



PROFILE FOUR  
Nablus, Palestine

# House of Dignity



Bait al Karama is a centre in Palestine where local women are using the fine art of Nablus cuisine to bring back pride to a forgotten community



PHOTOGRAPHER  
Tanya Habjouqa

WRITER  
Paul McLoughlin

**Our intention was to enhance self-esteem by showing the women their cooking skills are culturally and economically relevant**

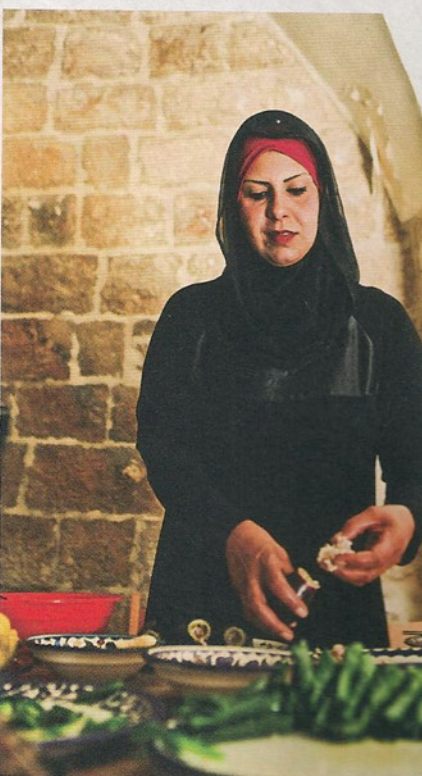
BEATRICE CATANZARO



01 Local women prepare for a cookery class  
02 Ingredients are procured from farms in the area



04



**KANAFEH**

This traditional dessert, consisting of Arabic cheese and pastry soaked in sweet syrup, is said to have originated in the city of Nablus. It is typically made with Nablusi cheese - a white brine cheese made from sheep's milk - spread over heated pastry and topped with thin streams of flour-and-water batter that resembling shredded wheat. A thick syrup of sugar, water and a few drops of rose water is poured on the pastry during the final minutes of cooking. Often the top layer of pastry is tinted with orange food colouring and crushed green pistachios are sprinkled on top as an additional garnish

03 Bait al Karama occupies a centuries-old villa  
04 Jibneh Baladiweh is just one of Nablus' delicacies



In a city ravished by poverty, unemployment and violence, dignity is a cherished sentiment. Over the years, the people of Nablus have worked hard to retain a sense of self-worth under soul-crushing conditions and the spectre of unemployment - estimated to be as high as 80 per cent according to UN reports - is another factor that has left a divisive atmosphere.

So, Bait al Karama, translating as House of Dignity, stands as a reminder of Nablus' rich cultural legacies and is a beacon of hope in the community.

It is a cultural centre, a cookery school and is soon to house a restaurant. Situated in the centre of the Old Town of Nablus, it gives a voice and increased confidence to local women.

'We understood the need to open a gathering place for women where they could meet, have coffee and talk. We started to think of other activities that could generate income on a local level in order to not depend on foreign donations but rather look at local sustainability,' says Fatima Kadumy, one of the founders.

Now the organisation works to train women in turning their home cooking skills into profitable business and equally as importantly, promotes the institution of Nablus cuisine to an international audience through cookery classes under the tutelage of local women. This enables a platform that is more than just showing off local cuisine, it is also a chance to learn how to generate incomes for their families, by teaching or selling their dishes abroad. So far this model has brought in women's groups, academics, food researchers and inquisitive

tourists to learn about Nablus' cuisine by cooking renowned Palestinian dishes.

Fellow founder Beatrice Catanzaro, explains they chose food as a vehicle as it encompassed all aspects of life. '[Food is] in the economy, social life, culture, and education,' she says. 'The initial idea of Bait al Karama was a cooking school, a place where women could transfer to a foreign public, their skills and culinary heritage and share it on a practical level by cooking together and sharing moments of conviviality.' But they also hoped it would help local women achieve economic independence. 'Our intention was to enhance the self-esteem of the local women by inducing awareness that their cooking skills are culturally and economically relevant.'

