the Berdawni alley and enjoy the beautiful weather of Zahle.

Lesser known yet tasty bites

Zahle has a long tradition of meat and poultry specialties such as shish taouk, an Ottoman inheritance

whereby the chicken marinates in a garlicky sauce. It is necessary to marinate the chicken overnight as it soaks with garlic and spicy flavours. Kafta a mix of lamb and beef meat with parsley, onion and all spice is a minced meat much appreciated.

At Barbecue Massaad or Mazaj, skewers are freshly prepared on the premises on a daily basis. Restaurant Hana Choueiri is a popular spot has some of the best grilled chicken in the city – juicy on the inside and crispy skin on the outside, the poultry is so good when bites are eaten with its fresh creamy homemade sauce.

Slightly edgy, Inns in Hoch el Omara, is run by Dominique Khabbaz a globetrotter chef. From his 30 years experience, he brought

back home his knowledge and interest into a pocket venue that he runs on is own with taste and a keen desire to produce quality sandwiches with savoury homemade sauces.

Coffee & cafés

On both banks of the Berdawni river, there has always been an ancestral tradition of cafés and small locations whereby residents would meet in the afternoon over a Turkish coffee while enjoying a shisha. Cafés still line up Brazil street where people gather to talk about everyday life.

Following the traces of the Silk road, coffee beans were brought from Aden to the Bekaa. In Zahle, the most popular coffee is Arabic Coffee. Mocha is the genuine coffee drank in the Bekaa. Mocha is a port in Yemen. It is famous for being



the major marketplace for coffee from the 15th century until the 17th century. Even after other sources of coffee were found, Mocha beans (also known as Mocha Sanani - from Sana'a) continued to be praised for their distinctive flavour. According to the Jesuit who sailed the Red Sea in 1625, Mocha was of limited reputation and trade but with the Turkish assumption of power throughout Arabia, it has become the major city under Turkish domination.

This traditional beverage has appeared in the Bekaa amongst the 'achair' (Arabs) and is still trendy nowadays. Coffee Adane – from Aden, as it's commonly named takes place as a ritual. Three pots of three different sizes are put to boil over charcoal fire. The biggest one is over the highest fire, the medium at a lesser and the third one is used for serving. Coffee is served in chafe (cups without handle). The brewing method is to keep over fire the pots allowing coffee to dilute its bitterness. Brewing takes place during a daily process. Unlike Turkish coffee, Arabic coffee is made exclusively with Yemenite beans. In Zahle, Kadmani sells the genuine Arabic coffee and grinds it on premises.

At Berdawani, men dressed in traditional costume serves all day Arabic coffee. They sometimes add cardamom, a spice much appreciated in the Arabian Peninsula.

Ice cream parlours



Back in the 1940s, the regular ice cream treat was made of snow and grape molasses. Electricity changed ice cream world and specialists could prepare ahead of time the cream they could freeze. There is a long tradition of Arab-style ice cream made of salep (flour made from grinding the dried tubers of the orchid genus *Orchis* L.), gum mastic (an aromatic, ivory coloured

resin harvested as a spice from the cultivated mastic trees grown in the south of the Greek island of Chios in the Aegean Sea) and fresh goat milk along with white powdered sugar.

Berdawni ice cream is run by Walid Khalaf. The popular ice cream parlour is an institution on the banks of the Berdawni river. Traditional Arab cream and Western flavoured creams are served whenever spring season is back. Real fruits and an amazing tasty plain (milk) cream is a must-eat.

The Berdawni River traverses Zahle, located in the heart of the Bekaa valley. It gushes out from Mount Sannine and reaches the city at a narrow rocky gorge. There, the Zahliots called it Berdawni, meaning a cool and fresh breeze. It's when the Bekaa sun reaches its peak that people, supplied with vegetable dishes prepared with tomato sauces and olive oil, go to picnic by the riverbanks. Around the mid-20th century, restaurants opened celebrating Zahle's joie de vivre, cuisine and ice cream!

Among the many ice cream makers in Lebanon, Zahle remains the precursor of such a cooling sweet. When Zahliots used to come to Al maï (water), or el Wadi (valley), seeking shelter from the heat of the sun, they brought with them their arak, vegetables as well as watermelons to cool in the Berdawni River.

Khalaf and Abou Sleiman are the most famous and probably the first to make ice cream at the Berdawni. Known as bouza dak, the ice cream was traditionally pounded in a mortar and poured into a central vat. Ice cream makers used to climb Lebanese mountains to fetch the snow essential for preserving the ice cream. It was mixed with salt and put around the wooden central vat. The traditional flavor was made with fresh goat milk, salep (a thickening agent), sugar and mastic. Walid Khalaf remembers that it was his father Khalil who learned the making from Anisseh, his own mother. But when an Italian pilot – who belonged to a family of ice cream makers – arrived to Kadri Hotel, new recipes were introduced to Khalil. And the Khalaf specialty became almond ice cream. The recipe was secretly kept for thirty years till Khalil got sick. Then, an artisan had to replace him at his workshop.

Khalaf – Abou Sleiman and Koraitem are Berdawni's famous ice cream makers. They have adopted modern machines for hygienic purposes. Walid Khalaf believes that the spirit of the Berdawni is the cool summer breeze and that traditions should be kept along with introducing new flavours.

In the suburbs of Zahle, in Hosh el-Omara, Rafic Ata is much appreciated for his ashta ice cream available in all seasons.

The workshop/outlet has been operating ever since the 1960s.

