

Conceptual take on culture and cuisine

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Tuesday, November 6, 2012 03:58:18 PM

Would you like to visit a non-Egyptian restaurant? So please, take a look round with the *Egyptian Mail* in this new restaurant, which tells a good story about people who stopped growing food with their own hands, and chose to purchase it from the local market.



The restaurant from inside.

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It's a small restaurant in a shanty town area of Giza called Ard el-Lewa. The restaurant is not unique or distinguished, having the appearance of local restaurants in the area. Using a small space and basic infrastructure, the restaurant will serve the most popular Egyptian dishes, however, the ingredients will not always be those of traditional Egyptian cuisine, but rather selected through specific instructions given on a weekly basis.

El-Matam El-Mish Masry (The Non-Egyptian Restaurant) is the new art project of Cairo-based Spanish artist Asunción Molinos that is being held at the pioneering Artellewa art space located in Ard el-Lewa. This project revolves around notions of food security and food sovereignty as applied to informal settlements in Cairo.

"*El-Matam El-Mish-Masry* is my second exhibition in Egypt; my first project and exhibition was in 2010 with The Townhouse Gallery it was called WAM (World Agriculture Museum), an installation project," said Asunción Molinos, who employs photography, video, installation and other media to explore cultural practices within the rural sphere.

In her first exhibition she was inspired by the eclectic Agricultural Museum of Cairo. Presented in an old Downtown Cairo flat, the World Agricultural Museums recreated the atmosphere and the old museum's aesthetics to present contemporary discourses on food sovereignty, food security and the use of biotechnology.

"The new project I am doing is an exhibition/installation/ restaurant, which work revolves around the following issues: loss of fertile soil and lack of food sovereignty in the context of Egypt. *El-Matam El-Mish-Masry* tries to be an instrument for common critical analysis to help understand the reasons behind Egyptians' diminishing access to food. We'll be dealing with the side effects of export/import policies, as well as considering the side effects of uncontrolled growth of suburban areas on top of agricultural land," explained the artist.

In order to address these issues, Molinos decided to base the project in Ard el-Lewa, one of the ashwaiyat (informal settlements) of Greater Cairo. The term ashwaiyat means literally "leaving things to chance". These neighbourhoods are constructed with no urban planning or public infrastructure, replacing fertile soil with constructed, paved land.

Paradoxically, the inhabitants of these ashwaiyat are mainly small cultivators, who have been dispossessed of their land or are unable to sustain themselves with its produce.

In her restaurant, which will remain open for four weeks, Molinos will offer in the first week the best quality products grown in Egypt, intended for an international market and rarely accessible to the Egyptian population. In the second week, four women from the neighbourhood will be asked to choose ingredients according to their actual household budgets, thus the foodstuffs will be affordable for low income families in the area of Ard el-Lewa.

In the third week the food will be of those products growing or found in fertile soil in an area of 200 metres around the restaurant. Everyday, the designated surrounding area will grow by 200 meters, until it reaches one kilometre on the fourth day of the week.

"Most likely people will find nothing but weeds, cigarette butts, or discarded chewing gums. However, as our foraging area expands, more edible ingredients will be available. By the end of the week, we hopefully might find a small garden to buy some vegetables from."

In the last week, as an exercise in agro-archaeology, people, will be searching for food underground through carrying out a series of excavations taking as a starting point the restaurant's backyard. This series of excavations will be accompanied by a parallel survey conducted "upwards", exploring the neighbourhood's roofs, where people breed chickens, ducks, rabbits and pigeons for sale or home consumption.

The project's title, *El-Matam El-Mish-Masry* (The Non-Egyptian Restaurant) makes reference to a feeling shared by many Egyptians: that they live in a country no longer their own, a country that is in "someone else's" hands. A series of recipes directly drawn from Egyptian popular cuisine exemplifies the new occupation experienced at the core of Egyptian culture through its food.

The art project "El-Matam El-Mish-Masry" (The non-Egyptian restaurant) by Spanish artist Asunción Molinos Gordo, is being held in the Artellewa art space, 19 Mohamed el-Eseary St, Ard el-Lewa, Giza. It runs until November 27, Saturdays to Tuesdays from 5 to 10 pm.