



A Tyre-less chef

Joe Barza is a globally recognised Lebanese chef, television personality and culinary consultant, known in the Middle East for co-hosting the regional version of the TV programme Top Chef. Born in Tyre, he graduated from the Hotel School of Arts in Lebanon at a time when the industry's reputation was not high. Since then he has achieved award after award in international culinary competitions and is the very public face of the country's revived cuisine.

Barza was first influenced by traditional Lebanese cuisine as a child in his mother's kitchen. Growing up in a war-torn country, food was always a matter of necessity rather than refinement and, during his time in a popular militia and later as a politician's personal bodyguard, food was about survival.

Finally, however, he faced down his parents' and friends' disapproval, enlisted in hotel school and, on graduation, emigrated to South Africa, seeking new work opportunities as a chef. His first job was at Johannesburg International Airport, where he started as a Chef de Partie, then quickly progressed in the ranks and within three years was Executive Sous Chef, responsible for serving up to 17,000 meals a day to travellers and managing a team of 110 kitchen personnel with three Sous Chefs.

The Lebanese civil war officially ended in 1990 and three years later Barza decided to return home as head chef at the Century Park Hotel in Jounieh, in charge of a massive catering operation: banquets for up to 4,000 people, weekly outside catering for up to 1,000 people and in charge of 20 permanent chefs. After eight years, he was appointed head chef for the Chase chain of international restaurants, with nine outlets in Lebanon and others

around the world.

After nine years, when the company changed ownership, Barza decided to end his head chef career and use the experience he acquired along the years as a culinary consultant. After three years, the Joe Barza Culinary Consultancy has been built around his personal experience and exposure to global culinary trends and it deals with all aspects of restaurant and catering operations, including concept formulation, menu elaboration, kitchen design, kitchen personnel recruiting, pre-opening strategy formulation, opening strategy formulation, post-opening follow-up, cost control and staff training.

Barza is also a consultant for the Salon Culinare of Lebanon and has acted as a roving global ambassador for Lebanese cuisine and a multiple winner of culinary competitions such as the 2006 Tuna World Champion in Sardinia, honorary jury prize winner of the 2003 European Sandwich Challenge and multiple Gold Medal winner at the Beirut Salon Culinare.

Passionate about Lebanese food which he believes deserves a place amongst the world's top cuisines, he is also committed mentor to young chefs from Lebanon, determined that the professionalism he has seen demonstrated in the world's top kitchens will be taken as standard in his home country.

What was it like when you joined the industry?

A chef in the Middle East never used to get any respect - it was a profession that people frowned on and many chefs were shy to tell people that was their job. That was part of the culture. When we did Top Chef, I remember one guy telling me that he just couldn't bring himself to tell his prospective father-in-law what he did for a living. My view is that what one man can do, another can do as well.

Chefs now have a better reputation. What caused the change?

Well, I'm proud to say I was part of that change. When I left South Africa where I'd worked in a big kitchen with chefs from 14 nationalities, I asked myself why I had to change out of my whites when I wasn't in the kitchen. What South Africa taught me is that a chef needs to be proud. In the mid-1990s, in Lebanon, you needed to impose respect with your knowledge and your skills. Our food was good and well known, but chefs weren't so we started entering international competitions and slowly our profile raised up.

Were chefs even looked down on in the villages or was this just in the cities?

The best chefs can come from a village but parents wanted their sons to have a real job, like a teacher. Chefs were seen almost as maids. All the big hotels used to import expat chefs because they saw Lebanese chefs as only able to cook Lebanese food, unable to do anything else although the good ones used to imitate. In South Africa, I was lucky to work with people who showed me that a chef was a human being like any other. A chef needs both to cook and think. Look, 30 years of civil war meant

that we had only a very small number of good restaurants - people couldn't afford to travel like they do now for training and the country only had one culinary school.

Did you like food as a child?

Well, I didn't start to cook till I was 24 but I remember, every Friday, my grandfather would bring a large basket of fresh fish down from Tyre. My mother used to cry from all the cleaning but the fish were delicious. Most days, however, we used to worry about what we would be able to find to eat the next day. Then, after the President was assassinated, I wanted to have a future, even if cooking was what women traditionally did. I was thirsty to learn and I got myself a Commis job in a little kitchen. I used to do double shifts - I was paid for the first but not the second, but I needed to learn as food had not been my passion before that.

As one of the President's bodyguards, didn't you get well fed?