Bakeries and dough

From tannourto tabboune

In the middle of the city or the remote countryside, each family baked bread once a week. In the city, the dough was kneaded and sent to the furn (bakery) whereas in the countryside there was a saj, a tabboune and a tannour at home and a bakery in the village square. During the Epiphany, a piece of dough is suspended on a tree awaiting the blessing of the Christ. The dough is then used as yeast. This custom is practiced in all Christian communities on September 14th, during the Feast of the Cross.

In the old days, every family owned a tannour, a stone oven. At its core, a fire is lit with wooden sticks. The dough is stuck on the surface and bread is cooked fast. The opening is narrow to allow heat distribution on surfaces. The bread in the tannour has a peculiar taste due to its stone surface. The bread is generally medium thick and made from whole-wheat flour.

The markouk or 'handkerchief-bread' is cooked on the saj. There are two types of markouk: the labbiq, the most perfect, and the jirmaz with some defects. The markouk can be

kept for almost two weeks without getting damaged. It is folded in four and stored in a plastic bag. The diameter is about 60 cm. To spread the dough, the baker uses a sort of pillow (cara) to flatten the dough. The 'handkerchief-bread' is the base of the lazayka. This poor man's dessert is simple. The bread is coated with fat (margarine or butter) and sprinkled with sugar. It is the French crêpe, Lebanese style.

Tlame is made of three flours: whole wheat, chickpeas and oat. Tlame is cooked in the tannour. Its diameter is slightly less than 20 cm and it is coated with olive oil spread by hand and stuck on the surface of the tannour, where it swells to form air bubbles that remain after the cooling of the bread. The tlame is eaten plain, stuffed with labne or cheese. It is delicious fresh from the tannour.

Tabboune is bread halfway between pita bread and markouk. Tabboune is a primitive oven of concave shape with a small hole to enter the bread. Fresh yeast is made with a piece of the dough from a previous batch. It is sun-dried for several days, passed in the sieve and stored in jars.

Korbane is traditional sweet bread used by the Greek-Orthodox community. Traditionally, the body of Christ is symbolized by bread. This sweet brioche is stamped with Greek inscriptions, a translation of



'el massih kam' (The Christ is risen). The bread is served during mass and is often distributed during burial. It is rarely sold in bakeries.

In the past, pita bread was made with whole wheat. Nowadays, it is made with white flour and cooked in the bakery. It is the perfect mezza bread for dipping.

The bakery industry is strongly connected with the region, top cereal producer and mills have been part of the city's landscape for decades. Nowadays, bakeries contribute largely to the local economy employing locals and using locally-sourced flour.

In Zahle, bakeries can be found in every back street corner. Most bakeries prepare traditional Zahle specialties such as Kaak el-eid (Feast cookie) made of milk, orange

blossom water, flour, salep and sugar. Another specialty is Korbane. Bread is served during mass and is often distributed during burial. Korbane is composed of flour, orange blossom water, gum mastic, sugar, baking powder and water.

Meshtah is another common bread prepared by local bakeries. It is made of whole wheat and white flour, nigella seeds, sesame seeds, baking powder, salt and water. It is usually eaten with labne at breakfast. In the south of Lebanon, another version is made with aniseed.

About Elias is one of the charming centenary bakeries run by the same family since 1967. It boasts its old oven remained untouched and genuine for a century and scrumptious dough, the family's best-kept secret.





11. FARMERS

The Bekaa Valley hosts a huge number of small-scale, artisan producers that produce authentic food based on heritage know-how and much appreciated well-processed products. These high quality products benefit from the good long-lasting reputation of the

Bekaa plateau farmers. They enable the region to prosper economically and attract even more tourists. This sustainable system matches well with small-scale businesses dedicated to food. However, some larger industries have settled in the region in order to value local food engaging in a higher quality large-scale production.

Milk Production

The milk production quantity is directly related to the farm size. Farms producing less than 100 kg/day represent 78% of dairy farms. They contribute to 23% of the total milk produced. Most dairy farmers rely on village milk collectors “hallabas” who play the role of the middlemen between farmers and dairy processing plants. Milk is usually marketed as follows: 60% of farmers sell their milk to village dealers or “hallabas”; 3% sell directly to processing plants; 27% retail raw and home processed milk (laban and labne), in villages and urban centres, using rudimentary utensils with poor hygiene; the remaining 10% is for home consumption and retail. Home processing and retail are being increasingly practiced in many regions, either because of the lack of milk collection facilities or because of the better prices obtained.

There are seasonal and spatial variations in prices. Prices are generally higher in summer time and lower in off-season.

Milk production varies very much with the seasons. Total milk production in the surveyed areas may reach 4 000 kg /day in May and 6 000 kg/day during the high season (June-July). Milk productivity is very low; the quantity of marketable milk over the lactation period is estimated to be around 60 kg/sheep and 100 kg/goat. At the end of the season (September-October) milk production is very low and almost entirely used for domestic consumption or sold as a processed product (labne, ghee, cheese). Most shepherds (70%) sell their raw milk-to-milk collectors “hallabas” at an average price of 600 LL/kg; the price is a little higher (800 or even 1 000 LL/kg) in the Bekaa because of easier access to roads, cooling tanks and other facilities.



Cheese in Lebanon is generally made from cow or goat milk. In the old days, each family owned a cow. The animal served several purposes: cow dung served as fuel for heating, to manufacture cob and terracotta bricks or as natural fertilizer. Cow provided the necessary milk for dairy products and helped in the field. Families ensured their survival and autonomy. The typical rural ‘jebne baladi’ is made from cow’s milk.

