



## TRADITIONS MAKE THE WORLD A HOME

Italian Gelato on a wintery coast  
Opening Maine to the world  
The music of good cooking



# THE MAINE-MOROCCO CONNECTION

ANOUAR MAJID HELPS  
MAKE MAINE OPEN TO  
THE WORLD

*Written by Deirdre Fulton*

For Morocco native Anouar Majid, the concept of tradition is truly at the heart of his academic and creative work. “I spent my entire life trying to figure out the impact of existing traditions on our thinking, including political actions,” says Majid, who serves as Vice President for Global Affairs at the University of New England. “How does one introduce radical ideas — meaning new ones — into well-established cultural traditions?”

This question has informed many aspects of Majid’s wide-ranging career. The answers are complicated, and sometimes controversial.

“National traditions are huge stumbling blocks for new ideas,” Majid says. This is an opinion that has evolved greatly over time, but also has roots in Majid’s early days as a scholar: “Since I was influenced by Marxist thought and analysis when I was a student, I read the world through that prism,” he tells *Incomer*.

“That automatically put me at odds with both capitalism and mainstream Moroccan traditions,” he continues. “It was very empowering to be able to explain the socioeconomic roots of poverty, not just say that it’s all mektoub, like we say, as if God chose to make some people rich and others poor.”

In every facet of Majid’s life, he has attempted to surface new perspectives, spur critical thinking, and confront deeply held assumptions. The result is an incredible breadth

of accomplishments that simultaneously embrace and challenge the traditions upon which we build our societies. Majid is founding director of the Center for Global Humanities at UNE, which is housed at the Portland campus and hosts live-streamed lectures that explore the human condition and problems facing modern civilization. A humanities professor, he also founded UNE’s English department, which he chaired from 2000-2009. Majid is the author of several non-fiction books that dig into orthodoxy, dissent, Islam, and the West (including *Islam and America: Building a Future Without Prejudice* and *A Call for Heresy: Why Dissent*

is Vital to Islam and America), as well as one novel, *Si Yousseff* (listed last year by the *Guardian* as one of the top 10 books set in Tangier). And that’s just what he does stateside.

After being tapped in 2010 to help globalize UNE, Majid conceived and established the university’s campus in Tangier, the ancient port city where he was born and lived until coming to the United States as a student in 1983. He has likened the city of Tangier to “poetry in motion.”

He currently serves as managing director of UNE’s operations in Morocco, which include the semester-long study abroad program (the campus includes state-of-the-art labs to accommodate UNE’s concentration of health sciences students) and the Tangier Global Forum, a Moroccan extension of the Center for Global Humanities presenting lectures by renowned speakers.

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This, he believes, is what convinced UNE’s Board of Trustees to move forward with the project. When Majid proposed the Tangier campus to the Board, the Arab Spring was in full swing. He admits that part of him “thought that our trustees would never allow it to happen in the midst of all the chaos in North Africa that was covered by the media nonstop.”

But the Board’s vote was unanimous in favor of establishing the campus — an achievement Majid counts as his “proudest moment of the whole experience. The rest was work — a lot of work, to be sure — but I was buoyed by the excitement I had witnessed.”

In Morocco, Majid says, “our students get to be in a Muslim, Arab, African, and Mediterranean country all at once. And they are only an hour away by ferry from Spain and Europe. Plus, Morocco is one of the safest countries in the world. For a university that seeking to expose its students to many cultural traditions, it really doesn’t get better than Morocco.”

Majid, who has lived in the U.S. for 35 years and in Maine since 1991, says he is “still experiencing cultural shocks on a regular basis. This is part of the invisible alienation of the immigrant,” he says. “It is hard to see and almost impossible to explain.”

Yet there is one American holiday that holds sway.

“As I look back,” Majid reflects, “I don’t think I acquired new traditions, except, perhaps, my absolute passion for the Fourth of July holiday.”

This passion is rooted in more than fireworks and cookouts, though. “I consider the American Revolution of 1776 to be the greatest and most defining event in modern history,” says Majid, who has argued that the American Revolution could be instructive for modern societies struggling under religious, political, and economic orthodoxies. The American Revolution, for Majid, represents a path away from tyranny and toward a culture of freedom.

Putting aside his affinity for the Fourth of July, Majid acknowledges that, more than any new tradition, his nearly four decades in the U.S. have bestowed the chance for his own “passions and skills to grow and even flourish.”

“The U.S.,” he says, “is truly a land of opportunity.”



## TILE BY TILE

In 2018, the University of New England (UNE) unveiled an authentic Moroccan tile wall inside the Danielle N. Ripich Commons on the Biddeford campus.

Spearheaded by Anouar Majid, the wall “is like a chronicle in tile of the shared cultural heritage of Spain and Morocco,” he said upon its unveiling.

The project employed traditional craftsmanship, with panels handcrafted in the Moroccan city of Fez by Arabesque, an internationally-renowned company owned by the Naji family, which has been creating Andalusian Moroccan tilework for more than 750 years. They were created in Morocco and installed at UNE by Master artisan Ahmed El Mghari, who has been learning the craft since he was a young boy in Fez.

According to El Mghari, the patterns appearing on the different panels pay homage to the shapes found in Islam’s sacred structures, such the Ka`aba in Mecca or the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, as well as to the refined artistry of Andalusian Spain.

“There’s no better expression of our global aspirations,” Majid said at the time. “It reflects not only our presence in Morocco, but also our global aspiration to be open to other civilizations and to embrace other cultures and traditions.”

