

THE DAILY STAR

LEBANON

Chef Barza: No one can stop me from doing what I want

By Susan Wilson

BEIRUT: Lebanese Chef Joe Barza strikes an intimidating figure. It hardly comes as a surprise when you first learn that before becoming a chef Barza was a bodyguard during the Lebanese Civil War. This is a passionate man; one who doesn't mess around.

His passion these days – as an ambassador worldwide for innovative Lebanese cuisine – was the result of a late awakening.

Barza began as a chef in Lebanon during the war before heading to Johannesburg, South Africa, for work. It wasn't until he returned back home to Lebanon that Barza found his own style. His “artistic” side, as he calls it, came at the late age of 39.

“That's when I started to see things differently, when I started to touch the food ... there is very close relation[ship] between me and the food, between the land, between the people even,” he tells The Daily Star.

“One day I was sitting with one of my sous-chefs and I told him why do we always have to mix hummus with tahini? Why don't we flip the table, but in a nice way?”

Barza began his path to innovation around 15 years ago, while working at the Century Park Hotel in Kaslik. He convinced a wary general manager to give him free reign over the kitchen and his reputation snowballed from there.

“We have very good basics, very good food,” he says, and once he began thinking about the hummus and the tahini, other things began falling into place. Take shankleesh, for example – it's a very tasty basic dish and easily reinvigorated with some tomato, some parsley, a change of presentation and a “slice of chicken on top of it, why not?”

By his nature Barza is someone who likes to mix his food, and he credits his innovations with having a mature instinct that proves him right 90 percent of the time. He is also pleased to see more Lebanese chefs moving toward innovation.

“The sky's the limit; some of them they win, some of them they don't because it needs a lot of instinct.”

Barza is incredibly proud of the heritage that Lebanese food brings, and his passion for the produce is reflected in his involvement as executive chef for Bioland, a “farm to fork” organic food provider in Lebanon.

He does believe, however, that there has been a reluctance to “interfere” with Lebanese food, with closely guarded recipes passed down between generations.

Barza himself acknowledges the comforting pull of how Lebanese food has always been done, speaking about his upbringing in Tyre in a family of fishermen and excellent cooks.

Talking about his mother, who passed away a year ago, Barza says; “It’s weird. I don’t know. And she didn’t want to believe ... she never wanted to believe that I am a chef. She never let me into her kitchen.”

Reminiscing over his mother’s cooking Barza gets reflective. “Every time you ask what your best meal is – it’s the meal of your mom, because she does this from her heart.

“The secret of our job is here [taps heart] it has to come from the heart,” he says.

His passion for what he does is part of Barza’s appeal and he has built himself a reputation as a TV personality and innovative chef; with his signature hat and goatee.

“It’s a personality thing, I dare to do things, but I dare to do things with maturity, I don’t mess around, I love the product, I really respect it,” he says.

“It’s a full package; it’s a charisma; it’s a look; it’s a signature; it’s what you have done.”

Barza sees himself as a calling card for the next generation.

He taught at the cordon bleu at the University of Kaslik he says, not for the money but he because he wanted to “pass on the message” to up-and-coming Lebanese chefs.

The older generation used to guard their secrets but Barza believes that chefs stay fresh only by having the next generation snapping at their heels.

He is satisfied with the way things are progressing now in Lebanon. Heavily involved in HORECA, he has seen the show grow to host “more than 200 well-known chefs from all over the world.”

As well as Bioland, he has recently worked with Casper & Gambini’s in Bab Idriss, and has opened three restaurants out of five with a Qatar-based consultancy.

Barza seems busy being himself. He has recently come back from presenting an award for BBC and happily shows photos of himself and Jamie Oliver that he has on his cellphone.

The only thing Barza seems reluctant to speak about is the recent furor over food safety standards in Lebanon, though he makes it clear he is behind Health Minister Abu Faour completely, calling for consistency in standards across the board – from supplier to restaurant.

“Lebanon is Lebanon. Lebanon has [always] been like this. I love my country. I love everything about it. I cannot complain. I am Lebanese, I am very happy,” he says.

Serves 4

Preparation time: 1 hour

Ingredients:

kg of lamb

2 liters of water

3 cubes of beef stock

50 g of onions, cut into wings

25 g of carrots, cut into rounds

25 g of leek, cut into slices

25 g of celery

2 garlic gloves, mashed

50 g of almonds sliced (saute with oil till they become golden)

4 branches of rosemary

dash of black pepper

dash of salt

30 g of olive oil

30 g of corn oil

500 g of basmati rice

1 big spoon of raisins

50 g of chopped dry apricots

dash of Arabic gum

1 spoon of tomato paste

dash of sweet pepper

dash of cinnamon

dash of 7 spices

Instructions:

1. In a pot put a bit of both oils and saute the meat until it has a golden color, then add water.
2. In a pan saute the leek, garlic, onions and carrots with oil and then add them to the liquid.
3. Add the stock cubes and all the spices, and let them simmer over low heat.
4. Soak the rice for 30 minutes.
5. Drain the rice, and set it aside.
6. When the lamb is cooked and soft, remove it and tear the meat into small slices, then set it aside with a bit of liquid.
7. Cook the rice in the liquid, when it starts boiling, cover with aluminum foil, put it in the oven at a temperature of 150 degrees, for about 18-20 minutes (till the rice is cooked).
8. Five minutes before the rice is cooked, add the chopped raisins and the apricots.