

GOURMET

AT HOME WITH THE FOODIES

They have the ability to make or break a chef's day, but what goes on in their own kitchens? We take a peek inside the lives of Dubai's most prolific food bloggers...

DUBAI BITES

34-year-old American Nausheen Noor started blogging in 2010.

Was food always an important part of your life? It played a big role in our family so I've always been a foodie. My mother made cooking elaborate meals at home seem effortless. She inspired me then and still does. I started baking at the age of six and even then, the magic of watching ingredients transform in the oven was totally enthralling to me.

How did that develop into a food blog? I can be quite shy and introverted, so I started writing as a way to challenge myself. It's been a wonderful exercise in self-expression and creativity.

You blog a lot of your own recipes. Where do you get your inspiration? The market usually dictates what I cook. I see what is freshest, or discover a new ingredient, then try to create something new with that.

What sort of food do you most enjoy cooking at home? It's usually based around a region. I like researching recipes and exploring different cuisines. One night it might be Korean, another Spanish. I mix it up!

Do you cook mostly to entertain, or do you spend time in the kitchen even if you're eating alone? I definitely cook for other people. If I'm by myself, I'll eat whatever is in the fridge.

Do you have a favourite Dubai restaurant? It used to be Kisaku at the Khaleej Palace Hotel. But now that Chef Takahashi has started Tomo at Raffles, I suspect I'll be spending more time there...

How do you think Dubai's food scene compares to that elsewhere? Dubai is great for the sheer diversity of ethnic cuisine. There are so many nationalities represented here, and everyone wants a taste of home.

What do you think the scene here is missing? I'd like to see some more creativity on menus. I also miss the intimacy of small, neighbourhood restaurants, the kind that serve food which could be homemade.

Do you have a pet hate when it comes to eating out? Overwrought dishes that still somehow taste insipid and uninspired.

If you could only eat one type of cuisine forever more, which would it be and why? It would be Japanese – I admire their dedication to perfection. Even the humblest of establishments will create dishes with a level of precision, purity and artistry not found anywhere else in the world.

What ingredients are always in your fridge? Eggs, parmesan cheese and dark chocolate.

What's your biggest culinary guilty pleasure? No question – pizza.





FOODIVA

39-year-old Samantha Wood launched her restaurant review blog in 2011.

When did you first begin to think of yourself as a foodie? I've always been passionate about food thanks to my parents' jobs in the hospitality industry. I then had a career in hospitality PR, developing a good sense for what makes or breaks a dining experience, and I always search out a good restaurant to the point that my life is meaningless without great food!

What prompted you to write a food blog? I felt there was a gap in Dubai for an online resource dedicated to impartial restaurant reviews. I pay my own way, refuse freebies and hope to have now narrowed that gap!

Do you have a favourite Dubai restaurant? Can I have two please? La Petite Maison at DIFC ticks all the boxes – food, location, interior and atmosphere. It's pricey but worth every dirham. At the other end of the scale, Bu'Qtair, a hidden beach shack, serves the most exquisite fresh fish cooked Keralan style. Cheap, cheerful and clean.

Do you have a pet hate when it comes to the eating out experience? Two! Nagging, over-attentive or submissive service and removing one or two diner's plates before the whole table have finished their meal.

How do you deal with getting recognised in restaurants? My reviews tend to focus on newly opened restaurants so it's rare, but if I do get recognised, I make it clear in the review that my cover's been blown so my readers can make their own informed decision.

What would you like to see more of on Dubai's food scene? Dubai restaurants invest in the highest calibre of chefs, knowledgeable sommeliers and no-expense-spared decor, but sadly, service is an ongoing challenge with poor menu knowledge, inconsistency and constant upselling, not helped by a lack of sufficient training. There are only a handful of restaurants here that get this right.

Do you cook a lot at home and, if so, what sort of food do you most enjoy cooking? I cook at home a couple of times a week and am a sucker for trying out new recipes. Because I eat out a lot, my home cooking tends to be reasonably healthy and carb free. Recently, I've fallen in love with concocting Moroccan tagines.

What three ingredients are always in your fridge? Free-range eggs, a selection of cheese, Greek yoghurt and I really need a fourth... bubbles, of course!

What's your biggest culinary guilty pleasure? Homemade Swiss cheese fondue.



THE HEDONISTA
*Australian Sarah Walton, 38,
launched her blog in 2010.*

Has food always been an important part of your life?

Not really. I was a very simple eater until I started waiting tables and studying wine in my early twenties. It snowballed into a state of near mania that is continuing to grow.

How often do you eat out?

At least twice a week but usually four or five times, including less substantial lunches.

Do you have a favourite Dubai restaurant?

I find that restaurants in Dubai go up and down – the scene is very changeable. If I had to tell a Dubai resident the ONE place they should go, it would be Table 9, for a fine dining experience unique to this city. For visitors though, it's always something regional. I love watching their faces light up when we eat somewhere like a Yemini tent!

You talk about your children a lot in your blog. Has your attitude to food changed much since you became a mum?

Dining with kids has been a learning curve. At first I tried to appease them with junk, but now their palates are maturing and they enjoy it. My youngest wants to have his 6th birthday party at the Burj al Arab – what have I created?!?

How do you find Dubai's food scene in terms of eating with children?

It's fairly good. Kids are welcome almost anywhere, but I don't like the emphasis on trashy food for them. Chicken nuggets and fish and chips won't help children explore their palate. Why should they eat frozen and deep fried rubbish while we get cuisine?

Your blog focuses on travel as well as food. Does cuisine factor when you choose a travel destination?

Not necessarily, but it definitely comes into the plan. Exploring the local cuisine is my favourite way to dissect a culture. Local food can tell stories about invasions, tradition, festivals and family life as well as any trip to the museum.

What's your favourite culinary getaway?

Easy – France. The markets in summer are unparalleled, from tomatoes, berries and cheese to seafood. We always stay somewhere with a kitchen because the food is so fresh and perfect, you can throw together simple meals effortlessly.

What makes a good family dinner?

Time and no iThings. Or if we're out, then lots of iThings!

What's your biggest culinary guilty pleasure?

Dulce de leche – scooped straight out of the jar – with almond biscotti and coarse fleur de sel sprinkled on top. It's Portugal, Italy and France in a million calories. ●