

The politics of food

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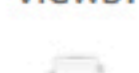
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Nadia Ahmed

Egypt's food production suffers from schizophrenia: it ranges from a tomato grown in sewage water and sprayed by killer pesticides to a perfect orange, grown following strict international quality and safety standards. The fruit and vegetable stalls in souqs all over the country are flooded with produce belonging to the former category, while most of the high-end, locally grown produce is exported to Europe and other markets.

"The highest quality products that Egypt produces are inaccessible to the normal consumer," explains Asuncion Molinos, a Spanish visual artist who inaugurated her latest art installation "El Matam El Mish-Masry" in the informal neighborhood of Ard al-Lewa in northwest Giza.

Through the creation of a restaurant with aesthetics that correspond to any street food venue in Egypt's popular neighborhoods, Molinos aspires to open a conversation on food in the public sphere. "This conversation should be happening in politics, but unfortunately it is not on their agenda," she deplors. "Healthy food is the best medicine, we could alleviate so many diseases if people had access to clean, nutritious and vitamin filled food," she says.

But, this food is out of reach for 99 percent of the Egyptian population.



The temporary restaurant that Molinos has opened will run for the entire month, with each week focusing on one dimension of the food problems Egypt is currently facing. This week, all the dishes that are served (which range in price from LE1 to LE5) use Egypt's higher quality produce, which is either exported directly to Europe or purchased by the local elite.

Every day, the restaurant will propose a unique menu composed of one soup of the day, two or three salads, one to two main courses and a dessert. "I just want people to rediscover what normal food is, and should be," she says, explaining that her definition of normal food is food that has been grown by farmers over the entire human history until the Green Revolution of the 1960s, which started applying industrial practices to agriculture.

"I don't like to use the term organic because not only has it been overused and acts as a brand, but also because the term is often misused, and some produce are dubbed "organic" when they really are not." According to Molinos, "ordinary food" instead of being the exception, should be the norm again, just like it was for all of human history.

Egypt's agricultural policies rely on cash crops, which were presented by economists as the solution for buying food that can not be grown locally. However, these cash crops require vast acres of land, suck up Egypt's scarce water resources and win over viable agricultural land that should be used to grow what Egypt consumes the most: wheat and corn.

Egypt imports more than half of its wheat supplies, mostly from the US but also from Russia, Argentina and France. Whenever a natural disaster strikes in these countries, like the great drought in the US this summer or the latest superstorm Sandy, Egypt faces difficulties in importing enough to feed its population, especially considering that bread makes up a third of the Egyptian diet.

Molinos believes that only a grassroots movement composed of farmers, researchers and university professors can create a coalition to defend the people's rights to decent food, and farmers' rights to a better lifestyle.

