

Baking Her Way Through Cultures & Transitions

An Interview with a Lebanese Canadian Woman in Qatar

Interview by Kate Berardo

In the true spirit of Culturocity, Arige Jomaa has taken one of her passions, baking, and turned it into a way to connect with people across the globe. Kate Berardo interviews Arige as she reflects on her global lifestyle, the challenges of moving across cultures, and how her home-baking business helped her transition across cultures and build connections with people from a variety of different cultures.

Arige Jomaa is a Lebanese Canadian mother of 3 children, Sarah, Sharif, and Danny. She was born and raised in Lebanon, was educated at a German school, and has lived in Cyprus and Canada. She now lives in Qatar with her husband and children and has a passion for baking American and European goods.

Though we have never met, Arige and I connected through a series of emails a few months' back after she read about Culturocity in the Gulf News Magazine, Friday. Arige first wrote to me from Qatar with her story—of her cultural past, her family, and her way of bridging cultures through her own personal interest in baking. I interviewed Arige to learn more about how she has created a lifestyle of Culturocity—finding ways to continually connect with people of other cultures, learn from these exchanges, and grow as a global citizen as a result.



Q: You've spent much of your life living in different areas of the world. What have you found to be the most memorable aspect of living in these different cultures?

A: I was born in Lebanon, spent my childhood and teenage years there, got married and had my first born Sarah there. Lebanon will always have a special place in my heart. The Lebanese people never give up, no matter what they go through, they always pick up and continue living.

In Cyprus I spent a total of 16 years, I made great friends that are now my second family and as a country Cyprus is in some ways similar to Lebanon.

Canada opened my eyes to a lot of new, challenging and exciting possibilities and without me knowing, this is where my passion for baking started. Also my best friend lives in Canada—she is much more than a best friend, I admire her and I adore her to pieces.

Germany I can relate to a lot, because I graduated from the German School in Lebanon and I have spent 15 years of my life with German people.

As for Qatar, it's a whole new experience from which I'm still learning a lot and I'm meeting wonderful and very interesting people. As far as the Qatari people are involved, there are a few that I

admire a lot for the work they are doing for their country.

Q: What has been the most challenging aspect of living in these different cultures?

A: The most challenging aspect is getting used to, adjusting and accepting a new way of life and the mentality of the people. It is very difficult to settle in a place and then have to move again, leaving behind your friends and the life you are used to. It is especially hard on our children. But my friends are with me and in my heart wherever I go.

Q: What prompted you to start your own baking business in Cyprus?

A: My husband and my children. They are the force behind me in everything I do. I know they are and always will be very proud of me. My mother has always encouraged me and supported my ideas and tried to help me in whatever way she can. She always has great ideas.

Q: Where did you do most of the selling of your goods? How did people learn of your business?

A: I always sold from home. My warm and homely kitchen is the place where I sell all my baked goods. I also participate in a lot of Food fairs and different events. People knew of my business from brochures that I did and word of mouth.

Q: How did your baking business help you to meet people from other cultures?

A: Cyprus is a cosmopolitan city. A lot of Europeans live there. I get to know them when they come to buy from me, and they always thought it was interesting that a Lebanese lady would bake American and European cakes and cookies. Also because I bake for people who are diabetic and who have Gluten Free Allergy, that allowed me to meet even more people.

In Qatar, now most of the people are now my friends. I met them when they came to buy cakes or other baked goods from me.

The people and friends we made in Cyprus are like family to me now and more. I have friends from Jordan, Syria, Australia, India, Lebanon, Italy, Ireland, Egypt, Greece, France, Brazil, plus of course the Cypriots. It always fascinated me when I got to meet a new person from a different country. You get to learn about their culture their traditions, their life and everything that goes along with it.

Q: Was language ever an issue between you and your clients? How did you overcome this?

A: Language was never an issue. Thankfully I speak five languages—that helped me a lot.

Q: Now that you're living in Qatar, you have started your baking business again. What similarities and differences did you notice between running your business in Cyprus and Qatar?

A: The most common similarity between Qatar and Cyprus is that people nowadays like more and more homemade cakes, cookies, breads and so on....People are more health aware because I bake also for people who are on certain diets. In both countries people trust my baking and they like it a lot.

The only difference I can say is that people in Qatar order in bigger quantities, and in Qatar I can't find all the ingredients that I want.

Q: Your friend, Samantha, said you remind her of the passionate cook in the movie, *Chocolat*. What a compliment! Do you think your passion for baking was something that attracted people from different backgrounds to you?

A: Definitely my passion attracted people. They can see how much I love what I'm doing and they always ask me how things come out so good and tasty. I tell them my secret ingredient is the love I put in my cakes or whatever I'm baking.

I have baked for all kinds of different people, different nationalities and Thank God I'm blessed that everybody has been content and has appreciated my baked goods.

The last email I had from Arige, she was exploring additional ways that she could help other people to understand and appreciate the challenges of moving to and living in other cultures—something she knows well after having lived on so many continents. Arige also attended an initial meeting of the new branch of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training, and Research—SIETAR Middle East, an association which is designed to bring together professionals of all backgrounds who share an interest in bridging cultures and helping others to do the same. ✧

*Kate Berardo is a Northwestern educated intercultural specialist who helps people from different cultures, backgrounds, and schools of thought understand each other and work effectively together. She is the co-author of **Putting Diversity to Work** with colleagues George Simons and Simma Lieberman, the Executive Planet Guide to Doing Business with the US, and the founder of www.culturocity.com, the web portal dedicated to building intercultural awareness in daily life.*

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