

What's hot on your plate



Toufic Akl, senior consultant and offshore manager, hodema consulting services, takes a closer look at regional restaurant trends

In the Middle East, just as anywhere else in the world, customers follow the latest trends. The world of food and beverage is no exception but varies depending on the exposure of a country to foreign cultures and the state of its economy.

International fast food: the affordable classic

The range of fast food is pretty varied as most types of cuisine can be found in the Middle East. International fast food brands such as **McDonald's**, **Burger King**, **KFC** and **Subway** are practically everywhere in the region due to their relatively low requirements to operate (low investment cost and basic food products) and low average check. The global taste for fries and sandwiches makes them a hit with most customers, regardless of age or revenue. Most are franchises and when located in areas lagging behind in terms of foreign exposure, symbolize a window on the world, a vision well illustrated in Iraqi Kurdistan's Erbil and Suleymaniah, where these franchises are massive hits.

The lack of exposure to diverse cultures also explains the strength of the trend in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, where competition in F&B concepts took off just recently. Cosmopolitan cities, such as Beirut or Dubai, are tougher on fast foods, as they compete with a wide range of more modern and refined concepts.

Lebanese food: the local reference

Lebanese cuisine has always had a special place in people's hearts and palates. That is why Lebanese born or inspired restaurants now flood the region. Most of them serve traditional recipes, but some now want to make the experience a stylish one, both

at the table and around it. The flagship franchise of the trend is **Burj el Hamam**, which is already open in Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Dubai and, of course, Lebanon. The large presence of Lebanese expatriates all over the region also brings a loyal and unreserved clientele to these restaurants.

Shisha cafés: the place to socialize

Smoking shisha's is a strongly rooted habit in the region. And, the smoking ban legislation that has swept most countries in recent years has not deterred locals from the habit. While, for a long time, they were mainly offered in traditional restaurants, the public's love for shishas has led to the emergence of dedicated cafés and lounges, mainly home-grown as the setup and operations are relatively easy. This trend is particularly popular in the Gulf, where public places in which people can meet and chat are scarce. And the trend has evolved from low-end destinations targeting a traditional clientele to hip new spots aiming at younger and trendier clients with their fad design and flavored tobacco.

Healthy cuisine: the rise of organic

The healthy trend - which promotes fruits, vegetables and fights artificial additives - has been booming in Western countries in the last two decades. But, it is only now that the region is jumping on the bandwagon. And, it is a very unequal jump. In Beirut and Dubai many diet shops and restaurants are already open but the Gulf lags behind. Although the trend is starting to pick up, the lack of exposure to foreign cultures and different beauty and weight standards have slowed down the expansion of "healthy" restaurants in the Gulf. However,



campaigns to raise awareness to health risks related to unhealthy eating habits are bound to promote the rise of this trend.

French cuisine: a high end 'en vogue'

France is known worldwide for its refined cooking and French cuisine is popular amongst gourmet food aficionados. But, this type of clientele is still rare in the region, especially in the Gulf where foreign flavors are often considered exotic and thus given the cold shoulder by local clients. But, Lebanon doesn't sing the same tune. Being a former French protectorate, the population is familiar with French cuisine and has strong ties with the culture. Many franchises as well as homegrown concepts have recently entered the Beirut market, such as **Fred**, **La Petite Maison** and **Couqley**. In cosmopolitan Dubai, many French restaurant brands have also opened.

Chocolate concepts: the Gulf's sweet tooth

The region is known for its love of sugar and sweets, driven by Gulf residents who cannot resist desserts. So establishments

dedicating their menus to chocolate quickly found an enthusiastic clientele in Jeddah, Kuwait, Riyadh, Dubai and Doha. In Beirut the trend has been static for a while, when in Baghdad, Erbil and Oman it is on the rise.

