

leo bites

<https://leobites.wordpress.com/2013/03/01/the-oud-makers-of-the-beqaa-valley/#:~:text=Ghadban%20is%20just%20one%20of,oud%20maker%20in%20the%20region.>

The oud maker of the Beqaa Valley

"A piece of my heart goes with each instrument I give away."



The scent of wood hangs in the air of Nazih Ghadban's workshop in the Beqaa village of Ras Baalbek. Unfinished ouds line the walls. On the left side of the room hang wooden shells, just an outline of what they are to become. The objects on the right side of the room are closer to the finished product, their colors and designs more visible.

"The climate of Ras Baalbek has made the trade a tradition here," divulges Ghadban, adding that it is a little known secret that Ras Baalbek's dry climate and lack of rain is beneficial for oud making. The oud, a traditional instrument of the Mediterranean, has eleven strings, grouped into five sets of two, with one lone string. It has a large, round back in the shape of a gourd and a flat face, with a short, curved back neck. Ghadban says the oud goes back to the sixth grandson of Adam. There is evidence of the oud from over 5000 years ago in what is now Iraq. Somewhere along the way, the oud found its way to Lebanon's Beqaa Valley.

Ghadban is just one of a handful of prestigious 'moa'limeen' (or masters) of oud production who hail from Ras Baalbek. While there are other noteworthy oud-makers from this Lebanese village, Ghadban cites a prominent man of Greek origin, along with oud-master Nikoula Hares. Ghadban, on the other hand, learned to play the oud at the Lebanese National Higher Conservatory of Music. "I am a philosophy teacher by trade," he said, "but when I was studying music people began asking for ouds."

Today he sends his ouds all around the world, from North America to East Asia. He has a wide selection of wood from around the world, each one a different color. Indian rosewood, Canadian oak and maple, and Burmese teak make different shades of tan, brown and purple, whilst African padouk makes red. There's also local walnut from Ras Baalbek, and a rare (and now illegal) reddish Brazilian wood (which Ghadban calls 'paolorio') that he bought in the 1970s. Upon receiving the wood, he stores it in his garage for at least three years so that it dries out.

Even if Ghadban were to use the same wood for every oud, the sound would be different for each, he explains. "You could not step twice into the same river; for other waters are ever flowing on to you," Ghadban says, quoting the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. Because of this, Ghadban gives each individual oud a name and serial number to mark its own unique identity.

Ghadban says that the oud improves with age. "*Da' al oud bi joud*," he says, quoting a Lebanese saying that translates as, "the more you play the oud, the better it sounds." He describes how the oud absorbs the music and stores it in its wooden body. The wood then projects the spirit of the music, as if reciting notes from memory.

In a small salon adjacent to his workshop, Ghadban begins to strum his oud. His fingers pressing firmly along the neck release faint squeaking sounds. He concentrates on the dancing of his fingers on the oud's neck. Each strum of the strings gives off a note, which resonates in the room. The notes overlap

one another to string together phrases that tell a story.

Watching him play, Ghadban's connection to the oud is obvious. His devotion to the instrument, which begins when he imagines an oud from a solid block of wood, clearly extends to the finished product, to the personality each oud acquires as it ages.

"A piece of my heart goes with each instrument I give away," he said. "I have a heart of stone now."

Yara Chehayed contributed reporting to this article.