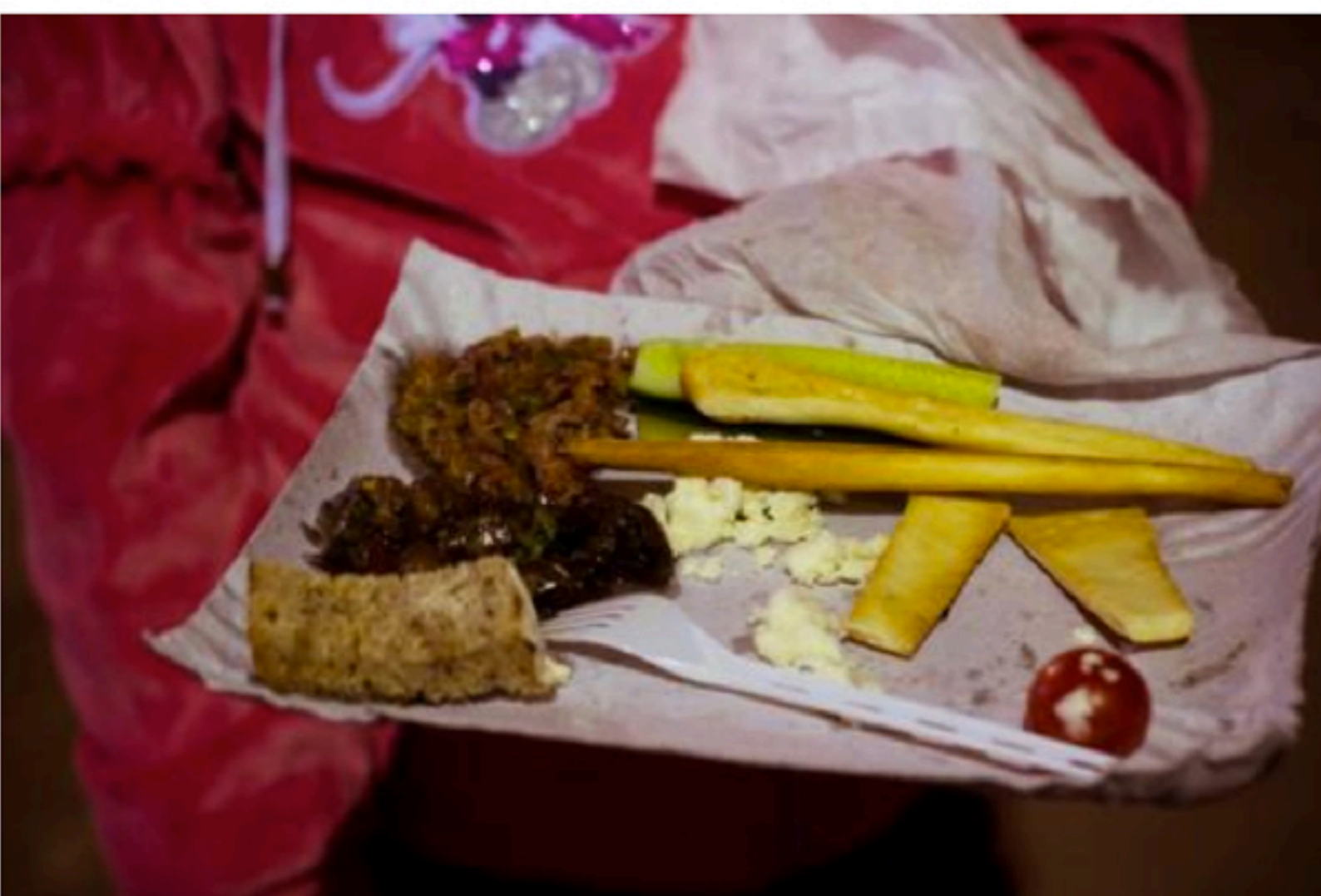
Reem Saad, a professor of social anthropology at the American University, is a specialist in rural issues. She told Egypt Independent that she is trying, along with her colleague Habib Ayeub, a geographer and professor in Cairo's Social Research Center, to include the concept of food sovereignty in the new draft of the constitution in the making.

"I believe that food sovereignty should be the cornerstone of Egypt's post-revolution food policies," she stresses. Food sovereignty is a concept coined by members of the international coalition "Via Campesina," which groups over 148 organizations that advocate a family farm-based sustainable agriculture. Food sovereignty refers to a policy framework that recognizes the right of people to define their own food and agricultural systems according to their needs and not according to the needs of the global market.

"This concept is very different from the idea of 'food security'" asserts Saad, because food security's only concern is to provide enough food and is strongly entangled with the fear of hunger. "Food sovereignty is about the quality of the produce, not just the quantity, and the welfare of the ones who produce our food, the peasants."

She also explains that agricultural and trade policies of the last decades have shown a constant lack of vision on food, and that it all comes down to a political choice: what type of agricultural policies do we want and where do we put public investment? "It is absurd that only the biggest agribusinesses receive help from the government!" she says.

Neither Molinos nor Saad are against Egypt exporting part of its agricultural produce, but what they advocate for is a vision and the prioritization of local consumers. "The idea is not to go back to the Middle Ages, it is just to have a shift of priorities," Molinos explains. "Egypt should grow healthy, nutritious food for its population, and sell the excess produce on the international market," she adds.



Khaled Zayed works for the food supplier company El-Nour in sales. The company he works for supplies many five-star hotel and gourmet restaurants in Egypt with the highest quality fruits and vegetables grown in the country.

"All the farms we work with have a Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certification," he says. The GAP is a collection of criteria that ensures the food is safe and healthy, while taking into account social, economical and environmental sustainability. "We sign agreements with these farms, then we have a quality control team which checks the product and in the final stage we take care of the packaging," explains Zayed.

To clarify the process of quality standards, he takes the example of a tomato. "We check the tomato's coloration, its diameter, and the chemicals that have been used, because some of them are allowed under the GAP certification, while others are completely banned."

The Hilton, GW Marriott and Four Seasons are the major clients of El-Nour company, and recently Offah.com, an online premium fruits and vegetable supplier, joined the list of the company's clients.

Since great food grows in Egypt, the actual challenge is to how to democratize access to cheap, healthy food. "It all comes down to dignity," Ahmed el-Droubi from Greenpeace Egypt said in a previous interview with Egypt Independent. "Food in quantity is not sufficient: quality and dignity need to prevail."

"El Matam El Mish-Masry" runs until 27 November, 5-10 pm at Artellewa, 19 Mohamed Ali El Eesary Street, Ard al-Lewa, Giza.

This piece appears in Egypt Independent's weekly [print edition](#).



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