

The brave new world of Dubai's restaurants

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The plane touched down so far ahead of schedule that there was no time for breakfast. Instead it was straight into what would prove to be a four-day ritual of a glass of pasteurised camel's milk; a bowl of rich rice pudding made from camel's milk and laced with saffron; *labneh*, thick strained yoghurt, with walnuts; and several different coloured but equally delicious dates.

I have to admit that I viewed my first trip to Dubai with some reservations but now feel that I have actually been professionally negligent in taking so long to visit this rapidly developing Emirate.

As someone who tries to keep his finger on the pulse of the world of restaurants I had made a mental note each time I read that one five-star Dubai hotel had poached a top European chef to be their executive chef or another had lured chefs from further afield to open outposts in a similar manner to that practised by Las Vegas hotels. But I had so far failed to appreciate just what a brave new world Dubai has become.

This was certainly the opinion of 20 food and beverage managers gathered around a room close to the helicopter landing pad at the top of the extraordinary Burj al Arab hotel. They were a relatively young, but well travelled group comprised of Irish, French, Italians, Australians, South Africans and New Zealanders as well as the odd Brit. They were all convinced that Dubai was, professionally, the best place they could possibly be.

'It is much more exciting than the Far East,' according to one of them, 'even before Sars. What the authorities here seem to do is to put all their efforts into building up the supply side, to building the hotels, attractions and infrastructure and then generating the demand afterwards. It's the reverse of anywhere else in the world and very, very exciting.'

Hand in hand goes a growing list of wealthy clients lured by the sun, the fantastic hotels and Dubai's charms not only as a tourist destination but also as a burgeoning business centre for the region. Before the hotel's head sommelier slipped away to attend to a particularly good local customer who had ordered his customary bottle of Château Pétrus, he described the spending habits of the numerous, demanding young Russians with a penchant for even younger great red bordeaux.

All the restaurant action takes places in hotels because these are the only places which can easily secure the lucrative liquor licences. If there is one cloud on these managers' collective horizon it is that Dubai's tax on alcohol will increase to match that of the other Emirates when a bottle of wine already costs an hotel here 100 per cent more than in the UK. Earlier this year the tax on caviar was increased by 300 per cent to make up for Dubai's previously rather lax controls on this luxurious import from the nearby Caspian. It has therefore disappeared from the hotels' Friday buffets - another, more specific, reason why I regret not visiting Dubai earlier.

As in other resorts, the top restaurants are financially underpinned by other more lucrative outlets, most notably the banqueting operations, private parties and night clubs which all the hotels provide. This is the side of the business which in certain instances can boost several hotels' food and beverage business to over £20 million a year.

What continues to amaze even old Dubai hands is how suddenly this business materialises. One manager cited a dinner he had just left in full swing in his hotel which had been booked for 300 only 24 hours earlier although in the end over 400 had turned up.

For the chefs who have moved to Dubai this requires a very different approach to the one they had been used to. Jason Atherton, who was cooking some of London's most exciting food at the now defunct Anis of Frith Street before he flew off to the Dubai Hilton, bemoans the paperwork above all. 'It's colossal and incessant,' he sighed, 'and the only way I can get into the kitchen at 10.00, which is where I think I should be, is to get into my office at 06.00 and get it out of the way.'

Atherton is, happily for Londoners, planning to leave Dubai in February 2004 after a three-year stint and will open his own restaurant in October. 'I have to get back into the swing of things, to get my name appreciated again before people forget who I am.'

For John Wood, who reluctantly swapped the kitchens of leafy Cliveden for the underwater kitchens of the Burj three years ago (he turned the move down three times before accepting) the most striking aspect of his job is the standard of hygiene. 'It is undoubtedly higher here than anywhere else I have worked in the world, even Hong Kong, and that means I still cannot import beef or veal from the UK.'

Instead, he flies in langoustines and lobster from Scotland and wild sea bass via Daily Fish in London. 'That is my logistical challenge as we have to import 90 per cent of the produce. The region only produces some fruit, herbs and spices, chicken that are really only good enough for curries, and a few fish, red snapper, halwyoo (a little like brill), grouper and Oman lobster.' But the implications of this policy are beginning to affect chefs and restaurant-goers worldwide - when Wood wanted wild sea bass as a main course for 400, his order cornered that day's entire market in London leading to angry phone calls and emails from his former colleagues.

Wood is most encouraged by the progress of the Emirates Academy of Hospitality Management, associated with the renowned Lausanne Hotel School, which in its third year is now training over 100 students to fill the many hospitality outlets the Emirate is planning. But it will be some time before the first Dubai-born top chef emerges, Wood added sadly, as the chef's profession is still perceived here as one of servility rather than one which gives pleasure.

For the foreseeable future, therefore, Dubai's executive chefs will be ex-pats supervising international brigades cooking for the well-heeled families who rule Dubai, working ex-pats and international holidaymakers. But even more ironic is that while chefs from Australia to California are looking to the Middle East for their current inspiration, the most difficult food to find in Dubai, other than my little taste of camel at breakfast, was Arabic.

Restaurant recommendations: Verre, Hilton, Al Muntaha, Burj al Arab, Splendido, Ritz Carlton, Olives, Royal Mirage, Cafe Chic, Meridien.