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The Healthy Kitchen, Recipes from Rural Lebanon

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Every indigenous culture has innate traditional wisdom of the medicinal and therapeutic uses of their native plants. However much of this knowledge is deteriorating due to the rise of globalization and the importation of the cheaper and more readily available “fast food” diet. This trend, consequently, is causing a wide variety of wild edible plants to be erased from the Lebanese diet and heritage.

Upon the completion of a two-year research project titled “Wild Edible Plants: Promoting Dietary Diversity in Poor Communities of Lebanon,” University of Ottawa Professor Dr. Malek Batal teamed up with the American University of Beirut’s Nature Conservation Center for Sustainable Futures (IBSAR), to produce ‘*The Healthy Kitchen, Recipes from Rural Lebanon.*’

According Dr. Batal, “the region is blessed with great biodiversity, and the population has access to many edible wild plants that could be easily harvested and used. The harvesting and use of these wild plants is, however, on the decline due to eroding knowledge and environmental degradation, which is threatening the survival of this fragile resource.”

Today the Lebanese diet has moved away from the traditional Mediterranean diet and now relies heavily on refined foods like white flour and vegetable fats, creating an increase in obesity rates.

After two years of research, Dr. Batal has collected an array of recipes still used in three rural areas of Lebanon – Hermel and particularly the village of Kuakh, Aarsal in the Eastern Bekaa, and the Chouf village of Batloun, Kfarnabrahk, and Warhaniyeh. One simple and nutritious dish is tabbouleh with lentils (تبولة بالعدس), a hearty salad rich in vitamin C and containing a substantial amount of iron, supplied by the parsley and the lentils.

“In the case of the Lebanese rural population’s traditional diet, we found a shift in food consumption. There were more pasta or rice dishes as opposed

to traditional foods using wild edible plants or traditional grains,” says Dr. Batal. “The poor are always the first affected by an unbalanced diet, one reason being that refined starch, vegetable oil, white bread, chips and processed foods are less expensive than healthier alternatives such as fresh fruits and vegetable and lean meats. We are trying to encourage people to include more vegetables, fruits and proteins for a healthier diet.”

The recipes in the book are original recipes acquired from the regions they originate from. For each edible plant used in the recipe the author provides a detailed description of its regional and historical dynamics as well as therapeutic uses, active compounds and scientific name.

The idea was to compile a book that offers the Lebanese a look at the traditional cuisine because people tend to choose a more western diet. Research and interviews were conducted with the women who were known, in their respective communities, to be knowledgeable about traditional Lebanese cuisine.

Making a written record of these dishes was of vital importance since all of the recipes from the villages were orally passed down from mother to daughter. The ten most common dishes cited during the interviews were replicated and tested for nutrient content and potential health benefits.

The book brings the Lebanese reader back in touch with ancestral knowledge that has been preserved through generations. It offers in depth research and scientific knowledge of the medicinal benefits of the various herbs that exist in traditional Lebanese culinary practices.

Although the majority of the wild plants mentioned are not easily available in Beirut, Dr. Batal’s book offers readers a fun and quick approach to creating a healthier lifestyle and substitutions are always possible with more readily available greens.