

DIGESTING DUBAI

Beyond the desert dunes and diamond lives of the UAE entrepot, a new generation of local and imported chefs is cooking up a culinary revolution fed by local ingredients and refined regional cuisines.

STORY REX AGUADO

COURTESY JUMEIRAH GROUP / AL MAHARA DESERT RESORT AND SPA / FOODIVA / OMNIA / CLÉ DUBAI

Al Mahara restaurant at Burj Al Arab Jumeirah hotel

If you build it, they will come. And if they come, they will need to eat – and some of them will want to eat very well indeed. The evolution of Dubai’s tourism scene seems to have followed this dictum: After the mad rush to build hotels and themed destinations for all market segments, the commercial and leisure capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been busy luring the world’s top chefs.

And while most of these celebrity chefs have practically cloned their “signature” restaurants to serve the Dubai market, a much more interesting trend seems to be emerging in the UAE, with home-grown, imported or locally trained chefs experimenting with indigenous ingredients or serving up inventive versions of standard cuisines from the Middle East, north Africa and the Levant.

From next to non-existent in 1990, the number of restaurants in the city is currently estimated at 6,500 serving a population of about two million, with expats accounting for 80 per cent of the total. A recent Euromonitor International report sees the number of Dubai’s restaurants hitting 19,000 by 2019 on the eve of the World Expo 2020 that the city will host.

MELTING POT

Most of these restaurants are attached to hotels and resorts, with some tourism estates hosting as many as 50 food and beverage outlets. But standalone food and beverage establishments have also been on the rise, led by independent operators such as Okku, Comptoir 102 and Fraiche, followed by the new wave of La Petite Maison, La Serre, Q’bara, Clé and Omnia, just to name a few. It is this second group that is shaking up the city’s culinary scene.

“Dubai’s restaurants have always been heavily reliant on chefs from around the world, whether young and budding, or more experienced, for the reason that there are very few professional chefs who hail from the Emirates. They each bring their own individual style of cooking to create a city that is a multicultural melting pot of different cuisines,” says Samantha Wood, founder of impartial restaurant review website www.foodiva.net and Dubai dine-around experiences.

“While we have a handful of highly traditional restaurants, we are beginning to see a creative spin shine through with restaurant concepts such Seven Sands at The Beach, and also Turkish-Bulgarian



chef Silvena Rowe’s restaurants, where she is heavily influenced by Emirati dishes and uses locally sourced ingredients where possible,” Wood adds.

HAUTE HOTEL

Any survey of Dubai’s food scene would have to start at its top hotels, which initially imported some of the world’s best chefs and presented Emirati and Middle Eastern cuisine to international guests at their in-house restaurants. Top of the list would be the Jumeirah Group, led by its flagship Burj Al Arab Jumeirah hotel with its seven restaurants, including the submarine-like Al Mahara and the airship-like Al Muntaha and its attached Skyview Bar.

“The food scene here is very fast – there are so many chefs coming in,” says Burj executive chef Maxime Luvara. “It’s very dynamic, and Dubai is growing so fast, so there’s space for every kind of chef and his or her cuisine.”

Luvara has a team of about 200 senior and junior chefs working at the Burj’s seven restaurants, where menus are changed thrice a year, which is just as well as one probably needs several days to savour their offerings. Typically, guests in the know start at Skyview Bar with its stunning view of Dubai Marina and the Palm Jumeirah, while sipping a 2003 Dom Pérignon Cuvée Rosé and nibbling on a generous pile of Sturia caviar.

For dinner, one can head to the adjacent Al Muntaha, or take the exclusive lift to the aquarium world of Al Mahara. The former has about 800 labels on its wine list, so the smart option is the wine-pairing



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— Samantha Wood, FoodDiva



02 Burj Al Arab Jumeirah executive chef Maxime Luvara

03 Skyview Bar’s signature summer cocktail at Burj Al Arab

04 Samantha Wood

05 Clé’s *harira* with chickpea and lentil soup with lime and stuffed dates

06 Greg Malouf

07 Clé’s *ouzi* of marinated and roasted baby lamb with meat and nut rice

menu that takes one on a global gustatory adventure. At Al Mahara, the Louis Roederer Cristal 2006 is served in Zwiesel flutes made exclusively for the Burj. The chef can prepare 3-4 courses featuring the day’s catch with the sommelier helping out on the wine pairing.

