

SPECIAL REPORT

insight

A conversation with **Maryam Al Nusif**

Up-cycle shows people how trash can be cool

Growing, eating own produce touches the soul

By **Cinatra Fernandes**
Arab Times Staff

Maryam Al Nusif, co-founder of the Shakshooka farmers market and the Secret Garden project, a community undertaking that is engaging and reshaping a forgotten space on Baghdad Street, is a true game changer who has been part of a team revolutionising Kuwait's urban interactions in recent years. In this week's Insight, she sheds light on the natural evolution of her undertakings, the healthier social relations fostered within, her ideas of food and sustainability, and her interest in permaculture, among other pertinent topics.

Question: Let's start at the beginning. How did you become interested in food?

Answer: I grew up in a home where food was very important. My father, in the later years of my childhood, started paying greater attention to what we were eating. He started raising chickens and goats in an old family house that nobody lived in. So we used to get our meat, our eggs, and our milk on our own for four years. Then my father got a farm and he got into organic farming. We were basically self sufficient and I loved that. I think that is a theme that has carried on with me, the idea of being sustainable. I like to know where things come from and where they go, even waste.

We had our first organic shop in a building on Baghdad street in 2003, right next to where the secret garden is located today. We had a range of products on offer, we made cheese, burgers, meat, pickled goods, and hot sauces in addition to fresh produce. But it was too early and people did not understand why we were selling vegetables and meat. We only had a handful of customers and it did not last.

Interestingly, I used to run the shop and spend my time in between my shifts at the garden. Now life has come full circle, and I am back here.

Q: Tell us the story of Shakshooka and how it began.

A: When I came back to Kuwait, my social circle comprised of a few of my customers from ten years ago. They remembered the shop and the produce and wanted access to the farm. They arranged for me to bring my produce into their parking lot one Thursday and they invited families they knew who would be interested.

On that day, while we were setting up a lot of passersby were intrigued by this pop up market and after making inquiries, started to buy the stuff. Those few minutes is when Shakshooka happened. The vegetables sold out first and we were left with just tomatoes and eggs. So we told those who weren't sure about what they could do with tomatoes and eggs to make Shakshooka, a dish where you just fry up some tomatoes and then you put some eggs in it or bake it. It is a great story because the start of Shakshooka was so serendipitous, the way it took off was so unexpected.

Q: For a long time, the location of Shakshooka would be announced just a day prior to the market. What was the idea behind this? Was this a means to cultivate anticipation?

A: Going back to the first ever Shakshooka, when we saw that people were interested, we thought we'd do it again the next Thursday. But the building owners had a problem with us selling vegetables in the parking lot and we were working on a petition signed by building residents to cause them to reconsider. So up until the day before, we hadn't got approval and hadn't announced the location because we didn't know where it would be held. In the end, we realised we couldn't do it in the building's parking lot and another friend invited us to have it in her courtyard. So we announced the location a day prior.

We continued doing it that way because we didn't have a fixed spot. By the fourth one, the group started growing with other people participating in it. Shakshooka gained a lot of attention on account of the reach of social media and blogs like 248am posting about it. There was a genuine interest from the community.

Q: What was your approach or strategy going in to these ventures?

A: We didn't really push it, it built a momentum and created a pull on its own. People who were interested were drawn to it. For me, I prefer a more natural way of things growing, so I don't try and impose or control.

But I do exert control in other terms. People always tell me about how I should do certain things or organise it in other ways so it can grow to be this and that, that just suffocates me. I don't want to put my hand in too much at the same time but I can also be very particular. When I have an event, I like to be prepared and everything has to be done a certain way but I also really enjoy spontaneity.

The way the Secret Garden has been shaping up, wasn't planned, the events we've had came about very naturally.

Q: Did you anticipate the success of Shakshooka? How did you sustain interest?



Maryam Al Nusif

biography

Ex-investment banker turned chef and gardener, Maryam Al Nusif, pursued her life-long dream of becoming a chef right after handing in her MBA thesis at Imperial College London. She studied at the Cordon Bleu and practiced in different London kitchens including Ottolenghi, The Providores,

Nobu, and Cocomaya. Upon her return to Kuwait, Maryam teamed up with creatives from various fields bringing to fruition multiple projects including Tempered, Shakshooka Market, Two Chefs and a Waitress, and The Secret Garden Project.

The third rule is that it can't be an established place. So if you have a restaurant, a kitchen and a staff, you can't be part of Shakshooka because it is not a level playing ground.

There is a reputation for markets in Kuwait to have inflated prices so there is a price cap at Shakshooka. The average should be around KD 3 and should not exceed KD 5, except in rare cases where the product is really worth more.

But right now, it is still overpriced and expensive compared to markets in London. But at the same time, you have to regard it not as a market with cheap street food but an artisanal and specialised one. Every stall has a story. We have Paleo pasta available at one stall which is very technical, difficult to make and tastes good, as well as other handmade and hand cut pasta. We have another girl who makes bagels and nobody does bagels right in Kuwait. It took her months to perfect the chewy New York style bagel. I cap the prices but I also understand and appreciate all that goes into each product.

There are rules also about packaging, vendors cannot use plastic and everything has to be recyclable. I myself use reusable plates and have had to fetch them out of the garbage on occasion, because people didn't know they had to bring them back.

Some people want to come here and mix drinks. People are really good at making cupcakes and pouring drinks in Kuwait. But I don't allow anything processed. If you make your own syrup, that's when you can join us.

Q: What would like to change about our current interaction with food?

