

"I believe in this country. I love Lebanon. Us Lebanese, we love to eat. We love to drink. We have style. And I love this culture," he said.

Born and raised in Lebanon during the civil war, Barza, like many Lebanese, has plenty to say about how the war affected his life and how difficult it was to stay during the war.

But leaving Lebanon was not the only change he made at the time. He would have to decide what he wanted to do with his life. After graduating from the Hotel School of Arts in Lebanon in 1986, Barza moved to South Africa, where his friend had opened a restaurant, and started working in the food industry.

It is clear from the way he talks about it that Barza owes a lot of what he has become to South Africa. He returned to Lebanon in 1994, but if he hadn't, Barza claims he would still be living in South Africa because of what he learned, and the people he worked with there. "I learned a way of living, a way of acting, a way of cooking. It's me, I even have a tattoo of a chef's head and the new flag of South Africa!"

From South Africa, Barza traveled all over the world, where he cemented his career as a chef. Although the decision to become one could be considered hasty and due to a series of unfortunate events, it turned out to be the best decision he could have made — at least for the people who savor his food. During his travels, he participated in a variety of competitions, shows and trainings all over the world, including a tuna cooking competition in the 90s.

"Cutting tuna!" he exclaimed. "Imagine me competing against people from all over the world, some of whom eat, sleep, breathe, worship the tuna fish! I didn't stand a chance."

He was telling me of some of the most bizarre competitions he participated in, such as the tuna competition, in which he ranked among the top contenders. But it was by taking precisely these types of risks that gave Barza his signature style.

As I skimmed through an album of newspaper clippings, pictures and awards that he compiled, Barza described the many competitions he attended. Traveling to participate in competitions helped him realize the potential in Lebanese cuisine.

"When you compete by preparing a

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Joe Barza

## IF YOU DON'T LOVE PEOPLE, YOU CAN'T INNOVATE

basturma sandwich against international cuisines, and actually make it, that's when you see what a special cuisine we have," he says.

He explained that taking the basic ingredients from Lebanese cuisine and "twisting" them to end up with a creative result adds more value to the product. Of course, this comes from years of experience and experimentation in the kitchen.

Barza insists that he is very proud of the Lebanese basics, and that through his work, he is not trying to change our identity, but rather strengthen and empower the Lebanese tastes in his dishes.

"No matter what it looks like, or the different ingredients used, it still retains its Lebanese essence."

Here, we moved to the kitchen, where I was able to see the chef at work. Barza was definitely in his element moving from one pot to another, joking around with his staff members and adding his touches here and there. He prepared a plate of fresh tuna slices on a bed of artichoke puree. I watched him peel grenadine and sprinkle a few pieces on the plate.

I recalled what he told me about taking basic ingredients and mixing them in different ways to create new tastes. Instead of dipping the artichoke in lemon like we usually do, Barza works with more of its qualities, and prepares them in the form of a puree. Or the burger that we usually use only in the "tabbouleh" can replace the rice in "riz bi haleeb."

Barza is all about fusion, pushing the boundaries and challenging himself. He takes caution in saying that he considers himself an artist, but Barza has indeed worked hard to understand the Lebanese cuisine and perfect the art of cooking Lebanese.

"I aimed to get here and to understand the Lebanese cuisine. I will never perfect pasta like the Italians; I can cook pasta, but it's not my baby. I do have something extraordinary to work with



### STYLE FACT-FILE

The last thing you bought that you fell in love with at first sight: *A red hat. I liked the color, and I am a big fan of hats.*

The last thing that you added to your wardrobe: *Running shoes.*

Your favorite suit: *I don't wear suits.*

Your favorite app on the iPad: *Angry Birds, I love it.*

The person you admire most: *Nouhad Dammous, as he has done so much for the industry in Lebanon and the Middle East.*

The ideal Sunday morning: *Morning breakfast with the kids.*

The best hotel you have ever stayed in: *The Imperial Hotel in New Delhi, India.*

What you could never live without: *My phone.*

If you had to limit yourself to one neighborhood in the world, it would be: *Champs Elysees in Paris. It's a place full of art and romance.*

You have recently discovered: *Flipboard, it gives me news about everything.*

The best gift you have received recently: *A painting.*

The last meal that truly impressed you: *At the Ronda Locatelli at Atlantis the Palm, Dubai, where I had a variety of Italian antipasti.*

Objects on your wish list: *Porsche. It's like driving a dream.*

An unforgettable place that you have travelled to in the past year: *Alicante, Spain.*

Your favorite room: *My garden.*

Your perfect evening out in Beirut: *Dinner and drinks with people I love.*





Style Guru

**CHEF JOE BARZA**

## THE CULINARY ALCHEMIST



THE CATERING PROFESSIONAL SERVES UP HIS  
THOUGHTS ON LIFE, LEBANESE INGREDIENTS AND  
HIS LOVE OF LEARNING  
BY DARIA EL SAMAD

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**C**hef Joe Barza's passion for food, cooking and all ingredients Lebanese is clear as soon as you meet him. "You have to try my food, otherwise you won't understand my style, the way I think and work," was one of the first things he told me as he showed me around his kitchen at Bread and Roses, a Gemmayzeh-based catering company. And I didn't mind. He generously served up one plate after another for a tasting. His dishes were simple yet unconventional, elaborate and innovative. His cooking mirrored his conversation, jumping between anecdotes and ideas, making verbal twists and turns, while the wide range of ingredients he tossed in his pots did the same. Fresh tuna on a bed of artichoke puree, garnished with a few sprinkles of grenadine struck a perfect balance of innovation and convention based on years of experience and mastery of ingredients. I quickly understood that he is better at communicating through his food than his words.

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and perfect; we have great ingredients and a fantastic cuisine," he says.

Barza has faith in the Lebanese cuisine, and is making efforts to spread his passion locally and internationally. He participates in Top Chef Lebanon, judges various competitions, and caters and attends cooking events.

He is also working on a couple of new projects in Lebanon that will showcase his passion and spread his knowledge of the industry.

At this point, I'm running after Barza from one corner to another in his kitchen, slipping in questions while he cooks. He tells me that his mother still doesn't believe he is a chef, and does not let him in the kitchen to cook when he's home.

"Did you meet Issam?" he asks. Here, he points out Issam, a university student who recently started working in the kitchen. He approached Barza at a wedding, asking if he could work with him.

"He wants to switch majors now. I see his passion," Barza says.

He then introduces me to every one of his staff workers. "Fifty percent of my success is my staff." He goes on to describe every one of their personalities, and how these different characteristics all work together in the kitchen. "I believe everyone has a talent, you just need to know how to bring out the best of each person. I respect every one of them. But I'm still a tough chef. You wouldn't want to be in my kitchen when something's gone wrong."

Barza has indeed made a difference in Lebanon and the Middle East. In the past, according to Barza, nobody respected the work of a chef, especially in the Gulf countries, unlike now, when people appreciate the chef and those who work in the kitchen, the entire image of a chef has changed.

"The chef can be proud of his work. A profession has been made of it," he adds. "Top Chef Lebanon was able to make a difference. It got people to actually sit down to watch chefs at work and respect them."

While I tasted the delicious white chocolate raspberry crumble that he had prepared, Barza confides that the secret to success is sensation.

"If you don't love people, you can't innovate," he says. For Barza, ingredients

come secondary to the passion he pours in his

1 My earring is custom made

2 50% of my success is my staff

3 White chocolate raspberry crumble

