Zahlé
UNESCO City of Gastronomy

Fast Facts

- Zahlé, the City of Wine and Poetry, is a major trade centre in Bekka valley.

- Many celebrities in poetry, arts, culture, literature hail from this village-city. Among the most famous are Said Akl, Khalil Farhat, Michel Tard, Riyad Maalouf and Joseph Abitaan.

- Lebanon has a long tradition of silk weaving. In Zahlé, artisans work specific designs that are passed down for generations.

- There are many Murano glass specialists in Zahlé thanks to Fakhredine II who initiated cooperation with Italy.

Major assets in gastronomy

- The Berdawni River is a famous historical site in Zahlé with many restaurants. These institutions have a strongly rooted reputation of delivering traditional local food in the region.

- Dishes and meals made using trout are considered a specialty for the Hermel and Anjar communities.

- Families in Zahlé distil arak using traditional know-how passed down between generations.
Economic impact

- The main concentration of food industries in Zahlé encompass wineries, bakeries, dairy, poultry and meat and agro-food processing companies.

- According to the Ministry of Tourism, in 2012, there were 200 restaurants and snacks establishments in Zahlé.

- The average annual production of trout is around 1,100 tonnes produced by 150 farms; 80% of which are located in Hermel-North Bekaa.

- Until now, plots dedicated to grapes amount to 200,000 hectares. Each year, this figure increases and 175 hectares are added, expanding the growing surface of vines in the country year by year.

- In 2011, local wineries produced over 8 million bottles of wine with 75% sold on the domestic market and 25% exported.

Events and Festivals

- The Baalbek International Festival began in 1956 and is a festival of classical music, dance, theater, opera, jazz as well as modern world music. The event is held over July and August each year in the city’s ancient Roman Acropolis.

- Food & Feast festivals The project aims at promoting ecotourism in the regions, in partnership with local communities and the civil society. The festivals celebrate the best of each village and locality such as fish in Batroun, karaz (cherries) in Hammana, akoub (Gundelia) in Deir el Qamar, kaak bi haleeb (Milk cookie) in Marjeyoun.

- The Poetry Festival is a tribute to the city’s heritage of poetry lovers and writers. Local and regional poets flood the city to recite poems and verses about the city of Zahlé and many other themes related to the country or the mediterranean sea.

- Corpus-Christi is celebrated on the first Thursday of June and dates back to 1825. The holiday is celebrated with a torch-lit parade and a large-scale procession commemorating when the city was saved from the bubonic plague.
• “Festival of the Wine”, traditionally held each September during which concerts, plays, poetry evenings and artistic exhibitions are organized daily over the course of two or three weeks. In September of every year, a local market run by Souk el Tayeb, the first farmers’ market in the country showcases the specialties of local artisan farmers and wineries.

Projects

• There are several schools and universities in the city, with a special ‘food related’ curriculum.

• Two NGOs, Ayam el Raja (founded by Fadia Abou Dib) and Rayon d’Espoir work with disabled youngsters. Both NGOs run an agricultural programme whereby young people are taught how to grow herbs, vegetables and fruit that are later used in jams, jellies or processed foods. Every year, the institutions train around 50 young people, sharing with them recipes, a love for food and respect for heritage within a framework of sustainable and locavore food.

• The main cultural infrastructure projects that are underway in the city include the renovation of the old souk of Blat, building a theatre in partnership with the Institut Français and creating a local library.

• Zahlé intends to initiate innovative programmes to increase the green and locavore input of the city by implementing laws that would favour green farming in the region.

• Zahlé participates in ‘Terra Madre 2014’ in order to showcase traditional local food and meet with actors of the organic farming communities around the world.