

The Little Piece Of Egypt In My Hometown

Just under two months ago Mohamed and Hesham, best friends and business partners, opened Cairo Café's doors to Reading and, being someone of Egyptian heritage, I was curious to find out how this café came to be.

A colourful cloth drapes over the table we're sat at; geometric patterns whirl around the material as, bearing a smile and an infectious laugh, Mohamed begins to tell me a story. Around twenty-five years ago, Mohamed's grandfather had a little shop next to a street vendor in Cairo. The vendor sold *kibda* (liver) sandwiches and well enough to propose buying the shop space from Mohamed's grandfather. They agreed and so this street vendor became a sandwich shop owner. Fast forward a couple of decades and the vendor bought out the space above and to the sides of the shop, forming the 'El Prince' restaurant. Mohamed tells me it is the most celebrated restaurant in Egypt. Perhaps his connection to such a place was in fact a mark of things to come.



"We want to bring the Egyptian street food [to] here in England. We want to show you our authentic food." he says when I ask him what the driving aim of the Café is. It is clear that imbuing Egyptian culture into this place is important to Mohamed and Hesham. When music plays the songs are Egyptian, favourites from their time back in Cairo. The photos on the wall, an array of wanderlust-inducing, greyscale memories, loosely sketch out some of the country's heritage.

The food is *distinctly* Egyptian. Amongst other dishes, they serve '*fūl*' (a broad bean dish) and *ta'ameya* (Egyptian falafel and the kind I recall eating so often with my grandparents). In fact, Hesham was away from the café that morning precisely because he was out preparing *qatayef*, a dumpling-esque dessert.

It comes as no surprise when Mohamed tells me it was "ninety nine percent definite that we want[ed] to open something Egyptian.". More so when he describes how it was with his mother that his love for making food began - "I always watched her doing this and that's what made me love food because it's made with passion, with love and care and choosing the best ingredients for your family".

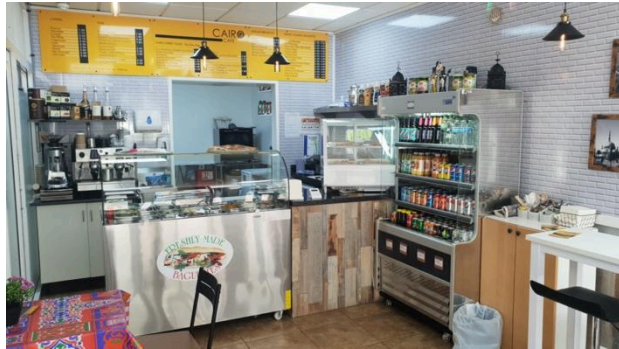
With all this effort put in, I wondered what Mohamed felt had come of it - the answer was resoundingly positive. Mohamed came to Reading, from Cairo, about nine years ago and tells me he didn't think there was much of an Egyptian community within the town. However, when they opened the café the number of Egyptians in the area took Mohamed by surprise. Perhaps because, in his words, "I think this place put them all together". He started to notice the café became a gathering spot for Egyptians and Arabs with many frequenting the place for their weekend breakfasts. "It means a lot to us that we are now one of the unique places for, at least, this group of people."

Indeed what the café seems to offer patrons - namely those with a connection to Egypt - is a link between where they are now and the culture of their heritage. It allows them to rekindle a connection with the food that has carried so much meaning for them. This is emotionally and very literally true. Mohamed and Hesham import certain goods from Egypt that cannot be

sourced here. When I first visited the café, Hesham offered me, my sister and my mother *gebna romi* - a mixed cheese that isn't sold here.

The narrative would be incomplete if we stopped here, for Mohamed tells me of another sort of customer. The sort who had long ago tried Egyptian food - maybe even travelled to the country - but since then had not had an opportunity to taste these dishes. For this kind of customer the café reintroduces them back to Egyptian street food. Mohamed plucks out a specific anecdote. A customer he served had tried *fūl* forty years ago, and never since, but upon seeing the café they went in and asked Mohamed if they had *fūl*. Mohamed was astonished at how long this customer held onto their memories of Egyptian food - "I was like I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it". Giving these customers that connection again is "a really good feeling" he says.

Mohamed tells me that he and Hesham are only at the beginning of their journey. What lays ahead has the potential to be illustrious; this is certainly part of the dream for them. Mohamed talks of making the brand bigger, of opening more cafés. Their heart is clearly in it and he even mentions the revered *Michelin* Star. He cites Raan Jay Fai as an inspiration - Jay Fai received a Star for her Bangkok-based street-food restaurant. "I think she's one of the best in the world" Mohamed declares. He also brings up the inventiveness of *Michelin* chefs, telling me how many make use of ingredients - like liver - that a lot of people wouldn't want to try. By doing so, they reduce waste creatively and with a flavoursome result - "[t]hey take everything...and elevate it.". This philosophy, one of respect and gastronomical open-mindedness, is one that may serve the pair's ambition well.



As I leave Cairo Café, it is plain to see that this place has been carefully curated, at the hands of two best friends, to evoke an atmosphere that represents much of their background. For both old and new, the Café serves as a bridge - it links Egyptians to a culture they're familiar with and newcomers to one they're yet to enjoy.

Speaking of enjoying, I got the chicken shawarma wrap before I left. I'd also recommend the ta'ameya...