



Food and Agriculture  
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# A taste for tradition

## Reviving traditional diets using video

*by Laura Tabet, Egypt*

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*of* **Stories  
Change**

*Connecting traditional knowledge and  
innovations for fair and sustainable  
food systems*

United Nations  
Decade of  
**FAMILY  
FARMING**  
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## **A taste for tradition: Reviving traditional diets using video** Laura Tabet, Egyp

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## Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

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*Cover photo by Laura Tabet*

# A taste for tradition: Reviving traditional diets using video

by *Laura Tabet, Egypt*

We were launching a rural tourism project just as the Covid-19 pandemic startled the world. How ironic, after waiting years for funding for our local organization Nawaya, we were incapable to do basic field work. We were excited, and decided not to delay important work. As we were unable to meet women, cook and share meals together, we decided to create recipe videos instead.

The videos would focus on heritage dishes, and the aim was to trigger a discussion and brainstorm healthy recipes that were exciting enough to attract visitors seeking a unique dining experience in rural Egypt. We made eight recipe videos with skilled rural women, and we screened them in a safe outdoor setting, wearing masks, to discuss the potential to replicate the recipes at home or for sale.

You can watch the videos here: <https://www.ecoagtube.org/channel/nawaya-egypt>

The women at the screening were attentive! They did not chat away as the video played. Some recorded the session on their mobiles phone and some took notes. Most of them are illiterate but imprinted the recipes in their minds. After watching the videos, we would open the floor to women to propose heritage recipes they knew and could share, not only with their families, but proudly to visitors from Cairo or even the world.



*Women discussing nutrition after screening. Photo by Laura Tabet.*

“So, who here will try these recipes at home?” we asked at the end of the screening. “I will try all of them for sure!” “Tonight, I will cook the fereek and liver dish. It looks so easy and I never thought of cooking fereek like rice!” Another lady said she sprouted Fava Beans but never thought to use their stock for molokhia soup. The screenings felt like a great success! We felt confident that upon returning home the women would dig deeper into their parents and grandparents memories for forgotten recipes.



*Watching the recipe videos. Photo by Laura Tabet.*

## Videos with impact

It has been almost six months since the screenings, and we wanted to gather the women again to start working more seriously on the heritage food menus that would become the centerpiece of our rural tour itinerary. Around twenty women were invited to be part of a focus group to assess the impact of the recipe videos.

I was excited as we had just on-boarded Hanan to the Nawayya team, an experienced Monitoring and Evaluation officer. Hanan is also a nutritionist, so I knew the discussion would be rich. I was excited to see which recipes inspired the women, and uncover with them recipes they could proudly serve on a heritage food menu.

We hosted the focus group on the land of a village leader, Om Abdallah, who runs a collective food enterprise with the help of her daughter Fatma. Cairo traffic was terrible, so we were late, and arrived as the women were sitting impatiently in the shade.

We sat quickly, avoiding small talk and dove straight to the heart of the matter: a woman's main responsibility as a cook for the family. Men rarely help with anything kitchen related. So it was our prerogative to do two things – to revive heritage foods as a means for women to find work in rural tourism; to revive heritage foods and improve family nutrition. Tourism is also a great mechanism to educate eaters, and shed light on how seasonal recipes and locally processed foods hold the key to stronger health and community.

## Abandoning tradition

We quickly discovered that the changing tastes of their children made it challenging for the women to serve these foods at the video recipes at home. Whether young or adolescents, the women ALL agreed that their kids have little or

no interest in traditional foods! Actually, some refuse it entirely, and leave a nice homecooked meal to eat junk foods. It is so bad that one mother said her son won't even reheat the food she made him, but instead he'll happily spend his pocket money on crepe, koshari, shawerma or pizza instead.



*Molokhia with sprouted fave bean stock. Photo by Laura Tabet.*

I thought that far away from Cairo the challenge of junk foods wouldn't be so big. I was wrong. It was worse than I thought. Even at home, the women often buy and cook industrial pasta, white chicken for panée, maggi cubes to replace stock, and regularly buy processed cheese and meats to please their children. Traditions were abruptly eroded by the corporate food brands with colourful fancy packaging, mega billboards, TV adverts with football heroes that attract young people like magnets.

The mothers seemed stuck between two generations, appreciating the taste of traditional foods, but also accepting that their children want to eat differently. The women admitted that almost every family has a member with anemia, diabetes, obesity, and how they often spend money to get dietary advice. The irony is that their struggle with family health can be overcome with a return to traditional diets. We quickly realized how creating a nice balanced



menu for heritage food tour, would be an impossibility, if peoples' diets in the heart of a village, were not traditional anymore.