No, we used to snatch burgers and such like. When I shifted from that life to the kitchen, it was a real shock. I remember sitting on an upturned tin of Milo and peeling 10kg of shrimp - I cried like my mother had cried. I was so hard, even getting to the place - public transport was terrible and I used to have to walk for 45 minutes as shells were whizzing overhead! But I had good will and, in six months, I had learned enough to realise that I was ready to move on. So I moved to South Africa

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to help a friend who ran a small pizza place. After about six months, I prepared a special sauce topping and asked a regular to try it out who I was serving.

So you weren't cooking?

No I was a waiter. He tasted it and asked me why I wasn't working. I joined an airline catering firm and got three promotions within a year. I also travelled exploring cuisines: America, Brazil, Germany and so on.

Then you returned to Lebanon?

Yes, I wanted to help my parents and I knew that to succeed that I had to fashion a look for myself, a style. So the ear rings, the goatee, I began to enter competitions and won the Tuna World Champion with a dish that reflected Lebanon: tuna marinated with shawarma spices. All had I had money for was the flight so I just took some spices with me!

What drives you?

I want to do well for myself, my friends, my country and for the Arab nation. I've been lucky and now

I'm well-known and that makes me very proud. Lebanese chefs are now experimenting and taking pride in their work and we have won the respect of the people. Look, every country has a treasure with its ingredients and those should be treated well so the cuisine improves, adds value. I think fusion for its own sake is wrong - why should I try and do better than a French chef with foie gras or an Italian chef with pasta? We should take pride in our food and I'm happy to spread the word, such as the time I went to the Culinary Institute of America and showed what we can do to some of the world's greatest chefs. How can we as chefs thank our parents for what they have given us? Not just by being creative, but by working and creating with all our heart and all our passions.

Why do you think people are now fascinated with chefs?

I think because we are in direct contact with people. Our relationship can be quite intimate because we are giving them pleasure with food. Cooking is pleasure. I also have built up quite a following after 25 years in the kitchen and I'm lucky now to make maybe four or five trips a month, meeting people and spreading the word about our cuisine. I have the respect of the industry and I can pick up the phone and invite just about any chef in the world to come to Lebanon.

How has Lebanese cuisine come to represent the wider Middle East, do you think?

We've clever, commercial people of course! Also there is a major diaspora - four million Lebanese in the country and 20 million outside. Each of them can make Lebanese food. And chefs now are not making just simple food - look at Philippe Masoud with his successful Illili in Manhattan with an investment of \$6m.

What's at the heart of the cuisine?

We took a lot from the Turks but adapted it over the centuries. The Syrians did too but they didn't know how to spread their cuisine outside Syria. Our cuisine is based on spicing. There has been what I would call a blend of cuisines rather than a fusion - no mix of chocolate and caviar for us!

How do your family now view your success?

My mother still says I don't know how to cook. Have I cooked in her kitchen? No, I wouldn't dare! But I was to continue to change attitudes so I'm always happy to mentor young chefs - they need to understand that if you don't reach then you'll never achieve. In the old days, recipes in Lebanon stayed the same and chefs guarded them - I give mine away everywhere.

Rice knefeh

Serves 4

Ingredients

pudding

250g Egyptian or small grain rice
200 ml milk
100g sugar
pinch of Arabic gum (miskeh), crushed
1 cup cornflour
500g neutral breadcrumbs
250g butter
150g halloumi, grated
150g mozzarella, grated
drop of rose water
drop of orange blossom

Syrup

500 ml water
400g sugar
5g lemon zest
5g orange zest
1 tsp orange blossom
1 tsp rose water

Method

1 To make the pudding, mix the sugar and milk in a pan and bring to the boil. Add the rice and cook until it gets al dente, then add the corn flour, crushed miskeh, orange blossom and rose water. Remove from heat and set aside to cool.

- 2 In a saucepan, add butter and mix the breadcrumbs until they turn golden brown. In an oven dish, arrange the breadcrumbs at the bottom, then pour the rice mixture on top as a second layer. Place the grated cheeses on top, then add another layer of rice mixture followed by a layer of breadcrumbs. Place dish on oven rack and bake for 15 to 20 minutes at 140C.
- 3 To make the syrup, in a heavy bottomed pan, place all the ingredients and bring to boil on medium heat until a syrup is formed. Keep it on medium heat for 15 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside to cool.
- 4 Serve a piece of the knefeh with the syrup on the side.



Basterma with pesto



Serves 4

Ingredients

50g labneh
10g pesto
70g basterma, sliced
10 rocket leaves
40g tomato, sliced
5g bread, roasted

Method

- 1 Prepare the basterma roll using labneh and pesto, rocket leaves and basterma slice. Prepare the sliced tomatoes and toasted bread.
- 2 Layer on the plate as follows: toasted bread, basterma roll and tomato slice.
- 3 Use five basterma rolls per plate.