

ENTREPRENEUR **YASMINA WAKIM** BRINGS SAFFRON BACK TO LEBANON



A collaboration between Yasmina Wakim and architect Tiago Mendes



Serial entrepreneur Yasmina Wakim, with a heart for socially responsible projects, brings saffron production back to Lebanon.

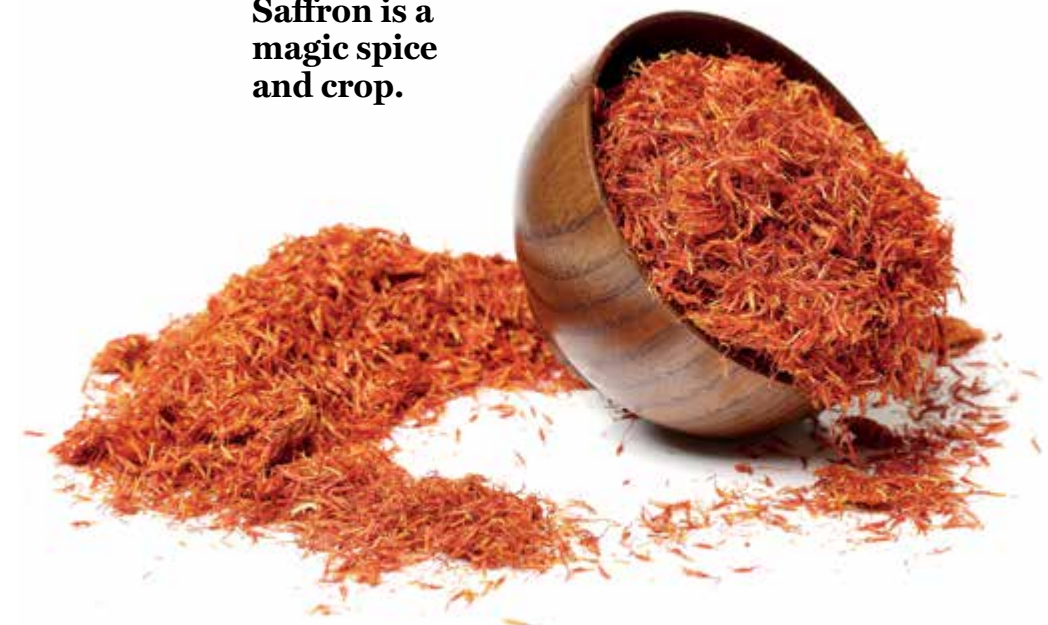
Asked where she's from, Yasmina Wakim replied, "Born in Lebanon and raised on the moon!" And after a few minutes with this Lebanese Swiss serial entrepreneur, you may indeed think she is an alien. It appears Wakim doesn't walk towards her objectives; she floats, and makes any challenge look like a piece of cake!

Stunning at 1 meter 77 centimeters tall (5 feet 7 inches tall), with a magnetic, shining face, Wakim, 34, is a successful businesswoman who juggles projects in Lebanon and Switzerland. She gracefully moves from one project to another, with her latest being Safran du Liban, a saffron cultivation and distribution business that aims to regenerate rural and economic development in Bekaa with sustainable agriculture.

Launching her career

After receiving a master's degree in architecture at École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne in 2008, Wakim started her professional career in Paris at the prestigious architectural firm Moatti & Rivière.

Back to Geneva in 2013, she worked as an independent architect. She also launched her first entrepreneurial venture, Street Gourmet, a healthy-food-to-go business located on a prime street in Geneva. Today Street Gourmet is frequently the talk of local Swiss bloggers and visitors alike.



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Next, she co-founded Café Voisins, a coworking café that promotes a sense of community through neighborhood events and a blog. Now with three locations, it offers office space, meeting rooms and a café.

Wakim said she is inspired by her favorite movie, "Alice in Wonderland," and driven by everything related to art, music, videos and VJing. But what makes her heartbeat speed up and her blue eyes twinkle like a star is a flower — not jasmine, the one her parents picked her for a name, but a purple one called saffron crocus, or *Crocus sativus* in Latin, with its vivid crimson stigma and style.

"I always wanted to do a project for Lebanon and in Lebanon," said Wakim. "I saw a TV show about the biggest saffron producer in France, Véronique Lazérat. This flower immediately hypnotized me. So I went to meet this inspiring lady in Limousin and had her train me on saffron cultivation.

"That same year, I found out that we do not grow saffron in Lebanon, but old books talk about saffron in our region. After investigating and researching, I finally met Professor Sui-Kwong Yau," a Chinese professor at the American University of Beirut from 1997 – 2012,

who, at that time, was growing saffron for experimental purposes.

Wakim took a sample from Yau, then contacted several Michelin-starred chefs in Geneva to test its quality. The results were astonishing. All were amazed by the quality and potential of this Lebanese product.

This is how a lady with a vision added Lebanon to the list of saffron producers.

Wakim founded Safran du Liban, Lebanon's first saffron production project. On its website, this project is described as "an effort to regenerate the rural and economic development of the region, bringing families back to agriculture and introducing new cultivation" know-how to the area.

"Saffron is a magic spice and crop," explained Wakim. Each year, every bulb reproduces itself. The idea is to distribute bulbs to families each year and create a cooperative around the project. This would enable families to grow their own saffron and transmit their knowledge from generation to generation.

Wakim manages the full cultivation and distribution cycle herself, including the continuous search for local and

international saffron buyers. And how does she succeed in all of that? By being a dreamer first and by being positive, especially under pressure, said people who work with her.

For others who feel inspired by her role model, Wakim offered this advice: "Remember that failure is part of each success. Don't be afraid, and talk to people who cross your path, highly positioned or not. You can learn a lot from them."

Safran du Liban isn't the final project for this young entrepreneur. She has more dreams.

"After working during my studies with a fantastic organization in Uruguay called Un Techo para mi País (a non-profit organization that engages youth in fighting poverty in Latin America), I understood why I was studying architecture — to have the ability to offer a roof for people in need. The right to housing is a fundamental human right; offering a shelter is the first step to improving the lives. My future project will be a humanitarian project in architecture."

With her next project already on her list, you can bet there will be many more to come!

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