Goat is also a common animal in the Bekaa plateau. It is popular for its nourishing milk. However, livestock is sometimes feared for destructions in fields. Indeed, goats devour tree roots and often ravage the field they graze on. A goat produces less milk compared with a cow, even though its milk contains more important nutritional elements. Two essential cheeses are made with goat milk: the darfiye and the ambariss. Darfiye is a goat milk cheese fermented in a goat-skin (the darf). The procedure of the goat's slaughter defines the skin quality. Only skins of mountain goats are used to preserve the darfiye. They are perfectly adapted to the manufacturing of this cheese. This aspect contributes to making the darfiye a typical cheese of the *terroir* enhancing a characteristic taste to the Lebanese mountain. Goats graze at 2200 meters. The milk is salted and placed in a ventilated cave where it drains shielded from the heat. The drying depends on the degree of maturing, generally one month. This cheese is eaten in its regional production. It is made at the end of the summer. This traditional, lost and found again cheese, is being introduced again and is popular among gourmets.

The aambariss or serdale is the other Lebanese goat cheese. 'Aambariss' in the Bekaa and 'serdale' in the Chouf refer to the same product. It is made from May through August, and the

maturing takes four months. It is a popular cheese sold locally. The goat's milk matures in terracotta jars without preservatives. The quality of the jar is essential. Villages of Beit Chabab and Rashaya el-Foukhar are the only two villages where they are made. Bad quality jars alter the grade of the product, rendering it inedible.

Labne, a common Lebanese cheese is either made from cow's milk or for a more pronounced taste, goat's milk. Labne is the salty and drained yoghurt. In the countryside, the labne bag was hung on a tree shielded from the sun. To preserve labne, it is rolled in balls, then put in a sealed jar filled with olive oil. This conditioning is usually made with goat's milk. This soft white cheese is eaten at all 3 meals. The sandwiches of school children are often made of labne, dried mint and olive oil.

Arishe is the milk whey from which one can make ricotta cheese. 5 kg of whole milk makes 450 g arishe. The milk whey is removed at the end of the production process of the 'jebne baladi.' It is boiled and removed once hardened. Arishe is best eaten with forest honey.

Jebne baladi is the most common cheese. The milk is placed over heat between 65°C and 72°C for 20 minutes. It is then placed in a bowl where the temperature is stabilized to 44°C. The rennet is added and



temperature is maintained for 10 minutes. For 50 kg, 2 g rennet is enough. Then, the milk is left to cool in a bowl where it curdles. The liquid part is removed, while the solid stays at the bottom. The liquid part is used to make arishe and the solid part, cheese. The solid part is shaped in balls of 150 g each. Molded by hand, it is left on a tray to harden outdoors. The cheese, once cooled and dried, is coated with salt and kept in the refrigerator. Without preservatives, it must be consumed within four days.

Shanklich is a typical Bekaa cheese shaped in ball, dried outdoors and matured for several days or weeks. Molds are cut off, it is shaped and coated with wild herbs. Some shanklich are made salt free, with spices, plain or coated with wild thyme. It is a pleasant mezze sample cheese. It is the pride of many Bekaa dairies.



> **Shanklich salad**

*Crumble the cheese over a serving plate.

*Thinly chop the onion.

*Dice the tomato.

*Spread the onion and the tomato over the cheese.

*Drizzle with olive oil 30 minutes before serving.

*Serve at room temperature.

Serves 6

1 shanklich

1 medium-size onion

1 medium-size tomato

3 tablespoons olive oil

Sheep livestock is important in Lebanon. Sheep, generally 'awassi', supply wool for the manufacturing of clothes and carpet. Meat is also popular. In Islam, sheep is the animal of sacrifices during religious holidays such as Atha or Eid el-Kebir. The preserved meat, awarma, is made with lamb. Generally, shepherds of Kurdish-Syrian origins roam between the Syrian and Lebanese mountains. Formerly nomads, herdsmen are now a settled community living mainly in the Bekaa Valley under tents.

Vegetarian cheese, 'kishk el-khamir' or 'kishk el-foukara' (the kishk of the poor men) is made of burghul, salt and water. The mode of production is fermentation plus different flavourful spices such as the cumin, the hot pepper or sesame seeds.

Goat and ovine livestock of mixed vocation, meat and milk, make a vertical transhumance according to seasons: summer in mountains, winter on the coast.

The Milky Way: Taanayel Convent

In the heart of the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon lies Taanayel, the convent and the Jesuit farm whose history dates back to 1833.

Back then, three French Jesuits settle in the Bekaa Valley. After the massacres of 1860, in order to compensate the 'blood shed' the Ottomans conceded to the Jesuits 230 hectares of what used to be swamps. Generations of priests have worked on the land, grown orchards, vines to transform this land into an amazing and respected farm. Today, the monastery is famous for its sustainable farm running with 160 head of cattle, poultry, vineyards and orchards. The artificial lake was dug in 1963 in the center of the area is ideal for strolling. The onsite store displays a wide range of organic dairy products, teas, honey, eggs, meats and signature jams.

For historical and obvious geographical reasons, the majority of dairy farms are located in the Bekaa Valley hence encouraging cheese making and dairy products in general. A huge number of dairy farms operate in the area each

making flavourful cheese and dairy by-products.

Dairy farms: the cult of dairy products

Dairy farming is a tradition in the Bekaa as sheep, cow and goat breeding is part of the regional heritage.

Chtoura, the first main city of the Bekaa, is famed for its numerous dairies. Badia Massabni & Rayess, Jarjoura, Hadwane or Massabki are among the dozens of dairy outlets that sell homemade dairy by-products and preserved food. They all line up the main road leading to Zahle.

