



ARVA AHMED

'EACH COMMUNITY OF DUBAI HAS ITS OWN FOOD SUB-CULTURE – WE SHOW PEOPLE THE BEST OF THEM'

The founder of Frying Pan Adventures in Dubai talks to **Eliot Beer** about her passion for foodie discovery and falafel rock stars

Q: How did Frying Pan Adventures come about?

A: In 2010, I started a food blog, and the stuff that was most exciting to me were all places that had some element of discovery, where I wasn't in a mall or hotel, but just walking down some random alley.

I developed this burning passion: I wasn't happy just telling people – I actually physically needed to take them to the places I loved. And that's how Frying Pan Adventures was born. We launched in 2013.

Q: How do you design a tour and choose restaurants?

A: There has to be either a cultural or geographic theme. The restaurants we select have to support that theme, they have to have foods that are extremely memorable. And they have to tell the story of a community. We like to have an interactive element – so walking into a kitchen, or having people compose their own monster falafel sandwiches. That gets people really invested in the final product they're going to eat.

Q: How did restaurants respond when you approached them about being part of a tour?

A: The only way to do it was to just go in and show my face as many times as possible, before the tours even began, so I could develop relationships with people – and then taking people there and seeing what happens.

What really helped was the guests we get are awesome; they're from really interesting places, they're very well-educated, well-spoken, very appreciative. So if the falafel guy is making falafel, they're super-interested, really engaged, they're going to compliment him – they make him feel like a rock star.

Q: Are people surprised by what they experience?

A: People are always surprised that there's this whole other side of town, which is just like a normal town, with some really interesting communities. When you hear of Dubai you only really hear about the skyscrapers and all the big landmarks.

They also find it very interesting there are so many sub-cultures within "Middle Eastern food". We have Palestinian falafel, or Iraqi fish, or an Egyptian pizza. We use Dubai as a way of showcasing and giving people that lesson on all these different cultures.

Q: What kinds of reactions do guests have to the tours?

A: All kinds! One of the most memorable ones was from this group from the UK. After they went home they sent photographs of this dinner party they held, where they recreated all the different foods they'd eaten – that was incredible.

Another time we got this message, and I saw the first line: "I'm so upset that..." I was thinking, what's happened? Then I read the whole thing: "I'm so upset that you essentially ruined every other falafel in the world for me." So that was a relief!



From traditional *harees* stew to five-star dining (via an oil boom and the Lebanese civil war), the history of Dubai's food scene is remarkable, says **Eliot Beer** – and its variety and excellence are beyond compare



Food always tells a story: peer into the dishes on a table and you can learn some geography and history, hear tales of scarcity and abundance and change. And the story behind the food in Dubai is one of the most fascinating in the world.

Dubai's food story has two parts: the first is as old as civilisation itself, while the second dates from just a few decades ago. Together they have produced an incredibly lively food scene, where one can dine on all the world's cuisines without moving more than a mile or two.

While it's often grouped together under "Middle Eastern food", the traditional cuisine of Dubai is quite distinct from that of the Levant – the source of what most British people think of as food from the region. The harsh desert climate of the Arabian peninsula, and the reliance on hardy herd animals instead of thirsty vegetables, resulted in a very different, but no less delicious, culinary tradition.

Harees is a great example of this: a thick stew of ground wheat, meat and animal fat or butter, it is traditionally served on special occasions such as weddings, or during Ramadan. The dish is cooked in a single pot until the meat is falling apart and combines with the wheat, then thickened to completion over a hotter flame. Wheat and other grains were one of the few crops which were accessible to Bedouins, and this mix of complex carbohydrates, protein and fat was just the sort of energy-dense meal which would get you through a long desert journey.

Machboos, or *kabsa*, a dish of rice and meat flavoured with spices and preserved lemon, illustrates the evolution of local cuisine. The meat, traditionally goat or mutton, came from Bedouin herd animals – but the rice and spices were brought from India and Persia, evidence of

the region's longstanding trade ties: *machboos* is regarded as a local dish throughout Arabia. Nowadays you can find *machboos* with a variety of meat, particularly chicken, and fish.

The date is the foundation for Arabia's sweet dishes. Many Brits may know the date only through the disappointingly tasteless variety which would languish in a box, ironically labelled "Eat Me". Compared to this, dates in Dubai are a revelation: grown locally and across the Arabian peninsula, they range from small morsels of intense dark caramel flavours to expansive sticky glory. No wonder Muslims regard dates as coming literally from paradise.

As well as being eaten on their own, dates become the syrup which soaks local desserts such as *luqaimat*, tiny doughnut-esque

dumplings, or covers *chebab*, the Emirati twist on pancakes, flavoured with spices and stuffed with cheese. You can find dates twice in *maamoul* cookies, first in the dough and then as a filling.

