

ON THE FOOD TRAIL



IN OLD DUBAI

There are many kinds of diners in the world. I fall into the class of Exploratory Eaters, those who view mealtime as an opportunity to explore the city and unearth culinary secrets far removed from the glitz and hype of five-star Dubai.

For an exploratory eater, restaurants play an incredibly important role beyond nourishing or entertaining - they have the ability to make you digest the localised essence of the city. The night markets of Penang, the quaint cafes of Paris, the street hawkers of Mumbai, the deep-dish pizza parlours of Chicago, the noodle soup carts of Saigon - all of these have a sense of place. Eating at any one of them, you could be nowhere else.

Feasting on lobster at a seafood restaurant facing gold arches and a giant panoramic aquarium might be exhilarating to some, but claustrophobic to others. The apricot-streaked tiger fish staring back at me through the glass tank is no less trapped than I am, each of us in our own isolated aquariums far removed from a sense of time, place and reality.

As an aspiring food writer, I am aware that such bold assertions might mean the end of free-flowing food at chic restau-



rants pandering after a positive publicised word. Disappointed I am not. I will not sulk because I lost an invitation to peck on foie gras six hundred feet up in the air. Instead you will find me where I would much rather be - on a brightly-lit

sidewalk in Old Dubai, juggling the hot blistered folds of an Egyptian feteer, fingers dripping with cheese and honey, lips glossed with silky icing sugar.

Memorable restaurant outings are ones that draw me closer to what makes this city 'tick,' a clockwork that is best oiled by the local streets and its diverse people. I could be queuing up at an oversubscribed haunt in the Keralite square of Karama, anticipating a dinner of floppy rice flour appams dipped in a sinus-clearing crab curry. Or I might be polishing off Saudi camel meat kabsa near Mamzar, on a street littered with sheesha cafes misty with double apple smoke and lively with cheering football fans.

It is a buffet of local and immigrant flavours, and is best washed down with the vibe of the local neighbourhood. These unembellished experiences bring me closer to cracking the code of a city constantly accused of being 'soulless.' As I wait for a Chinese mother to roll lamb and coriander dumplings in her twelve-chair restaurant in International City, I start becoming a part of the code itself.

A sense of localised context is one element of feeling connected to a city, a connection that is deepened by a thirst for discovery. Few people know that Dubai is home to an unofficial 'Little



A TINY CHINESE EATERY IN INTERNATIONAL CITY

Ethiopia,' tucked away in that congested armpit of Deira better known as Frij Murar. The roads are so mangled that only regulars can make sense of the urban mess, but once you develop your own twisted form of navigational logic, the noise melts away and all that remains is a treasure map of the best Ethiopian haunts for a fiery doro wat. I once embarked on a hunt for an Ethiopian restaurant called Alysennian, introduced to me by a friend whose sense of direction had landed us right at the doorstep on a previous visit. In his absence,



I fumbled around like a rudderless boat. Ethiopian ladies with thin wiry braids snaking around their faces sat supervising the neighborhood cafés, smoking their water pipes behind beaded curtains and steering me closer towards Alysennian. I whirled by Ethiopian hair salons, tailor-

ing stores, shops with rusty steam presses and starched shirts swaying by the windows, and closet-sized rooms with spinning machines hissing out reels of thread with crazed mechanical repetition.

With every misguided turn and hesitant retraced step, I could feel the exhilarating

abandon of someone out for an adventure - a destination in mind, but the journey being as much a part of the meal as the destination itself. While undeniably more complicated than a walk down the polished floors of a hotel lobby, the act of strolling through backstreets until I find a hidden gem plays up to my wanderlust. Many might find a directionless walk through an alien neighbourhood frustrating, but I find such experiences both liberating and formative. They connect me, the exploratory eater, with a fabric of Dubai that often slips through the fingers of those who rely on the obvi-

ous. I know I will leave Alysennian fulfilled, not just with chicken stew slopped over the fermented rag-folds of injera bread, but with the knowledge that I have chalked out a trail through a Dubai that did not exist for me until that morning.

It pulls into stark contrast a recent dinner at a French restaurant in one of many glimmering towers piercing through the city's horizon. While everything about Alysennian - the walk to the restaurant, the streets outside, the atmospheric neighbourhood - energised me with a sense of discovery and accomplishment, the restaurant in the tower did just the opposite. I was swallowed up in a vast cavity of a dining room that is indistinguishable from ones in New York or Paris. The brie smeared across my crusty baguette was perfectly enjoyable, but the ambience bordered on sterile. Two months down the line, if my mind erases one less memorable dining experience from its records, you might guess which one it would be.

This is not to say that I never don a cocktail dress for an occasional upscale outing, my last one being the unforgettable truffle ravioli at Ronda Locatelli on The Palm. But more often than not, I find myself hankering for down-to-earth experiences where I can clear away the excess silverware and rub shoulders with a broader socio-economic bracket than the ones in red-soled stilettos.

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A TRADITIONAL GULF RESTAURANT IN DEIRA

The Glamorous Gastronomer might sneer at me for turning down an invite to the latest restaurant opening, but I would rather use my evening to walk down Al Rigga Road and try Sham Sham. This repetitively named eatery is another dime-a-dozen Levantine restaurant, one that is squashed inconspicuously between the syrupy baklava trays of an Arabic sweet store and the dusty entrance of a one-storey building that flouts the city's Law of the Skyscraper.