Small-scale producers

Wherever we walk in the city, we come across outlets selling goods from small-scale local producers. Nowadays, a trend is on the rise: organic farming. After decades of intensive use of agro-chemicals to increase yields and improve one's living, farmers are more concerned about issues of environment and health. Some have decided to shift to organic farming adopting a new conception of earth respect and cutting off old habits of wrong practices. It is also an economic issue as demand for organic products is increasing in the country as



more awareness is drawn toward environmental concerns boosting up health shops and organic outlets. On a more institutional level, NGOs

have initiated the promotion of organic agriculture helping farmers to gain national certifications while developing international standards.

Among local little-known producers, the Swelling Fruit run by Michel Charbel, is a small company located in Zahle. Vegetable and fruits are

grown in an organic plot operated by Michel Charbel and produces are directly sold to restaurants and shopkeepers in Beirut.



12. THE GRAPE ROUTE: OF WINE AND ARAK...

Ever since Phoenician times, Lebanon has a traditional wine heritage. They were renowned as the most ancient wine trading sailors. 4000 years ago, Phoenicians had

a perfect expertise in viticulture (vine selection and growing) and viniculture (different winemaking techniques). Encouraged by this winemaking know-how, they

spread their influence along the Mediterranean creating *comptoirs*. Their dominance over the Mediterranean region declined in 50 BC leaving behind a rooted wine culture. In 250 AD, Romans built in Baalbek the largest temple ever dedicated to Bacchus, the God of Wine providing the region with a legitimate legacy.

Wine as trade started in the 19th century in the Bekaa valley in the vicinity of Zahle. Jesuit priests encouraged wine making while settling in Ksara in 1857 and later on in Taanayel in 1870. Back then, Taanayel (“the cauldron of God” in Arabic) was still a marshy region. The introduction of vines served to produce church wine for the clergy use solely. During the French Mandate (1919-1943), French soldiers boosted the wine demand and the Jesuits provided them with commercial bottles. In 1868, a French engineer Pierre Eugène Le Brun settled definitively in Chtaura where he operated the oldest commercial company in Lebanon, Le Domaine des Tourelles.

Arak and wine are the main drinks of Lebanon. They have been produced in the country for millennium and some vines are indigenous. According to Sumerian tablets with cuneiform inscriptions, beer was the first drink fermented in the region. In 3200 BC, beer was

the drink at all feasts. Wine appeared later. In Lebanon, there were 22 varieties of native vines, only 6 of which remain today. For the arak, the souri and the obeide are preferred to the merweh, mariami, obeide and sarini. The latter is excellent for white wine. Formerly, the merweh that grows as high as 1000 meters (Mount Lebanon) was used for grape molasses, arak and wine. The local vines would be naturally exempt of phylloxera (a greenfly that attacks young vine). Since the Crusades, numerous French vines have been imported. The most famous are Cabernet-Sauvignon, Cinsault, Grenache, Merlot, Syrah and Carignon.

Arak or the 'milk of the brave' is the perfect match to *mezze*. The arak is inextricable of the fertile Bekaa valley. Cousin of the raqi and the ouzo, it is made of grapes and aniseed through a subtle process of three consecutive fermentations. White grape and aniseed are the two basic ingredients of arak. It is only recently, in the last two decades that wine has become more popular and appreciated than arak. Wine is being considered by middle-class as more chic than old-fashioned arak. Nonetheless, new wineries have adopted arak and through a clever marketing campaign are trying to recover its blitz. The most famed arak makers are located in the Bekaa Valley.

The region's agricultural goods are interrelated, especially in the Bekaa located at crossroads of several routes. Indeed, aniseed is grown in a prosperous and fertile region in the outskirts of Damascus – Syria and driven in trucks down to Lebanese wineries. It is the most popular aniseed the Middle-East and offers a tasty and excellent combination when distilled into arak.

Wine... a tribute to Bacchus

Wine is Lebanon's other national drink. The vineyard has become part of the Lebanese gastronomy. Vine leaves are stuffed (mehchi waraq inab), the green clusters transformed into verjuice, ripe grape transformed into molasses or vinegar. Picked in July, it is a white grape pits free slightly acid is the 'achlamich'. Zbib (sultanas) are eaten dried or in syrup.

Since the 3rd century BC, Phoenicians exported jars of wine and olive oil as well as the purple dye within the framework of trades with other Mediterranean countries. Purple, extracted of the murex, a coastal mollusk enriched this civilization that invented the 22-letter alphabet.

In the religious complex of Baalbek is a temple dedicated to the god Bacchus built in the mid-2nd Century AD. The god of wine,

Bacchus, is represented on a mosaic, stretched out and tipsy. He seems to savour this sweet moment of bliss.

The Arab invasion of 636 AD threatened wine culture. However, powerful Christian presence in Mount Lebanon maintained its process. Monks and priests saved winemaking by using in mass. In Kesrouan, Bzommar's Catholic Armenian Convent has been producing wine since 1810. The first vintages were exclusive to the convent purpose. Henceforth, the convent produces hundreds of bottles sold at the convent's shop. On Virgin Mary Day (August 15),

grapes are blessed for good harvest. From mid-18th century until the end of the Ottoman occupation, Christian clerics negotiated with the Sublime Porte the right to produce wine within the framework of the rites of the church. The Turks, followers of hanafite rite, were tolerant with alcohol. They produced raki, similar to arak. Ever since the French mandate and the display of their troops in the Bekaa Valley, wine started developing rapidly. In the 1920s, domestic production has been concentrated in the Bekaa Valley above 900 metres. Wineries were modernized and wine increased in quality. Le Comte de M,



a symbolic wine, has been produced by Château Kefraya since 1996. The winery, a joint property of three producers-connoisseurs extends over more than 400 hectares in the fertile Bekaa Valley.

