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STREET FOOD: A TREND ON THE GO



Regional take-away and snack options leave their Western counterparts standing, as investors in the food and beverage sector take over the trend. **Nagi Morkos**, managing partner of Hodema consulting services, shares his insights

“ The growing trend of healthy eating and vegetarian dishes also benefit Lebanese street food ”

If there is a trend that never goes out of fashion it has to be street food. Highly popular, usually cheap and sometimes really good, it attracts all sorts of food lovers. The trend encompasses ready-to-eat or quickly prepared food or drinks sold in the street or in markets from stalls, carts or even trucks.

Street food was initially aimed at workers and offered mostly local dishes and snacks that didn't cost much to prepare and thus to buy. Then American chains saw the opportunity of the growing market, with the rise of Western middle class spending power, more women working full-time and less people cooking. Giants such as McDonald's, Burger King, and KFC took over the world, popularizing US-styled fast food such as hamburgers, fries or chicken wings.

In the Middle East, international fast-food chains face fierce competition from local traditional cuisine including *mezze* such as *fatayer* or small pizzas, *falafel* and sandwiches (*shawarma*, *kebab*, *manakish*, *saj*), all of which are suited for street food. Small booths are spread all over the region, offering around-the-clock take-aways and snacks. Many also provide delivery services, which enable customers to eat street food for lunch at the office, or for dinner at home. Investors in the food and beverage (F&B) sector have taken over the trend, with Lebanese brands such as Shawarmanji, Zaatar W Zeit and Tabliyit Massaad expanding across Lebanon and beyond.

The massive success of Lebanese cuisine abroad has definitely given a helping hand to its street food cuisine, with its flavors of



warm bread, cheese, spices and olive oil served in Lebanese restaurants everywhere, thus familiar to most countries in the world; unlike Asian take-away dishes for instance. All the ingredients can also easily be found in most countries, which facilitate the supply chain and keeps the prices down, whether consumers are in Australia or Italy, Berlin or Los Angeles. Successful street food names have emerged in big cities, such as Comptoir Libanais in London, Noura in Paris and Ilii Box in New York; all of which offer healthier options than most typical fast-food restaurants.

The growing trend of healthy eating and vegetarian dishes also benefit Lebanese street food: *falafel*, fresh salads, grains, as well as the numerous types of vegetable, cheese *mezze* and sandwiches are often



avored over the less varied but tasty western meal options.

But the most loyal aficionados of street food are to be found in the region: in Dubai, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, people have integrated Lebanese street food into their daily eating habits. Man'oushe Street and Automatic have become landmark hot spots in Dubai; Sands and Palm Beach are attracting popular crowds in Jeddah. Many others have made a niche for themselves in the Gulf, where the traditional diet is rather unvaried. While the Arab Gulf's US-styled burger rivals attract a stable crowd of a youth following, Lebanese street food gains a larger, more varied customer base.

The future of street food, whether in Lebanon or abroad, should be bright.



“ International fast-food chains face fierce competition from local traditional cuisine ”

On the home front the economic crisis has a negative impact on restaurants but benefits cheaper fast food stalls. In the rest of the world, Lebanese cuisine has made a name for itself and become part of people's eating habits.

hodema consulting services hodema.net



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Mkalles 2001 Center □ P.O.Box: 175091 - Beirut, Lebanon □ T: +961 1 688 735 □ +961 1 688 736 □ F: +961 1 688 354 □ M: +961 3 250 997
e-mail: armobel@armobel.net □ www.armobel.net