



Flavours of Dubai

From traditional street foods in the old quarter to innovative dishes downtown, opportunities are increasing for visitors to taste Emirati and other regional cuisines. Locals lead the way.

By Radhina Almeida Coutinho Photography by Philip Lee Harvey

this spread:

(left) *Missov mante*
(meat dumplings
and yogurt) from
downtown's Mayrig;
(right) Omnia
Gourmet's Chef
Silvena Rowe

“*ESH AL BULBUL. Kul wa-shkur. Boukaj . . .*”

A litany of baklava names slides off Arva Ahmed’s tongue as she peruses trays of the sweet at a shop in labyrinthine Old Dubai. Nightingale’s Nest. Eat and Give Thanks. Knapsack. Each name corresponds to a particular type of nutty, syrupy parcel. A champion of Dubai’s old-school eateries, Ahmed says, “I have been buying baklava from **Al Samadi Sweets** since I was 6 years old, and I can’t imagine buying it anywhere else.”

Across town in glamorous New Dubai, Samantha Wood introduces me to a modern twist on the classic dessert. **Qbara’s** Baklava Smash dances with the archetypal flavours of the Middle East (cinnamon, orange blossom, rose water). But there’s a twist: Executive Pastry Chef Elizabeth Stevenson crumbles up golden pastry, walnuts and dark chocolate, and then tops it with creamy camel’s milk ice cream. “Qbara’s cuisine is fusion, spinning traditional Arabic ingredients and dishes rather cleverly, and serving food that is lighter and, well . . . Arab-esque,” Wood explains.

I’ve long been fascinated by the food in Dubai, where I live and blog about my culinary discoveries far and near. But to gain more insight into Dubai’s dining scene, both old and new, I’ve enlisted the help of two of the city’s most popular and knowledgeable food bloggers, Ahmed (www.iliveinafryingpan.com) and Wood (www.foodiva.net), each of whom hosts local food tours—which couldn’t be more different. Ahmed dives straight into the narrow streets of Dubai’s old trading heart, a world of flashing neon shop signs and glass-paned stores spotlighting mannequins dressed in showy, bejewelled gowns. In contrast, Wood handpicks inventive, contemporary addresses for savouring modern Middle Eastern cuisine. Both tours, though, reflect why this is an exciting time to eat Middle Eastern food in Dubai: A vast and varied swathe of Emirati and other regional cuisines awaits, a newly accessible world in a city that has focused visitor attention mostly on Western European flavours.

No surprise—Qbara is part of Wood’s food tour. One of the hottest recent entrants on the restaurant scene, its name is basically the word “Arabic” spelled backwards, which illustrates its philosophy of turning regional food on its head. Just take the dessert platter: In addition to baklava, I sample a crème brûlée with a honeyed tinge of saffron, and an Arabic coffee “Pick Me Up” that playfully combines the textures of soft chocolate torte, coffee meringue and Turkish coffee ice cream. It’s

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this spread:
(left) Qbara's Baklava Smash and typographic wall exterior;
(right) baklava at Old Dubai's Al Samadi Sweets

hard to pick a favourite, but if I must, it's the Turkish delight chocolate bar—sticky *lokum* dressed in chocolate and served with a delicate rose-water ice cream.

Qbara is just the sort of trendy place that appeals to Dubai's multicultural population, which comprises more than 200 different nationalities. But despite any "melting pot" descriptions, the city is less an amalgamation of different traditions than a symbiotic collection of cultures—learning, emulating, borrowing, flirting with each other at the fringes. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the local dining culture. Immigrant populations form the fabric of Dubai's dining scene, and Emirati cuisine is itself a coming together of Bedouin culinary traditions overlaid with spices carried in from the East by Arab explorers of yore.

"You can see an interesting split in the Dubai food scene when it comes to Middle Eastern food," Ahmed observes. "You have the authentic, immigrant-run joints in areas like Deira and Bur Dubai, where Jordanian, Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, Egyptian, Yemeni, Iraqi, Moroccan, Turkish and Iranian restaurants cook the food their countrymen crave. In the newer areas of the city, you have restaurants that are attempting to entice the Western palate to try Middle Eastern food. In Old Dubai, you don't find this desire to make the food accessible. Everyone already knows what they want."