Bait al Karama was founded 2004, after Kadumy and Catanzaro teamed up with London-based cultural manager Cristiana Bottigella. They took over a dilapidated century-old brick villa and injected it with optimism, chatter and the heavenly aromas of kanafeh - the sweet pastry dessert dish that originated in Nablus and was exported by the Ottoman rulers of Palestine all across their empire.

'The building is in a back yard that makes it very private and therefore ideal for a women's centre,' says Catanzaro. 'In 1927 it was partly destroyed by an earthquake and the building collapsed again during air strikes in 2000.'

Reconstruction of the building began again in 2004, using a combination of international donations and local expertise coming from Nablus' bounty of architects, craftsmen and, of course, the local women.



#### SLOW FOOD

Bait Al Karama prides itself on its dedication to the principles of Slow Food - an international movement that promotes options of local produce and regional cuisine. It began in Italy as a protest to a fast food restaurant that opened close to the Spanish Steps in Rome and the movement has since encouraged consumers to avoid industrial-scale produced food and go back to more traditional ways of dining.

Catanzaro says Bait al Karama became involved with the Slow Food movement when some representatives visited Palestine. Quick to impress the group with their Nabulsi culinary traditions over a lunchtime discussion, the group decided to work to protect Palestine's culinary heritage.

'As we started to rehabilitate the building for Bait al Karama we worked only with the local community and artisans. Our intention was to benefit everyone. Although our target group is women, we want the whole community in general to benefit from the economic benefits that we can generate: from the floor tiles, to the tables and chairs, to the decorations,' Catanzaro stresses.

This community effort also spills out onto the streets and into the stalls of the city's traditional souq where fresh produce are purchased for evening meals at Bait al Karama.

It is all in line with Catanzaro and Bottigella's passion for slow cooking, where meals are prepared using ingredients procured locally. They say slow cooking would allow for the preservation of Palestinian dishes and act in protecting the country's heritage through the central facet of cuisine. 'Our perspective on food is very wide, ranging from its social to its anthropological angles, but it is the economical possibilities and cultural values [that are most promising].'

This will be promoted through a rooftop restaurant due to open later this year which will offer dishes 'grandmother used to make' and will follow the organisation's mission of making Nablus a hub for tourism in Palestine. The eatery will also adhere to traditional Palestinian styles of architecture with a vertical extension at its centre. 'It would be a complete novelty for the Old City and a great challenge for us, as we will have to learn a new set of tools to manage and run a restaurant. But there is no better way to learn than by doing it yourself,' says Catanzaro.

01 Bait al Karama is set in the city's Old Town district  
02 The women use traditional cookery techniques

03 Nablus is one of the region's culinary capitals  
04 The centre is Nablus' first Slow Food Convivium

اشخاص





Also in the pipeline is a shop displaying handicrafts from the community, as well as a café and beauty salon, including henna designs and local threading hair removal techniques. It will be an important part of empowering women in a community-relevant way the group maintain. 'On the one hand it represents a local income generating activity, and on the other it will give a real social dimension to the centre. In the Arab World, beauty salons are among the most accessible social environments for women and we want to make our women to feel at their place and practicing their right to have their own place [to socialise],' Catanzaro points out.

'In terms of networking with the local community, here it is very simple: a couple of telephone calls and a chat with the neighbour and you are able to gather half of the Old City. The connectivity here is not virtual it is real.' Socialising over coffee is how Bait al Karama began, and the group are confident that through this women's centre there will be many more ideas generated amongst Nablus' women.

In a city where knowledge is often passed on first hand by men on the streets, there is a new dynamic with Bait al Karama. 'Especially in the Old City there are fears regarding change, we represent a little transformation that needs to be accepted by the local community. The constant state of emergency in which this city was been kept in the past years has generated a sort of immunity towards long planning and new perspectives,' Catanzaro points out. 'But looking back it seems unthinkable that from that little spark of idea, the cooking school, we went all this way.'