In the 1990s, numerous domains blossomed in the Bekaa including Massaya run by Ghosn brothers putting the country on the wine map. Nowadays, Lebanon exports its wine and its bottles win international prizes.

From tradition to modern-style wineries, the Bekaa Valley has been hosting the most ancient winemaking location to the most up-to-date stylish winery. The first commercial winery, Domaine des Tourelles was founded by a French engineer Francois-Eugene Brun. He was the general supervisor of Beirut-Damascus road when he settled in Chtoura. In 1868, he opens up a guesthouse in a traditional mansion together with an in-house winery dedicated to guests. The Domaine started expanding by producing wine for French troops stationed in the region in the aftermath of the 1860 Druze-Maronite skirmishes. Brun developed an excellent arak, a benchmark of quality pretty much appreciated for its original ageing process and its authentic taste. Every year in September, the Domaine organizes a 'gerbode', the feast of the

wine whereby regular customers and wine lovers celebrate the end of the harvest gathered around a typical traditional meal. The domaine grows 40 hectares for a yearly production of 150,000 bottles out of which 35% are exported. Families Issa and Issa-el-Khoury, the owners, boast the first commercialized vintage in 1868.

The Jesuits founded the Ksara winery in 1857 in the Bekaa Valley. In 1860, Father Kirn improved the production process and started making a flavourful, popular wine. Ksara's caves were discovered by accident. According to legend, in 1898 a fox was chasing away hens, when it rushed into the caves of the convent that date back to the Roman period. Jean Gharios, an orphan who helped out Jesuits was flushing the fox out when he came across subterranean galleries. This led to the discovery of natural cellars spreading out for 2 km with a constant natural temperature of 12°C/53°F; ideal for the conservation of wine bottles; humidity level is also ideal.

When the story first began, the vineyard was exclusively dedicated to mess purposes. In 1870, Ottoman authorities granted Jesuits 25 hectares alongside with existing Taanayel village crops. They grew vines for the church needs. The French mandate that ran after WWI from 1920 to the Independence in 1943 boosted wine production due

to an increase in demand by French soldiers.

In 1972, the Vatican decided to sell out the property that was privatized and bought by several shareholders. The civil war didn't stop the activity and production suffered from the consequences but never failed to deliver a yearly tasty wine. In 1990, a general reshuffle took place and several development programmes led to establish the winery as one of the leading business in the wine field. Nowadays, 340 hectares are exploited and production reaches 2,700,000 bottles for 45% export. The first vintage was released in 1860.

One of the most successful wines in the Bekaa history is certainly Château Kefraya. Michel de Bustros inherited land in the neighbourhood of Kefraya village in the 1950s. He planted orchards and started growing vines. The land in the Bekaa is perfect for vine growing as it doesn't require huge amounts of water and the climate is ideal with high temperatures in the summer, a freezing snowy winter, just what it takes to grow juicy and fruitful grapes.

18 years after planting vines, Michel began to produce wine from his harvest. In 1979, while war was raging in the country, de Bustros was starting a lucrative business. In June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon

and Israeli troops occupied Kefraya. In order to reach his fields, the winemaker took a boat from Beirut to Sidon and made his way through the mountains to check out on his vines and produce the 1982 war vintage. At an altitude of 1,000 meters, vines are just in the right place to give the best wine. Strongly related to the history of the region, Kefraya hosts 1st century Roman catacombs underneath the winery. An estate of 360 hectares, a production of 2,000,000 bottles and 33% export insures a leading place in the wine sector of the region.

In 1893, the Gantous family launched in Zahle a distillery for arak and wine. In 1947, arak was widely commercialized on the domestic market as a joint venture between the Gantous and the Abou Raad families, both arak producers arak since the 1890s. In 1971, the Wardy family bought Abou Raad's and introduced two new brands of arak Al Najjar and Al Arrab. In 1973 Gantous & Abou Raad became Lebanon's leading arak. In 1989, the winery started harvesting its own grapes on private vineyard. Domaine Wardy was launched on the Lebanese market in November 1999 with a full range of red, white and rosé wines. Nowadays, 45 hectares provide an average production of 250,000 bottles out of which 65% is exported. The first vintage was in 1997.



When tradition leads to a modern an attractive business

In the aftermath of the civil war that torn apart the country, wine making became trendy and a huge number of wineries started spreading out in the famous Bekaa region. In 1990, 4 wineries were operating in the region while in 2012, over 20 wineries are active in the sector. It's an expanding business that is also diversifying by opening wine restaurants and dedicated tours.

Massaya is the brainchild of two native Lebanese brothers, Ramzi and Sami Ghosn, who have combined their fabulous *terroir* to the know-how of two French winemaking connoisseurs. Massaya is situated in Taanayel in the middle of the Bekaa plateau.



After a period of rest, the white wine is put into traditional Moorish lid copper stills for the distillation. The first distillation (eight hours) is the first step, the second (eight hours) removes impurities and leaves the “heart” of alcohol, while the third (twenty four hours) gives arak its purity and distinction. Massaya combines the third distillation with the maceration of the very best green organic aniseed from the village of Hineh on the Syrian slopes of Mount Hermon. Arak is aged in traditional clay amphorae especially artisan made by potters of renowned Mount Lebanon village of Beit Chebab. They are made porous enough to absorb some of the liquid and allow it to breathe. During this crucial resting period that lasts many months, a portion of the alcohol, part of angels, evaporates and the clay lends a faint golden clarity to the matured arak. First vintage was in 1998 with over 300,000 bottles out of which 85% are exported.

