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### Food and food history

Passant Darwish

*The American University in Cairo*

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## **Multimedia Writing 202 – Story Corp Project**

### **Interview Transcript**

**Interviewer:** Passant Nagy Darwish

**Narrator:** David R. Blanks

**Date:** 26/09/2011

**Place:** Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Alsaud Hall, Room 2143. The History department in The American University in Cairo (AUC), New Cairo campus.

**Professor:** Dr. Kim Fox

**Date Completed:** 27/09/2011

Date: 26 September 2011

Persons Present: Passant Darwish

David Blanks

Darwish: This is passant .... Darwish interviewing Dr. David Blanks on the...food and food history...Good evening Dr. Blanks...could you please interv..introduce yourself.

Blanks: Yeah, well I'm a associate professor in the department of history, have been teaching here for nineteen years and Food history is one course I teach out of many . It's a type of world history course.

Darwish: And where do you live?

Blanks: I live here in cairo. I live in Maadi

Darwish: And what's your age or age range?

Blanks : I'm fifty

Darwish: You're fifty. Okay. I wanted to know what is food history?

Blanks: Well. Food history encompasses everything, right? I mean you know, you You can look at it from the angle of political science or economics or you know arts and literature or culture, obviously history. You know, I mean you can even look at it from like level of nutrition, and you know co.. mass consumption and globalisation and things like that. I mean it encompasses almost everything that people in,, you know, journalism, humanities, social sciences study. Even some in the natural sciences.

Darwish: So it's an interdisciplinary course?

Blanks: Very much so. Yeah.

Darwish: Yeah. Tb... when was it established as a discipline?

Blanks: As a discipline...People have been teaching courses in food history for maybe twenty years. Here at AUC [The American University in Cairo], I taught the first courses and a course I teach now called Food in World History from about three years ago

Darwish: And what you make...what made you interested in teaching this course?

Blanks: Bec...because...like...cooking and food is...the...the experience of preparing food and cooking is the most of the fundamental human characteristic, it is what separates us out from other species, okay? The use of fire and the ability to communicate and

share and corporate, something that no other species has, and...it...it's so wrapped up in our identity that because I like to...study large s- time scales you know, and sort of study how cultures and societies have changed in the past ten thousand years across the globe I can do it with different topics, you know I can do it with the environment in world history, which I do. Or I can take something like you know...you know revolutions in world history, or ...you know, art in world history or whatever, bu...but because food is so central to the human experience it makes it a really good medium through which to understand people, culture and cultural change.

Darwish: So you have a timeline...do you begin from studying foods in history from the begging of the written history?

Blanks: Even before that, we look at hunter-gatherer societies up until today.

Darwish: Okay. When did you come to Egypt? To teach in Egypt?

Blanks: September 1<sup>st</sup> 1992.

Darwish: So in the nineties? What do you think of the Egyptian cuisine from now...from the nineties till now?

Blanks: Well Egyptian cuisine per say hasn't changed any from the nineties till now, but Egyptian eating and dinning culture has changed a lot you know, with the arrival of

the supermarket and you know, certain decline in the local sook [ the Egyptian traditional market] and with the spread of fast food and you know, the growth in the restaurant...in the café business, food culture has changed a lot although Egyptian cuisine per say has not, food culture in Egypt a lot, or at least in the capital

Darwish: what do you think of the Egyptian traditional dishes that they are claimed they are Egyptian but they are not?

Blanks: Well I mean you know, everything even Egyptian people to an extent are a mix of different cultures, I mean what is an Egyptian? You know, If you are an Arab you know, are you an Egyptian? Yes and no. you know, food is the same way, different influences from different places. Anything, for example with tomatoes in it or potatoes could not be claimed as being Egyptian because these foods didn't exist here until the sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth century, okay? Fa but there are some things that are really fundamentally are Egyptian and can trace back in Pharaonic times such as Molokheya, for an example or foul and pigeon, for example are really traditional Egyptian dishes that are still with us. There are other things that Egyptians believe are essentially Egyptian like Koshari, which are not at all. I mean this was an import from India by British soldiers in the late nineteenth century.

