



A FAREWELL TO ARMS – and hello, kitchen!

Sophie McCarrick catches up with Lebanese culinary superstar Joe Barza to find out about his extraordinary journey from being a military man to a celebrity chef taking Lebanese cuisine to the world.

Notably raising the bar for gourmet Lebanese cuisine internationally, chef Joe Barza is not only a global ambassador and innovator, but a seasoned traveller and television personality too, whose culinary journey did not begin in the most conventional of ways.

Formerly working as a bodyguard for the president of Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, after a dramatic event when the president was assassinated, which left him rudderless for a while, Joe found his safe haven in the kitchen, where he discovered his true calling as a chef. Having trained with internationally renowned chefs, including Marc Veyrat, Jean-Pierre Jacob, Pierre Marin and Ciccio Sultano since then, Joe has accumulated more than 22 years of professional cooking and kitchen management experience. He also starred as the head judge and co-host on the

Photographs SUPPLIED

Emmy Award winning television show, Top Chef Middle East, for two consecutive years. Now working as a culinary consultant with restaurants and brands across the region, Joe has developed a well-established reputation for taking traditional, home-style cooking and transforming it into dazzling, modern Lebanese dishes.

As Joe reflects on his experiences, he opines it's time for the culinary world to get back to its roots – back to the methods of its ancestors and the land's finest. Ever charismatic, genuinely friendly and humble, Joe opens our conversation with a smile: "Let me tell you my story, and why now, it's time for us all to get back to basics in the kitchen."

At what age did you realise being a chef was your calling?

My family were fishermen who spent their days talking about food, which ignited a passion in me, growing up. I didn't think about becoming a chef, however, until I started to cook properly at 24. I think my talent really kicked in when I turned 39, that's when I found my flow.

Do you think growing up in Lebanon shaped your cooking habits?

Absolutely. Having now worked in this industry for 20 years, I can look back and really appreciate how much Lebanon's heritage shaped my direction in the kitchen. I'm very proud of my country.

You've revolutionised Lebanese cuisine in a way. What were people's initial reactions to your contemporary ways?

Honestly, people accepted it. My food really isn't too far from traditional Lebanese. I like to view my work as polishing a diamond, I believe that people view my food as simply an upgraded version of what's already out there. They like the twist and are very accepting of it.

What made you want to modernise Lebanese cuisine?

I was inspired in France, by a lady making foie gras in a unique way. This made me question my culinary direction and ask myself – why does hummous always have to be mixed with tahini? Why do we always play it safe in Lebanese kitchens? I aspired to become an innovator.

And so you did. But how did you make such a success of it?

I stick to the basics. I respect the produce and I respect Lebanese recipes. Most Lebanese dishes were not created by professional chefs, they were

invented by housewives. So, I simply refine their home-style methods, and take existing products to the next level of sophistication. Fantastic home cooking, with an elegant twist – that's how I describe my culinary style.

You moved to South Africa after culinary school – what was that experience like?

South Africa taught me how to think, to stretch

● I want to help educate people on the importance of knowing where they source their food from. ●

my creative wings and develop as a chef. Learning in a kitchen with 14 different nationalities, one day I asked my teacher, "Is it acceptable to put chicken and beef together?" He told me to look up at the sky, and said, "Joe, the sky is your limit." Since that lesson, I've really grown as a chef.

Unlike most chefs, you chose to open a consulting company rather than a restaurant to your name. Why?

I had come to a crossroads in my life, where I knew it was time for me to start a business. There was no particular reason, I just noticed a gap in the market for a consulting company as opposed to opening a restaurant. And so, I began catering to that demand. I also want to help educate people on the importance of knowing where they source their food from.

For most people, a culinary consultant is a person who devises a menu. Tell us, what else does your job entail?

It's not easy, you really have to sit down and listen to your client. It's not as straightforward and flexible as some may think. I only take on long-term projects for a minimum of one year. It would be very easy for me to consult, provide some recipes and then leave. But, this is not a long-term solution, and I must make sure my consulting is effective and withstands the test of time.

You're not only a consultant but also a notable TV personality. What was your experience with Top Chef like?

The experience opened my eyes to how much the Middle East's culinary industry has matured. Not long ago in this region, the role of a chef was not a respected position in our restaurants and households. But now, it's changed. It blew my mind to see how many people tuned in to watch the show. Any part I can play in helping people understand that chefs are skilled people, is a worthy one for me.

What's next in the pipeline for you?