### **Why eat traditional?**

Hanan took a turn in the discussion to ask them about their nutrition knowledge. She asked if they understood the importance of minerals. The women said they knew minerals were important but couldn't explain why. When we asked them the source of minerals in their diets, the women were surprised about how minerals are transferred through soil into fruits and vegetables. The women also lacked confidence on how to serve enough vegetables, whole grain dishes or simply lack the skill to make their own traditional products like pickles, cheeses and dips.

"Your child's health is the best investment you can make for them! It's what matters most! More than school and getting them ready for marriage!" Hanan said with harshness, her voice louder now. I didn't expect her to raise her tone, but I did feel somewhere that it was needed, as the situation is bad and it is so unfair for young children, being denied the opportunity to instill healthy habits. "Da or Dawa....Da or Dawa...." Hanan words echoed throughout – "poison or medicine"- that, is what food is.



*Reviving old recipes. Photo by Laura Tabet.*

The women were silent at times. I felt a heaviness in my chest. I don't know how they felt, while some joked, some might have felt guilt or shame. Some just trusted that packaged foods were clean and safe. I was hoping Fatma would speak up but she was silent. I wondered if she was thinking of the small fight we had the week prior. Fatma is young, married at 17, was already divorced with a young daughter that is almost two. The other day I scolded her at a farmer's market, we were together representing Nawaya and our work on heritage foods. She had brought her daughter along, and of course, she was bored and tired and cried for her mother's attention. To stop her drama from escalating, Fatma gave her a large packet of ketchup-flavored chips.

As her daughter ran around the market stall, happy with the bag of chips, I expressed my frustration to her: why not give her the healthy food we were here selling here? She looked at me defensively, and then said "you wouldn't understand! The day you become a mother and have children you will understand!" After arguing with her, I sat and stared blankly at her mother, wondering, what we have been doing all these years? There must be a better way to approach this seemingly unsurmountable challenge of healthy eating that mothers deal with on a daily basis.

### **We need full buy-in**

It's not the first time I feel our team at Nawaya needs to carefully craft a strategy to overcome unhealthy eating habits, that will be motivating for the mothers as opposed to cause conflict or shame. During fieldwork in the villages, mothers attend our workshop and bring their young children along and stuff them with junk foods to keep them from crying and disturbing the training. I stay calm, while I m boiling inside, as we talk about nutrition, while their young children munch on Indomie Noodles, Doritos and Molto. If kids learn to enjoy these foods as toddlers, how can we develop interest in

traditional breads, cheeses, fermented foods, or simple veggie snack? If mothers accept this reality, how can they be leaders for preserving and promoting heritage foods? Without these heavy discussions on parenting, I now don't see a change for diverse food systems that promote local crops and traditional processing. Also, it is not their fault, not at all, as there is a bigger picture to be seen here where it will take efforts at multiple levels to fight against addictions to junk foods....

To conclude the focus group, Hanan and the women agreed that a first next step would be to find recipes women felt they could cook with confidence to their children. "We need more breakfast recipes – that way at least we know they get a healthy start to the day". As a team, we also noted that we needed to make simplified message on nutrition accompanying the recipes. We need the women's full buy-in, to truly believe in her own ability to trigger change on the family dinner table. While it was just a community screening, it was a recipe for a deep reflection, bubbling emotions to the surface, and digesting what it means to be a mother and what it means to reach for a pack of chips.

## Motivating youth

I could have never expected that through rural tourism, we would end up leading nutrition outreach activities! While Covid-19 felt like a stick in our wheels, it is now such a blessing, and it has allowed us to speak more clearly with women on the importance to eat healthily to build our immunity. The strict hygiene measures for Covid-19 have also facilitated increasing awareness on the needed hygiene steps to serve food to visitors.

In our upcoming plans at Nawaya, we decided it is a priority to invite young men and women from these families and re-explore the value of heritage foods. We are now developing a series of social media workshops where the youth themselves will make videos campaigns to tell the stories of their grandmothers' recipes. We can build on the healthy heritage foods that young people are still interested to eat, while shedding light on the dangers of unhealthy eating. By luring young people into gaining video making skill, maybe this way they can start to communicate the gems their traditions hold!

*Photo by Laura Tabet.*



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