

Home-grown concepts shine in Dine Around night

IT'S A WHILE since I've seen five venues in one night – probably 15 years, when Dubai had no trouble enticing me out all night as a young-ish singleton. How times change.

Tonight I'm a guest of foodiva – popular food blogger Samantha Wood, strangely one of the first people I met back in 1999 – and her enthusiasm for food and the city remains undiminished.

Our 12-strong group for the Dine Around Dubai night (supported by MMI/Moët and Careem) is a pleasant mix which includes an events head for an organic food markets company, PR executive, female business traveller from London, newly arrived interior designer from Pakistan, and two men who work in the military and share a passion for food.

This evening's hand-picked quintet has been chosen to promote home-grown concepts – which, even before I've had my first mouthful, instantly appeals, given the prevalence of multinational brands and franchises.

We set sail on the attractive terrace of Tomo at Raffles Dubai, where sushi, tuna and sashimi are presented on an attractive wooden boat. As most of us prepare to snap the chopsticks, Wood explains how Japanese eat sushi with their fingers; her blend of local and international knowledge elevates the Dine Around experience from your standard food tour.

Thereafter we head down to the Italian Solo Bistronomia and Bar for a second appetiser. Many of Solo's dishes are influenced by specific regions of Italy. The grape sapa bread accompanying the chicken liver pate is a sweet Sardinian bread; the fresh burrata with caponata is Sicilian; while the gnocchi in the organic gluten-free potato gnocchi with prawns, mushrooms and veal bacon is an



ingredient common to Veneto in the north, and the poached lobster salad is served with a mix of celery, tomatoes, onions, basil and avocado. The Solo pomodoro dish with different textures of tomatoes is a new one to be added to the menu – both these dishes are chef Corrado's creative interpretations.



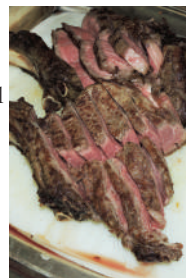
It's a short walk around the corner to Qbara (phonetic for Arabic, back to front) whose range of Middle Eastern contemporary dishes



has established a name for itself. "I always say if you have one night in Dubai, you have to come here," beams Wood. "For the first time, we actually have a restaurant which embraces the food from the region we live in." Most of us drool

over the poussin marinated with sumac, onions and dried yogurt on thick buttery flatbread although I couldn't stop picking from the ultra-tender lamb shank.

Next up, Careem whisks us to Prime 68 at the JW Marriott Marquis Hotel Dubai, a restaurant whose cuts are as varied as the 360-degree aerial views. We're served Creekstone tenderloin, wonderful soft braised short ribs with jus, fresh asparagus from France and a cheesy potato gratin – and there's more beef on the bone on a carving trolley.



"You can get different cuts from different countries," says Wood, explaining why this high-rise venue made her premium cut. "And it's the only restaurant where you can get Burj Khalifa and Burj Al Arab views."

We round off with dessert at La Serre in Vida Downtown Dubai a short drive away, enjoying arguably the best table in the house, adjacent to the kitchen, where the doors folded out to create one fun interactive space. The passion fruit cheesecake is a lovely finale, although I couldn't do justice to the apple pie.



The main drawback in seeing five in a night is inevitably there are some venues which appeal more than others. For me, the stand-out was Qbara and I could have happily stayed there all night.

But in many ways it's a good snapshot of the city's culinary scene, and suitable whether you're in town for a few days or a long-term resident trying to keep up with it all. The next morning I didn't feel fatigued, or at least as tired as I might have if I'd sat five hours in one venue.

The next Dine Around Dubai will be on May 25 and monthly thereafter. Book through foodiva.net/events

Dusit's café-style brunch

IF YOU'RE looking for a more intimate European café-style Friday brunch, then consider Maison Mathis Dusit Thani's Bubbly breakfast which includes fresh breads and croissants, eggs benedict and dessert. Prices from AED125 for one person (includes two glasses of bubbly), rising to AED250 for two (two glasses per person) and AED300 (two people/bottle).