Tabbouleh celebrations drive home Lebanese commonality

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Special to The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Lebanon is a diverse society, but *tabbouleh* is a national dish common to all. Now several non-governmental organizations have formally celebrated tabbouleh in an attempt to bring Lebanese together through this unifying dish: The Garden Show and Spring Festival concluded on June 14 with Tabbouleh Btijmaana (Tabbouleh Unites US) festivities.

The event was held at the Beirut Hippodrome as part of Food and Feast 2008, which is co-organized by Souk al-Tayeb and the United Nations Development Project (UNDP) under the patronage of the culture and tourism ministries.

The UNDP's literature states that its Peace Building Project aims to nurture social harmony among local identity groups, enhance citizens' participation in local activities, strengthen institutions (especially those at the municipal level), encourage multi-stakeholder dialogue and empower civil society to play a more active role in the peace process.

"Tabbouleh Btijmaana, as well as the other Food Feast events, is about learning about other communities and getting to know the rich diversity of the Lebanese people because food reflects our heritage," UNDP project manager Lana Ghandour told *The Daily Star*.

"The tabbouleh theme was perfect in bringing people together through inter-communal exchange. Food is irrespective of religion, politics, profession etc.," she said. "It promotes coexistence and peace building, while enhancing a better understanding of the other."

Tabbouleh Btijmaana, like other Food and Feast events, featured farmers and producers who temporarily set up their stalls at the Souk al-Tayeb section at the Garden Show.

Souk al-Tayeb was launched in 2004 at the Garden Show and is Lebanon's first farmers' market of fresh seasonal, traditional and natural food products. They hold three markets a week, and are constantly expanding their activities through cultural and educative activities for children and adults alike.

"The event was a real success. Common differences often lead to problems and wars, but similarities are maybe exclusive to only one domain, which is food," Kamal Mouzawak, the founder of Souk al-Tayeb, told *The Daily Star*. "Tabbouleh is what Lebanese really share, a dish that unites, and more than that, a festive dish, typical of holidays and feast days."

"The Souk al-Tayeb allows us to transport the rural to the urban and vice versa. By bringing farmers to Beirut for markets and events such as Tabbouleh Btijmaana, visitors can discover specialties of specific regions."

The venue hosted producers from Beirut's suburbs and Southern Lebanon. Mouneh, which are traditionally made jams and spices indigenous to the South, were sold alongside vegetables and fresh strawberries from the Beirut suburbs and were inspired by the theme "Bhibak ya Jnoub" (I love you South Lebanon).

"Most of the 28 farmers we brought from the South have never been to Beirut before and normally would not have the opportunity or the resources to pay the LL5,000 entrance fee," Ghandour said.

Each farmer and producer received a bag, made of recycled material, from the Food and Feast organizers that included information and fliers about the project.

Ghandour said the cooperatives generate income and provide employment, helping those who participate to attain self-sustainability.This initiative is key to the idea of Food and Feast, because it promotes community and economic development. It also creates synergy between consumer and producer, she added.

The main attraction was the competition to make the best tabbouleh and was judged by Rola Ajouz, a board member of the Beirut Municipality; Antoine Daher, editor in chief of *Elle Orient*; Jocelyne Zablit, head of AFP in Lebanon; culinary expert Joe Barza; and Joumana Salameh, of Hospitality Services (the organizers of the garden show).

Daher drew applause as he explained that the colors of the ingredients in tabbouleh represent the colors of the national flag, and while retaining their shape and color in the salad, work much better as a whole. He added that this symbolizes how diverse the Lebanese are but that they all constitute one entity, which is the tabbouleh.

The winners were May Boutros (for best tabbouleh) and Kamleh Kawsam (most original tabbouleh). Every participant received a certificate of appreciation from the UNDP and Souk al-Tayeb.

Naziha Darwish, who collaborated in the seven-person team headed up by Kawsam, told *The Daily Star*: "We are very proud to have won; it is a very old recipe from Bint Jbeil that people don't use anymore."