

A taste of the good life

The Middle East region continues to fine-tune its culinary cravings as the appetite for luxury food surges. Gourmet restaurateurs tell all

From Iranian golden caviar to rare teas, from India to kobe beef only found in Australia, demand for gourmet food is high in the Middle East – so high that more outlets have been cropping up across the region to supply this burgeoning market. Examples include the advent of internationally renowned gourmet food store and cafe Dean & DeLuca to Dubai, Kuwait and Doha. Dubai, meanwhile, has welcomed its first gourmet food market at the Oasis Center, while Qatar is priding itself on the region's first La Maison du Caviar in the W Doha Hotel. And in Lebanon, U Bay Club and Restaurant in Jounieh has just opened and specializes in fine dining French gastronomy served up by a two Michelin Star chef. With a region so famished for gourmet the Dubai World Trade Center decided to launch the inaugural Specialty Food Festival from October 31 to November 2.



The region is "very perceptive of the latest food trends and world fashion," according to **Patricia**

Kebbi, managing partner, **Gou**, a gourmet restaurant, patisserie, and boutique in Beirut. "They constantly request new things to discover and try." Several high level restaurants are opening, notes **Maroun Chedid**, corporate executive chef, **Medi Resto sal**, which runs the successful **La Posta** restaurant in Beirut. "The quality of the restaurants in Lebanon is undoubtedly

improving. This should be a sign that the demand for refined products is increasing," he remarks. **Aziz**, a leading name in gourmet food supply that tapped into a niche market when it first opened in Lebanon decades ago, agrees. "The gourmet stores trend is evolving in Lebanon and the region. Those who can afford high-quality and luxury products will buy them," says **Alain Abi Aad**, co-owner, **Aziz**.

"We consider Lebanon and the region as a promising market for the concept of a gourmet restaurant," says **Ziad Mouawad**, manager, **Burgundy** restaurant. Associate **Karl Asseily**, notes that this part of the world is "ready to be educated about authentic wines and fine French gastronomy". Three years ago **Alfred Asseily** launched his award-winning French gastronomic restaurant and lounge **La Table d'Alfred** in Sursock, Beirut. The nation was ready for a new cuisine, which was missing, according to Asseily.



Harking on the requests of its customers for Italian gourmet products, **Medi Resto** rolled out **La Posta Gourmet**, explains **Michel Ferneini**, the company's chairman and general manager. "Gourmet food is not just any food in



La Table d'Alfred, Beirut

wonderful packaging... It is directly related to the quality of the product," he stresses. "Gourmet is also about details and the refinement of cuisine and service," points out **Mohamed Al-Sadek**, owning director, **Al Mourjan**, Qatar. "To attain gourmet standards, Al Mourjan created an in-house training school to develop our professionals to a level where we can serve a seven-star service. This is unique in the region."



Inspired by Qatar's original architecture and seaside cultural heritage, the Lebanese restaurant also went the extra mile in terms of design. "It's more costly because it involves a completely different level of operation; your setup in general is more high-end from the décor to the raw materials used," Al-Sadek elaborates. "A fine dining



Burgundy, Beirut



Al Mourjan, Qatar

restaurant certainly needs higher investments in terms of decoration and machineries than a regular restaurant," Chedid continues. Mouawad and Karl Asseily say the same applies to Burgundy, which offers a selection of the finest wines and delicacies. "Designing and building a restaurant of this caliber necessarily involves hidden investments to the consumer, such as a truly professional cuisine with top-notch ovens, wine coolers, as well as the quality of the materials chosen to recreate the spirit of Burgundy. The consumer will also appreciate the small details like the chairs, utensils, etching on the knives and glasses..." For Gou, the product

Getting real

Foodie Kamal Mouzawak gives us his opinion on gourmet food



In his book *Jordan, the land and the table* the writer Cecil Hourani confesses, "What is important is not the variety or richness of a cuisine, but its authenticity, its fidelity to what is available, and its best exploitation to its potential."

Food is the most authentic expression of a tradition, of a land and of history. And so in Lebanon, nothing speaks better of mountain or sea, north or south than its food. Of all the expressions of tradition, food is the most authentic and the one that is mostly perpetuated through time and place. There are five million Lebanese in Lebanon and three times as many abroad. It is these who took with them kebbeh and tabouleh, as did the Italians with pizza and pasta, the Japanese with sushi and sashimi and the Mexicans with fajitas and beans.

Authentic is the new trend, or should I say the new way because trend is fashion, it comes and goes. It's better to look at authentic as a new way, as a discovery, to build on and nurture along, rather than forget and move to another trend. Authentic is not just about a concept, décor or a crowd, it is about the food: how good it tastes, where it comes from, what story it is telling, how clean and fair its production is.

I will illustrate my case with a hotel and not a restaurant. The Ace hotel is a new breed that was born in Portland. We love dreamers, says their slogan. It is all about going

straight to the point and discarding all unnecessary clutter. Why do I need a triple bed cover? Why does my bed need to be tucked so tight? Why do I need so much clutter? Very often the answer is "because it is done so".

At the Ace, it is first about a **sense of place** – I simply want to know where I am and not be in a copy paste chain hotel that is the same all around the world. It is about Portland's creative New York's vibe with Palm Spring Scoubidou chairs. It is about the **low card and high card**. At the Clyde Common restaurant you'll have the best beef burger or salad, on raw wood tables, with silverware, and fine crystal glasses. Why have more than necessary and less than necessary luxury? A hotel is no longer just a hotel - Ace Hotel is working with forward-thinking local businesses to make the building a hub of movement and culture.

Going straight to the point, is going straight to the investment, to cost and pricing and to where customers is put their money. It is how to go **beyond time**, just mixing and matching the best of each period by layering pieces from several different periods, sources and original uses. Why shouldn't a fiberglass Eames chair go with an early 20th century industrial counter, or a laboratory table?

soukeltayeb.com



Gou, Beirut

remains the first and foremost selling point. "We aimed for our fine food products and restaurant creations to be our store's heroes, and not necessarily the fittings of the store itself," Kebbe states.

"Gourmet food is not just any food it is directly related to the quality of the product"

"I never cease to travel the world to bring our customers innovative specialty food products and collections, which vary with the seasons and conjure gourmet discoveries, culinary excursions, and sensory revelations," adds Kebbe.

And offerings depend on how much cash one is willing to part with, varying from a simple handmade flower candy at \$3 to a few grams of black winter truffles from the Perigord at \$300. Le Table D'Alfred also imports more than 90 percent of its products. "We also have a wine menu that includes more than 550 types of

wines from Lebanon, France, and all over the world," says Alfred Asseily. "By launching such a high scale restaurant, our clients expect from us the best service accompanied by excellent food," adds Asseily. Al Mourjan imports lamb from Syria, lobster from Oman, and shrimp from Kuwait, and the average paycheck oscillates between \$50-100.

Of course, this business comes with its own set of challenges. "The main challenge consists in educating the local consumer to understand and appreciate the true wonders of Burgundy wines, as well as grasp the idea of a new creative cuisine," says Mouawad.

For La Posta outlets, products are selected and picked from several areas of Italy and each of them requires knowledge of Italy, its people, and its land.

And the region is in store for more excellence as Gou and La Posta are going outside their borders, while Al Mourjan is invading Europe and the US, and Burgundy is branching out in Paris, Tokyo, Shanghai, and New York. ■



La Posta, Beirut



Aziz, Beirut