Life Preservers

Lebanon has taken in more than a million refugees from Syria and Iraq. One group of women has cooked up a way to make them feel at home • *by* **ANNA LEKAS MILLER**

AFRAH ZOUHEIR FLEXES HER HAND as she purposefully stirs a pot of lemon juice, the fruity aroma filling the air as it rises to a boil.

"It needs to be hot in order to mix well with the sugars before it cools down and thickens," she explains. "Then we bottle it and let it settle into a syrup."

Freshly rolled balls of yogurt cheese at the House of Mouneh, a business that employs local and refugee women in Falougha, Lebanon.

Photos by James Haines-Young

A worker pours lemon juice into glass bottles at the House of Mouneh, which offers a variety of cordials and juices. Below, finished jars of preserved vegetables and yogurt cheese balls.

Zouheir has all of the looks of a professional chef. Her shoulder-length dark brown hair is tied back in a hairnet and her hands are coated in plastic gloves. She wears an apron over her sweatshirt, fanning the air, making sure that the lemon syrup drink she is making smells as it is supposed to; she appears undaunted about managing multiple pots simultaneously simmering over an open fire.

However, this is her first time working in a kitchen—at least professionally. In Mosul, Iraq, where she is from, she was a kindergarten teacher. But when the Islamic State invaded her home city in late 2013 and began targeting religious minorities, including Christians like Zouheir's family, she grabbed her belongings and fled to Lebanon with her husband and four children. After a short stint in Beirut, the capital city, where rent is expensive and prejudice against refugees, among other factors, makes work hard to come by, she and her husband moved to Falougha, a mountain village where the air is fresh and, most important, the rent is cheap.

"It is too expensive for a family of six to live in Beirut," she says. "We can have a better life here."

In Falougha, Zouheir discovered the House of Mouneh, a collective of 11 women from Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq who gather each day to prepare *mouneh*—an all-encompassing Arabic term meaning "to store" and, in practice, referring to anything that preserves or is preserved. It is everything from jams and syrups made from locally grown seasonal fruits and vegetables to regional delicacies such as stuffed cabbage and grape leaves, stored and preserved in fresh olive oil.

Cooking up friendships

While the *mouneh* made at the House of Mouneh is bourgeois by design, packaged in artistic jars and sold online and at boutique fairs, as a concept *mouneh* isn't just an upscale regional tradition. With centuries-old roots in the Middle East, *mouneh* has also been an essential tool of survival during times when food was scarce or modern conveniences—such as refrigeration—were not available. *Mouneh* sustained families in remote villages under siege during Lebanon's 15-year civil war, which ended in 1990 and is still a fresh memory for many. More recently, preserved *makdous*, a kind of chili-spiced eggplant, has kept Syrians warm during the winters of the ongoing Syrian war when electricity is cut due to bombings and airstrikes.

"I love it," Zouheir says, smiling from her post in the small, industrially equipped kitchen at the House of Mouneh. "I love getting to prepare such an important food with all of these other women from different backgrounds. We're forming great friendships."

Zouheir's lemon syrup—which is mixed with water for a refreshing fruit cocktail—is one of many ongoing operations in the House of Mouneh. In the refrigerated hallway outside the kitchen, Dunia Hajj, a native of Falougha and no stranger to the preparation of *mouneh*, strains fresh milk into balls of *labneh*—a sort of lovechild between yogurt and cheese and a staple of Lebanese breakfasts and *mezze* platters. While some of the *labneh* balls are served plain, preserved in jars of olive oil, others are rolled in *zataar*, a popular spiced thyme, or chili powder, for those with a spicier palate.

"There is a little something for everyone," Hajj says, smiling. "You can't find something you won't like."

In a corner room, several other women sit around three tables chopping fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, and parsley before mixing in rice and spices and rolling it all in cabbage leaves to make *malfouf*—another regional delicacy preserved in oil, drawing from Lebanese, Syrian, and Iraqi cuisines.

"We have such a mix of cultures and cooking styles represented here," says Hajj with pride, taking a break from rolling *labneh* balls to offer a tour of the facilities. "Afrah and Rania showed us how to make the *malfouf* with extra spices, Iraqi style, and now we offer an Iraqi version of the *malfouf* for those who are interested in trying something new."

> "I wanted to employ half Lebanese women and half refugee women. I wanted to buy from local farmers and support the local economy."

The 11-woman crew at the House of Mouneh includes three nationalities. Though most are Muslim, some are Christians who were forced to leave Syria and Iraq because of religious persecution and the war. Some are from major cities, such as Aleppo and Damascus, and are dressed in T-shirts and blue jeans. Others are from more rural or conservative parts of Syria and Iraq and wear the traditional hijab head covering with long skirts or dresses.

However, all of them are required to wear hairnets and rubber gloves while working in the kitchen and handling the food.

"Professionalism is key," Hajj says, winking and snapping a hairnet.

Not just a charity

The idea for the House of Mouneh was born in 2014 when Carol Malouf—a Lebanese journalist, at the time working as an aid worker on the Lebanon-Syria border—saw firsthand the effects of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanese society. While many of the refugees were in a desperate situation, often fleeing their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs, their presence—mostly in already poor areas of Lebanon—was causing tensions with the local population, many of whom felt that refugees were competition for already-scarce work.

After witnessing these tensions bubbling in her homeland, Malouf was inspired to create a project that would be economically beneficial for both refugees and Lebanese communities, rather than just serving as a charity for refugees. Armed with a copy of *Mouneh: Preserving Foods for the Lebanese Pantry*—a sort of bible for the production of *mouneh*, by Lebanese chef Barbara Massad—Malouf put out a call for the women who would become the House of Mouneh.

"I wanted to employ half Lebanese women and half refugee women," Malouf says about the creation of the House of Mouneh. "I wanted to buy from local farmers and support the local economy." The mountain village of Falougha seemed a natural headquarters for the project, located as it is between the Bekaa Valley, the breadbasket of the country and home to many of the country's 1.2 million Syrian refugees, and Beirut, where the women could sell their products.

Longing for home

In addition to creating opportunities for peaceful communication between Lebanese and refugee communities, the House of Mouneh is also specifically oriented toward creating a means for women to support themselves. With little work for refugees in Lebanon, many men who were once the sole providers for their families find themselves unemployed, leading to extreme poverty inside the refugee camps—and also increased instances of domestic violence.

Malouf hopes that offering women a means to support themselves—or at least to leave the house—might ease these tensions and give women the independence necessary to start a life on their own if needed.

"Many of these women have never worked before, particularly those from more conservative communities," Malouf continues. "So it is an opportunity for economic empowerment as well."

Although the project is mostly funded by the U.S. Embassy and grant money from Malouf's umbrella organization, Lebanese4Refugees, the final *mouneh* products are packaged, marketed, and sold in a variety of different places, from farmers markets in downtown Beirut to culinary outlets in the mountains of Lebanon.

"Now I have a little bit of extra money for my children," says Fatima Hamdou, a refugee from Aleppo, Syria. "It feels good to be able to buy them something nice every once in a while and not just be focused on putting food on the table."

Though Hamdou knows she's better off than many other refugees living in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East, she still longs for her homeland—to which she hopes to return, when the war is over.

"I'm happy for my life here, and I have it much better than other refugees," Hamdou continues, while stuffing cabbage leaves and carefully setting them aside to be preserved in oil as *malfouf*. "But I really would give anything to be able to go back to Syria." ■

***Anna Lekas Miller** is an independent journalist based in Beirut.*

Three women with the House of Mouneh collective make the vegetable-stuffed cabbage rolls called *malfouf*.