



DUBAI FOOD FESTIVAL

THE FOODIE EXTRAVAGANZA

BY SCOTT ARMSTRONG



I can't think of anything I want to do for 50 hours continuously, not continuously.

Thinking about it, if I had to choose one thing I had to do non-stop for that length of time it wouldn't be to cook a piece of meat.

And then if I did, and I really wouldn't, the last thing I'd do is give it to a complete stranger, having never met them and not knowing if they would appreciate all that time and effort.

But having said that, as I bit into the beef rib prepared by Chef Izu's team at the La Serre Bistro, in Dubai's boutique Vida Hotel, I can genuinely say the melt-in-the-mouth experience as the juices streamed out was worth the two-days plus it took them to achieve.

I'd never really considered myself much of a 'foodie'; I can't even write it without putting it in inverted commas. Yes, I've known what I have liked, I can differentiate between average, good and excellent.

And I've learned from experience that cost does not always translate into quality.

But sitting in the light, chic interior of La Serre Bistro with a gentle buzz of convivial conversation surrounding me, a glass of something chilled in hand, and an array of to die-for French cuisine to attack, I suddenly thought, 'Mais oui! Je suis un foodie' (in a horrible British accent sounding not remotely Gallic).

I'd crossed the border to Dubai to experience the Dubai Food Festival, which is running in the Emirate until the end of this month. In its second year, the festi-

val features a host of food-related events, from street cafes to fine dining in five-star hotels.

In total some 22 celebrity chefs from around the world have flocked (do chefs flock?) to the UAE, concentrating on four main themes, Emirati food, homegrown food, Multi-cultural dining and street food, and international dining.

The programme is dizzying, too much for even the largest waistbands (and we know that is saying something in the Gulf), with dozens and dozens of restaurants participating.

Oman itself is witnessing an emerging 'foodie' revolution with diners taking to social media to voice their opinions on the fare set before them.

Facebook groups such as Oman Restaurant Review have attracted thousands of devotees who regularly submit reviews. Food bloggers are on the rise, with MuscatMutterings.com often weighing in with his views on the restaurant scene, while heyfatsu.com is drawing a growing fan base with her regular musings on all things cuisine.

So the appetite for a trip across the border to such a huge food festival, if only to put the Oman scene into context and perhaps draw inspiration, should prove tempting for many.

But despite all the gastronomy, you don't have to be a food devotee, addicted to posting pictures of your food on Instagram, to enjoy this festival and come away with your culinary horizons broadened.

For sitting in that delightful (not a word I often use) French restaurant and slowly savouring (again another word not often in my phrasebook) the soft texture of that beef rib, letting the flavours sink in, I understood that it is not all about the food.

Wait, stay with me on this, yes of course it is about the food, but it is more, because for the people that devote 50 hours to deliver such rib perfection this isn't just labour, in every sense it is art.

Like a painter, they sweat for their art,





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they craft for hours to get it just right. While they have colours on their palette, employed to achieve a tempting appearance on the plate (the first bite is with the eye and all that), they also paint in flavours, texture, smells, it is three-dimensional, sensory art done over and over again for consumer after consumer.

Flowery language perhaps, one of my pet hates in fact, but it is difficult not to enthuse about the Dubai Food Festival and its participants.

La Serre Bistro was one of three venues in two days I was lucky enough to sample, its marinated lamb cutlets with spices and the lightly spiced duck giving that legendary rib a run for its money.

The night previous the one and only Royal Mirage was host to my taste buds, more specifically (a word I do use too often) its Moroccan restaurant Tangine.

Dark and intimate, with intricately carved wood, the interior set a distinctly North African tone.

The eight different dishes, some sweet, some savoury, which I sampled were just a snapshot of a typical traditional Moroccan meal, but what a whistle-stop tour of a dinner.

Of it all the Mechoui, the roasted lamb

shoulder served with saffron rice, was possibly the most memorable meat dish I'd ever eaten (until the rib), with the flesh crumbling away. The strong flavours combined with the tenderness of the meat made the diner sit up and take notice, and you knew that in the back, in conditions far too hot for you or I, an artist was again at work. The Tagine Djaj Bi Zaytoon, braised chicken served with preserved lemon and green olives, also deserved attention.

As far as venues and views go, I saved the best for last, visiting the award-winning Pierchic at Al Qasr at the Madinat Jumeirah.

As the name suggests this stunning restaurant is set on a pier, giving you a 360 degree view of the water, framed at the rear by the five-star hotel.

While the hotel for me is a little too austere, trying too hard to be grand, Pierchic gets it totally right. Relaxed and yet smart, convivial and classy, charming yet contemporary, it oozes confidence just like the Parisian Jean-Luc Naret, former CEO of the Michelin Guides, who Jumeirah have appointed to oversee their restaurants.

A small sliver of pride for me was that





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in the heart of all that easy European charm, which comes so hard to uptight Brits such as I, responsible for the food magic is head chef Rosalind Parsk. This insanely talented English woman trained with Gordon Ramsey and Marco Pierre White before moving to Dubai.

Their loss is the Gulf's gain.

Excelling in seafood, Pierchic set out a menu of Ceviches, Tartars, Risottos and Bisques, but it was the Roasted Yellow Tail with celery root, green apple and black truffle sauce which impressed and surprised.

Fiendishly difficult (I'm told) to cook correctly Yellow Tail has all the appearance of a meaty tuna steak, but when the knife cuts in it crumbles almost like cottage cheese and is delicate and fluffy in the mouth, bursting with flavour.

It's on that high note that I'll end the seemingly endless monologue of dishes but all will linger long in the memory.

Looking back on the Dubai Food Festival it's clear that even for the uninitiated it is an education in cooking, in flavours, in textures.

If you don't believe me consider this, a boy who grew up with battered sausage and curry sauce as his absolute favourite dish, just wrote 1,100 words on food.

The Dubai Food Festival runs until February 28. I can sum it up in two words, 'go' and 'now'.

Oh, and try the ribs. ☺

-Food photographs courtesy: heyfatsu.com



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