

## Western trend for health and natural foods yet to take hold in the UAE



[Caline Malek](#)

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ABU DHABI // The trend in many western countries for healthy and natural foods has still to take hold in the Middle East.

A study over the past five years found that just 4 per cent of new types of products launched in the Middle East were "natural" - those sold as being without artificial additives - compared with 12 per cent in the rest of the world. "There's a serious gap between the Middle East and the world average," said Xavier Terlet, the president of the food database XTC World Innovation Europe, which conducted the study. "There are less healthy products on the market [here], which is strange."

The focus of innovation here had been on products that were intended to be convenient, and eaten "on the go". "Maybe this is because of the [western] influence so there are more products geared towards pleasure," he added.

He was speaking on the sidelines of SIAL, the annual food exhibition at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre last week.

Others, however, suggested that natural foods were gaining momentum in the Middle East.

"It's changing quite quickly," said Andre Leu, the president of the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements. "People have more education and more money to spend, that's when you see more choices develop. "Some people aren't aware of pesticides or other issues, but each region does it in its own time, and the time here has come now."

Part of the problem is that the region's soil is not ideal for organic crops. "You can grow, but it takes extra effort because you need to make your own soil," said Elena Kinane, the managing director of Dubai-based Greenheart Organic Farms. "Most farmers here grow in the sand, which doesn't have any aggregates so the nutrition uptake for plants is very difficult."

She said chemical fertilisers had to be added when they prepare the soil before planting and they have the tendency to remove all taste or smell. "Food has to be exciting, it has to smell and taste right," she said. "You have to make your own compost and manure and create something where the plants can naturally absorb nutrients."

XTC found little consumer enthusiasm for ecology or ethics, with no innovative ecological products launched in the last five years.

"Consumers don't have this issue in mind and they're not very aware of it," said Mr Terlet. "But we can definitely expect more of it in the future because it's such a big issue around the world."

Although ethical food items accounted for barely 1 per cent of new products, Mr Terlet detects a shift.

"There's a potential for environmentally-friendly and ethical products to evolve in the coming years," he said.

"When you buy these products, you are sure your coffee hasn't been produced while exploiting people in Latin America or children.

"This kind of dimension is more important in Europe and America, but it could be an influence in the Middle East in the future and producers have to take this point of view into account."

The biggest food trend of the past five years in the Middle East has been towards products that excite a variety of senses. More than a quarter of product launches fell into this category.

"Products can be chosen according to pleasure, health, physical, convenience and ethics," said Mr Terlet. "In the Middle East, pleasure is a guiding force with more than half the innovative products launched in the past five years geared towards pleasure."

[cmalek@thenational.ae](mailto:cmalek@thenational.ae)

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