Darwish: Okay. You've owned a restaurant for a while, could you tell me about your experience as a restaurant owner in Egypt?

Blanks: Well, I owned a restaurant in Zamalik for three years in the...from like...let's see, I think it must've been about 2004 to 2007 or something like that, maybe 2003 to 2006. It was a good experience, I enjoyed it, it was a lot of fun. Where I failed, I really think it is because my main focus was on the food and some of the stuff that I was trying to do was a little bit too cutting edge and I didn't pay too much attention to décor and marketing and you know, most people...Egyptians are not at all adventurous eaters, they are very conservative. They like chicken, rice, scaloppini, spaghetti bolognese, and they do things outside that formula and it's just very hard to survive.

Darwish: And you've mentioned in your column at the Caravan that..."the undergraduate food mentality", what do you mean by the undergraduate food mentality and what is the AUC undergraduate food mentality?

Blanks: Again, it's not particularly very adventurous; you have some people who are conscious about what they put in their bodies. Most are not. And so they eat you know, junk food, fast food, chippy and stuff like that all day long and then occasionally, will get a balanced meal at home with the family. But you know, often

not you know, so by and large they...and there is nothing...most college students are like that, right?

Darwish: Yeah.

Blanks: You know, so they don't take care of themselves very much, and are very timid when it comes to trying new things.

Darwish: So you're not a big fan of fast food?

Blanks: Fast Food taste good you know, I like it and I eat it sometimes, but it's not very nutritious you know, it has way too much fat and salt and you know, carbohydrates and cheese you know. Chillies is like the enemy of good nutrition, some of it taste good but it's not very good for you.

Darwish: In your course at AUC, Food History, do you just teach books and readings or do you make students cook as well?

Blanks: It varies from a semester to semester, but I've tried to use all sort of things. We do videos, readings, we eat out together, sometimes we cook together, different things.

Darwish: How do you find AUCians as cooks?



Blanks: Again, they're inexperienced and shy, I mean every once in a while you find one that can do it but usually, even though they eat chicken, rice you know, four, five times a week, the idea of actually touching a raw chicken is ...is you know, too much for them.

Darwish: Laughter

Blanks: They freak out over things like that. That's what I'm trying to do , that I'm actually trying teach them to learn where their food comes from. It doesn't show up in a box at the restaurant, you know.

Darwish: At the end of the course do you think they can...handle food?

Blanks: You'll have to ask them, I mean it seems to me they changed a lot, if you really wanna know the answer to that question ask some people who have taken it.

Darwish: And what do you think of the...what's the significance of food history to you?

Blanks: Again it's a window through which you can understand and explain almost every aspect of human culture, beginning with the fact that part of what makes us human is our ability to...use fire and cook and share and communicate, I mean other animals can't do that and also the entire human experience on some level flows from that all up to the, you know, the idea that, you know, some of modern warfare is all over

what? It's all over land, and land is basically where you grow the food so you know...human societies is entirely taken up with this on every possible level since the beginning of time.

Darwish: So war is to some extent because of food?

Blanks: Absolutely! Yeah, I mean that's what it's about, right? Enough land to grow stuff to feed your people

Darwish: Right...

Blanks: and food is used as a weapon during war as well you know, like you know, for an example, like what's going on in Darfur now, right?

Darwish: Yeah.

Blanks: Why are people starving? Well because you know, certain militia groups are preventing food to getting where it needs to go. We have enough food for everybody in the world, that's not the problem. The problem is that political circumstances prevented to getting to certain people because the militaries and governments of those regions are trying to control all of that.

Darwish: So they use it in politics as well?

Blanks: Absolutely, you know, and just think about things, you know, arguments in...in EU

over subsidies, imports, exports...etc...etc...etc, the ceremonial role of food in politics throughout history you know, absolutely it's political, and Americans, right?

When-when...During the I think it was the first Gulf War, when they stopped the...when French wouldn't support the natal allies. Americans said "alright, we're not going to call them French fries anymore, we're going to call them freedom fries" right? So even you know, culturally, food is used as a symbol of politics.

Darwish: Yeah, alright. Thank you Dr. Blanks for your time.

Blanks: Alright, you're welcome.