HEALTHY HERITAGE

Luvara admires the new wave of Dubai chefs exploring Arabic cuisine. “They are not really re-inventing it, but they are making it more refined, more presentable,” he says. “It’s good that some chefs are playing around with tradition, but we also need some places where we can find the traditional, otherwise we risk losing the heritage.”

Heritage is also a concern at Al Maha Desert Resort, but it has more to do with what is being cooked than how it is cooked. “As part of the Choose Wisely initiative initiated by the Emirates Wildlife Society in association with WWF, we use only local fish and seafood whose populations are at a healthy and



sustainable level,” says chef Piotr Kamieniczny. Nestled in glorious isolation in a 200-square-kilometre desert reserve for white antelopes, oryxes and gazelles, Al Maha is a super-exclusive Bedouin-inspired resort for 96 guests. Its Al Diwaan restaurant serves only organic fine-dining fare, amid sweeping views of desert dunes and wildlife. “Our guests are up to date on the latest food trends and are very conscious of what they eat, so we are always ready to accommodate food preferences,” Kamieniczny says. From Al Maha and across the city, the Atlantis The Palm Dubai is also busy tweaking its local offerings. “We are currently renovating our signature restaurant, Levantine, where we are looking to take the traditional Levant cuisine and add a fresh new feel, without losing touch with tradition,” says Sascha Triemer, vice-president for culinary services at the Atlantis, home to Nobu’s Dubai outpost and the dramatic Ossiano Seafood Restaurant.



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INDEPENDENT TASTES

“I think we have some very forward thinking chefs doing Arabic and Levant cuisine who are embracing modern techniques and funky dish presentation to match their international counterparts,” Triemer adds, citing Khulood Atiq, deemed the first female Emirati celebrity chef.

Another chef to watch is Mohamad Ali Makki, the sous chef at Madinat Jumeirah’s Khaymat Al Bahar Restaurant that specialises in Lebanese food. Their recent buffet for *iftar* – the evening meal when Muslims end their daily Ramadan fast at sunset – was a veritable Aladdin’s cave of Arabic flavours and treats, with the irresistible *pièce de résistance*: the dessert showcase designed by executive pastry chef Paul Hayward featuring candied nuts and fruits, milk-



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“HOME-GROWN RESTAURANTS ARE BECOMING A TREND AT THE MOMENT BUT THEY WILL ALSO BECOME THE FUTURE OF DUBAI ... WITH ITS UNIQUE BLEND OF DIFFERENT CULTURES AND DYNAMIC CUISINES, DUBAI HAS THE POTENTIAL TO RIVAL LONDON, NEW YORK AND PARIS”

— Izu Ani, La Serre Bistro and Boulangerie

- 08 Sunset aperitifs at Al Maha Desert Resort
- 09 La Serre Bistro and Boulangerie
- 10 Izu Ani
- 11 Madinat Jumeirah’s Khaymat Al Bahar Restaurant
- 12 Mohamad Ali Makki



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based *mouhalabieh* pudding, semolina-based *maamul* tamer cookies, *halva* and *maakaroun*.

A gastronomic tour of Dubai is not complete without doing the rounds of the city’s cutting-edge independent restaurants, among them Clé at the Dubai International Financial Centre, the very theatrical Q’Bara near the international airport, and La Serre and Omnia in Downtown Dubai.

