

JOHN PAULL of Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University visited Dubai late last year, 2008, and spoke with Nils El Accad, CEO of the region's biggest organic retailer, *Organic Foods and Cafe*.

## Dubai embraces biodynamics



The Satwa store of Organic Foods & Cafe on Al Mankhool Road, Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

**N**ILS El Accad is shaping the Middle East's newest and biggest organic supermarket and is already the CEO of the biggest organic retailer in the region, *Organic Foods and Cafe*.

Nils opened Dubai's first organic supermarket at Satwa four years ago and followed with his second organic supermarket near to the massive Mall of the Emirates - famous for its indoor snow ski run.

Both organic stores are about 10,000 square feet (930 square metres), and now Nils is embarking on a third and bolder venture.

Why organics? "Because I'm mad", Nils confesses. His new organic supermarket was just about to open in "the biggest shopping mall in the world".

The Dubai Mall sits at the base of the world's tallest building, Burj Dubai - "burj means tower in Arabic". Completed height is a secret, but it will be

short of a kilometre, and is anticipated to be 818 metres. That compares to Australia's tallest building, the Gold Coast's Q1, at 323 metres.

"The shops aren't financially viable on their own, but because I supply to hotels and wholesale to supermarkets we need more volume", said Nils, who is keen to expand by franchising, and has cast an eye towards Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain.

"Dubai Mall will be the biggest and the best mall in the world" Nils enthuses. "The new shop will be 27,000 square feet. The biggest and the best. With more departments. There will be toys. There will be paint. Now you can truly live organically, as organically as you can go".

The Dubai Mall opened on November 4, 2008 with 600 retailers, and that will grow to 1200.

Amidst those shops, one is Nils' third organic supermarket.

This newest *Organic Foods and Cafe* is nearly three times the size of the previous stores. Mall attractions include 'the world's tallest aquarium' and an Olympic size ice rink.

Dubai is a tiny city state, one of seven emirates comprising the United Arab Emirates. It is a petro-dollar extravaganza, with the Persian Gulf on one side and the Arabian Desert on the other.

If you are flying Emirates to Europe you will get a taste of Dubai. For one Dirham (40 cents Australian) you can take an *abras*, a people's water-bus, across the Dubai Creek, or for a small fortune you could stay at the sumptuous Burj Al Arab, the world's tallest hotel, built on its own near-shore artificial island, and described as 'the world's only seven star hotel'.

Nils has worked in the mainstream food industry and he is now scathing of its productionist and industrial values.

"The food industry's attitude is let's do whatever is legal and whatever we can to make it cheaper. They brag about adding vitamins A, C, E, synthetic vitamins, they don't tell you they are synthetic preservatives".

Nils explains that it was illness in the family that drew him into organics. He grew up in Dubai and recalls his mother getting sick when he was a teenager "and then I got sick".

Recovering his health was a personal journey of discovery that eventually led Nils to organic food.

"I want to go biodynamic with most products. We have nothing from multinationals. I know the owner for every product that we sell. Whether it's a farm, or a shop, or a family business.

"With biodynamics the crops fluctuate a lot more" says Nils.

He sees biodynamic produce as the gold standard for organics. "You can

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grow in harmony with nature, or you can force it”.

Nils imports from biodynamic producers in Egypt, South Africa and New Zealand.

Biodynamic producer Sekem, in Egypt, supplies tomatoes, grapes, capsicum, cucumbers and beans.

Biodynamic mutton and beef come from New Zealand. Organic cabbage, broccoli, lettuce, peaches and poultry come from South Africa.

Austria supplies organic beef. There are organic apples from France, organic cheese from Holland and organic fruit from Uganda.

“We don’t import products out of USA and Australia. We do the closest source possible. We do South Africa and New Zealand. We do apples from New Zealand, that’s sea miles. We import from Egypt and India.” explains Nils.

China? “They are the big volume people. When the time comes I’ll go there. There’s a lot of skepticism about China. Some of the organic product that we import from Europe is sourced from China”, said Nils.

“Customers are mostly expats and westernized Emiratis. I’ve tried for rich Indians but they are not interested. We need western expats. They are much better aware of organics in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain”.



Free pamphlets extolling the benefits of organic food and production methods are available in both English and Arabic at Dubai’s Organic Foods & Cafe.

Dubai imports virtually all of its food.

What about local organic production? “Dates, there’s a couple of farms

certified by EcoCert. They are not producing a crop but they are certified. We will have some eventually” declares Nils.

“The Ministry of Agriculture has its own set of organic standards. But there is no money and no glory in it so they are not behind it.

“I’m looking more at Oman, maybe establishing farms for lettuces and cucumbers next year. That’s because of the soils and the water supply”.

The average annual rainfall in Dubai is 88mm. Compare that to Australia’s driest city, Adelaide, with a rainfall of 585 mm, or Sydney with 1217 mm per annum.

Nils is also developing a new line, “doing beverages and packaging, fruit juices, both organic and conventional.

“With the Emiratis it all needs education, it’s about getting the message out.

“They can be frightened by the price. If there is a big difference in the price, there is a big reason.

“With chickens there is a big difference.

“With salmon there is a big difference. It is because it is intensively



Nils El Accad, CEO, Organic Foods and Cafe.

grown or it’s not intensively grown”.

As Nils sees it, “the challenge is education, so they know it’s worth the money”.

John Paull is an environmental scientist with a special interest in organics. He spent the European summer at Oxford University as a visiting scholar. While there he attended several conferences including the 16th IFOAM Organic World Congress in Modena, Italy. He has degrees in mathematics, psychology and environmental management.

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