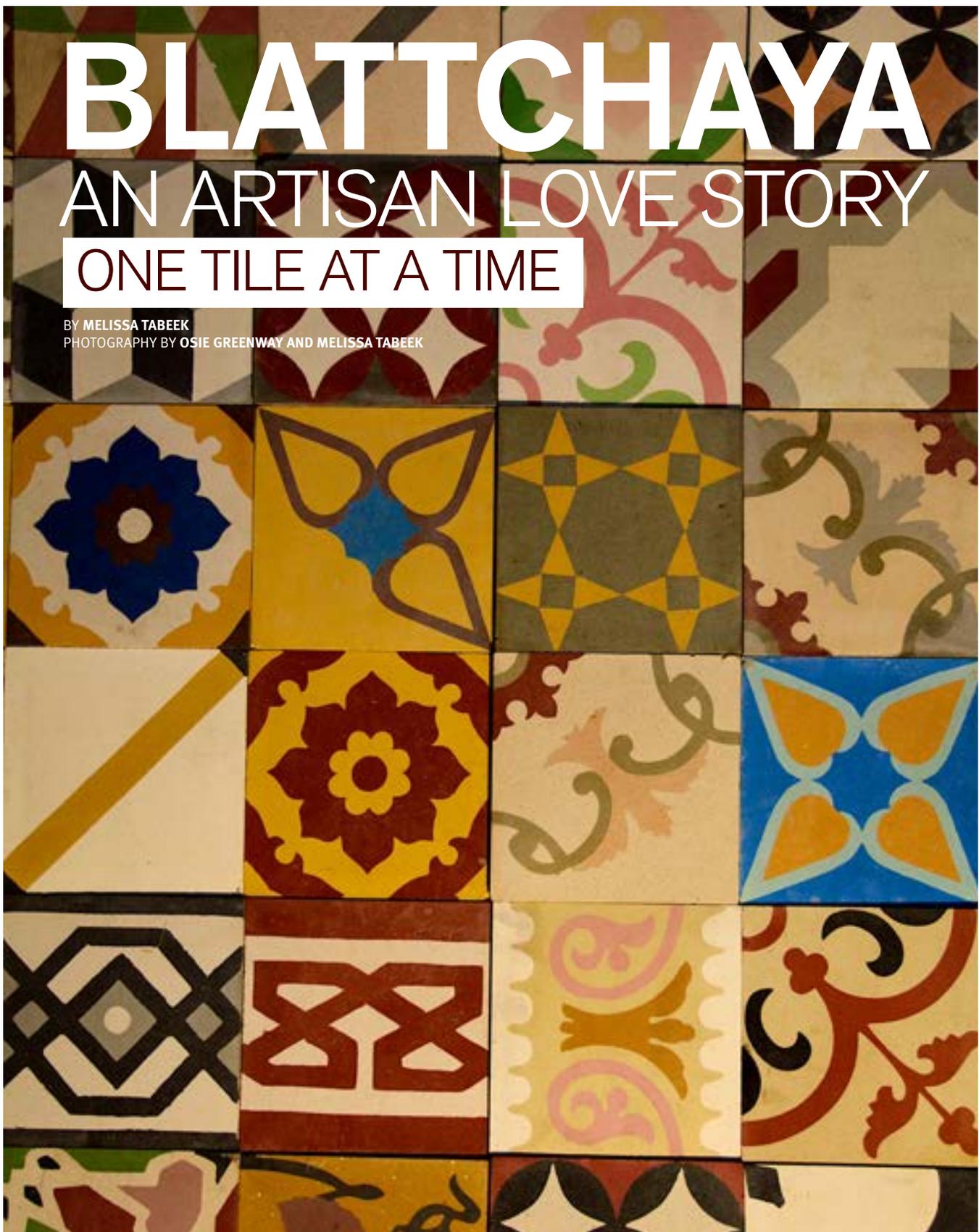


# BLATTCHAYA

AN ARTISAN LOVE STORY

ONE TILE AT A TIME

BY MELISSA TABEEK  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY OSIE GREENWAY AND MELISSA TABEEK



The BlattChaya warehouse feels like coming home, even for a guest. There is an indecipherable familiar scent when you walk through the door, with opera music and a carpet of brightly colored tiles that beckon one to the office of the heart of today's BlattChaya, Edgard Chaya.

