

Good thymes for designer who turned dream into business

By Maria Rada-Soto

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KFAR HOUNE, Lebanon: Abdullah Hitti, his eyes half-closed, took a bite of a piece of bread spread with zaatar mixture for him by Fady Aziz. “This flavor takes me straight back to my childhood,” Hitti told The Daily Star as he stood in Aziz’s workshop in south Lebanon’s Kfar Houne.

Zaatar – the Arabic name for both thyme and the quintessential Lebanese herb mix in which it is the main component – acted like a time machine on the Lebanese executive.

Hitti left Lebanon to study in France in 1970, when he was 19, and has not lived in Lebanon since.

The power of thyme to tap into memory was a significant factor in Aziz’s decision to dive into an industry in which he had no prior experience. Aziz grows and dries zaatar,

before mixing it into different blends with a variety of other natural produce, such as nuts and “superfoods.” He wraps these in packages he designed himself, for sale under the name of his business: The Good Thymes. The name itself is a reference to both the mixes’ main ingredient and their powerful nostalgic pull.

Aziz, a 37-year-old design chief at M Media, spent his childhood playing in the grounds of the St. Georges al-Mezeiraa Monastery in Kfar Houne, the village where his family passed their summer holidays.

Some of the monastery’s lands are now carpeted with Aziz’s zaatar.

“All I knew is I wanted to go back to nature,” the entrepreneur said.

He was inspired partly by his children, Chris, 7, and Lyn, 3. The family’s predilection for a thyme-filled breakfast meant zaatar was one of Lyn’s first words.

“I didn’t know before that [that]

I had a passion to work with the wild herb,” Aziz said. “Working by hand now with this plant is really indescribable to me. It has become my playground.”

Despite his excitement about the project, realizing his zaatar dreams was not easy.

The bank wasn’t willing to lend him the money he required, claiming that he lacked the necessary agricultural and land management experience – despite the fact that his two consultants, Jihad Noun and Mohammad Nehme, were masters in the field.

So Aziz took on freelance design work, on top of his full-time job, to finance his business.

The monastery wasn’t keen to lease land to Aziz, arguing too that he lacked experience – even though the land had lain fallow for at least 40 years. But he remained determined.

“If I don’t do this, who is going to do

it?” he asked himself, aware that most people steer clear of rural projects in favor of living in Beirut.

Before he was able to find a potential foreman, his foreman-to-be found him. Emile Issa, a land-loving military man from the same region, wasn’t a natural first choice. But Issa was persistent and Aziz eventually hired him. “I am not here for the money, I want to be part of this journey to revive the forgotten land with you,” Aziz remembered Issa saying.

Now, the foreman mostly works alone, caring for the thyme and other herbs needed for TGT’s eight recipes. Whenever Issa needs help, he hires temporary workers. After the harvest, the thyme is dried in the shade and ground in a machine. The herbs are then sent to the workshop, where Aziz enlists the help of local students to prepare the mixes and either package or store the blends. “I do want to create an opportunity for

[the helpers] and a reason to have fun in the area and stay,” Aziz said.

The students are consistent, too, with TGT’s young, fresh brand.

“I want to stay in the region, but we need decent job opportunities,” Aline, 20, who studies finance at Sidon’s American University of Science and Technology and works part time for TGT, told The Daily Star.

Georges, 16, and Mariebelle, 27, agree. “Do not let anyone stop you [doing] something you believe in. Take the risk. ... Rewards come after,” Aziz told them.

An open kitchen concept in the workshop allows people to visit freely and look around.

Some people tell Aziz that he could cut costs by using cheaper ingredients, but his position is firm. “I want high-quality products from my country,” he said, explaining that rather than buying cashews from Syria, for example, he sources the nuts from a

family-run roaster in Lebanon. Everything that can be sourced from the region is bought from the farmers at a fair price, he said.

The first TGT batches hit the market this July, nearly 18 months after he first dreamed up the project. Having once struggled to get permission to use the monastery’s land, he is now being offered fields to cultivate zaatar. “First and foremost, I do this out of love for nature and food. I did it for myself before it became a business,” he said.

Ever since his successful debut at the Beirut Design Fair earlier this month, business has been thriving. Despite mounting orders, Aziz is determined to control the reins of both his project and his life – and will not jeopardize the quality, attention to detail and steadfast values at the core of his business. “I don’t want to rush it. It is all about having a good time – or thyme – in the process.”



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