A year later, 1998 saw the release of Cave Kouroum first vintage. Run by Bassim Rahhal, the Kefraya winery produces 700,000 bottles and export 40% of its wine. The estate of 200 hectares extends in one of the most beautiful areas of the Bekaa.

The first 1998 vintage of Chateau Saint-Thomas was quite successful. Touma family had been in business

since 1888. The low-key winery produces 450,000 bottles a year on 65 hectares and exports 65% of its wines.

Heritage is a West Bekaa winery run by doctor Dargham Touma. 55 hectares and a production exceeding 400,000 bottles a year with a large export of 60%, the wine grows on perfect hills at 1,150 meters of altitude.

In 2000, Nicolas Abou Khater, a passionate winemaker opened with his wife the pianist Roula a family winery. Located on the hills of Zahle, the cellars and fields boast an excellent sun exposure. Coteaux du Liban spreads over 16 hectares for 60,000 bottles that are entirely exported. The first vintage was in 2000. Since Nicolas passed away tragically, his wife took over the business.

Chateau Khoury is located on a privileged location on the eastern foothills of Zahle at an altitude of 1300 m. The winery is a family run business. The philosophy is to design a high quality wine expressing characteristics of the Lebanese climate and *terroir*. Young winemaker, Jean-Paul Khoury hailing from Zahle introduced Alsace-grown vines onto Lebanese soil in order to prove that wine offer can be diversified and Alsacian varietals adapt perfectly well in

the Bekaa where anything could grow due to perfect climate. With 15 hectares and 50,000 bottles, the family winery has released its first vintage in 2004.

A year later, Chateau Ka offered its first vintage. With 70 hectares and 150,000 bottles, the family is in business since 1919. Akram Kassatly, the founder was brought in a wine ambiance. In 1919, Akram's father opened a bottling factory in Beirut and produced Saint-Nicolas a low-key wine. It was not until 2003 that Akram decided to purchase land in the Bekaa and produce its own-made wine in 2005.

Domaine de Baal is located on the heights of the city of Zahle. Vines grow on terraces facing the South and are located on a fertile red clay soil mainly limestone rocks giving grapes freshness and mineral notes. The domaine encompasses 12 hectares for 12,000 bottles. Varieties grown are Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Cabernet Franc, Syrah, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc. Winery roofs are vegetal providing natural chilliness during the hot summers. Sebastien Khoury will soon get the bio certification. The first vintage was in 2007.

Domaine Mar Helios is a garage wine with a first vintage in 2007. It was by accident that Marwan el-Chemelany started the winery after the 2006 Israeli-hezbollah war hit

the Bekaa valley leaving behind grapes in the fields and no sale possible during harvest to leading wineries. In Qab Elias, without any customer, Marwan decided to start a small wine production.

In 2005, the Saade holding purchased 55 hectares of land in the Kefraya region to establish Marsyas, a wine produced only with home grown grapes. They released the first acclaimed vintage in 2007 and produce 50,000 bottles and export 15%.

Chateau Qanafar is a small winery with 12,000 bottles and first vintage in 2008. It is a typical wine project whereby retired executive decide to open up a winery to dedicate their leisure time to wine production. George Naim operates this tiny winery and comes up with a velvety wine that he sells on the domestic market.

In 2009, Chateau Barka started producing wines thanks to the 12 hectares belonging to the family Geagea. A small production of 5,000 bottles sold entirely on the local market.

Coteaux Heliopolis is a unique wine experience as it's the only winery run by a cooperation of farmers. Formerly, the region was solely dedicated to hashish growing encouraging farmers to start a lucrative yet not an illegal business.

In 1991, 20,000 hectares were used to grow drugs, and these fields have since been transformed into grapes growing. The cooperative encompasses 11 villages in Deir el-Ahmar region. All villages agreed to replace hashish by grapes. Brainchild of the project, Sami Rahme from Ainata worked together with l'Oise in France to establish fair trade wine involving 250 farmers.

Until now, plots dedicated to grapes total 200,000 hectares. Each year, this figure increases and 175 hectares are added, hence expanding the growing surface of vines in the country year by year. In total, in 2011, wineries have produced over 8 million bottles. 75% sold on the domestic market and 25% exported. Grapes prices have witnessed an increase due to the strong demand and an expanding wine market as well as a growing interest towards wine.

Arak, the genuine local drink

Ever since the mid 19th century arak has been processed in the region. White grape is pressed and first distillation comes after a period of fermentation during which some water is added to the must (the first step in wine-making). The first phase is made in a still. Arak is kept in terracotta jars for a year. In the second phase, alcohol is mixed with aniseed. Then, the mixture is poured



into a still. Eventually, a third and last distillation results in a liquid with stronger alcohol content. This last distillation is adjusted with some alcohol obtained from the first distillation. Arak is called 'mtalat' (triple distillation) or 'imm el-kheil'. The still was probably invented by Abou El Qassim El Zahrawi, an Arab-Andalus who lived in Cordoba in the 10th century.

Arak contains an average of 45%/vol. Classic mixture is 1/3 arak for 2/3 water with one or two ice cubes. It takes on a milky colour. This is why it is called the 'milk of the lioness'. In Zahle, they call it 'tears of the Virgo'.