Given his Lebanese background, Australian chef Greg Malouf – famous for MoMo in Melbourne and Olive in Hong Kong – is a natural fit for Dubai, so it’s no surprise that his massive venue is called Clé, or “key” in French. Being in a special economic zone, Clé can serve

– but not display – alcohol. However, it’s not all roses. “Produce is the biggest issue here,” Malouf says. “Things do grow here in sand, but I seldom use them because the water is not right – it’s desalinated and there’s no dirt.”

Most of Clé’s ingredients come from Europe, with bits from Lebanon and Turkey, though deliveries can also prove challenging, Malouf adds. Still, he is happy that several chefs are tracking down great produce in Dubai and promoting the importance of local, sustainable farming. “It’s about time Middle Eastern food is shaken up a little bit,” he says.

ALL SHOOK UP

Stirring and shaking have been a constant in the life of Izu Ani, the Nigerian-born, London-bred and pan-European-trained chef at multi-awarded La Serre, which he set up in 2013 a few years after moving to Dubai to launch La Petite Maison in 2009.

La Serre’s boulangerie wing is infused with fresh-baked aromas, while the bistro is as smart as the best of the lot on the Cote D’Azur. This is haute cuisine in bistro format. The very polished flavours here are French-Mediterranean, with a palpable African, Indian Ocean and Levant inflections (think thinly sliced scallop marinated in sumac and lime, or sea bream ceviche with apple).

Ani sources about 30 per cent of La Serre ingredients locally. He’s just opened a gourmet shawarma venture called S’wich in Dubai Marina and is now working on La Serre Research and Development Kitchen, a lab-kitchen where any chef can experiment with ingredients, techniques and style. In a way, Ani is shaking up things again. “Dubai is such a cosmopolitan city, with so many different cultures – it’s the perfect playground for chefs to perfect their skills,” Ani says.

“Home-grown restaurants are becoming a trend at the moment but they will also become the future of Dubai,” Ani adds. “With its unique blend of different cultures and dynamic cuisines, Dubai has the potential to rival London, New York and Paris.”

WISH FULFILLED

If Turkish-Bulgarian chef Silvena Rowe had her way, she’d probably add Los Angeles to Ani’s list. But that’s jumping ahead. Leaving behind her TV cooking shows and celebrity clients in London, Rowe moved to Dubai in 2013 and, with a local business partner, set up the restaurant brand Omnia (“wish” in Arabic) a few months later. Within a year, she has five venues in Dubai, with a couple more in the pipeline for Doha and Kuwait. In five years, she wants to break into the US, via Los Angeles.

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— Silvena Rowe, Omnia Group

13 Berries in elderflower jelly and vanilla panna cotta from Omnia by Silvena

14 Jumbo Arabian Gulf prawns, also from Omnia by Silvena

15 Silvena Rowe

locally sourced – which is almost unheard of in the UAE, especially in Dubai,” Rowe says.

Rowe, who has Muslim roots on her father’s side, wants to make Omnia synonymous with “delicious and healthy food” – something very overused, so she presents herself as living proof of her food philosophy: by cutting back on sugar and meat, eliminating gluten and dairy, and shifting to nuts and plants (most of them consumed raw), Rowe says she lost eight kilos in four months.

“All these celebrity chefs, they come and go. So for me, it was a no-brainer – you’re either here to do something amazing, or don’t bother leaving London then,” she says.

Rowe says Omnia by Silvena, her flagship, is a celebration of the spirit of Dubai – “glitzy, glossy, shiny, aspirational” – designed by French-Tunisian artist El Seed. In contrast, her dishes are stunningly simple yet decadently delicious. She uses local veal and chicken, seafood from Oman and crabs from Dubai, but she sources lamb and beef from Canada, and wagyu from Australia (though she uses local olive oil for her burger). She regularly visits her suppliers’ farms in the UAE, “so when I say it’s organic, it’s organic – because I’ve seen it.”

In a way, Rowe wants to prove that there’s a solid market for genuine Emirati cuisine – even if that means no alcohol on the premises. “In the Koran, we often talk about ‘the gateway to heaven’. My gateway to heaven is by offering people very clean food,” she says. ☺

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