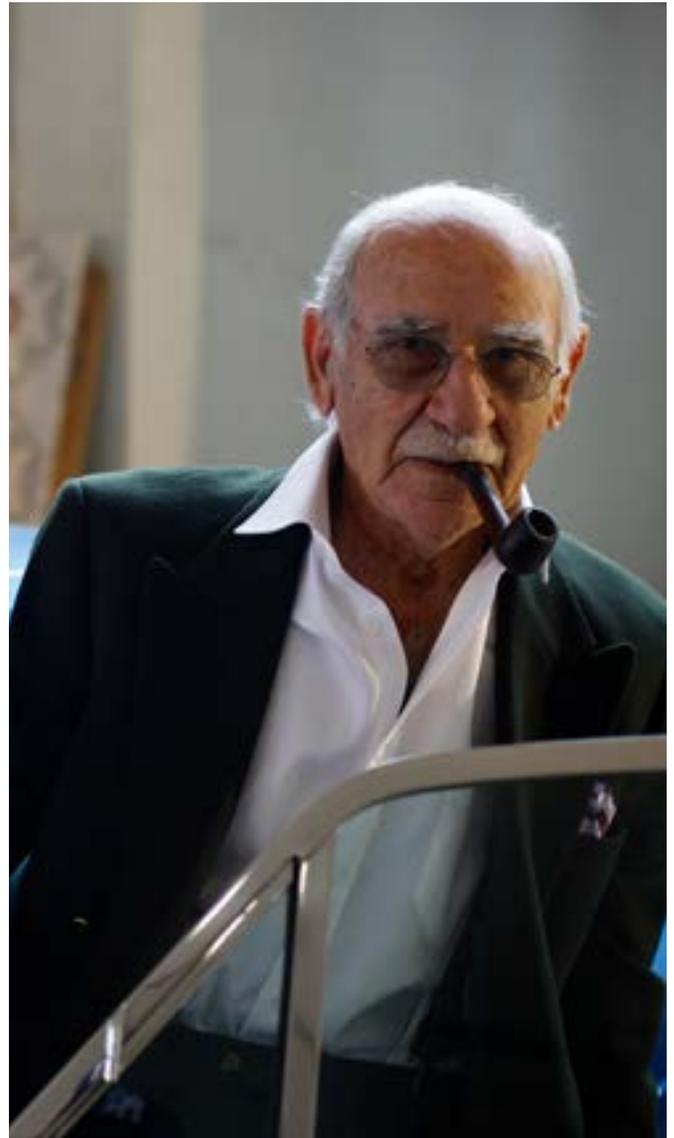
Edgard, who is always impeccably dressed, sits behind a large desk with his pipes and a tin of crushed BlattChaya tile fragments he uses as a filter at arm's reach. Sipping on an espresso while talking across from him, it feels more like a visit with a family friend than an interview. Edgard is clearly delighted to tell his story as he speaks about his revived family business, pride beams in his voice as he recounts all of the architects and others who have come through to see his work in person.

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"Big architects come from around the world, Italy, New York. One Italian, the only word he said, 'Fantastico, fantastico.' Everyone else says, 'Wow,'" he says happily. "I made a tile with the Arabic letter, wow. You can't imagine how many times I hear this."

There is a reason people come from around the world to visit BlattChaya's workplace in Dekwaneh, in the suburbs of Beirut. It is not only the artisanal cement tiles that bring them, but the story behind these tiles, of a man with a tireless passion who turned a hobby into a trademark.

BlattChaya began in the late 1800s, around 1881. Edgard's grandfather, Tannous Chaya, whom Edgard himself does not remember, began making cement tiles. It was tradition handed down through three generations from Edgard's grandfather to his son (Edgard's uncle) Lyan and onto his son, Nasri. The business ended with Nasri, who was not a savvy businessman Edgard says, and the factory was abandoned. This also coincided with the start of mass production of marble, rather than the traditional terrazzo tiles that can be seen in many older Lebanese homes from the late 1800s and after, becoming more popular as it became more affordable. This artisanal work all but disappeared.



This could have been the end of BlattChaya, except for a case that serendipitously came into Edgard's possession after his uncle passed away. It was filled with about 12 tile molds, some of which were broken, but they were enough to get started.

By that time, in 1996, Edgard had been retired for two years from his long career as a money exchange officer, and had grown weary of the rest. "The rest tired me," he says. He began experimenting with the molds. It took him four years to make his first.