The observation hits home when I compare the ingredients on Ahmed's and Wood's tour menus. At the traditional **Al Tawasol**—just around the corner from Old Dubai's most recognizable landmark, the Deira Clock Tower—Ahmed highlights the use of *bzar*, an Emirati roasted spice made from pounding together cumin, fennel, cinnamon, coriander, black peppercorns, red chillies and turmeric. *Bzar* or *baharat* (a similar spice mix) forms

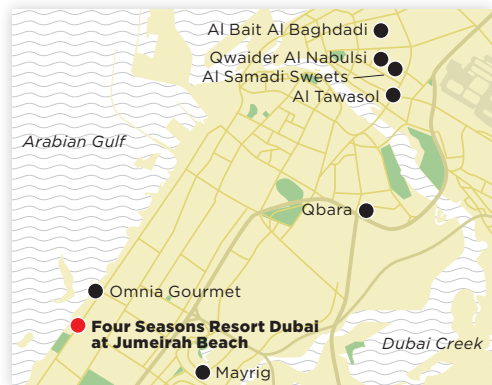


“Chickpea falafels stuffed with chilli paste and onions are perhaps the best-known Arabic street food. At Qwaider Al Nabulsi, I enjoy this traditional falafel mahshi with Ahmed, who notes the tangy key ingredient: sumac, a crimson, lemony spice that's a mainstay of Levantine cooking.”

this spread:
(clockwise from top left) Ibrahim Qwaider, owner of Qwaider Al Nabulsi, and the restaurant's classic falafel mahshi; Al Tawasol's laham salona, or curried lamb, and neon exterior; Omnia Gourmet's bzar-crusted tataki of Wagyu beef; teapots from the souk in Old Dubai



DESERT OASIS | A New Four Seasons



sleek concepts by Adam D. Tihany, outfitted with elegant pieces from Italian furniture maker Colber. Tihany is acclaimed for his lofty designs within the Burj Khalifa, the city’s most celebrated landmark. The Resort’s market-inspired restaurant Suq and lounge-level Shai Salon pay homage to the local vernacular, with Arabic favourites featured prominently. The suave Hendricks Bar, Asian-inspired Sea Fu restaurant and rooftop Mercury Lounge complete Dubai’s most anticipated new dining collection.

Executive Pastry Chef David Peduzzi is digging into the desert for inspiration at the new **Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach**, blending local ingredients like date molasses and camel’s milk and heady Middle Eastern flavours such as rose water and pistachio into inventive new desserts.

“I want to give diners a sense of place,” Peduzzi says. “Desserts naturally call for an imaginative approach, and the region has a unique flavour profile. I’ve been visiting local suppliers to find interesting produce, and we’re looking at having some fun with what we find.”

The Resort adds five glamorous venues to the beachfront dining scene, three of which are

this spread:
(left) Camel driver Hassan Khasam heads towards a Platinum Heritage dinner in the desert just outside Dubai; (right) the Burj Khalifa skyscraper is not only the centrepiece of downtown Dubai, but also the tallest building in the world.



FOR MORE
Four Seasons chefs share their favourite international dishes in Dubai.
taste.fourseasons.com

the base of the Arabian Gulf kitchen, liberally used in dishes like *machboos*, also known as *kabsa* (spiced rice with stewed meat and vegetables), and *laham salona* (curried lamb). At **Omnia Gourmet**, which I visit with Wood, the same spice mix makes a more subtle and globally minded appearance in the form of bzar-crusted tataki of Wagyu beef.

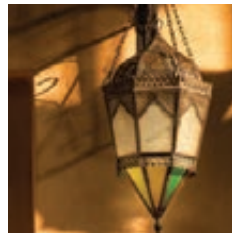
Chickpea falafels stuffed with chilli paste and onions are perhaps the best-known Arabic street food. At **Qwaider Al Nabulsi**, I enjoy this traditional falafel *mahshi* with Ahmed, who notes the tangy key ingredient: sumac, a crimson, lemony spice that's a mainstay of Levantine cooking. Back at Omnia, the same spice creatively accents a foie gras crème brûlée with caramelised dates.

Headed by Silvena Rowe (of London's Quince restaurant fame and the BBC's *Saturday Kitchen*), the quirky Omnia puts a contemporary twist on Emirati food. "About 75 percent of her ingredients are locally sourced [in the high season, or winter months], which is fairly impressive in Dubai," Wood says. "Rowe has done her homework when it comes to studying Emirati cuisine and putting her spin on it. It's refreshing to finally see restaurants in Dubai rely less on importing foreign concepts and more on really developing something that's homegrown."

Interest specifically in Emirati cuisine is enjoying a resurgence in Dubai. The city takes great pride in its ethnic eateries, and many chefs and local tours now understand the value in showcasing little-known national dishes. While Levantine favourites like hummus, kibbeh, baba ganoush, fattoush, tabbouleh and kebabs once dominated most "traditional" desert dining tours, today's boutique tour operators are including freshly cooked Emirati fare. Dishes like *harees*—a wheat and meat stew popular across the Gulf region—have found their way onto desert menus.



