

'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 extremel memorable. And they have to tell the story of a community. We like to have an interactive element so walking into a kitchen, or havng 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!

Tep tours from Frying Pan Adventures

SOUKS AND CREEKSIDE

FOOD WALK

See Dubai's traditional

markets, and the tasty

MIDDLE EASTERN FOOD PILGRIMAGE

Discover the region's food

with 10 unique tastings

reats around them

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



ood 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.

Tirepits

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

climate of the Arabian peninsula, and the reliance on hardy herd als instead of thirst 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 Lebanese out of the country.

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.

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JBAI'S

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

cheese. You can find

maamoul cookies,

then as a filling,

first in the dough and

dates twice in

region. The harsh desert Dubai has been a trading post for centuries, home to many different settlers who vegetables, resulted in a have left a foundational influence on its cuisine

> 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





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 late-night suhoor just before dawn

he Holv 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-vou-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, samboosa (similar to samosa), and thareed (lamb and bread stew)



Where to eat

Emirati cuisine used to be the preserve of the home but now it enjoys its own vibrant restaurant scene

> ot so long ago, if you had asked the average (non-Emirati) resident of Dubai what the city's traditional dish was, they would most likely have said shawarma. But while this kebab is both tasty and ubiquitous, it is, in fact, a Levantine import. For many people, particularly visitors, Emirati cuisine remained a mystery, rarely seen in restaurants.

Thankfully, in recent years there has been a push to bring Emirati food into the spotlight - and now Dubai boasts plenty of places to sample traditional local dishes as well as modern twists. This is to everyone's benefit, as Emirat cuisine offers a fascinating and delicious insight into the UAE's culture and history. One of the main reasons Emirati food was

not served in restaurants was that it was served at home - and if you are fortunate enough to be invited to dine at an Emirati household, this remains the most authentic way to experience the cuisine, and should not be passed up. But fortunately, even the casual visitor has ample opportunity to enjoy local dishes.

Emirati cuisine starts with the Bedouin, the local nomadic tribes who have occupied the Arabian peninsula for millennia – so a great way to enjoy their food is out in the desert. The Heritage Desert Safari tour from Platinum Heritage includes a traditional meal, taken in the evening in a traditional Bedouin camp lit with torches. For a more settled (and luxurious) desert dining experience, Bab Al Shams Desert Resort & Spa is a good option. Set deep in the desert outside Dubai, Bab Al Shams offers traditional Emirati cuisine under the stars, or inside at its Al Hadheerah Desert Restaurant along with a number of international options, and a host of desert activities.

The Sheikh Mohammed Centre for Cultural Understanding gives a great overview of Emirati cuisine complete with a lesson in local culture. The centre offers breakfast, lunch and dinner on various days of the week, along with traditional Emirati afternoon tea on request.

tour of the seven emirates of the UAE.





A significant number came to the UAE and

default Arabic cuisine in the city, symbolised by the dominance of the humble *shawarma* - although in recent years, Emirati cuisine has been resurgent (see below for tips on how to eat truly authentic Emirati food).

As the Gulf's oil boom continued, Dubai's growth centred on trade, thanks to the dramatic expansion of its ports, and later its airport. Much of the city's population growth came from immigration, particularly from India, Pakistan and other South Asian countries - with the result that Dubai has some of the best South Asian cuisine in the world, from tiny cafes offering chilli-fried chicken and rice for a few dirhams, to sumptuous restaurants serving the Mughal-style curries the UK is familiar with. In the 1990s, Dubai attracted the attention of

American fast food franchises - McDonald's opened in 1994, Chili's in 1997 - but it was after

MANDI

Slow-baked lamb and rice

Find it: Mandilicious in

Times Square Centre

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 barbeque 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.

anorama of Souk Al Bahar in front of Buri Khalifa, Dubai, main picture; inset, clockwis from top: chicker Biryani with a vogurt tomato raita; succulent dates, luqaimat doughnut balls and the historic neighbourhood of Al Bastakiya in Dubai; a deluxe desert feast, left

City of





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





MASGOUF Marinated grilled fish from Iraq Find it: Samad Al Iraqi opposite





authentic local food

Possibly the best way to get to learn about any local cuisine is to prepare it yourself - and this is what's on offer at the award-winning Seven Sands restaurant at The Beach next to Jumeirah Beach Residence. Seven Sands offers a hands-on Emirati cookery class every Tuesday morning, after which guests get to eat their handiwork, along with other tasty dishes, and take home some souvenirs including a spice blend. And for those not so keen on cooking themselves, Seven Sands also offers a culinary It may be in a mall, but Al Fanar restaurant at Dubai Festival City aims to take diners back in time to the 1960s, when Dubai was a small town, still unknown by most of the rest of the world. The delightfully authentic décor (aside

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

