

## HOMECOMING QUEEN

— *Beit Nazha is an Enchanting Little House that Reigns in Byblos*

Granny Nazha once lived here. She was the queen of her castle, an old rural Lebanese house she built herself. The walls here are imperfect and uneven. The ceiling and windows are cluttered with authenticity. She dotingly cooked for her extended family from this humble abode, which she enriched with her personal charm and deep-rooted respect for local heritage and history.



This is Beit Nazha. Nazha no longer lives here, but her spirit lingers. This is what Richard Abi Saab will have you believe as you walk into the pint-sized restaurant in the heart of the Byblos old souk. You are struck by the raw beauty and nostalgic undertones that the young, gifted interior architect has encapsulated – particularly when you learn that this space wasn't really Nazha's home, or anybody's home for that matter. It was, in fact, a stark yellow plaster box with an outright commercial look and feel. Nazha, however, did exist – she is the grandmother of the restaurant owner.

Nestled within a stone's throw from UNESCO Square in one of the oldest Mediterranean cities, Beit Nazha is down-to-earth, inviting and simple to the core in truly rustic old Lebanese home style. The 210 square-meter restaurant boasts of both indoor and outdoor areas; the former can seat up to 40, the latter around 60. The interior is comprised of two rooms, each of which is partitioned into two compartments wherein wood and marble are the order of the day. To achieve the whitewashed walls milieu reminiscent of old local homes, Abi Saab capitalized on interior plaster/clay,







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which was stained with warm white paint, creating almost infinite parametric design variations is the unrivaled protagonist in the space in the space, juxtaposed against shades of brown. The earthy tones of predominantly browns and tans are muted and flat; they are punctuated by dabs of demure blues and grays.

A spotlight on origin and craftsmanship comes to stark relief at Beit Nazha, "where a few carefully chosen accessories give the right warmth to an otherwise open space," says the founder and creative lead of his eponymous design studio, which has one foot in Lebanon and another in New York. The unassuming off-kilter design tables express the rough wood details, while the traditional Lebanese woven chairs, bulky upholstered benches and sinuous curves of the white polished clay counter further accentuate the "Nazha has lived here" sentiment. The choppy, "worn" floor, the vintage-chic patina nuance and the small, all-white niches that house nifty little ornaments seamlessly translate that idea as well.

Beit Nazha is replete with echoes of the past, without descending into an overly decorative, tawdry space in the

process. We love the typical Lebanese pantry with the chipped wood, the traditional water pitchers perched on the window shelves and the sizeable vinegar jars that line the walls.

Abi Saab goes on to surprise us with the resourceful use of everyday materials in the wittiest ways. Wooden sieves are randomly suspended from the ceiling, morphing into a sculptural lighting installation at the entrance, while large jute fishing baskets double as lampshades with soft yet substantial silhouettes, producing a sense of coziness and relaxation. "We wanted anyone who visits Beit Nazha to relate it to their own grandmother's residence, not necessarily with everything, but perhaps with a detail or two," remarks Abi Saab who is presently working on the Ashrafieh outlet of Beit Nazha, slated for opening in November.

What makes the restaurant so classically sleek is the treatment of materials in a very clean and modern fashion. This wise approach has rendered it tranquil and tasteful, genuine yet alluring. It is a tiny house of sunshine and cheer, a beaming little homecoming queen of Byblos.

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