

# START-UP

MAHMOUD ALFAYYAD - PITT PIRROTTE

## A “SYRIOUS” TASTE FOR LIFE

**It is a rustic place, located in Hollerich on the rue Baudouin. There, you will find a nazar – an eye-shaped amulet believed to protect against the evil eye of misfortune – keeping watch over the main room, while inviting to a serious look at a culturally gastronomic experience not to be missed. Two years after Mahmoud fled the war in Syria, he opened Syriously!, a Syrian restaurant with social impact, supported by Pitt Pirrotte, Marianne Donven and many others, where you can count on being served up tasty and authentic cuisine.**

Text: Marie-Hélène Trouilleux – Photos: Laurent Antonelli/Agence Blitz

### Where are you from and what’s your story?

**Mahmoud Alfayyad:** “I come from Raqqa, where my family owned and operated a company selling pharmaceutical products worldwide. The business was founded by my grandfather and my family is quite popular in Syria. From generation to generation, we have been working as pharmacists. My father, who passed away 14 years ago, had been living in Prague for ten years where he worked in the pharmaceutical industry. I have seven siblings. Two sisters and one brother are pharmacists, while my other two sisters and one brother are engineering technicians, and I have another brother working as a business administrator in economics. Our parents wanted us to stand as one.

In 2014, when the jihadists marched into Raqqa, we fled to Aleppo, leaving eve-

rything behind us. Aleppo is a very old city with historic buildings dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, a time when the trade routes of Europe and Asia came together. It used to be a wonderful and busy city with a population of 5 million people, where many communities – Armenians, Jews, Muslims, Christians... – lived together in peace. The city was the heart of industrial and commercial life in Syria. It drew visitors from all over the globe and was known as ‘a city that never sleeps’. It was also famous for its restaurants offering the most delicious food. In Aleppo, I joined Pharmaciens sans Frontières to lend a hand, but the situation worsened and the city turned into a very dangerous place. I lost close friends who were killed, so I decided to leave. I couldn’t take it anymore...

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What struck me foremost and attracted me to Luxembourg was its multiculturalism!  
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### Why did you choose Luxembourg to apply for asylum?

**M. A.:** “I had read about Luxembourg on the Internet and had a good feeling about the country. What struck me foremost and attracted me at the same time was its multiculturalism! Besides, I have a cousin in Germany and I thought it would not be too far away from Luxembourg. I made the risky journey by sea on a dinghy with 63 people and 25 children amongst them! We were left on our own and had to take care of the boat. The motor broke down in the middle of the ocean and everyone started to panic, so I tried to calm people down. Luckily we all arrived safe and sound.

### Was it easy to integrate yourself?

**M. A.:** “To me, multiculturalism is synonymous with enrichment. Multiculturalism is a way of life, luckily, my way of life. Luxembourg is the right place to be in this respect! But we are different from Europeans and people in Luxembourg don’t know much about our Arabic culture. Two weeks after I arrived in Luxembourg, I immediately volunteered to become a member of Pharmaciens sans Frontières Luxembourg, in order to practice my skills, meet people and better integrate myself. My pharmacy degree was accredited and after three months, I received my status papers. This gave me the opportunity to work part-time as a pharmacist for one year. I made new contacts and got to know Marianne Donven, who set up the ‘Open Home - Oppent Haus’, a citizenship initiative that aims at bringing together resident families and refugees. Marianne is also responsible for the Hariko project, which she launched in collaboration with the Luxembourg Red Cross to create a positive meeting environment for refugees. I volunteered to help during the Open Day of Hariko and cooked there for the first time. Marianne was very appreciative and enthusiastic about the food I served her. She asked me to cook again and offered me a EUR 150 meat mincer machine. This is how everything started! I thought that food could be a way to get closer to the people. I’ve always loved cooking meals for friends and family. My dream was to open a restaurant in my new country, but I had no idea where to start to participate in society. ▶

Before Syriously! was born, Pitt Pirrotte (left) and Mahmoud Alfayyad renovated the old grocery store with volunteering friends, within three months, and for a limited budget of EUR 25,000.



### How did your paths cross?

**Pitt Pirrotte:** “As luck would have it, I had been helping Marianne at Hariko. I was also involved in teaching Luxembourgish to asylum seekers at the Red Cross and this is where I met Mahmoud. As most Syrian refugees, Mahmoud is highly qualified and ready to integrate into the labour market. He loves to cook and I love to eat! (Laughs). Besides, my grandmother was a pharmacist, so fate brought us together, I think. In 1999, I founded a real estate company, Property Partners SA, now called Inowai SA, and sold it in 2010. I currently run two other companies that specialise in property development. I own a few houses in Hollerich that are due to be demolished by the end of 2018 to make way for a new residence, so I suggested to Mahmoud that he takes possession of the premises for 18 months. This way, a purposeful ending was given to these old walls that could expect to house a pop-up Syrian restaurant soon. Many volunteering friends came to lend a helping hand to transform the place, which used to be a grocery store. We renovated everything all by ourselves within three months for a limited budget of EUR 25,000. Mahmoud has a

microcredit which he will repay. I didn't wish to invest more money into a building that is planned to be demolished. The concept was that the renovations would be carried out by a small team with minimal investment into the premises and maximum social impact for the implied people.

