

1) What is your personal story of motivation to start to work as a chef? When did you first cook as a chef? Are there persons or places that leaved traces in the beginning of your professional life?

I grew up in family where every morning the women would prepare the stew of the day to feed all the hungry mouths of the household. The smells and aromas emitted from my Grand-mother's and mother's kitchen, and the curiosity of knowing what ingredients produced what smell forged my first link to the culinary world. In 1987, whilst I was living in South Africa, my boss then Bryan Mc.Kun told me one day, "a good chef is not one who has good knife skills, or who can produce a Boullaiabaise, but it is someone who can use his mind and channel his thoughts into becoming a good manager of both people and product". These words were engraved in my mind, and were a turning point in my culinary career, because from that day, I started using my head and not just my hands, and that was the beginning of my success story as a chef.

2) You are very much inspired by the traditional food. But in today's gastronomical world, the creation of food is getting more and more conceptual, it became more and more "a project". In this context, how do you describe the conceptualization of your cuisine or your "project"?

I have cooked all over the world, and alongside some of the best chefs in the world. My project today is simply to be an ambassador of Lebanese ingredients and culinary methods and techniques to the world. I do not work to promote brands and companies, but I work for the ingredients and techniques that have taken hundreds of years to be developed and mastered by our grandmothers and grandfathers, and that have not been properly represented in the world market up to this day. I have taken Lebanese ingredients that are typical of far away Lebanese villages where farmers have no access to roads in the winter due to heavy snowfall, and demonstrated dishes with those ingredients in places as far away as Australia. This gives me pleasure and pride, and a purpose in my career.

3) Because of the war, you moved to South Africa in 1982 where you continued your culinary experience. Did your migrations back-and-forth between two different cultures inspire your creations? How?

In South Africa, I had been lucky to secure a job at an airline catering company at Johannesburg International Airport. The sheer scale of the business required the company to have enormous industrial kitchens, and the workforce was from all nationalities and walks of life. It is through that exposure to the people of different nationalities, that I got acquainted with the French style of cooking, the Japanese, the Chinese, the British, the African etc. Moreover, in operations of this scale, there is no regard to personal likes and dislikes, and the individual has no direct effect on the procession of business. The key word in such an operation is the "System". You either adapt to the system, or find a way to integrate yourself in it, you will leave and no one will even notice that you were there in the first place.

This exposure and work environment has taught me reliance on oneself, and that if you do not strive to outperform others by using your brain, you will be sucked into a vicious circle of a routine that will destroy all your hopes of progress in life.

4) What is your description of Lebanese Cuisine? Could you give examples of the local food culture that is especially interesting for your creations?

Lebanese cuisine is very much influenced by Lebanese geography, as Lebanon in its small area has a very diverse geographic relief. The Mediterranean coastal towns, which are known for their fish and seafood dishes and mezzes, are very close in proximity to high mountains that are heavily inhabited, and that are famous for vegetarian dishes and mezzes. Lebanese geography is not ideal for raising cattle due to the roughness of the terrain. As a result, we can describe Lebanese cuisine as Mediterranean, relying mostly on fish, and vegetarian varieties.

A very traditional Lebanese ingredient is "Kishik", which is mainly sundried yoghurt, typical of Lebanese villages where during the summer villagers would sundry yoghurt in order to stock the powder for the long months of winter, where fresh milk would be unavailable. This ingredient has a tangy smoky flavor, and is used typically in stews accompanied with rice. I have taken kishik, and used it to crust oven baked fish prior to baking. The flavors permeate into the fish, and give it a wonderful aftertaste and aroma.

5) You are now "executive chef" in Chase restaurant, beside this; you also operate "Joe Barza Culinary Consultancy". How these two are affecting each other, feeding each other?

Both businesses revolve around the hospitality and food industry. "The Chase", enables me to look at the industry from a customer's point of view. It helps answer the big question, what does your average customer expect from their dining experience?

Sometimes a restaurant customer sees things that the restaurant staff does not see or consider to be important. Sometimes the restaurant spends money and time on things that customer don't really care about. These different perspectives acquired through "The Chase", enable me to better advise my consultancy customers.

6) How would you describe the atmosphere of the Chase cuisine? What kind of a system exists both in the kitchen and the dining room? What are the most favorite meals in the restaurant?

"The Chase" is one of the oldest international cuisine eateries in Lebanon. So many generations have gone through the door, and many if not all customers are returning customers. Some even come every day, and as a result the cuisine should be flexible and diverse enough to accommodate returning customers, and provide them with different choice alternatives for every meal course of everyday. We are big on breakfast, lunch, dinner, and biggest on coffee breaks and desserts. The menu consists of very simple dishes from all around the world, and the focus is on fresh premium ingredients and taste. In "The Chase", the waiters know all the clients by name, and some of the more gourmet clients can even tell who prepared the food on any particular day in the kitchen, from slight presentation changes. The favorite meals in the restaurant are the individually hand beaten Escalopes, as well as the goat cheese Pizza, and the "Kebbet Samak Arnabiyeh" in the daily dishes varieties.

