

SHIFTING SANDS

Middle Eastern cuisine is getting a makeover as traditional ingredients are blended with international techniques. **Jenny Johnson** meets the chefs leading the movement in Dubai and Abu Dhabi. Photographs by **Kate Lewis** and **Danny Allison**

Until quite recently, a mention of Middle Eastern food conjured up images of family-style meals at home or that no-fuss shawarma stall down the street that stays open late. But lately, everyone's talking about the growing trend of fine-dining fare from the region. Adding modern twists to traditional dishes, using quality local ingredients and investing in artistic presentation, a new breed of Middle Eastern chefs are stepping up to the gourmet plate.

EAST MEETS WEST

Nouvelle regional cuisine is all about respecting traditions while elevating them through new techniques and flavour combinations. Australian-born Greg Malouf, who retained a Michelin star for his Lebanese cuisine at **Petersham Nurseries Café** (www.petershamnurseries.com) in London and has opened haute Lebanese restaurant **Clé Dubai** (www.cle-dubai.com) in Dubai International Financial Centre, says diners at Clé will find new interpretations of familiar dishes. "Dumplings might be stuffed with goat's meat, the yoghurt might be mixed with fresh broad beans and peas and there might be a drizzle of green harissa."

Opened in Dubai in early 2015, **Omnia by Silvena** (+971 4 552 0129) is run by Turkish-Bulgarian celebrity chef Silvena Rowe, who's cooked for UAE royalty, Orlando Bloom and One Direction. Her more casual restaurant **Omnia Gourmet** (www.omniagourmet.co) in the Jumeirah Fishing Harbour has a loyal following. "I don't use fat or salt in my cooking and my desserts are sugar-free, gluten-free, dairy-free, Paleo and vegan. Emirati food is traditionally seen as heavy, salty and oily; I'm trying to change that. We live in a country that has problems with obesity and diabetes so I am providing healthy food and hope others will follow suit."

An international sensibility has certainly contributed to the popularity of **Qbara** (www.qbara.ae) in Dubai's Wafi, thanks to its then chef Colin Clague, who hails from the Isle of Man. "I came to the Middle East in 1999 and am very comfortable with the food," says Clague, who previously worked at Zuma, The Ivy and the Burj Al Arab. "The idea was to take regional dishes that everyone knows—



like falafel and fattoush—and use the same ingredients, but deconstruct them and put them together in a different way."

Co-host of the Middle East version of *Top Chef* and culinary consultancy founder, Joe Barza returned to his roots after several years in South Africa, aiming to take Lebanese food a step further. "I like to be daring with dishes like raw fish kibbeh. I marinate the tuna with shawarma spices for a local twist."

Stacie Overton Johnson, food writer at *The National*, says, "Middle Eastern chefs recognise the need to stay relevant and adapt to the public they're serving. Diners today are more discerning than ever before. They travel more, they know more, and they're willing to try things they might not

have tried in the past." Jasmine Bandali, editor of *Gourmet* magazine in Dubai concurs. "Dishes have been adapted to appeal to international tastes, while ancient spices like sumac and freekeh are enjoying a renaissance."

THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS

The farm-to-table movement that reached its zenith in America a couple of years ago has been spreading globally—and some Middle Eastern chefs are looking to adapt it as much as is feasible given the climate and geographical conditions. Says Rowe, "I use around 65 percent locally sourced produce and organic ingredients wherever possible. My chicken comes from a farm in Al Ain, and the lamb is also local. All my fish products are from Jumeirah Fishing Harbour so, my fish cakes are made from local sherry and sea bass from Fujairah. My cheese is locally sourced and I only use camel's milk." She admits it's hard to sustain this as the produce isn't consistent, so it's not just about finding the best farmers and suppliers and working closely with them but also about the willingness to adapt the menu based on what's available. →



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“Nouvelle regional cuisine is all about respecting traditions while elevating them through new techniques”



Joe Barza, co-host of the Middle East's *Top Chef* and leader in the reinvention of Lebanese food. Previous page from top: Barza's version of freekeh on a bed of cucumber; Jumeirah Beach in Dubai



Over in Lebanon, Barza heads up the catering team at the **Bioland farm** (www.bioland-lb.com) in Batroun, which produces its own organic local ingredients, and has a restaurant and farm shop on site. The farm also hosts school trips to educate children about organic produce.

THE WHOLE TAMALE

The age of Twitter and Instagram threw up a new challenge to chefs everywhere: with diners obsessively photographing and publicising what they are eating, visual appeal came to the fore. Says Overton Johnson, "Not only does your food need to taste great, it needs to look great, too. Middle Eastern chefs are recognising the importance of that."

"Even a humble falafel or some labneh or kibbeh can be elevated to a better standing with gorgeous crockery and beautiful produce," says Malouf. "I look into the traditions of the dishes and try to add a couple more layers and make them look more architectural."

GLOBAL APPEAL

A clear sign of Middle Eastern food's changing stripes is that it is weaving its way on to more sophisticated tables in international markets.

Melbourne, where Malouf grew up, was one of the early adopters of Middle Eastern

cuisine due to the strong presence of Lebanese and Syrian communities. "Globally in some of the bigger cities, there's a touch of something Middle Eastern on the menu, whether it's harissa or preserved lemons or cous cous," says Malouf.

