

Palestine's first female-run cookery school is 'a labour of love'

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Bait Al Karama, the first Women's Centre in the heart of the Old City of Nablus, runs a cookery class [Terra Madre Salone del Gusto/Facebook]

Terra Madre Salone del Gusto/Facebook

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"Today we live life in temporary slots," Beatrice Catanzaro tells me. "Even a mother saying that she wants to have a baby thinks about it as a project. We live project to project, so we grow disconnected from reality."

The artist is one of the founders — the other is Fatima Kadumy — of **Bait Al Karama**, the first Women's Centre in the heart of the Old City of Nablus, which combines a culinary social enterprise with art and cultural activities. The space was established to support the social and economic needs of women in the Old City struggling in the aftermath of the occupation, and to draw international attention to Nablus as a place of art and culture.

In explaining how Bait Al Karama came into being, Beatrice Catanzaro insists on differentiating between simply starting projects and carrying out work. Coming from a socially engaged artistic practice, she was frustrated by working on projects that would inevitably come to an end, with an exhibition as an outcome, or even finishing abruptly due to a lack of funding.

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During an artistic residence in Palestine, Beatrice visited Nablus and heard that it was one of the economic capitals of the country, a trading post famous for its olive oil soap. She also learnt that it was a very strong outpost of resistance to the Israeli occupation, where some of the toughest incidents in the second intifada took place.

On one of her trips, Catanzaro met Fatima Kadumy, who runs the Women's Committee of the Nablus Old City Charity Society, and started talking about the situation of local women. "She is a very active woman who helped with first aid during the second intifada," she explains. "She became a sister to me and I basically moved into her place where she lived with her two sons and husband."

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The two decided to create a social enterprise, a centre for women to learn how to become independent and develop awareness and culture around food. What was a simple project funded for three months by Fare, the Italian art association, turned into a five-year sojourn in Palestine for Beatrice. A project became work.

The two women had opposite approaches. While Beatrice would work on the computer, Fatima went to the market and talked directly with women. "It was a completely different way of connecting. You really experienced the neighbourhood. We finally found the space; an Ottoman palace which needed complete renovation."

From there the two women started thinking about fundraising, choosing funding with very few strings attached in order to keep their independence. "The problem with places like Palestine, is that the majority of the economy is based on aid," the artist laments. "Funding often comes from international organisations and is only granted on certain terms."

One important step in the process was getting Cristiana Botticelli involved; the former director of the educational department at the art foundation Fondazione Pistoletto became their cultural manager. "In a couple of years, between dinners and grants we gathered something like €45,000. We used the money to renovate the space and organise training and activities."

As an artist working in the social sphere, Beatrice was very mindful of her approach: "For me it was a personal exercise of not appropriating someone else's story. It was about avoiding any opportunity that might lead to taking personal advantage of a contextual situation by putting my name on it."

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The detachment from the idea of "the project" was also found in letting go the frustration of having to present an outcome to this work which would be recognisable within the art world. "In presenting Bait Al Karama to the European art scene, I'd have faced the problem of representing 'the other'. This means narrating a story which would inevitably look very ethnic to Western eyes." Living in Palestine, Beatrice has experienced that dimension and those cultural norms in a spontaneous and natural way. "However, I'm aware that all these visual structures, starting from the veiled women, represent a certain kind of narrative for the Western world. They can be used by others to create opinions which are not grounded in reality." In making Bait Al

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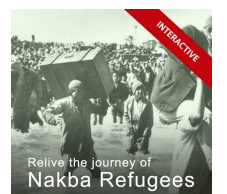


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Karama a work in progress, she freed herself from accountability to the art world.

With that perspective in mind, Beatrice and Fatima decided to make Bait Al Karama about food, rather

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than making it into a space for highbrow cultural activities. "Culture in Palestine is generally upper class and receives international funding, and is often not very inclusive," she notes. "I taught for three years at the Fine Art Academy of Ramallah. Some girls, especially veiled girls, felt uneasy when they would hang out at the so-called cultural avenues of contemporary art. They felt like outcasts."

The centre opened officially in 2012. There are now 50 volunteers who help with all of the activities and around 20 women who have part-time involvement with Karama, cooking or teaching. "There is an 80 per cent unemployment rate in the old city of Nablus. In this context, providing women with work and microcredit supports not only families, but an entire society."

Among their activities are culinary tours in the old city, a beauty salon, training for women, language courses and after-school care for children. However, the core of Bait Al Karama is the cooking school, which caters especially to an international audience. "It's very interesting to see single men coming to the centre, and being taught to cook by women" Beatrice points out. "It has been a quantum leap, something unthinkable. It was magical to see how everything normalised."

In 2012 the cooking school joined the "slow food" movement, which aims to combat fast food trends in society and preserve local foods and traditions. Slow food operates under the premise that through certain lifestyle choices comes the ability to influence the cultivation, production and distribution of food, and thus affect the environmental, cultural or political lives of people. "We teach about buying products cultivated in Palestine. We also try to raise awareness of certain nutritional parameters."

It is through food that Bait Al Karama wants to present a different picture of Palestine, which remains overshadowed by a prevalent political vision. The work, the artist explains, is to track down and preserve the traditions of Palestinian cuisine. "We research the origins of the food and where the spices come from by interviewing local women and creating space for the exchange of information, stories and recipes."

What's more, Bait Al Karama invites women from the villages around Nablus and brings them into the city to cook together and get to know each other. This is important in a fragmented territory where it is not easy to move around due to the restrictions put in place by the occupation.

"For us," says Beatrice, "an important point was to create an asset for the community starting from real capabilities and capacity. Women like to go to Bait Al Karama because it's beautiful. They can meet and congregate in a friendly space, in a very natural way. At Bait Al Karama we have started from the ground up, so it feels like a house."

This, she pointed out, is very different to the top down approach of people coming in with a preset agenda in mind. "While the idea might

be great, it sometimes doesn't apply to the reality. At Bait Al Karama we have really tried to stick to what is needed, and thus have the capacity to steer events when needed."

In her own words, for Beatrice Catanzaro it's about resilience. "This is what has allowed us to survive and not become yet another project, but a work for life. It is, quite simply, a labour of love."

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