



## Culinary practices and food politics in the Arab world

International Forum, 15-17 January 2015

Jointly organized by the Orient-Institut Beirut and Goethe-Institut Beirut

Food is a basic need and a subject of contestation. What we eat is constructed and has cultural, political and economic significance.

The aim of this forum is to take a comprehensive look at food in Lebanon and the Arab World where food insecurity coexists with obesity; and where most of the food consumed is imported. It aims to contribute to the contemporary debates surrounding food by addressing pressing issues such as culinary practices, food globalization, food safety and food security. The forum will bring together farmers and entrepreneurs, activists, artists and politicians and academics in order to echo the voices implicated in the debates over food. Participants will critically examine current eating habits, cooking and dining cultures, food trends as well as the relation of food and arts. These themes will be addressed in open discussions, film screenings, academic presentations, a photo exhibition and excursions in and around Beirut.

The forum is organized around five themes:

### **Theme 1: The Power of Food**

Food is always linked with power and politics. Who controls what we produce, buy and eat? Are states responsible for people eating sufficiently? How are authorities able to intervene in global food systems? How much influence do farmers and consumers possess in defining their own food systems ("food sovereignty")? How does climate change pose challenges for sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry in the region? How powerful is food as a tool of political control and mobilization?

### **Theme 2: A Matter of Taste**

Food is a basic need, yet what we accept and experience as tasty, appropriate and nutritious depends on social and cultural factors. Different parts of society distinguish themselves from others in their culinary practices. Do culinary practices reproduce inequalities or help overcome them? What is the role of new acquired tastes in the displacement of "traditional" culinary cultures? How are food prescriptions (such as halal food) and taboos negotiated or contested in fragmented societies?

### **Theme 3: Is Food Eating Us?**

Food safety and food quality has been under the spotlight in the region. What makes food "safe" or "unsafe"? How does the concept of food safety shift over time? Who is responsible for monitoring the safety of food, lawmakers and state authorities, producers, NGOs or the consumers themselves? How effective are measures of consumer protection in Lebanon? And how should people be educated about food, from school curricula to workshops to campaigns?

#### **Theme 4: Brave New Kitchen**

We live in an increasingly homogeneous world, and food movements mirror these trends. Food trends such as “slow food” and “organic food” on one side, and industrial food (including GMOs) on the other exist in opposition. Are special diets labeled as vegetarian, vegan or gluten-free as healthy and sustainable as many writers suggest? What about the famous Mediterranean diet (olive oil, fish)? What are the economic and social costs of these diets? Can any of them lay the grounds for a sustainable food system for the near future?

#### **Theme 5: Think global, eat local**

Only few products that we buy and eat can be labeled as truly “local”. In this section we highlight the dialectical relationship between globalization and local food production and consumption. What influence do transnational corporations have over what is consumed or produced? Do campaigns and boycotts have any effect on the policies of these economic giants? Given the inequalities of global food distribution today, can local eco-farming build a more equitable future?

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