

## TRENDS

# Asian food trends



Did Asian food come to the Middle East from the West?

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We hear much about Asian food, yet we sometimes fail to grasp the diversity of cuisines this includes

Asian food is a label for very different types of cuisine counting Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Malaysian, Polynesian, Korean, Filipino, Singaporean and Hawaiian food. It is very popular all over the world, witnessing tremendous growth, with significant market penetration both internationally and in the Middle East. The growth of Asian food involves Asian products, such as spices, ginger, lemongrass, exotic fruits, as well as development of restaurant concepts.

### A course in history

The Asian food development saga started in the 19th century, when Chinese merchants and immigrants from Canton began developing settlements in the West, particu-

larly California. Meat and vegetable dishes were served in standard sauces, while other dishes were sweetened with caramel, sugar and fruit such as pineapples or cherries. New items were then invented, such as the Chinese fortune cookie or the California roll. Asian architecture and interior design in restaurants also influenced the popularity of Asian cuisine. The best example would be the famous chain restaurant Trader Vic's (created in 1932 in California) and Tikki bars. They combined colourful interiors with typical design and offered Polynesian dishes. From America, the trend spread to the rest of the world.

### Asian influences

At the end of the 80s, world food

started with globalisation. Consumers were interested in discovering new cuisines-either shifting from one type to another or combining them during the same dining experience. Among these new cuisines were the Ethnic and Asian cuisine which lay at the heart of world cuisine development. Although the food is adapted to local consumers, the spirit of the original recipes was respected. Many Asian dishes and products were assimilated like sushi, curries, spring rolls, spices, soy and others. Eventually, the world cuisine experience added components such as music and the architecture. Interior design soon became a predominant element in the composition of a world cuisine experience. Design even affected the perception about

the quality of food, such as with the Buddha Bar concept (Paris, Beirut and Dubai) or Nirvana Lounge (Paris).

### Fused with Asia

While assimilating varied cuisines and adapting them to their taste, western culture created what is now known as fusion cuisine. Early expressions were the Tex-Mex food and Asian food described above. Unlike world cuisine, fusion is a mix of ingredients and cooking techniques on the same plate. Today, with the impulse of chefs such as the famed Jean-Georges Vongerichten, Asian food is gaining an unequalled place in fusion cuisine. The French-born chef, who lived for several years in Asia and then in New York, started by mixing

Middle East countries	Asian food restaurants	Chinese	Japanese	Indian	Korean	Pakistani	Thai	Vietnamese	Others
Dubai	81	18	15	18	2	3	11	2	12
Lebanon	44	19	15	4	-	-	2	1	3

Sources: Dubai Explorer 9th edition (2005)

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### ABOUT DIM SUM

Dim sum is a Chinese tradition originating from Canton. The dishes include a wide selection of fried and steamed dumplings, as well as various other sweets and savoury items. Originally, dim sum referred to the Cantonese practice of serving small dishes in the teahouses. The method involved food being brought to the table on a tray. The customers would then select the items they desired. Often their bill would be calculated by counting the number of empty plates each person had in front of them. Today, Dim sum is also a term used to describe Chinese style appetizers or snacks, served in any manner, as well as steamed and fried dumplings.

Asian spices with traditional French dishes in many of his restaurants in New York and Europe (Vong, Jean-Georges, Market). Other examples of fusion cuisine include the combination of Japanese and Peruvian food by Nobu Matsuhisa, as well as the mix between Asian and Cuban cuisines by Asia de Cuba restaurants in New York and London.

### Asian food in the Middle East

Asian food arrived to the Middle East in successive waves, coloured by western tastes. In fact, Middle Eastern dining trends were influenced by the evolution in western markets. The last wave typically illustrates the development of trends in the Middle East. One of today's lifestyle trends, whether in clothing accessories or interior design, is conceived in a 'new age' Zen minimalist approach. The focus is on the raw unaltered material and ingredients. This Asian trend explains the success of the Japanese/sushi restaurants among all Asian and the very quick absorption of market shares. Indeed in terms of cuisine, it offers the most adapted nutrients with this new living mode.

Success of sushi in the Middle East has been fast and massive. The development of the sushi also favoured and encouraged the restaurant design development. Sushi was naturally associated with trendy and hip design, causing architecture to reinvent restaurant conception, even pushing the limits with designs such as the Yo Sushi in London (the birth of the sushi trail) and the daring design of the Yabani sushi restaurant in Beirut. The high visibility of sushi restaurants has rendered the other Asian

restaurants lacking in design. Asian design was always traditional and authentic creating the impression of out-of-time old restaurants. As a result the gap between sushi and other Asian food grew, and today sushi is considered the locomotive of trendy Asian food.

However, new eating habits and emerging best selling items, such as the Chinese steam cooked dim sum or the Asian noodles, may trigger the revival of other Chinese foods. The new trendy restaurants, such as Wagamama and Noodles House, seem to proclaim this new trend.

The other example, the dim sum, a Chinese Cantonese traditional item, is also gaining popularity. Some restaurants even serve dim sum exclusively for lunch. New trends may also be affected by the 'grazing' style of consumption, which is familiar to the Middle Eastern culture, since it is related to the mezze concept. The Thai Kitchen at the Park Hyatt hotel in Dubai best illustrates this trend. The restaurant is designed with seating around three open kitchens. The food is served in small celadon cups, plates and saucers to encourage sharing.

In terms of availability of Asian food on the market, Dubai and Beirut offer the widest choice of restaurants. Dubai alone has more than the double, in terms of outlets, in comparison to Lebanon. This development was massively encouraged by the presence of skilled Asian labour and the geographical proximity. As a result, Dubai lists 18 Indian restaurants as opposed to 4 in Lebanon, as well as some Pakistani restaurants, which do not exist in Lebanon.

Asian Food is still underdeveloped in the Middle East and is perceived as a westernized trend. This trend is often warped by a tendency of mixing Asian foods from different countries, creating 'Pan Asian' restaurants, which would normally be considered a heresy in Asia and Europe. If you are in Tokyo, Bangkok or New Delhi, you will not find curries, sushi and Peking duck in the same menu, but you would find them in Beirut or Dubai.

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### NOBU MATSUHISA

Born in Saitama, Japan, as the second son of a lumber merchant in 1949, Matsuhisa traces the beginnings of his professional ambitions to the day his elder brother who took him to a sushi restaurant for the first time. Everything in this new 'adult' environment fascinated him. After leaving school, Matsuhisa began working at Matsuei, a well respected sushi restaurant in Tokyo.

When he was 24, Matsuhisa accepted an offer from one of his customers to open a restaurant in Peru catering to the Japanese businessmen and diplomats. It was during these years that Matsuhisa began weaving foreign influences into his cooking. More importantly, the experiences opened Matsuhisa to the world of international cuisine. Finally, he secured a loan to start up what would be the first of many restaurants, Matsuhisa.

From the Matsuhisa, Nobu was determined to pursue the hearts of customers, not profits. Matsuhisa would be dedicated to serving the finest food, using only the finest ingredients from around the world. This dedication won the hearts of the customers, and Nobu soon became one of the most popular restaurants in Los Angeles.

