

Organic supermarket opens in Nigeria

 By Jessica Tennant

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A New Earth, a boutique organic and eco-living store based in Beirut, Lebanon, recently announced its opening in Lagos, Nigeria. The expansion is testament to the owners' belief in moving towards a cleaner, healthier, more sustainable way of living.

“We have to remember that we are hosts on this planet and that what we give to our soil, it gives back to us. We have to care for our future generations and ensure continuity, if possible, in the least damaging ways. This is something that I defend fervently and consumers are always pleased to hear that by choosing organic, they are also taking a stand towards clean agriculture,” says co-owner Layane Makarem, who started the business in 2009 with Sabine Kassouf.

Makarem explains that their goal is “to propel Nigeria into the organic market by educating, supporting and strengthening ties between local farmers”.



■ You recently opened a store in Lagos, Nigeria. In addition to the store in Beirut, Lebanon, where else do you have stores?

I own two stores for now; one in Beirut and one in Lagos.

■ What was the deciding factor to enter Africa and why Lagos specifically?

I grew up in Lagos, and my family has been in Nigeria for several generations, so naturally I decided to open in Lagos.

It's a great time to enter the market, besides inflation and the floating of the naira, as awareness for healthy living has increased and has become a natural evolution.

■ What have been some of the challenges to scaling the business, i.e. maintaining your quality standards?

Administration and protection of local production have proven to be challenges. It is normal for a country to defend its natural production but not when we try to offer better quality products, in this case certified organic. In addition, NAFDAC regulations do not allow easy introduction of new products and tend to ban many items for import and not for the better,

unfortunately. It was very hard for me to convince them of the higher grade quality I am trying to introduce and in some cases, they asked me to fortify items (e.g. I was not allowed to introduce A-grade quality Himalayan salt, proven to be superior to table salt). This allows an open door for banned items to penetrate the market illegally, as we can see everywhere and consequently the skyrocketing of prices of some packaged foods and raw products.



■ **You purchase products for retail sale from local, regional and international wholesale suppliers and vendors. Will you be importing most of your products or sourcing them locally?**

My ultimate goal is to propel Nigeria into the organic international market by educating, supporting and strengthening ties between local farmers. A New Earth has always placed itself as a showcase for local products.

■ **How do you educate your customers and those who have not yet bought on the benefits of organic food and chemical-free beauty products?**

Information is key. Fortunately, we are in an era where access to information is everywhere, if you know what to look for. The only way I can do that is by meeting my customers where they are and understand that this lack of understanding and information is not their fault, as that is what western civilization has taught us as long as we remember. Plus, with all the food scandals that we hear of everyday all around the world, it becomes very easy to convince people to get back to the roots.

■ **A New Earth “is rigorously committed to sustainable agriculture.” Please elaborate.**

We are rigorously committed to sustainable and organic agriculture. We do not allow anything that has not been tested and proven clean into our stores. It is easy to get confused, these days, about terms a normal consumer would not understand. What is natural? What is local? What is organic? Each term has a very specific meaning and can imply different things. For my customers' peace of mind, I do the research and make sure I only sell products that are certified clean.

■ **Why is sustainability important to you?**

We are all aware of our planet's atmospheric situation and the damages we keep doing by cutting out and eliminating our forests, pollution, mass grazing, etc.

We have to remember that we are hosts on this planet and that what we give to our soil, it gives back to us. We have to care for our future generations and ensure continuity, if possible, in the least damaging ways. This is something that I defend fervently and consumers are always pleased to hear that by choosing organic, they are also taking a stand towards clean agriculture.

The change has to come from all of us, as a society. We are the only ones that can make things shift by demanding more transparency, more traceability and the right to choose what should be served on our plates and in our schools.

■ **What are some common misconceptions around the term ‘organic’, and as an educational hub, how do you hope A New Earth will change these?**

There is much confusion between natural and organic. The ‘organic’ seal means the food has been strictly regulated by certified authorities to ensure the farmers and processors follow a strict set of standards and therefore contain no toxic pesticides, synthetic fertilizers, antibiotics, synthetic hormones, genetic engineering or sewage sludge – yes, that is what we find everyday in conventional products! On the other hand, ‘natural’ has no definition, no standards and is used freely by any manufacturer. It is just a marketing tool to appeal to health-conscious consumers.

A New Earth provides certified organic products and specialty items such as raw food, gluten-free, vegan, low-sodium and low-fat items, as well as a selection for baby care, including foods and related products.

■ **Has the demand for these kinds of products increased since launching in 2009?**

Yes, since opening in 2009, the demand for specific foods has kept increasing. Again, this is something that we try to educate our consumers about but with the rise of more specific diets and ways of life, there really is a demand for very specific foods. Our role is to show how a balanced diet does not need to be very complicated, but until then, we try as much as possible to respond to their demands, as long as the demand is about healthy food.

■ **What is the demand in Lagos, specifically?**

I have just recently opened in Lagos and am still very excited to see what people will be asking for. I always tend to be two steps ahead when I place my orders by introducing specialised food items too quickly, so I always end up realising that I have to take it slowly.

■ **What are your plans for the business going forward?**

There is so much to do in Lagos. My objective is really to work closely with local actors, farmers and professors in the field of organics and allow access to healthy food to everyone.

ABOUT JESSICA TENNANT

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