**M. A.:** “At first Pitt took me to Pontpierre to have a look at a business premise, but the place was way too big. When he showed me the old grocery in Hollerich, I felt that this space would be a perfect location for the restaurant I had in mind. Pitt built the counter in the main room, we created a kitchen and a bathroom and we renovated the main room and the terrace. I worked from 8 a.m. until 4 p.m. in the restaurant. Then I would change clothes to go to the pharmacy, where I worked from 5 p.m. until 8 p.m. On May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2017, Syriously! was born.

### Did you receive adequate support before and during the setting up of your project?

**M. A.:** “I met Frédérique Buck, a communication and media consultant and copywriter, who founded lamnotarefugee.lu, a digital platform that combines storytelling, journalistic research and interviews in order to give

refugees the chance to speak for themselves and bring residents and refugees together. Frédérique conceived the name ‘Syriously!’ and managed the communication campaign. As I love to work and I am more of a serious guy, Frédérique once said to me: ‘You are so serious!’, and she came up with the word ‘syrious’, then ‘Syriously!’... that suggested both Syria and serious. I thought this was an excellent idea. Then Marianne and Pitt helped me to get the business permit. I had completed a master's degree in phytotherapy in Syria and my experience as a pharmacist provided me with the required knowledge to deal with food hygiene and safety.

**P. P.:** “The House of Entrepreneurship at the Chamber of Commerce was very helpful to us and very time efficient. Within one day, everything was clearly defined and the project ran smoothly. We were well taken care of and received successful advice. All in all, it was an enjoyable experience!

### Did you expect Syriously! to be such a success?

**P. P.:** “To be honest, the success of Syriously! went beyond our expectations. Mahmoud and other asylum seekers keep

Mahmoud has always been a passionate cook and thought that food could be a way to get closer to the people.





The success of Syriously!, that hired seven new employees since its opening in May 2017, exceeded Pitt's and Mahmoud's expectations.



themselves busy in the kitchen by preparing traditional Syrian dishes every day. I believe that this first work experience allows them to develop social and language skills and in return they enrich Luxembourg with their energy and culture. Our customers are enthusiastic about the food and they come back for more. All of our dishes are delicious and some of them are fabulous. Come hungry, leave happy! (Laughs). On a more serious note, we offer fresh, homemade and inexpensive food for Luxembourg. You can eat and drink for no more than EUR 20.

Reservations are accepted by email or using our Facebook page. Again last night, we had 60 people for dinner! At the back of the restaurant the colourful and cozy terrace promotes an 'Oriental feel', where they can smoke shisha water pipes, if they wish to. We also grow our own vegetables and herbs in a small garden at the far end of the terrace. For the time being, we are open for dinner only, but we are considering opening for lunch soon.

**M. A.:** "Pitt usually tastes the dishes and gives me his advice. We print a different

menu card every two weeks and we add new menu ideas, so that people won't become bored, but rather return to us ready to excite their taste buds anew. In this way we establish loyal customers and new friends.

#### **Do you have any plans ahead?**

**P. P.:** "Before the end of 2018, we will need to relocate. What we have today is a pop-up style restaurant. Obviously, that will change. What makes Syriously! charming is a certain 'lack of perfection', which will be hard to get in a modern building. But I have a few ideas already... I intend to protect the business name 'Syriously!' and I have already applied for a trademark. In the future, we would like to deliver catered food, approved by Syriously!, directly to one's door. This is the plan!"

**M. A.:** "Eventually, I hope to be able to acquire Luxembourg citizenship and someday reunite with my family! Simply put, I desire to lead a normal life. What keeps me going is the hope that one day, when peace returns to my country, I will be able to take my new friends from Luxembourg there and return the favour of kindness that I enjoy here.

#### **What pieces of advice would you give to the Luxembourg government...**

**M. A.:** "I met so many people from different countries since I arrived in Luxembourg. The country has already welcomed some 3,000 refugees. The government should not only assist people by giving them money, but also recognise what we can offer in return. As refugees we have something to give and we can enrich this country! Once I signed my contract to work as a pharmacist, everything became easier. People should be given a chance to have a working permit delivered to them.

#### **... and to a young refugee who is just starting out in life?**

**M. A.:** "Stay focused on your goals, work hard and remain selective. Show what you can and there will be 'another' Pitt waiting for you". ●

*Syriously! is open from Monday to Saturday between 6 p.m. and 9 p.m. and is located on 51, rue Baudouin, Luxembourg (Hollerich). [www.facebook.com/syriouslymhoody](https://www.facebook.com/syriouslymhoody) [syriouslyluxembourg@gmail.com](mailto:syriouslyluxembourg@gmail.com)*