His daughter, Caline Chaya Chaoul, was living in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia at the time and was used to her father's hobbies. "I was happy for him because he was retired and knowing what an active and handy-man he is, I knew how he would love to do this. I was happy to think at least he's making himself busy. We did not take this seriously [in the beginning]," she says. ▶

**A MAN WITH A TIRELESS PASSION WHO TURNED A HOBBY INTO A TRADEMARK**

## CULTURE CLASH

With much persistence, Edgard refined his technique. With time and resources at his disposal, he was able to do something that Caline says many others would have given up on. "It started with a passion with my father and because he wasn't eager to make money but eager to succeed, he did. He was patient enough to take his time, to succeed and to start having tiles made in the proper way and therefore being able to sell them," she says, continuing, "I think the most beautiful thing about this whole story is that Dad started doing tiles without him wanting to build a proper institution. He just wanted to do this to succeed and to bring back the heritage he had."

More than 100 years later, BlattChaya has now become a three-generation operation once again. Edgard is at the center, and each of the other family members has their place and their talent they also bring to the business. Karim Chaya, Edgard's son, is a well-known industrial designer who, despite co-founding the design and production firm, ACID, spends at least an hour at the office every day. Caline handles mainly marketing and Youmna is the one behind the improved website that includes a tile simulator that allows people to choose their own tile patterns and colors. This mix of knowledge, age and experience within one family makes work both more easy and difficult, Youmna says.

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**EVERYTHING IS IMPORTANT AND PRECISE, FROM THE COLOR PIGMENTATION TO THE INTRICATE, HANDMADE MOLDS**

"I learned that it was very hard. I was not working just with my mother who generation-wise thinks more like me, but I had to work with my grandfather. Very different ways of seeing things...But it creates an amazing synergy. You do learn a lot...It's extremely delicate, but very strong as well. We learn from each other, from our times," she says. Edgard is meticulous and adamant that the process remains exactly as his grandfather did it, with the only difference being that they use electricity. First, all sand used for the cement tiles is hand-sifted. It is then washed up to five times, or as many as it takes to clean it to Edgard's satisfaction, then it is spread to dry. Only once it is dry can it be used. The concrete tiles are made one by one, by a lengthy process of sanding, drying, curing, compressing, pouring, layering, mixing and polishing. Everything is important and precise, from the color pigmentation to the intricate, handmade molds.

One other thing Edgard is unwavering about is the fact that BlattChaya must stay near the production rate it is currently at, as this ensures that all the tiles stay handmade, with the proper quality, one by one. Each tile goes through a multiple-day process that cannot be rushed, with about 20-30 sq. meters per day produced. ▶







Each tile also has between 6 to 8 millimeters of color, to guarantee the color stays after much washing and wear. As Edgard says, it is not only the story and the look of the tiles that make them “BlattChaya,” but the fact that the quality stands above the rest.

Having family involved is natural for Edgard. He cannot work with people he does not love. He even has a special tile among the many designs — nearly all are named for different places in Lebanon — called “Macanaka,” name for his children: Maxime, Caline, Nabil and Karim. He loves his tiles, “my children,” he calls them, and he loves his employees. “If I don’t have a family, I would try to find people I love as much as my family,” he says. Apparently, he has done so. There are about 10 workers, and he cares for them as an extension of his blood working in the office.

“The people that are inside working with us, when he speaks about them, he calls them his children. “Lwleid.” ‘I have to bring for lwleid,’ he says. He really cares for them. He has to love his employees to be able to give and to work with them. His [employees] are his lwleid,” Caline says.

### **HE HAS TO LOVE HIS EMPLOYEES TO BE ABLE TO GIVE AND TO WORK WITH THEM. HIS [EMPLOYEES] ARE HIS LWLEID,” CALINE SAYS**

Though artisans and handmade products are now a global trend, there is still something special about a man who began an artisanal with only vague memories of watching his uncle hand press tiles. BlattChaya is well known not only in Lebanon and the Middle East, but throughout the world, with business now from New York to Geneva to Russia and many places in between. There is a delicate balance Youmna says they must maintain, to be innovative while keeping “the human soul” of BlattChaya. But ultimately, Edgard believes that people will always be looking for something tangible of the past and Youmna trusts this now.



“There’s so much pressure in what’s happening outside. I used to tell him, ‘If we don’t go, we’ll go backward,’ because this is how my generation was taught. If you don’t innovate, don’t continue going forward, [Blatt Chaya] will not,” Youmna says. “And this is what he told me: ‘You will be going forward if you can stay who you are, if you can keep how it was made in the past, to keep on going, this is going forward.’ This was something I understood.” ■