Italian cuisine: the famous pizza hit

Accessible taste, relatively affordable and most times healthy: Italian cuisine is a hit in the Middle East. Most big cities have their pizza and pasta hotspots, such as **Margherita** and **Vapiano**, and the trend is still rising. Many homegrown concepts are opening across the region. Muscat and Erbil are still behind, but these cities have started opening up more recently.

Local cuisine: the back to the roots' fashion

Eating local is definitely the biggest trend these days. Traditional food, until recently associated with grandmother's kitchen and old dusty restaurants, are back in fashion in a modernized setting. Old concepts are revisited and kitsch ambiances revamped: **Aseil** in Jeddah, **Bikers Café** in Dubai and **Café Leila** in Beirut are all successfully



Couqley

Margherita



Aseil



Vapiano



betting on their heritage. The trend comes under different concepts, such as casual dining, fast casual, lounge and even mall counters.

Steakhouses: the struggle for meat quality

In a region where meat usually represents half of the restaurants' menus, it comes as no surprise that steakhouses are well established in Beirut, Dubai, Doha, Jeddah and Riyadh. The trend is stable, but has not witnessed any rise recently. In

smaller and newly developed cities such as Erbil and Muscat, local restaurant owners struggle with the quality of the meat and the bill can end up being quite high.

Bakery and sandwich cafés: an eat-out option

Bakeries and sandwich cafés are mainly present in shopping malls and high traffic areas. Families and business people with limited mealtime favor them. In Lebanon, **Paul** illustrates this rising trend, but other more remote areas are not yet exposed to these types of concepts.

Coffee shops: a popular hangout

The trend of coffee shops has swept the region, and they are now present in all cities across the Middle East, although their offer and format vary. The most popular brands are **Starbucks** (with more than 230 stores), **Tim Hortons** and **Second Cup**. Many new brands are still entering the market. Many are international franchises, as they are easy to set up and implement, and some strong local names such as Lebanon's **La Maison du Café** are defending their ground. Like fast



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food, these concepts are usually the first 'westernized' concepts to open in new markets and they attract shoppers, students or businesspeople. On the other hand, in the Gulf, they are a destination for socializing.

Ice cream and frozen yogurt: a tradition revamped

The combination of a sweet tooth and hot weather has made a real hit out of ice cream. Ice cream parlors exist all over the region and the new trend in this sector is the emergence of new types of this frozen dessert such as Italian gelateria and frozen yogurts. This trend comes from the US with new modern designed shops.

Sushi: a newly affordable cuisine

The sushi trend flooded the world two decades ago. It is now a well-implemented trend in most big cities in the region. It can still be considered as a rising phenomenon even though new brands and concepts are opening at a fast pace. In existing restaurants the concepts have also evolved to serve a wider menu including other Japanese dishes. But the main reason for its growing popularity is that with emerging concepts such as **Yo!** **Sushi** it now reaches a wider range of clients by lowering its check.

Asian cuisine: a slow feeble rise

Asian concepts can be mostly found in Dubai and Beirut where the concept variety is larger than in the rest of the region. Dubai is the only city where most Asian concepts are considered hotspots. In Beirut, the trend has seen many openings and closings and is currently staging a comeback. In most cities, Asian cuisine is offered in shopping

mall food courts, and it is not very well spread due to the lack of franchising brands serving this cuisine and to the low expatriate population originating from these countries with the means to open an outlet.

Burger joints: the latest hype around

Burger joints, a US born concept, are currently the most popular trend worldwide, and the Middle East is no exception. The hype around this trend is boosted by the new given aspect of a "gourmet" meal through creating new recipes, using premium ingredients like bison burger or toppings such as brie cheese and bacon and serving it in a more elaborate venue with impeccable service. The affordable check also explains the massive hit of the trend that took off during the 2009 financial crisis. Many franchised brands entered the regional market, such as **Fatburger** and **Shake Shack**, but local brands like **Brg. Co.** in Beirut, **19th Century Burger** in Jeddah and **Burger Bureau** in Dubai are also riding the wave.

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