More work at Bioland – a farm I'm a partner and executive chef at in Lebanon. We produce organic food, and have a restaurant that allows me to really get back to basics. I want to start placing more emphasis on promoting the healthy food our grandparents used to eat, before the generations of today ruined it with processed, chemical-infused food. My future is about going

back to the roots and cooking from the earth, it's so important that we all start trying to do the same. Not only for better tasting food, but more crucially, for our own health.

So, say it's 2035. What do you think you'll be doing?

Cooking at the farm. Teaching mothers how to cook for their children, because this is where good, quality cooking begins, at home with the children. I predict by then, many societies throughout the world would have resorted back to the older methods of cooking, and will be living properly off the land once more. I feel sometimes the industry has lost its way, over-complicating things, and has forgotten how special food is when we stick to the basics. It's the art of simplicity that works, and keeps us healthy. >>

Quick Qs with Joe

Your top three countries in the world for food?

Apart from Lebanon, Italy, Spain and France.

Your ideal dish?

Fish, raw fish. Nothing beats a piece of freshly caught fish.

You are married with two children – do you cook at home?

Absolutely, all of the time.

Who is your dream chef to work with?

I'd cook with my mother again, if she were still alive. She would be my dream chef to work with.

The best piece of advice you'd give to young chefs?

You must cook from your heart. Passion, passion, and more passion – that's it! As long as you're passionate, you're on the right track!

SIGNATURE RECIPES



Fish tajin with eggplant

SERVES 4 PREP 30 mins COOK 35mins **EASY**

- 1 eggplant (about 300g), cut into 4 pieces**
- Salt, to taste**
- 150g small onion rings**
- 2g saffron**
- 2 pieces of cucumber pickles, cut into cubes**
- Pepper, to taste**
- 500g seabass, cut into cubes**
- 40ml corn oil**
- Zest of a lemon**
- 1 tomato, cut into rounds**
- 1 tsp rib al har (hot pepper paste)**
- A drizzle of pomegranate molasses**
- Chives, for garnish**
- 1.5 pieces of avocado mashed and mixed with 1 spoon of laban**
- FOR THE TAJIN MIX**
- 100g laban (yoghurt cheese)**
- 75ml water**
- 100g tahini**

1 Sprinkle some salt on the eggplant and set aside for about 10 mins, then rinse and dry well.

2 In a separate bowl, mix the laban with the tahini, hot pepper paste, and water – it shouldn't be thick, add more water if needed. Set aside.

3 In a pot, heat the oil then sauté the onions. Add the saffron and mix with a wooden spoon until it is translucent, then add the pickles and a pinch of salt. Lower heat and add the tahini mixture to the pot and stir it well with a wooden spoon for about 10 mins.

4 Heat some oil in a pan, then add the fish, and the zest the lemon on top, cook for 5 mins. Then, add in the Tajin mix and keep cooking the fish on both sides for another 10 mins.

5 In another pan, sauté the eggplant as well as the tomato slices for about 5 min. Add salt and pepper to taste.

6 To serve, place a piece of eggplant, top it with a tomato, and a spoon of the fish with tajin mix. Drizzle the pomegranate molasses over it, garnish with some chives and a spoonful of the the avocado mix.



Mouhamara with pistachio crust

SERVES 6 PREP 15 mins NO COOK **EASY**

- 500g breadcrumbs**
- 150g walnuts**
- 50g pistachio**
- 2 cloves of garlic**
- 110g rib al har (hot pepper paste)**
- 2g white pepper**
- 3g cumin powder**
- 200ml olive oil**
- 170g tomato paste**
- 10g salt**
- A dash of coriander powder**
- 4 ice cubes**
- FOR THE SAUCE**
- 5g tomatoes, cut into cubes**
- 5g cucumber, cut finely**
- 5g onions, finely chopped**
- Olive oil**
- FOR GARNISH**
- A large handful of pistachios, chopped**
- 1 spring onion**
- 2 sprigs of mint leaves**
- A drizzle of pomegranate molasses**
- 1 tbsp minted labneh**

1 Mix all the Mouhamara ingredients well, except for the sauce, in a blender until it becomes a paste.

2 Combine all the ingredients for the sauce.

3 Roll the Mouhamara into balls of about 80g each. Roll it in some pistachio to coat, then slice into rounds.

4 To serve, place the Mouhamara pieces on top of the minted labneh on a plate, drizzle some pomegranate molasses and olive oil over, and garnish with the spring onion. 🍴

