



By Fadi Kattan



A City's High-End Tourism Adventure When a City Council Supports the Quiet Revolution of Palestinian Food

When the Bethlehem Municipality renovated the Hosh Al-Syrian complex, the goal was to set an example of how to turn a historic building into a guesthouse and attract tourism to the heart of the Old City. The rehabilitation was supported by the Italian government-run Palestinian Municipality Support Project, and the Centre for Cultural Heritage Preservation carried out the work.

At first, the aim of the project was simply to invite people visiting Bethlehem to stay in an old, traditional *hosh* and share an alternative experience of the city. The initial plan was to cater to lower-budget tourists, but this soon transformed into something quite different: a high-end, cozy guesthouse with a gastronomic restaurant.

We very quickly identified the need in Bethlehem for medium-to-high-end accommodation that could cater to all visitors, but in particular to cultural tourists, who have higher expectations than traditional pilgrims in terms of service, heritage, and historic settings, and who demand a personalized service with attention to detail.

My vision for the kitchen, which gained full backing from Bethlehem Municipality, was to promote Palestinian cuisine, reinterpret its classics, defend the origin of produce and recipes from Palestine, and raise awareness of the beauty of our culinary heritage. This takes full advantage of our location – just steps away from the Old City souk and close to local artisans.

HOSH AL-SYRIAN

Bethlehem Municipality, under the leadership of Mayor Adv. Anton Salman with his hard-working team, has provided us with constant support that has taken many different forms.

First, we have an arrangement with the city by which we sponsor many of their key events and in return they host some of their most prominent guests at Hosh al-Syrian. This allows for some of the visiting dignitaries, diplomats, and key cultural figures to discover the heritage of the city while enjoying a purely Palestinian meal with a modern twist.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, as we endeavor to create more public awareness of our work in the hospitality and food industries, Bethlehem Municipality is always present. In some cases, this has meant welcoming journalists who desire to write about Hosh al-Syrian and Fawda Restaurant, giving them a valuable, wider insight into the city. In others, the municipality PR department has helped share our successes, for example, when we were selected by TripAdvisor as the first Palestinian property to obtain its Traveler's Choice Award or to be highlighted in the world-renowned *Truth, Love and Clean Cutlery* guidebook.

The third way the municipality has helped us can be adapted by any local authority that tries to promote tourism in an old-city setting. Many social and environmental challenges arose because we are located in an area that is of cultural, historical, and spiritual importance but that had been abandoned before the Bethlehem Municipality started to renovate Hosh



Chef Fadi Kattan. Photos courtesy of Hosh Al-Syrian Guesthouse.

Al-Syrian. For example, there were many reasons that our surroundings were not ready to welcome a high-end guesthouse, but throughout our partnership, the city of Bethlehem really helped us engage our immediate neighbors. This has worked out to the advantage of all – so that when we or the municipality provide new services – for example, in terms of lighting or festive decorations – the whole area has been embellished.

The main environmental challenge was at the level of waste management: how to preserve the cleanliness and neat appearance of the vicinity of the guesthouse and so forth. Bethlehem Municipality has arranged for its teams to take good care of this in terms of rubbish collection and pest control, while from our side, we have tried to support these efforts. By providing bins and staff training, as well as implementing our own strict procedures, we have worked together to help create a clean and safe environment for local inhabitants and visitors who stay or dine at the Hosh Al-Syrian. Some of our neighbors have made their own efforts too, which further adds to the beauty of our historic location.

A final benefit of our relationship with the municipality is our cooperation for the purpose of mutual campaigning: our common interest in showing the world a positive image of our city's riches, including our culinary culture. In today's world, a social-media presence, press reviews, and guest-rating systems such as TripAdvisor are fundamental to the development of a food and hospitality business as well as a tourism destination.

At Hosh Al-Syrian we have invested in creating a positive presence on all social-media sites, we frequently welcome and help journalists writing about Palestinian food and travel, and we interact with guests commenting on platforms such as TripAdvisor. During the past two years, we have also been honored to introduce famous chefs, holidaying celebrities, and VIPs – many of them

social-media influencers – to our guesthouse, to our Palestinian *terroir*, and to Bethlehem.

Through our partnership with Bethlehem Municipality, we strive to create a model that can inspire others. We firmly encourage other private-sector entrepreneurs and local government authorities to invest together in joint initiatives – whether in tourism with more guesthouses and restaurants or in other sectors altogether. When we team up, we are more successful in serving our own communities and innovating and showcasing our cultural heritage to the world.

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