The mindset of tourists coming into the region is also changing, according to Arva Ahmed, who conducts authentic culinary tours at **Frying Pan Adventures** (www.fryingpanadventures.com) in Dubai, with diners becoming more accepting of new

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dishes that deepen their appreciation of local cuisine. "The people who join our food trails are always excited to experiment with the flavours of preserved Jordanian yoghurt or buy an ingredient like pomegranate molasses so they can incorporate it into dishes back home," she says. Devina Divecha, senior editor, Hospitality Group at ITP Publishing Group, finds visitors are seeking out experiences and flavours, beyond the well-known shawarma and hummus. "These dishes have been fairly well marketed, but how many people have

eaten a mandi sitting on the floor of a tent?" she asks. "How many have watched an Iraqi masgouf being cooked over flames? Or a man bake pebble bread in the traditional Iranian way? Diners are becoming aware and are seeking out rarer dishes."

NEW WAVE

Chef Ali Salem Edbowa is the executive chef at fine-dining Emirati restaurant **Mezlai** (www.kempinski.com) at Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, but it took him a decade to pursue cooking full-time as it was seen as

menial labour among local society. When he first bought a restaurant, he had to hide the fact that he also worked in the kitchen from his friends and family, and would change back into his regular clothes before leaving each evening. "I would go home in the dishdasha and put on perfume so no one knew I was working in the kitchen." Now →

Clockwise from left: **Greg Malouf, who is experimenting with Lebanese fare at Clé Dubai; Mughrbia scallops at Mezlai; Ali Salem Edbowa of Mezlai; the Grand Mosque in Abu Dhabi**



Colin Clague, formerly of Qbara. Left, from top: a wall at Qbara; Sayadieh of black cod with garlic, onions and spices at Qbara; Jumeirah Fishing Harbour in Dubai



he is an award-winning chef who has had three cooking shows on television and hopes to introduce Emirati cuisine to the world.

Barza faced similar obstacles in Lebanon. "In the Arab world, the cook was always the maid in the house, but with shows like *Top Chef* we have changed this perception and Middle Eastern chefs are respected now."

This shift in attitude has helped Middle Eastern chefs get to the point they have now, where they innovate along with the best of their global counterparts. Gourmet food trucks are big business in countries like America, though not as common in many other places. Yet Kuwaiti chef Adlah Al-Sharhan's TV show, *Keshtha*, saw her driving around the country in her "KESH-TRUCK"—a modern food truck from which she cooks up local dishes, showcasing her unique techniques and interviewing a range of interesting personalities along the way. "TV shows and celebrity chefs are changing the landscape," says Overton Johnson. "People learn a lot about the food and the culture from them: what goes into it, what spices and flavours are used and how to pronounce the names of the dishes. And then they're more likely to try it in the real world."

Rowe now has eight cookbooks on Middle Eastern and eastern Mediterranean cuisine that are sold in several countries, in more

than six languages, and has raised the profile of regional food enormously. Her TV presence has also helped: she has been a major culinary figure on the UK's *Saturday Kitchen* alongside James Martin and *This Morning*, and was a judge on *America's Time Machine Chefs*. Malouf's cookbooks, which have a large and loyal global following, range from classic recipe books to travelogues exploring the region and its cuisine, from Iran and Lebanon to Syria.

As one of the celebrity chefs who introduced Lebanese food on Qatar Airways, Ramzi Shwayri's version of Lebanese cuisine is going places on flights around the world, raising awareness among international Business and First Class travellers. The first Arab chef to cook on television, and with a bestselling cook book under his belt, Shwayri also has a Lebanese recipe app.

Making Middle Eastern food even more accessible, Malouf and Rowe both have their own retail food lines. Following on from her mezze-inspired *Delicatzee* range at Waitrose in the UK, Rowe has created a range of healthy desserts which she hopes to stock at the likes of **Spinneys** (www.spinneys-dubai.com) and Waitrose in the region. "The strapline for my Omnia Slim desserts is 'slim as you sin'. The sweetness comes from natural ingredients like maple syrup and

dates, and they are loaded with superfoods." After developing a range of Middle Eastern spices while working in Melbourne, Malouf is set to launch them in Dubai so that people can recreate his dishes at home. "I will have a little retail unit at Clé, where I will sell my spice blends and tagines that capture the flavours and aromas of the region."

FLASH FORWARD

With global markets importing Middle Eastern restaurants—healthy fast-food chain **Just Falafel** (www.justfalafel.com) has plans to open over 700 outlets across the world—chefs are now looking at franchising fine-dining concepts around the world, too. Rowe, for example, plans to expand her new Omnia by Silvena concept on a global scale. "I want to build my brand here and then take it to the West, which is the opposite of how things tend to work out here with so many international chains," she explains.

"My wish is that Middle Eastern food will head in the direction where an entire region is no longer lumped under one banner," says Frying Pan Adventures' Ahmed. Adds Overton Johnson, "Each country has its own ingredients and cooking techniques. As people become more exposed to this kind of food, they'll be able to recognise which country a Middle Eastern dish is from just by looking at it or, at least, when they taste it." 