A: I think it is very important to know where it comes from. The idea behind what we are doing here with the market

behaviour is diseased. On account of our attachment to material things, we feel that we don't need to collaborate or work with other people. There is no interaction with public spaces. But this project is forcing us to interact. It is a learning experience for all of us. You don't necessarily become friends with everyone but you become more tolerant and less judgmental of others, and we need a lot of that in Kuwait and in the rest of the world today.

Q: How socially acceptable was it for you to abandon the Investment Banking trajectory move into food and subsequently, Shakshooka and the Secret Garden project?

A: At first, it wasn't accepted. After coming back from London, there was this idea that I would get a day job and cook on the weekends. But I had been slaving for four years in kitchens in London, and proving myself. So I wasn't going to give that up.

Today, people are open minded enough to say that if you are chef you must have a restaurant. But I don't have a job as a chef or a restaurant, I have nothing physical to show for it. So I get a lot of flak because I don't walk around with anything tangible, and so people think I'm doing nothing.

There were reservations about why I had started cleaning a public garden and wasting my time in it. But family members that were once sceptical are now my strongest supporters. I think they are a symbol of what Kuwaiti society is and how it can be changed.

Q: There has been a real spurt of private dining events. Why is this so popular among chefs today? What is your experience with Two chefs and a waitress.

A: Two chefs and a waitress came about on account of my experiences abroad. Private dining is quite popular in Europe and the US. What I like about it is that I cook and guests have to eat it. It is very efficient, there are no leftovers. If you are going to try to work with Kuwaiti taste, it is difficult; to please them, you will have to compromise a lot what of what you like and what you are trying to do. Honestly, if they had a choice, they wouldn't eat my food.

So I do Two Chefs and a waitress with Danna Altourah and Wadha Alnusif, the second Chef and waitress respectively.

We love the idea. This is how it happens — people sit, it strikes eight and we start plating. Now, we do two shifts of 35 plates each. We work with volunteers as waiters. There is a new generation of people we met through Shakshooka who are foodies and want to cook but are still in the stage of figuring out whether they should go to culinary school. We have them work with us and they get paid for it.

It is a fun thing to do because of the rush. We have young volunteers in charge of service and they have learnt that it is not easy dealing with customers. It shines a light on how rude we can be. There is no waitressing culture in Kuwait for youngsters, as is present in many foreign countries where everyone has tried it at some point. When you've worked the same job and see someone making a mistake, you empathise with them.

Q: What is your style of cooking?

A: I am into street food. If you give me caviar, foie gras, scallops, all this rich stuff, of course I can make something great but that doesn't excite me. When I have little, I can do the most. I do focus on quality but I don't want to be given everything, it kills my motivation. A good example of this is the onigiris that I make, which is a very simple Japanese street food made with rice.

Q: What has been the highlight of your endeavours?

A: We did Shakshooka and Two chefs and a waitress in Bahrain last year in March. One of our fellow Shakshookians got married and moved to Bahrain, and invited us to hold it there. We carried 600 kgs with us on the plane that comprised of pots and pans, ice boxes with our protein, we shopped for vegetables there but anything we were not sure would be available, we took from here. We found a hotel with a duplex setting and a small kitchenette that was fully equipped. So we cooked there, it was really ghetto.

The night before, we were told that we'd be holding Shakshooka at a relatively new and unknown spot. We didn't have the connections we have here in Kuwait, we didn't know the market and what their purchasing power is. So we stencilled our Shakshooka 'egg' logo and started sticking the papers all over the avenue that got you to the garden. We just sat there and waited for people to come. The turnout was amazing and the response was incredible. That was honestly one of my best trips ever.

Q: In a region of so much excess, how do you make people see value in waste?

A: Recycling is a problem because the company that used to pick our stuff up, closed down. Hopefully, someone starts something up soon. So what we do right now is, up-cycle. It is a very small way of showing people how trash can be cool. We have a couch, an elevated stage and the entrance made of wooden pallets, and in our gardening we do composting, which is up-cycling trash into nutritious soil. We have also tried to engage children with up-cycled water bottle planters that are self sustaining.

Q: Can you tell us more about how the Secret Garden engages children?

A: We have schools coming in and we do gardening and composting workshops with used water bottles to create a self sustaining eco-dome. We have four and five years olds from nurseries who have been planting in boxes. They donate KD 2 to 3 and they adopt one box, we give them seeds and soil. The children come in weekly and water them.

Q: What are your plans for the summer when the project goes on break?

A: I will be off in June for two weeks with my mother on a permaculture project. Permaculture is basically learning from nature. It is not just agriculture but a way of living, a community setup of shared kitchens for more efficiency and less waste. They live in harmony with nature instead of trying, as we have been doing in these past decades, to teach nature how it is done by coming up with chemicals and processes that are really hurting the earth.

Everything on this earth has a purpose. With permaculture, they are humble, they try to learn from nature and simulate it. They have new agricultural techniques that work and these projects are all over the world. We are going to one in Portugal. There is one in Jordan that started ten years ago where a whole village has started living differently. The soil there has transformed, it is rich and moist because instead of depleting and moving to the next or reinforcing it with chemicals, they have learned how to work in such a way that the more you grow, the better the soil becomes.

Q: What practical advice would you give to someone who, like yourself, wants to change things in Kuwait?

A: Start. Starting is the hardest part. But as soon as you do it, something else kicks in. In the process, you may have to start several times. Those steps, even if they are sometimes wrong, it doesn't matter because it is part of the journey. If you are not happy with something in your life, you are the only one who can make a change.