

STYLE FILE



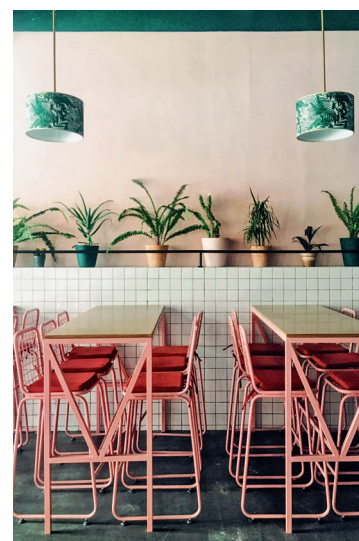


# DESIGN SCENE: TUNIS

The Tunisian capital is at the heart of  
the country's cultural renaissance

WORDS BY SARAH KHAN

Opposite,  
clockwise from  
left: Inside Dar  
Ben Gacem  
Kahia; lamps  
and pillows  
at Supersouk;  
a Baraa Ben  
Boubaker design  
in the medina;  
a doorway in  
Sidi Bou Said;  
Dar Ben Gacem  
Kahia; Club  
Gingembre;  
the terrace at Maison  
Dedine; from the  
Lyoum collection





## STYLE FILE



An unmarked black door on the fringes of Tunis' medina marks the entrance to photographer Sabri Ben Mlouka's lair. If you've been lucky enough to score an invite to one of his private evening gatherings, you'll follow flickering candles through a restored arabesque archway into a cavernous loft furnished with tables, an unmade bed and oversized photographs. Is this a gallery? A supper club? Or an eccentric's private atelier?

The answer is all of the above. Ben Mlouka rescued the abandoned building, turning it into an exhibition space for his work and a setting for the events he hosts with chef and TV personality Malek Labidi. Here, small, eclectic groups of guests experience Ben Mlouka's photography and Labidi's inventive dishes, like dates stuffed with foie gras and mint.

"For us it's a laboratory," says Ben Mlouka. "I try things in photography, and she tries things in gastronomy."

That such experiments could exist in the heart of Tunis was unfathomable a decade ago, under dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. But the Tunisian Revolution, which began in late 2010, changed everything. And with democracy has come creativity.

"When you are in a dictator system, your mind is sleeping," says Labidi, who returned from Europe the month the revolution began. "You don't allow yourself to see all your abilities



"WE FELT THAT MAYBE THERE IS A NEW ERA, A NEW CHAPTER. WE WANTED TO START A BRAND THAT'S A VISION OF THE NEW TUNISIA."

because you know you cannot realise your dreams. When they said, 'Now, people, you are completely free' – the creativity of everyone completely exploded."

Soon other Tunisians began returning home. "I wouldn't have come without the revolution," says Sofiane Ben Chaabane, who had been living in France. In the upmarket seaside suburb of La Marsa, he and his French wife, Claire, have recast a 100-year-old tiled villa as the office of their fashion brand, Lyoum. "We felt that maybe there is a new era, a new chapter," he says. "We wanted to start a brand that's a vision of the new Tunisia." In local Arabic dialect, lyoum means "today," and at the couple's nearby boutique, this

contemporary vision is easy to find. Billowing knee-length culottes and floral dresses hang next to shirts that proclaim "Lennon loved couscous" and "Gainsbourg loved harissa."

The country has long been a production hub for global brands, like Levi's. But now, says Ben Chaabane, "there's a new vision of 'made in Tunisia.'" The fresh creative energy has a centuries-old foundation—in the medina alone there are hundreds of artisanal workshops – and young designers are blending traditional workmanship with global sensibilities.


For her label Anissa Aida, designer Anissa Meddeb – who just opened an airy new boutique in the capital's Mutuelville neighbourhood – makes gossamer silk blouses

**From left:** Designer Anissa Meddeb's new Anissa Aida boutique in Mutuelville; Dar Ben Gacem Kahia. **Opposite, from top:** A display at Supersouk; Sidi Bou Said; Anissa Aida



evoking the striped motif of handwoven fouta towels and voluminous coats inspired by the burnoose cloaks worn by Berbers. Baraa Ben Boubaker shuttles between Nice and Tunis to work on her breezy resort wear with experts in the dyeing crafts, like ogle embroidery from Gabes and hayek weaving from Kairouan. Her collections retail at the elegant concept shop Musk & Amber alongside contemporary art and cutting-edge fashion from across the globe.