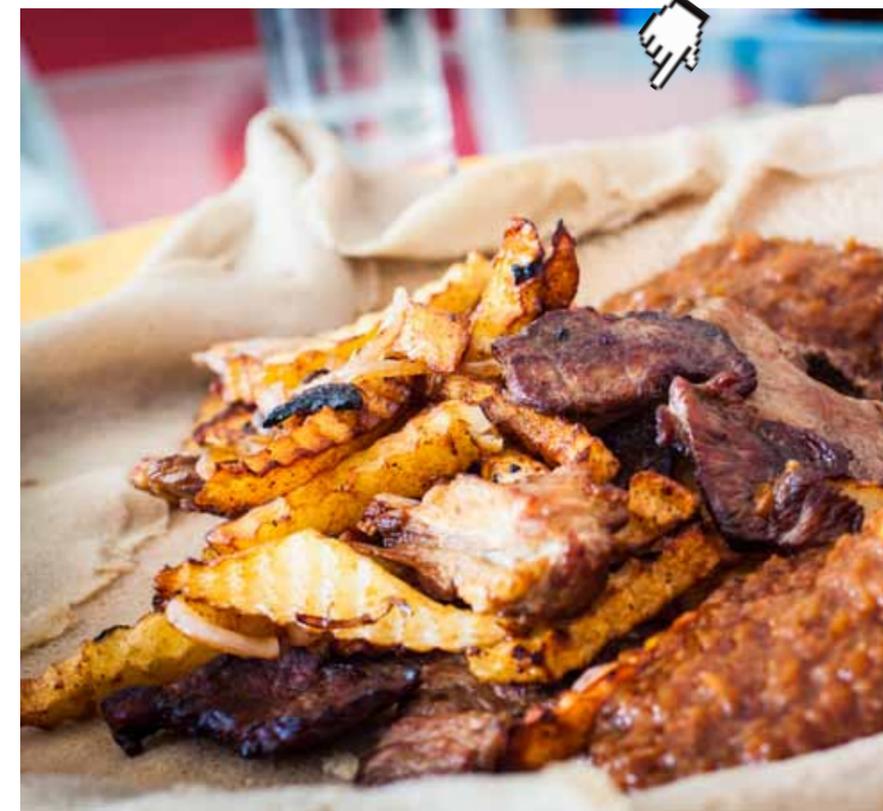
There was admittedly nothing outstanding about my meal at Sham Sham earlier this year, yet it is not one that I will forget easily. As I forked through a baby eggplant with its skin prematurely wrinkled into salty aged lines, the calming din of street life murmured around me.

A myriad of bodies drifted past the vibrant yet unassuming street, confusing my ears with an unintelligible blend of Arabic, Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, Tagalog, Russian, English and the citywide official language - car honks. Sitting al fresco on Al Rigga Road with an unpretentious bowl of scalloped hummus, pickled eggplant makdous and a lamb pastry threaded with pomegranate beads, I soaked in an experience that was much more than the sum of its gastronomic parts.

It is precisely this unadorned reality that makes people flock to the not-so-secret Bu'qtair fish shack and Pakistani-cultured Ravi's. These are experiences that are precious not because they are exclusive, but because that is exactly what they are not - a refreshing concept in a city not shy about announcing its affluence.

A plate of fried fish and coconut curry dished out from a beachside cabin gives Dubai's oft-celebrated diversity a far more inclusive dimension than anything handed down by a perfectly constructed plate of miso cod - no matter how delicious.

It is the small, unassuming restaurants, both the trails leading up to them and the simple food they serve, that have helped me build my internal compass of Dubai. This is the compass that not only guides me to the most authentic eateries, but helps me navigate a city with context, a city with its caked-up layers of concrete and glass makeup peeled away, a city that I will attempt to explore to every last corner. And the experiences I have savoured at every turn belong at exactly those turns, nowhere else.



THREE TO TRY

MUSAHARATI RESTAURANT

The thick shisha smog in this restaurant is sufficient to make you dizzy even at midday. But if you can keep your head above the smoke, swipe to the Moroccan section of their surprisingly tech-enabled iPad menu and order a chicken bastilla. This moist Moroccan pie arrives tucked into a crisp buttered pastry, plump with a saffron-scented stuffing of chicken, almonds and sugar. Study it with undivided attention, before you graduate to the meltingly tender lamb and prunes tagine.

AIRPORT ROAD, GARHOUD, 04-2829148

THE DUMPLING QUEEN

This cosy restaurant is nestled into one of the many uninspiring structures of International City, a haven of Chinese culture worth visiting during the unavoidable excursion to Dragon Mart. Delicate dumplings are hand-rolled just minutes after you order, and there are few more delicious ways of honing your chopstick skills than practising across their fifteen filling permutations.

CHINA CLUSTER C15, INTERNATIONAL CITY, 04-3674558

BERIANI ESFAHAN

Few things can be more disorienting than Biryani without rice - and Beriani Esfahan delivers that shock with authentic rice-less Biryani true to its native home in Isfahan. Shock value aside, their Iranian kababs, meaty okra stew and richly stewed lamb shank make for a stomach generously sated and a wallet undeniably relieved.

MAKTOUM ROAD, DEIRA, 04-2340093

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARVA AHMED WWW.LIVEINAFRYINGPAN.COM

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