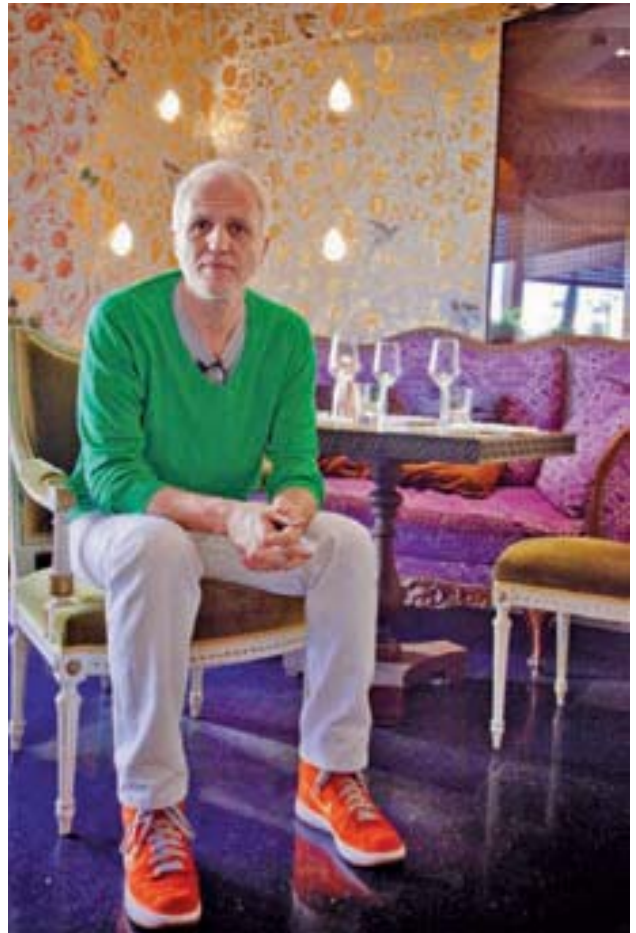


MOURAD MAZOUZ WAS BORN WITH A CREATIVE SPOON IN HIS MOUTH. THE DISCERNING EYE, BUSINESS ASTUTENESS, AND PRICELESS HUMOR CAME LATER. "WE DID A SPECIAL CLOAKROOM IN MOMO AT THE SOUKS. BUT EVERYONE THINKS I RUN A LAUNDRY MAT," MAZOUZ SAYS. HIS LONG YEARS IN LONDON RUNNING HIS STELLAR RESTAURANTS CLEARLY LEFT HIS FRENCH ACCENT UNSCATHED.

# MOMO'S Beirut



## Meet The Man Who Only Serves Aces

**F**or someone who is so anti chains, Mazouz causes a chain reaction with every space he rolls out – the latest being Momo at the Souks in Beirut Central District. Built around a hanging garden, it is a gush of gold and pink, punctuated by heartwarming wood. It is a hodgepodge of vibrant creations and styles living happily ever after. Curve enters big Momo's house.

### **You're always involved in the intricate design details of your outlets?**

Yes because I'm a restaurateur, not a businessman. I don't let anyone do the place for me, except that this time it is my mother-in-law, Annabel Karim Kassar, who did it. Without me it would not look like this, and

without her it would not look like this. It is like a partnership, and this is how it should be. Unfortunately, today it is all chains, which don't work for me. So the two Momos (London and Beirut) are different and the other concepts differ in design...

### **How did you and Annabel work out the design?**

I didn't think and she didn't think. It just happened during the work process. Annabel, who is an architect and decorator, has a friend called Violaine Jantet, a decorator who is very selective of her clients. I love her taste.... We all took a little truck and scouted the flea markets in Bardou, Lille...







**Why did you pick the Souks for Momo Beirut?**

It picked me. It was Nasser Chamaa (chairman of Solidere) who approached me. We were in Paris. I was in a good mood... Nasser was charming. I'm not interested in opening a lot of businesses but the mother of my children is half-Lebanese and the grandparents of my children live here... They (Solidere) showed me the Souks during construction two years ago and I chose this place because it is independent...I chose this place immediately because it had a good feeling.

**How big is the space?**

One-thousand square meters; the entrance and cloakroom on the ground floor, the restaurant and the café are on one floor, and toilets and machinery on the roof...In winter the space is very small because the balcony garden is closed. It's quite well done for Beirut, as from what I know there are fewer visitors in winter time... During the day, the café is a dreamy sight because you are overlooking everything, surrounded by a hanging garden. I wanted to do a garden because there is an intense lack of green in Lebanon. I wish I could do a bigger garden but I cannot...