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helping to offset the strong coffee with which they are usually served.

Dubai has been a trading post for centuries, and over the years has become home to many different groups, particularly from Iraq, Jordan, Persia and the Indian subcontinent. These settlers have left a foundational influence on Dubai's cuisine, dating back well before the foundation of the modern United Arab Emirates – and making delicious Iranian kebabs or Iraqi *masgouf* (grilled fish) easy to find in the city.

But it was the discovery of oil in the 1960s, and the creation of the UAE in 1971, which indirectly spurred a dramatic shift in Dubai's food scene – along with some outside forces. One of these was the Lebanese civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990 and forced many Lebanese out of the country.



City of splendours
Panorama of Souk Al Bahar in front of Burj Khalifa, Dubai, main picture, inset, clockwise from top: chicken Biryani with a yogurt tomato raita; succulent dates, luqaimat doughnut balls, and the historic neighbourhood of Al Bastakiya in Dubai; a deluxe desert feast, left

2000 when Dubai's food evolution moved into a new, more interesting phase. As the emirate changed its tactics to focus on becoming a regional hub for business, a greater variety of visitors and immigrants arrived in the city – and looked for something to eat.

This led to the establishment of a huge variety of international eateries across the city, most of them small, family-owned establishments catering to their diasporas. From Ethiopian *injera* to Korean barbecue to Indonesian *nasi goreng*, authentic international food quietly mushroomed across Dubai.

Meanwhile, at the other end of the spectrum, Dubai's growing numbers of high-end hotels fought to differentiate themselves – partly by investing in ever-more elaborate dining establishments. Hotels imported top international chefs and made great play of using fresh, authentic ingredients. As a result, the city is now packed with high-end gastronomic delights, from the Asian fusion of Nobu to the arriving-soon molecular gastronomy of Heston Blumenthal.

The combination, the layering of this community-driven authenticity and prestige-laden haute cuisine has given Dubai – a city where you can eat a different dish 365 days of the year – one of the most vibrant dining scenes in the world. Bon appétit – or, as they say in Dubai, sahtein.

MANDI
Slow-baked lamb and rice
Find it: Mandilicious in Times Square Centre



KOUSA MAHSHI
Stuffed marrows or courgettes
Find it: Laila Restaurant in Downtown Dubai



MASGOUF
Marinated grilled fish from Iraq
Find it: Samad Al Iraqi opposite Jumeirah Beach Park Centre



MUSAKHAN
Palestinian-style roast chicken
Find it: Beit Maryam in Jumeirah Lakes Towers



LUQAIMAT
Crispy, fluffy, sticky sweet dumplings
Find it: Logma in BoxPark, Jumeirah

Top tours from Frying Pan Adventures



SOUKS AND CREEKSIDE FOOD WALK
See Dubai's traditional markets, and the tasty treats around them



MIDDLE EASTERN FOOD PILGRIMAGE
Discover the region's food with 10 unique tastings



FOOD TOUR ON WHEELS
Explore Dubai's food further in air-conditioned comfort



LITTLE INDIA ON A PLATE
Experience six of Dubai's most interesting Indian eateries

AUTHENTIC DINING DURING RAMADAN

During the Holy Month, diners break their fast with a lavish iftar buffet and settle down for the elaborate latenight suhoor just before dawn

The Holy Month of Ramadan is the most sacred time of year for Muslims, and marked by fasting during daylight hours. But after the sun sets, the fast is broken with the *iftar* meal. Traditionally a light meal, it's followed just before the dawn by *suhoor*, to see you through the coming day's fast – sometimes with dinner in between. These days in Dubai, iftar is often a lavish buffet just after sunset, and suhoor is another

elaborate meal late at night. Almost every restaurant in the city offers their interpretation of both meals – although an all-you-can-eat Pizza Hut buffet is not considered traditional. To experience an authentic iftar or suhoor, visit an Arabic or Emirati establishment – but be sure to book if you can. Expect to eat delicious dates and fruit, along with *harees*, *machboos*, *sambousa* (similar to samosa), and *thareed* (lamb and bread stew).



from some 'interesting' waxwork figures) is matched by the deliciously authentic food. Recently, the chain opened another Al Fanar at Al Seef, by Dubai Creek, focusing on Emirati-style seafood dishes. (And you can also enjoy Emirati cuisine at Al Fanar's London branch, in Kensington.)

Just a little further down the creek is Local House in the Al Fahidi historical district, where you can enjoy traditional food in as traditional a setting as you can get in Dubai. Local House specialises in camel meat – traditionally a rare and prized dish – along with camel milk ice cream.

Another mall-based option is Milas in Dubai Mall. Popular with Emiratis and visitors alike, Milas offers modern twists on local food, such as Emirati-style chicken pasta, or shawarma bites – along with more camel ice cream.