Arak production has dropped by 10% in the last decade due to lack of export to conflict countries such as Iraq and competition from neighbouring countries such as Jordan. Yearly, approximately 1,700,000 bottles are sold in the country. Most distilleries are located in the Bekaa Valley. Several brands compete on this market. One of the oldest distilleries is also a major actor in the wine sector, Domaine des Tourelles produces an upper-scale arak. Arak, la reserve is aged 5 years in jars in cellars. This mature refined arak is one of the most expensive and the

most popular among connoisseurs. Arak represents 50% of the revenues of the winery. With a production of 200,000 bottles, it is number One in gourmet outlets and at the airport. The biggest arak producer is Nader Distilleries. Founded in 1985 in Mtein, the Bou Nader family produces 500,000 bottles yearly. The standard arak is sold at a low price and caters for lower-class communities. Arak Al-Amir, Al-Assi and Baalbek are the three brands of the company.

In Mtein, Al-Kasr sells 150,000 bottles yearly at an average price. The Khairallah were specialized in baladi arak (privately produced) when in 1988 they decided to found Château al-Kasr. Arak is made of Bekaa grapes and Syrian aniseed. A main arak producer, Massaya uses only locally grown grapes matching them with organic aniseed bought from an artisan producer across the border in Syria.

It is common to acknowledge such commercial between the two countries as farmers and producers are used to exchanging products since centuries. Kefraya sells 50,000 bottles a year at an average price. Grapes hail exclusively from the Château vines located in the Bekaa plateau. While producing 2 million bottles of wine, arak's production has decreased due to higher interest for wine.

Ksara is another Bekaa main arak producer with 100,000 bottles per year. The brand Ksarak is popular among Middle Class and sells well abroad.

Arak Ghantous & Abou Raad is one the oldest institutions. The company produces a high quality arak made of triple distillation and sold at a reasonable price. It is quite popular internationally and sold in Lebanese restaurants throughout the world. The Bekaa company boasts international recognition. In Zahle, Arak Wardy is a famous brand selecting the best of Bekaa grapes.

Arak al-Karaam is one of Zahle's artisan arak distillery. It is located in the city and has an excellent local reputation.

Biggest brands are Nader Distilleries - 1985 (500,000 bottles/year), Abousleiman - 1950 (170,000 bottles/year) or Al Kasr - 1938 (150,000 bottles/year).

The accurate figures of arak cannot be checked as many families distil their homemade arak. They often sell their produce in an off market (food markets, small grocery shops, festivals) or at restaurants without any permit or registration. Therefore, the figure of yearly arak production in the country could easily exceed 2 million bottles.



13. FESTIVALS, FEASTS AND EVENTS

In the 1940s, Zahle ranked on top of 'entertainment in the region'. Restaurant owners brought artists, and actors and comedians for evenings of dining and drinking where mezza was king. In the 1960s, Najib Hankache, nicknamed 'zarif loubnane' (the witty Lebanese), returned from Brazil a wealthy man. Very soon, he became the most famous comic actor. He even ran a program on the national television, back then, the country's only TV station. On some evenings, Khalil



El Ari, an outstanding musician, played the oud, a Middle-Eastern string instrument. Both men hailed from Zahle. Together, they created a festive atmosphere that attracted a regional crowd. On the program: Badia Massabni, dancer and singer, Sabah and Feyrouz. The pair presented a certain vision of Lebanon, nostalgia melting with 'joie de vivre'. Feyrouz was the star of Lebanese folklore, the diva of the Lebanese Nights, and she popularized the Dabke, the national dance. The big attraction was musicals of the Rahbani brothers that dazzled the starry nights of the city of Baalbek. And like the ancient city itself, they are forever etched in the city's history. Nasri Chamseddine and Wadih el Safi were two other bards of Zahle's wild evenings. The cultural picture was completed with the 'hakawiti' (story tellers), narrators who inspired the night with their tales.

The Baalbek Festival began in 1956, championed by the President of the Republic Camille Chamoun with the brilliant May Arida at the helm. It attracted people from all over the world. The first season was inaugurated by Jean Cocteau, director of the play 'La Machine Infernale'. The festival welcomed an impressive array of artists: Samson François, Gina Bachauer, Rostropovitch, Richter, Von Karajan, Margot Fonteyn and



Rudolf Noureev. Sometimes, Hotel Kadri was so full that guests slept in corridors. The evening began in Baalbek in the middle of millenary ruins and ended in the sweet Oriental chants of Zahle's streets. Often, evenings included George El Jabali's zajal. The zajal, a verbal sparring match requires an innate gift for gab as well as the ability to react, creativity and spontaneity. People exchange retorts in an impressive confrontational style that could sometimes turn tense. It is the spiritual theater of improvisation where spectators hang on each word.

During harvest in September, there is a wine festival, with conferences, exhibitions, concerts, plays, poetry evenings and artistic exhibitions, plays and dances. Zahle is full of life during this festival and there is the election of a wine beauty queen. Zahle culture has long revolved around its signature crop, grape, and its by-products, wine and arak. Arak, in particular, has traditionally been served in cafés at virtually any time of the day. Together with the town's breathtaking natural settings, it has provided inspiration to many poets and writers, natives that have praised the city in their writings, leading to the designation as 'City of Wine and Poetry'. A graceful personification lies at the town's entrance gate: a statue of Erato, the Muse of love poetry, holding a bunch of grapes. The last Saturday evening features

the crowning of the 'Maid of the Vine', a local beauty queen. The festival usually ends with floats entirely decorated with flowers according to a central theme. In September of every year, a local market run by Souk el Tayeb, the first farmer market in the country showcases the specialties of local artisan farmers and wineries. Food and Feast celebrates local Lebanese diversity, highlights local culture and food traditions of a village or a region. Discovering local hidden treasures, typical products, special dishes, wonderful farmers and producers... Always celebrating the best of each village and locality such as fish in Batroun, karaz (cherries) in Hammana, akoub (Gundelia) in Deir el Qamar, kaak bi haleeb (Milk cookie) in Marjeyoun...