For a quick tour of Tunisia's creative renaissance, hit Supersouk, a gleaming two-story design emporium that houses 120 homegrown labels, most launched within the past few years. "When I was young, it was not the same Tunisia. When I left I said, 'I'll never come back, bye-bye!'" recalls its cofounder Isaure Bouyssonie, who is from a French family that has lived here for six generations. But she returned with her Swiss husband, Marlo Kara, in 2015 to create Supersouk and the furniture-and-housewares label Marlo & Isaure.

They embody the hope that endures in Tunis. "We just try to live every day," says Labidi, "and make our dreams come true." 

## GETTING BUSY IN THE CAPITAL ART AND SHOPPING

### SELMA FERIANI GALLERY

Look for young local artists like Lina Ben Rejeb and Malek Gnaoui in this former 1960s convent, now home to Tunisia's leading gallery — set to also open in London's South Kensington this autumn. [selmaferiani.com](http://selmaferiani.com)

### LYOUM

Pick up a spin on the denim dengri, the ubiquitous traditional workman's coat, at this homegrown boutique's outposts in the suburbs of La Marsa and El Menzah 1, which celebrate a pan-Mediterranean lifestyle with floaty fabrics. [lyoum.co](http://lyoum.co)

### SUPERSOUK

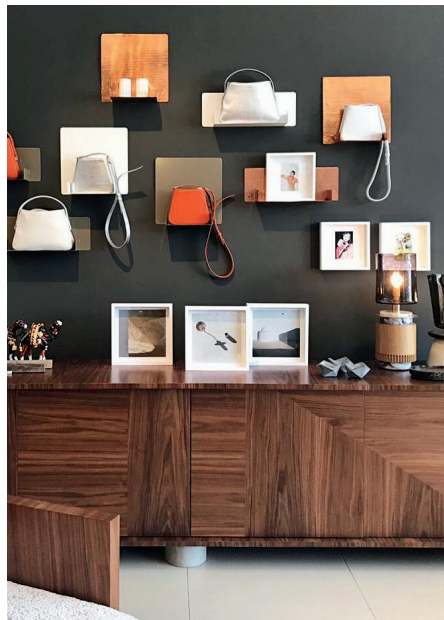
Highlights at Tunisia's top multibrand designer shop include Samaka, a menswear line by DJ-designer Aziz Kaleb; minimalist wooden lamps from JK Lighting; and ceramics by the house label, Marlo & Isaure. [supersoukshop.com](http://supersoukshop.com)

### ANISSA AIDA

Local fashion designer Anissa Meddeb opened her eponymous boutique this spring in the Mutuelleville neighbourhood to house her minimalist collections, which combine authentic workmanship with Japanese wabi-sabi aesthetics. [anissaaida.com](http://anissaaida.com)

### B7L9

The London- and Tunis-based Kamel Lazaar Foundation opened this new cultural venue in an underserved neighborhood of the city in 2019, bringing experimental contemporary art



installations from across North Africa and the Middle East. [kamelazaarfoundation.org](http://kamelazaarfoundation.org)

### MUSK & AMBER

Globe-trotting tastemaker Lamia Bousnina Ben Ayed brings her keen eye to the thoughtful curation of regional art and design at her concept shop and gallery in Tunis's Les Berges du Lac. [muskandambergallery.com](http://muskandambergallery.com)

### STAY

#### MAISON DEDINE

If this glamorous five-room luxury guesthouse in Sidi Bou Said were any closer to the water, you'd be swimming. Works by contemporary Tunisian artists adorn every room. [maisondedine.com](http://maisondedine.com)

### DAR BEN GACEM KAHIA

After the success of Dar Ben Gacem, the first of several traditional houses in the medina to be reborn as a hotel, owner Leila Ben Gacem opened a sister property nearby in a 17th-century house with a marble courtyard. [darbengacem.com](http://darbengacem.com)

### EAT AND DRINK

#### DAR EL JELD

Live qanun music and wall-to-wall tiles set the scene for an elegant dinner in the heart of the medina. [dareljeld.com](http://dareljeld.com)

### CLUB GINGEMBRE

One of the most popular nightclubs in Tunis, located in the trendy seaside district of Gammarth. [instagram.com/clubgingembre](https://www.instagram.com/clubgingembre)

### AU BON VIEUX TEMPS

Rub shoulders with artists and designers over pasta and regional wine at this lively bistro in La Marsa. [facebook.com/bonviemarsa](https://www.facebook.com/bonviemarsa)