7) What are your criterias and principles to create a menu? How would you describe "menu

Menu elaboration is tricky business, especially in food and beverage consulting where you are creating and selling menus to establishments that you do not necessarily own or are not the acting head chef of. You have to remove all your prejudice and preference to certain varieties and ingredients aside, and adapt your thinking and choices to your client's preferences, to the demand of the market, and to the specifications of the client's kitchens and preparation areas. My exposure to the different culinary cultures in South Africa has given me the ability to work and think in an international culinary mindset and not just in my local culinary mindset and that in turn has enabled me to re-create menu varieties that include items and ingredients fused from the different parts of the world. Often, when the job requires a menu from a specific foreign food culture, I consult a chef from the network of chefs that I have gotten acquainted with and worked with along the years, and use his or her knowledge to brainstorm and draft the menu, elaborate the recipe cards, and later validate and fix the recipes in the presence of the client in food tasting sessions held in our demo kitchen in Beirut.

8) What are your criterias to choose your materials for cooking? Where they come from?

I am currently obsessed with traditional ingredients, going back to the roots and experimenting with these ingredients using modern cooking techniques and technology. I am a big fan of Sous-vide cooking, and the combi-steamer oven. To give you an example, fish and lamb in traditional Lebanese cuisine have always been cooked in traditional diesel ovens, whose temperatures could not be properly regulated, and which released lots of fumes and carbon residuals that often affected the taste of the food. In combi steamers, the computer regulated temperature and humidity accentuates the taste of the product by preserving its aromas and those of its garnish. For me to be able to ameliorate dishes that have been imprinted in peoples mind as being what they have always been and changing their perception of these great foods is a true passion, and I am always looking for the next challenge of a dish that has been taken for granted, and doing everything possible to hear the mmmm's and woww's and it never tasted like this before.

9) What are your inspirational sources or how do you feed yourself in the process of creating new tastes and gastronomical experiences?

For me, travelling is the true soup for the mind, and through rubbing shoulders with foreign cultures one acquires great knowledge. My references and inspirations for creating new tastes and gastronomical experiences are gathered in local popular markets all around the world, where the aromas of local spices mixed with the feel of the local atmosphere and the sounds of the interaction between the people and the merchants give me an insight into the culinary culture of the place. I then fill a small suitcase with whatever catches my mind in these markets, and come back home carrying fresh ideas, and all the necessary goods to execute these ideas.

10) How do you see the gastronomical trend of the near future? What could be the new trend?

In the near future, I see people giving a lot of attention to their health in an attempt to root out disease, sickness, cancer, and all the other plagues of our century. People are moving away from canned food, processed food, and foods rich in saturated fat, and are opting more and more for the natural, organic, roasted, steamed, grilled varieties. For me this is good news for Mediterranean cuisine in general, and

for Lebanese cuisine in particular for all the reasons mentioned above. Food related technology will also play a big role in future trends, as more and more chefs are embracing new techniques of food handling, processing, and preparation, and are enrolling in training programs to stay up to date with modern technology especially related to food hygiene and HACCP procedures.

11) What would be the priority of a chef, operating his/her own dream restaurant or making high profit?

To keep the customer happy, and coming back!

I always tell my staff over and over, "keep the customers happy", they pay all our salaries from their hard earned cash.

12) When we take a look at the successful chefs' careers of graduates from culinary schools, many of them had become sous-chef in some time of their careers. Is this situation a must or a new graduate chef from a culinary school can achieve these specialties by reading books, watching media, practicing on business planning and by doing experiments in kitchen by him/herself alone?

When interviewing chefs for my kitchen, for customer's kitchens, or even during the casting of candidates for the T.V. Show "Top Chef", I can tell if a chef who claims to have substantial experience is telling the truth by asking very simple questions. How do you prepare a good mashed potato, and a good stock from scratch? If the candidate is offended by the question, then that says that he or she are too cocky, and most probably will not work well with a group. If the candidate does not know, then that person has memorized or written down a certain set of recipes from their previous job, and will keep on copying recipes as they go from job to job. If the candidate answers correctly to the questions, then a quick look at the chef's hands will often tell you a lot about whether or not they have had their fair share of knife cuts and scarring in their claimed years as a chef. To answer to the question more directly, it is not enough to know the theory of a good fish stock, if you have never made one with your own hands, and cut your fingers doing it.

13) Do you recognize Turkish Cuisine, what are your impressions? If yes, what are your recommendations to take it on a more progressive level? How the Turkish Cuisine which is not really suitable for a la minute service, could be carried to the Haute Cuisine?

Turkish cuisine and culture are very much responsible for a variety of dishes in the Lebanese repertoire, and for that I cannot but appreciate and respect Turkish cuisine. Regarding Haute cuisine, the wording is French, and the meaning has been identified with French cuisine. Why would we ever want to carry any cuisine other than the French to the status of Haute Cuisine. The Spanish have never and will never turn Tapas into haute cuisine, and I think neither shall we turn our mezze into haute cuisine.