Food & Feast festivals highlight the cultural specificities of Lebanon's various regions with the aim of establishing a stronger relationship between city and village. These festivals not only introduce people to these villages, but also promote the local economy by giving producers a market to sell their products. The project also aims at promoting ecotourism in the regions in partnership with local communities and the civil society. The aim of the Festival is to connect farmers, producers to patrons. In 2012, the festival took place on

September 23rd attracting tourists from throughout the country.

An important cultural event is the "Festival of the Vine", traditionally held each September, during which concerts, plays, poetry evenings and artistic exhibitions are organized daily over the course of two or three weeks. The final Saturday evening features the crowning of the "Maid of the Vine", the local beauty queen, and the next afternoon, the festival closes with arguably its most popular event: a parade of floats held on the town's main avenue. The floats are entirely decorated with flowers



according to a central theme. The statue at the entrance of the city has been at an early stage criticized for its nudity. However, zahliots and their free-spirited lifestyle fought to keep it as it is and not covering it as it reflects both freedom of speech and a devotion for life.

The Poetry Festival is a tribute to the city's heritage of poetry lovers and writers. Local and regional poets flood the city in order to recite poems and verses about the city of Zahle, its beautiful Vine Maid and many other themes related to the country or the Mediterranean Sea.



Prophet Elias (Elijah) is the town's patron saint, whose feast on July 20 is traditionally celebrated with fireworks and food booths across the city.

Another notable holiday is Corpus-Christi, celebrated on the first Thursday of June with a large-scale procession, with a torch-lit parade being held on the previous evening. The Corpus Christi celebration dates back to 1825, when the town was spared the ravages of bubonic plague. The bishop carried the communion glass and wandering around the city. As a miraculous result, all residents were healed. Since then, on Thursday of Holy Body, the bishop tours the city followed by worshipers from all over the region. Indeed, believers flock in from Egypt, neighbouring Syria and Jordan.



14. PARTNERSHIP

Zahle will set a special framework in accordance to the Creative Cities Network by structuring a platform whereby locals would be involved in the fulfilment of commitments set up by Unesco that defines a city of gastronomy.

Zahle has already strong allies, in the first place the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Culture that fully support the application of 'Creative Cities Network'.

Zahle has for many years now a special and reliable French partner, the Departement of l'Oise. The two institutions work hand-in-hand to improve culture, economy and agriculture.

The main projects that are underway include the renovation of the old souk of Blat, building a theatre with the Institut Français and creating a Local Library. The city of Zahle will benefit from the expertise of l'Oise to forge a reliable and creative potential focused on the gastronomy assets of the city.

Zahle is also partner-city with Québec in Canada and member of the Association Internationale des Maires Francophones (AIMF)

Zahle is considering encouraging public and private institutions to work together on a common

blueprint to help preserving the gastronomic heritage of the city through workshops, fairs, awareness campaign, ads and master classes.

The work with institutions would help the development of a more efficient gastronomic education in order to pass on down future generations food know-how & literature. Zahle would initiate innovative programs too to increase the green and locavore input of the city by implementing laws that would favour green farming in the region.

On the other hand, Zahle intends to help farmers and producers providing them with technical help to enhance local production and promote local know-how. This promotion is already set up thanks to the yearly farmer market in collaboration with Souk el Tayeb that takes place in September. It gives a serious push to local organic farmers that are respectful of the environment and praise a sustainable agriculture in harmony with Mother Nature. In this prospect, Zahle would participate in 'Terra Madre 2014' in order to showcase traditional local food and meet with actors of the organic farming communities around the world. Zahle is conscious that artisan food is an added value to the city as this food has a proper identity and a strong story connected with its surrounding. These products

compete on another level with mass produced foods that have a lesser identity and that are not rooted in an environment.

In collaboration with hospitality actors such as restaurants & pastry shops, Zahle wants to work on a knowledge-sharing programme with other cities in the network.

Zahle wishes to participate in food events to provide high exposure of local food, mezze being the most important part of it. The Municipality is serious about keeping up the food tradition in line with the growing awareness of healthy slow food. Zahle is very proud to offer to its residents as well to tourists a high-standard food quality, mainly locally-sourced.

Zahle membership will connect the city to a global network and to institutions working in the food field, so that Zahle would benefit from the expertise and know-how to expand its local food and help small scale food producers. This would also encourage ecotourism and environmental-friendly activities.

SOURCES

A large amount of information in this application is taken from written sources, interviews with historians, food experts, chefs, hospitality communities and zahliots.

In Lebanon, web sites are not quite developed and only a few archives can be found on line.

The books

C'était Zahlé, de Carlos & Nevine Hage Chahine, 2008

Zahlé par Chawki George Raya, 1994

Zahleh, land of poetry and wine, travel guide

Liban: Mémoires d'un instant, Clément Tannouri, 2006

Zahle, ya Zahle, archives de Zahlé, 2011.

L'annuaire de Zahlé

Les Archives du Festival du Tourisme, 1994

150 regards pour un cinquantenaire, Centre Culturel Français, Zahlé, 2009

APPENDIX 1

*Copy of Zahle Application Letter to 'Creative Cities Network'

*Map of Zahle

*Le Liban Gourmand – a gourmet foodie guide to Lebanon – Chérine Yazbeck – 2011

All photos by © Chérine Yazbeck except © Clément Tannouri :

Photos page 37,87,98,99

Photo © Randa Mirza : page 90



