

What happens to restaurants during Ramadan

12 Nov 2005 by JR

While a couple of books, a trip to the British Museum and the internet provided me with enough preliminary information about a trip from Alexandria to Cairo and Aswan, nothing seemed to yield encouraging results about Egypt's better restaurants. Emails to friends who knew the country well bore little fruit; the guide books were pretty uninspiring; while one friend, currently living in Cairo for a year, commented that a dearth of good restaurants was the only drawback to an otherwise fascinating city.

To compound matters, my trip coincided with the end of Ramadan, the holy month during which Muslims do not eat or drink from sunrise to sunset, and I remembered from a similarly-timed trip to Morocco that this can be embarrassing, if not awkward, for hungry and thirsty travellers.

But in fact staying there during Ramadan resulted in three particular insights into Egyptian hospitality. The first was the pungent aromas that rose from grills across whichever city we were in just before sunrise and again just before sunset as its inhabitants prepared for and then broke their fast. The second was the warmth of the welcome we received, certainly the equal of any top restaurant's that I have encountered, as we walked round the streets of Alexandria at sunset from all those gathering either at communal tables or, if they were soldiers or policemen at rather lonelier spots, to join them in their meal. The third was a comment from our Cairo guide, "You know, Ramadan is a fast but it has become such a social affair between sunset and sunrise that many of us end up putting on weight."

To discover just what the financial implications of Ramadan are and what are the consequences for a successful restaurant and hotel operation working in a country where wine sales are insignificant, I sat down one afternoon with German-born, Muslim, Frank Heinen, the Director of Food and Beverage at the new Four Seasons Nile Plaza whose restaurants, my Cairene informant opined, have made a huge difference to eating out in the city since they opened a year ago.

"In fact," Heinen explained, "the absence of an income stream from wine sales doesn't make that much difference. The duty on imported wines ranges from 400-800% depending on how and where you buy the wine so the prices we have to charge will put off most enthusiasts. But, fortunately, compared to the relatively small gross profits most hotels outside the Middle East make on their wine, we can make a much higher profit on the sales of soft drinks and mineral water and we sell these in very large quantities so that is a much more significant revenue stream for us and every other hotel."

"Egypt is still basically a whisky culture," he continued, "and other than during Ramadan many Egyptians will go out with their own bottle of whisky or gin. They'll put it on their table and expect to pay a small corkage charge for it, so again we'll make our income from the mixers and soft drinks that go with them."

Ramadan, however, does present one particular commercial opportunity and one particular challenge for Heinen and his colleagues in the Egyptian hospitality business. The former comes at the end of the first week when, after breaking the fast chez various members of the family, it becomes an occasion for corporate entertainment, with the hotel's banqueting suites, which can seat over 800, full every evening – events obviously greeted with considerable enthusiasm judging from the queues of well-dressed Cairenes I witnessed just after 5pm waiting to pass through the hotel's security check point, sadly a routine feature throughout the country.

The challenge is how to serve this number, not just because the hotel's waiting staff also has to break their fast at the same time but also how to maintain standards, as no Muslim chef is allowed to taste what he is cooking during the day. Buffets where the guests help themselves or having the cold first courses already on the table solve the first problem while the secret to the latter, according to Heinen, is to press all the hotel's expatriate staff into the kitchen to taste and to ensure that there is always a healthy balance of Muslims and Christians among the kitchen brigade.

A more long term challenge for those in Heinen's position, however, is trying to persuade Egyptians to be more adventurous when they eat out. "Egyptians are still terribly conservative – and I can say this because my wife is Egyptian and I will always have an argument with my mother-in-law about how even the pasta should be cooked because they won't eat it al dente. They are reluctant to go out to eat Egyptian food because they believe that nobody makes it better than Mama so why bother. When we opened Aqua, our fish restaurant, it had a strong Pacific Rim influence but it initially bombed because it didn't fit their image of the better fish restaurants that you find here and in Alexandria where there is an open fish display, the fish is weighed and then simply grilled or fried in an open kitchen. We had to broaden the menu considerably by introducing steaks and pasta, but I do plan to revert to its original concept because I am sure we can educate our customers."

Certainly, there was a huge difference in style between our two fish meals at Aqua and the Fish Market in Alexandria. The entrance to the former boasts decorative fish tanks which lead on to a Japanese-manned sushi counter that would not look out of place in Tokyo, London or New York. Nor would the range and quality of the sushi, sashimi or sushi rolls on offer. What would come as a very pleasant surprise to any sushi lover however are the prices. At 10 Egyptian pounds or one pound sterling per reassuringly fresh piece, Aqua's sushi is the best value I have come across in a very long time.

By contrast, the menu and style of service at the (notably clean and modern) Fish Market do not seem to have changed in decades. On the side of the long room that looks out across the city's Corniche and the Mediterranean are a bread oven; an open display of that day's catch; a set of scales behind which a man weighs your order and calculates your bill, and a large, open grill. Half a dozen mezze appear as soon as you have sat down and the bill that followed a meal for three of squid, clams, red mullet, a rice dish studded with shrimps and a flavourful grilled chicken came to a total of £18 without coffee, dessert - or wine, of course.

We skipped dessert because right below is the Samadi Patisserie and we wandered back to our hotel (the Sofitel Cecil is probably the best choice until the new Four Seasons Alexandria opens late next year) with a small tray of those ultra-sweet Middle Eastern pastries along the seafront of an historic city which, thanks to its magnificent new library, is finally undergoing a long, overdue renaissance.

Aqua, Four Seasons Hotel, Cairo at Nile Plaza, 1089 Corniche El Nil, 202-791 7000.

Fish Market, Alexandria 480-5119.