



Clockwise from left: Inside Tawlet; Paris' Canal St Martin; Kamal Mouzawak; dishes from the ever-changing menu

Food for Thought

Kamal Mouzawak's efforts to champion traditional Lebanese flavours have made him a culinary icon. **Rooksana Hossenally** meets the changemaker at his new Paris restaurant Tawlet

Barely visible, pasted over by timeworn ads, this corner spot in Paris' Canal St Martin neighbourhood sat empty for months until January. That's when culinary activist Kamal Mouzawak opened his first Tawlet outpost outside of his native Lebanon, filling shelves with Lebanese staples, including jars of olive oil, za'atar and sumac that stretch from the waxed cement floors to a corrugated iron ceiling. Curious diners settle around a communal dining table and feast on dishes like mehché selek ate (stuffed chard leaves), kibbeh laktin (sweet and sour pumpkin kibbeh) and burghol aa banadoura (tomato burghol) – I consider myself to be fairly familiar with food from the region, but many plates sound deeply foreign to me.

“We all know mezzes, Lebanese restaurant food and street food like shawarma, which I love,” explains Mouzawak, who opened Souk El Tayeb, Lebanon's first farmers' market, in 2004.

“But I wanted to share the roots of Lebanon – and for me, that's the food you can experience only when you go to people's homes.”

While hospitality tends to be dominated by hotels and restaurants, it's actually at its purest and most authentic at home. “We are home cooks, not chefs – it's two different approaches,” he continues, giving his long-haired dog Souk a pat as she stretches out under the table. “When you're a cook, you want to welcome the other into your home, feed them, take care of them, nurture them.”

The menu changes daily with dishes cooked by Lebanese transplants from a different region, always starring Mouzawak's parsley tabbouleh with its tangy kick. The food is from the mountains the day I visit, starting with a whole-grain makhouta. I settle into my perch in the middle of Paris' buzzy 10th arrondissement, but through the hot steam of the comforting stew, I can almost feel the frosty mountain air as the first rays of sunshine pierce through the darkness

somewhere in Lebanon's countryside.

“But we are losing our traditions, even in Lebanon,” laments Mouzawak, whose aim has always been to preserve and promote culinary heritage through the souk, his restaurants and guesthouses. In February, his contribution towards protecting the diversity of Lebanese cuisine and uniting a fragmented people through food earned him the Foodies Icon Award at the World's 50 Best Restaurants' inaugural Middle East and North Africa awards in Abu Dhabi.

Last spring, following growing disillusionment and frustration at the lack of change as the struggle to survive continues to tear through Lebanon, Kamal moved to Paris to continue his work here. “Sharing our identity is the most important thing to me,” he says, musing about plans to open more Tawlets in France, London and Copenhagen. “In Lebanon, where we are fighting to live – at least this way our culture will survive.”

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