

Egypt's Most Popular Coffee Shop Chain Challenges Europe

By Karen Dabrowska

Starbucks and Costa Coffee step aside – Cilantro, Egypt's most popular high street coffee shop chain has come to London and is hoping to open in France, Greece, the Czech Republic and Eastern Europe.

Cilantro (Italian for the herb coriander) opened its first up-market coffee shop in Egypt in 2000 and now has 60 outlets in the country. In June 2008 it came to London's Piccadilly Circus and a second outlet is planned in London's Tottenham Court Road.

"Our slogan is 'appetite for life', explained Nadine Beshir (33), managing director of Cilantro in Egypt and London. "We don't just want to serve you a sandwich and a cup of coffee, we want you to feel comfortable

and welcome. Our coffee shops are about human interaction and talking to the staff. Some customers come in two or three times a day".

Cilantro has captured the friendly spirit of the traditional Middle Eastern cafe, a male preserve, and clothe it in a new, Western body. The community cafe's are women friendly and offer everything from laptops-to-borrow, free chargers, the top ten books, magazines, doodle pads and in-store give-aways.

In the Piccadilly store the décor is simple and stylish: wooden bookshelves with tasteful pottery, marble tables, orange and light green chairs.

"British people who have lived in Cairo are among our regular customers", Nadine said. "In fact

20 percent of our customers have lived in Egypt". And in Cairo the rents for the premises are higher than in London.

In the true spirit of a community cafe Cilantro has partnered with Mungo's a charity for the homeless. "We have a social responsibility as well as a profit agenda", Nadine said proudly. In Egypt Cilantro partnered with the Hope Village Society, an organisation which looks after children at risk and was instrumental in getting a law passed to protect these children. The coffee chain also employs people who have been assisted by these charities.

The coffee is brewed according to the slow roasting Italian method. "The temperature of the cappuccino and latte should not be steaming- up to 90 degrees or you burn the beans", Nadine explained. "In London the German method of roasting the beans for eight to nine minutes is used as opposed to the Italian method of roasting for 18 minutes". In addition to 11

custom-made coffee blends, Cilantro also serves hot apple cider and hot chocolate and adds whipped cream, chocolate, toffee and caramel sauce to its drinks.

The aim of the coffee shop chain is to expand internationally through franchising and a listing on the stock exchange is envisaged in five years time. The success of Cilantro is reminiscent of the varied,

Nadine





enterprising and challenging career of its managing director. Clad in a fashionable hijab and contrasting pearls, Nadine admits that people expected her to face problems because she is a Muslim woman but she is eager to point out that she has never suffered from discrimination.

"I have competed with men for jobs and I got the job. During the time of the prophet in Medina the minister of trade was a woman. In Egypt today there are women judges and there is a quota for women in parliament. We have to distinguish between culture and religion. During haj men and women stand next to each other. The women do not cover their faces when they are engaging in religious practices. In the desert bedouin women cover their faces but this is a cultural, not a religious issue".

Nadine completed a BA in Business Administration and Visual Arts at the American University in Cairo. She worked as a personal assistant to Egyptian billionaire Mohammed Nousseir and played a part in restructuring his business empire which encompasses pepsico, medical equipment, real estate and radars. In 2000 she opened her own consultancy the Orange Consulting Group. She joined the Energya group of which Cilantro is a part in early 2005.

The Egyptian business environment is family friendly and her six year old daughter Jana sometimes accompanies her to meetings with her colouring book. The extended family helps take care of Jana when Nadine is travelling and she feels she has the best of all world's enjoying a challenging career and fulfilling family life. ■