

# ARABIC SPEAKING IMMIGRANTS & MIDDLE EASTERN CUISINE

## FROM THE AGRICULTURAL ENVIRONMENTS OF NORTHEASTERN COLORADO

### PROJECT INTRODUCTION

The Middle Eastern region is diverse and vast. For this project, the focus will be on the areas of the broader Levant region for their cuisine as they have a direct impact on the Coloradan community. Lebanese food provides a strong influence in the Levant region and directly connects with my heritage making it both accessible and personal. Therefore, I will be providing a deep dive of Lebanese cuisine by and its influence in both the Middle East and the Northeastern Colorado region. Through this process, I am researching the literature surrounding agronomist work, ultimately supporting the traditional Lebanese spice, Za'atar, and discovering whether it can be produced in the Colorado region.

I have connected with local Lebanese and Middle Eastern restaurants and grocery stores like Yum Yum Social and Olive Tree to understand the Colorado Middle Eastern community and what can benefit them in their production efforts. Through this research, I have learned more about the sociopolitical, regional, and cultural ties that connect the Middle East. Particularly, the U.S. Census Bureau found Coloradans who are of Lebanese or Moroccan descent make up the largest number of Arab Americans in our community. This research directly impacts the Colorado community and my personal experiences.

### INTERNSHIP GOALS

What really separates Middle Eastern food is the spices used in the cuisine. The goal of the internship is to gain an understanding of the existing literature on Middle Eastern Cuisine, particularly around plants that create the spice blend of Za'atar which includes dried oregano, thyme, marjoram, sumac, and sesame seeds as it is used in many recipes. My goal is to research the history of these spices, how to grow them, and discover whether it is possible to grow these foods in Colorado.

### HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR EDUCATION

Learning about these foods and how they are grown directly helps me connect to my family and my ancestral history. I grew up with my grandparents speaking Arabic to me and cooking Lebanese cuisine. They were proud to be American and they were proud to be Lebanese. Through my research, I found a strong connection to my heritage because food is such a large element that continues to connect me with my culture. I remember the flavors and community conversations surrounding Lebanese cuisine, and how powerful food was to bring people together. The Middle Eastern influence impacts my worldview but also influences my work in film and media studies as I study Middle Eastern cinema. Food is one aspect of the culture I am rekindling from my past to better help me understand my future as a scholar.

### WHAT YOU DID

This summer I have researched and found supporting evidence for all the spices and herbs within Za'atar that can be grown in Colorado. Particularly they would grow well in controlled environments like greenhouses. Most of the agriculture from different meats like lamb and chicken are already produced here in Colorado. I went through over 75 academic articles on agronomy to see if this production was possible in the Colorado region. Although it is possible, there might not be high enough of a demand to make this worth it.

What makes Middle Eastern cuisine unique is how the foods are cooked, and more importantly, the spices and the flavors in the cooking. The most common ingredients in every dish are olive oil, lemon, and garlic. Some of the special ingredients that make up Za'atar are oregano, thyme, marjoram, sumac, and sesame seeds. The herbs and spices are essential ingredients as they create the flavors that give Mediterranean cuisine a distinctive zesty and light taste. The Mediterranean diet is praised for its benefits on health because of the minimally processed foods and its focus on fresh ingredients.

I went through extensive interviews with the community and my family to get the cuisine and history of the food and culture. In the Fort Collins area, there is a Lebanese restaurant called Yum Yum Social and a Middle Eastern grocery store called Olive Tree. I went to both of these locations to talk to the owners and what issues they had in acquiring the particular spices. Many of them spoke of high shipping prices to receive the ingredients overseas. They also mentioned the lack of quality in some of the foods like chickpeas an important ingredient of hummus.

In the latter half of my internship, I focused on collecting, creating, and designing a cookbook of all my family recipes. Through this process, I learned a lot more about my grandparents, their stories, the history of Middle Eastern people in the United States.

Figure 1. The Levant Region of the Middle East



The Levant Region refers to countries and their approximate historical geographical area.

The Levant encompasses the countries of Cyprus, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Iraq, Libya, and Turkey.

### WHAT YOU LEARNED

Throughout this project, I have learned a great deal about my heritage and the importance of food and culture, particularly in the production process. Creating a strong understanding of a region can be cemented by the kinds of foods and practices they share. I found myself emotional as I was researching basic ingredients as I recalled much of my past with my grandparents and the foods we would make and share together.

This experience has helped me develop a better understanding of the region and rekindle the previous relationships I have had with my family in Lebanon. Through this process, I have been inspired to take Arabic in the fall to continue my growth and understanding of my culture.

The most important aspect of this internship has been connecting with people who share my heritage. I believe it has resurrected much of what I have lost in my life, with the early deaths of my grandparents. Ultimately, finding a community of people who share a similar story particularly after feeling like hiding their identities after 9/11 because of the hate and bigotry directed toward Middle Eastern and Arab communities. I have developed a strong sense of pride, love, and interest in who I am and the Middle Eastern community around me.

Table 1. The Lebanese Cookbook- Stories and Culture



The Lebanese cookbook was printed and produced with a lot of my own history, stories, and culture in the pages.

### NEXT STEPS

The biggest obstacle against Middle Eastern spices production in Colorado comes from finding a large enough market for these foods. Although there is a market of people interested in the product there needs to be economic value for the farmers to produce spices like sesame. For example, Sesaco is a sesame-focused production company located in the United States. They work with local farmers to produce sesame, although mostly in Nebraska. There is an increased need and interest in the Mediterranean diet because it is incredibly healthy and we can see the influence in the cuisine with the increased interest in hummus in grocery stores. America has become more interested in curiosity in foods, building intercultural connections that can beneficially highlight foods and culture in our community.