EMERGING SCENE | Secret Suppers



Underground supper clubs are making a debut across Dubai. With guest lists curated to include eclectic individuals, secret supper clubs offer bold diners "a sense of adventure," says

Tomas Reger, a private chef and restaurant consultant. He has worked with digital social concierge **Lime & Tonic** to conceptualise a number of Secret Gourmet Supper Club evenings, driven by the idea of the un-restaurant. "You don't know the location, who you'll meet or what's on the menu," Reger says. "Our guests are from all walks of life, which makes it more interesting."

Emirati friends Alamira Noor Bani Hashim and Buthaina Al Mazrui, the duo behind **The Dinner Club by No.57**—dubbed "the toughest reservation list to get on" by *Time Out Abu Dhabi*—says it's the people who make the dinners. "We tend to pick extroverts, influencers and interesting characters," Al Mazrui says. "Sometimes they are people we want to meet; sometimes it's someone a friend recommends. We keep an eye out for fascinating people living in or visiting the UAE to invite as guests to our next supper club."

These guests have included the likes of **Christian Louboutin** and **Sama and Haya Abu Khadra**, the twin Saudi-born Palestinian fashion darlings. All enjoy menus that are tailored to the particular location and theme. "We typically invite new guests to each dinner and are always looking for fun, outgoing people from different backgrounds," Al Mazrui says. "Dubai is so multicultural, and there are so many creative people."

this spread:

(clockwise from top left) Spices from the Souk Al Bahar; mint-scented melon, sumac-crusted *labneh* and za'atar ricotta from Omnia Gourmet; dinner preparation at Platinum Heritage's safari; Zesty Arabian Delight from Pastry Chef David Peduzzi at Four Seasons Resort Dubai at Jumeirah Beach and sunrise from the Resort; a day at the souk

Tourists tuck into lavish spreads within tents pitched amid the dunes as part of **Platinum Heritage Luxury Tours and Safaris**. Its “Heritage Wildlife Drive and Bedouin Breakfast” serves dishes like *rgaag* (crêpe-like bread), *balaleet* (sweet vermicelli served with egg) and *chbaab* (plump pancakes). Some extend the experience with an overnight safari that features authentic Arabic dishes such as *shorbat adas* (lentil soup), *ouzi* (lamb cooked underground) or camel-meat casserole. “Food in the UAE is more than nourishment; it is an important social and cultural activity—it is a blessing, savoured amongst family and friends,” says Adam McEwan, managing director of Platinum Heritage. “We have set up a social atmosphere where our guests mingle with each other as they share this very special meal.”

The revival of Emirati cuisine—its spices, limited pantry and bare-bones Bedouin cooking techniques—is inspiring a new breed of chefs. Omnia’s Rowe is exactly the sort of chef who personifies Dubai’s emerging dining scene. With her international culinary experience, Turkish-Bulgarian heritage, flamboyant bleached blond hair and sequinned abaya, if anyone can succeed in reinventing Emirati food for modern Dubai, it’s Rowe. “I’m lightening up the traditional dishes, presenting them in a healthier, fresher and Instagram-friendly format,” she says. Her smartphone-toting patrons are snapping it up—you can’t trawl the Dubai food scene online without seeing pictures of Omnia’s kitschy, butterfly-covered café walls and dessert counter.

Whether you go for the glow of New Dubai cuisine or the traditional fare of Old Dubai, you can’t help but appreciate the similarities. Words like “osmosis,” “layering” and “culinary marriage” pepper both Ahmed’s and Wood’s descriptions of their tours’ dishes, from grilled Iraqi *masgouf* (river carp roasted over wooden embers) at **Al Bait Al Baghdadi** in Old Dubai to Armenian *missov mante* (meat dumplings and yogurt) at nostalgic **Mayrig** in the heart of downtown. The tours remind me that the diversity of today’s Middle Eastern food results from melding multiple cultures—Ottoman, Bedouin, Mongolian, South Asian. This fusion is as prevalent on today’s Arabian Peninsula as it was centuries ago. And now it’s cooler than ever to be, as Wood says, Arab-esque. ▢

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this spread: (clockwise from top left) Family portrait at downtown Dubai’s Mayrig and readying the restaurant’s dining room; Chef Sayed Qadir Shah prepares Iraqi *masgouf* (grilled, seasoned carp) at Al Bait Al Baghdadi