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A CHANGING PERSPECTIVE



“ McDonald’s has teamed up with Weight Watchers to show its commitment to healthy eating practices ”

“Healthy eating” is a global trend beginning in the United States, spreading to Europe and now reaching the Middle East. **Nada Alameddine**, partner at Hodema consulting services shows how this is affecting the industry

In Lebanon the healthy eating trend began timidly with diet centers and restaurants serving organic fruits and vegetables. It was initially disregarded by the vast majority of Lebanese who did not feel the need to change their deep-rooted restaurant habits for healthier ones. Since no regulations enforced farmers to abide by strict production rules, many doubted the origin of reported organic produces.

The food scandal that plagued the country in 2014 pushed the healthy eating trend into the spotlight and advertised responsible production values. Many popular restaurant chains and supermarkets were pilloried by the Ministry of Health. These revelations shocked a country, traditionally proud of its world-famous food heritage. It also raised concerns for consumer health, with numerous reports of food poisoning. Many customers here now have since switched to restaurants that pay specific attention to quality and traceability. The Beirut

Chamber of Commerce also took the matter into its own hands with the creation of a food safety training center at the Lebanese Standards Institution (LIBNOR).

One current healthy eating trend is “farm to fork” whereby restaurants purchase ingredients directly from producers, limiting safety and storage risks and guaranteeing the freshness of produce whilst also supporting small farmers. The only downside is that chefs are now dependent on seasonal ingredients, forcing them to often change their menus. In Beirut, Souk El Tayeb, a farmers market that offers local, fresh and organic produce. When it comes to health drinks, fresh juices have been a big hit, with “juiceterias” – or juice bars – opening across the country.

The organic trend, which is well-established in Europe and the United States, is also having a hard time to establish itself as a popular eating habit





in Lebanon. However, organic producers received a helping hand when the Ministry of Agriculture tightened restrictions on the use of pesticides, herbicides and other chemicals in food production. The main players, such as Biomass, Campagnia or Bechly Green and Zeitounati, benefitted from the recent food safety scare. Some restaurants have even partnered with them; such as le Petit Gris with Biomass. Despite the lack of state control, this booming sector has set its own regulatory body. LibanCert, recognized by the European Union (EU), provides inspections and certifications to producers who can then export their production to the EU without an export certificate. The main limitation to the organic industry in the country is meat traceability. While fruits and vegetables are relatively easy to produce according to the organic rules of production, meat is subjected to local slaughtering standards. Some farms advertise their poultry as “free from

antibiotics and chemicals” but consumers have no way to control the housing and slaughtering conditions of livestock. Purists can, however, always turn to imported meat, which is much more expensive and subjected to local storage risks. Despite its growing popularity and public involvement in farming regulations, organic produce in all forms thus seems doomed to remain restricted to particular customers who have time and money on their hands.

Another type of healthy eating establishment are diet centers. The negative impact of international fast-food chains on people’s health has prompted some Lebanese to pay more attention to the calories on their plates. The pioneer in the country is Sawsan Wazzan’s Diet Center and her latest healthy restaurant Well B, which offers both meals and nutritional advice. The concept has since slowly spread within Beirut, with Kitchen Confidential in Ashrafieh.

“Another type of healthy eating establishment are diet centers”

But the most surprising trend is certainly the fast-food take on healthy eating. Also called “fresh casual”, it has introduced new ingredients in lower-end chain menus, such as kale or grains. This has triggered more innovation and diversity in traditionally unvaried meals; McDonald’s for instance has teamed up with Weight Watchers to show its commitment.

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