

Eat Ma7ali

BY Mostafa Ismail
PHOTOS COURTESY OF Ma7ali



Healthy food culture has been booming over the past year in Egypt. As the trend grows, restaurants, grocery stores and mass producers are adapting by providing food that meets the needs of health-conscious customers. As this food-olution escalates, people have more and more questions about the process that their food goes through before it reaches their tables and fridges. Out of the food movement in Egypt, an idea was born.

Bassem Khalifa and Ziad Abou El Nasr are two friends who dedicated their lives to food – but not just any food. Their focus is on healthy, nourishing and creatively prepared food. With Khalifa's background in environmental studies and Abou El Nasr's farming experience, the two came together to create a revolutionary movement in the healthy food market and opened Ma7ali.

A deli and grocery store located in Maadi, Ma7ali, headed by executive chef Mariem Magdy, is inspired by slow-prepared foods and serves food made from scratch, offering cured meats and clean veggies. The grocery, on the other hand, is inspired by weekly farmers' markets. The grocery store's uniqueness comes not only from how clean and fresh their products are, but also from the fact that they aspire to be transparent about how the food is made.

But the duo's love of food is not limited to their deli and grocery. Before starting Ma7ali, Khalifa teamed up with documentary filmmaker Ahmed Elabd to create "Ma7sool" productions, which

aims to document Egyptian food heritage. And while Khalifa still works on Ma7sool, his main focus now is on Ma7ali.

At the same time that Khalifa kicked off Ma7sool, Abou El Nasr was working in aquaponic farming – a variation on hydroponic farming. Hydroponic farming uses no soil, pesticides or chemicals, relying instead on growing plants almost exclusively in water. One way of understanding hydroponic farming is to imagine the roots dispersed in a vaporized chamber, where they feed off the nutrition flying around.

Aquaponic farming is creating a self-sustainable system of farming by using the water from a fish tank, which is then vaporized into the roots and condensed once again back to the fish tank. "Al Bustan," the aquaponic farm that Abou El Nasr used to work on, sold their produce at the farmers' market. Fascinated by their products, customers often asked where they could buy aquaponic products outside of the market, which sparked the idea of Ma7ali.

In the summer of 2013, about a year and a half ago, a vision was created for Ma7ali as a grocery and deli that offers food and produce sourced according to three values: "Good, Clean and Fair." Ma7ali's mission is to find well-preserved, locally grown produce that is pesticide and chemical-free, and to create different flavors out of the produce. Vegetables come from reliable sources and meats and poultry are cured in-house to preserve and enhance their taste.

While cured products have been part of the Egyptian food heritage for millennia, the curing process is rarely given much attention. Egypt is famous for its "basterma" (pastrami) and Egyptian Siwan Salt is considered by many as one of the best salts for curing meat and pickling vegetables. Pickling, another form of curing, is a term that refers to curing vegetables. "Kish Sa' eedy," a traditional dish made from dairy products, is made to preserve milk in Upper Egypt. Served with bread or rice and salad, it provides a highly nutritional day-to-day meal for simple Egyptian farmers.



What makes Ma7ali stand out is their on going effort to find and collaborate with producers by giving them a space to sell their produce and encouraging them to expand their production lines. Their understanding of the products that they sell shows the effort they have put into knowing and co-creating the final product. One of their biggest concerns the duo has is making sure that producers get the recognition they deserve.

"We believe that if we sell honey made by Sheikh Said from Saint Catherine, we should make it clear that it is Sheikh Said's product and not ours. We encourage small producers to put their own labels, or we label their products for them. We want our customers to recognize the effort invested in the production of the food that we sell," says Khalifa.

"What we'd like to build up to is to provide all the information around the product: to explain where and how it was grown, what went into fertilizing it, how pests were managed, and what soil and water were used. Basically, we would like to be able to share the whole story of the product so that people know exactly what they're getting," says Abou El Nasr.

While consumers have become more aware of chemicals and pesticides in food, they often still do not know what organic labels mean. One of Ma7ali's goals is not just to say that their products are organic, but also to help customers understand what organic or clean eating means. In doing so, they believe that customers will better understand what it is that they are buying



<p>good جَد</p>	<p>1. tasty, flavorful, of high quality, wholesome, 2. fresh, local, seasonal, 3. rich in flavor, aroma, texture, engaging to the senses</p>
<p>clean كَلِين</p>	<p>1.a does not harm humans or the environment 1.b. promotes human and natural life and vigor 2. free of pesticides, chemicals, artificial preservatives and other toxic inputs</p>
<p>fair فَيْر</p>	<p>1. accessible prices for consumers and fair conditions and pay for producers 2. recognition of producers' efforts</p>
<p>local لُوكَل</p>	<p>1. Sourced from within Egypt, 2. Unique, heritage foods and products</p>

10B rd. II, Maadi
facebook.com/eatma7ali

