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Lifestyle

Beirut celebrates National Tabbouleh Day

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By **Beckie Strum**
The Daily Star



National Tabbouleh Day aims to bring all Lebanese together.



BEIRUT: A champion stood among the piled jars of makdous, rolls of sticky dried fruit and crates of fresh produce at Souk el-Tayeb Saturday morning. Her call to fame: tabbouleh.

Jamileh Nohra won first place in a tabbouleh competition at Souk el-Tayeb, a farmers' market at Beirut's new waterfront. Souk organizers hosted the competition in honor of National Tabbouleh Day, which seeks to unite Lebanese-style tabbouleh lovers from all over the world. It is celebrated every year on the second Saturday of July.

"I am very happy, of course, because I made other people happy," said Nohra, who promptly returned to work at her vegetable stand after the winner was announced.

"Food is what unites people, and this is what I like to see," she added.

Nohra's message reflects the very purpose of National Tabbouleh Day, which is to use a common and beloved dish to bring Lebanese from the diaspora and from all the religions and regions of Lebanon together for one day, event organizers said.

Tabbouleh, a simple chopped salad made from bundles of parsley, ripe tomatoes, onion and cracked bulgur wheat, seasoned with lemon juice and salt, is a mainstay of Lebanese cuisine.

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With so little room for deviation, one might assume it's impossible to differentiate one of these simple salads from the next. But Nohra assures, and her judges confirm, that the trick to making fabulous tabbouleh is in the freshness of the ingredients.

Her secret: Wash the parsley in drinking water not tap, keep all the ingredients very cold before preparation, and if possible grow your own veggies.

That's easy for Nohra to say. She grows vegetables at her home in the west Bekaa and sells them every weekend at Souk el-Tayeb. The souk brings together farmers and traditional food artisans from around Lebanon each Saturday morning until 2 p.m.

Nine vendors participated in Saturday's competition, seven women and two men.

There were no hard feelings among the rest of the participants, said souk coordinator Mira Makhlouta.

The souk holds friendly competitions so often "they're actually happy if someone else wins," Makhlouta said.

Souk el-Tayeb has been hosting events for National Tabbouleh Day since 2007, when the Tourism Ministry officially approved the celebration.

The idea for the special day is much older, founder Ricardo Mbarkho said.

The idea came to Mbarkho in 1996 when he was confronted with a tinge of homesickness for an authentic Lebanese tabbouleh in France.

"I was walking around Paris and I found an odd tabbouleh; it might have been Algerian or something," Mbarkho recalls. "Then I was in the market and I saw another strange dish."

"I thought I should make it clear for the international community what a Lebanese tabbouleh is," he said.

In 2001, the idea for an international tabbouleh day exploded beyond Mbarkho's imagination thanks to the Internet.

Trained in fine art, he sees the web of people enjoying tabbouleh one day a year as an unconventional form of art.

"It gives form to a powerful link between people who love Lebanese tabbouleh," Mbarkho's said, whether they are eating it as a family in Lebanon or alone in Canada.

Nohra, who's been preparing tabbouleh for at least 40 years, knows how it links people, she said. She inherited her recipe from her mother and grandmother.

"As a girl, I used to see my mother and my neighbors and my grandmother making tabbouleh, and then I started making my own," she said. "It comes from within me."

A version of this article appeared in the print edition of The Daily Star on July 09, 2012, on page 2.

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