**Momo at the Souks enjoys a great deal of detail. Every corner you look, there is something new happening. So every time you pick a different corner, you will see something new. Is that intentional?**

Yes, I like it that you discover something new every time. And it's not finished. There are many more details on the way... Because I visit lots of flea markets everywhere, every time I see something that fits I bring it here. In a public place, things are always breaking, so you always need to find replacements, things that I find beautiful. Taste is relative... Some people come here and find it too much; others might find it great...





**What is the feeling that you want people to have as they step into Momo at the Souks?**

Everyone in Lebanon would go on and on about the days "before the war", which I was not familiar with... So this is my interpretation of what a restaurant done before the war would look like – elegant but very laidback. I was all along thinking that everything should please Yves Saint Laurent... mind you I didn't know the guy,

not one bit... Personally, I like my apartments... to have lots of light and the strict minimum furniture... So all this frustration that I don't vent out in my flats, I do in my restaurants. I read décor catalogues, go to flea markets, and visit décor shows in Paris and Milan for that.

**So you have a deep-rooted interest in architecture?**

A restaurant is constructed around food. It is like the heart of a flower.

The service, the décor, the music, the light... make up the petals of the flower. If you take away the petals, the flower withers.

**Some of the interiors of Momo Beirut are local designs and others are not, right?**

A third has been bought from flea markets in Lebanon, England, Paris... another third bought as is from Europe and across the world, and a third was custom-made for the place. I love the mix of furniture...

**Can we go through the highlights of the interiors?**

It is very sleek and modern; a mixture of styles. In the restaurant, there are roundtables that accommodate eight to 10 people, allowing people to talk, which is a dream for me. The restaurant walls are made with the cuir de Cordoue (leather of Cordoba) technique. This is embossed and hand-painted cardboard instead of leather. But we used leather in some areas...



“...In general, any public place that brings people needs to have a soul.”

Everywhere there is a different detail on the walls. The birds are not the same. There are the golden padded metal chairs that cost a fortune and are very comfortable, some brass chairs that look wood; some old 18-century chairs that look crocheted in various colors, thick tray tables from Morocco, and a couple of carpets I brought in from Morocco. As for that shining dome that marvels everyone, I wanted something on the wall that was mobile and geometrical to go with the jagged ceiling and reflects the light similar to something that I saw at the Frieze art fair in Paris and I asked my friend Mehrnoosh Khadivi to do it... We also did a robot oven in the kitchen, which has a window that displays where the food is coming from...

**How do you describe the design?**

It is timeless. In 10 years' time, when everything is cracked and rundown, I will not fix it. I like things to look their age. So I will never inject botox into my face.

**How are your Momos different?**

The café in London is very narrow, it's like a shop. It is about bringing a little bit of Morocco where after 15

minutes of being there, you forget you are in London, as if you are traveling. Here, it's all about the elegance and charm "before the war".

**How do your restaurants reflect you?**

Where I choose to have them is a reflection of me. I interpret what I think I can like for a country, city where I'm doing it.

**There is always a great deal of color in your restaurants. Why is that?**

I think life should be in color. But not all of them are like that. In Sketch, there is one room that is full of color while the one next to it is black and white, as there is a video projection...

**What is the defining element of any Mourad Mazouz restaurant?**

...In general, any public place that brings people needs to have a soul. I believe that you need to be involved in all details to bring out the soul. That is why I find chains soulless, although some are very well done... I am still a commercial artisan, I'm still here doing my little things, doing my menu, continuously following up... I am more than involved. Actually I am sick

because I am obsessed by details...

**Don't you think that this acute attention to design might rob away from the food experience?**

This is the case the first and the second time you visit an outlet but the third time you don't look anymore...

**It appears you have great interest in art from the way you include it in your outlets, correct?**

Absolutely not. I cannot stand it. I believe that we need to live with our time. Art is part of our time, much of it is stupid ... the interpretation and prices of art, how gallerists take care of artists... I criticize a lot but I live with it...

**What's next for you and Momo?**

I found out that I am opening a restaurant every four-five years. I suppose when I start I am excited and by the time I'm done I'm down. So I will keep doing something to make sure I don't get depressed. I don't think I will do something else in Beirut at this moment, but who knows! That's why I love Beirut. It's where I feel people live every day more than anywhere else in the world.

