

## TRENDS CONCEPTS

# Modernizing Lebanese cuisine

Can Lebanese cuisine innovate and evolve not only on the international but also the local scene

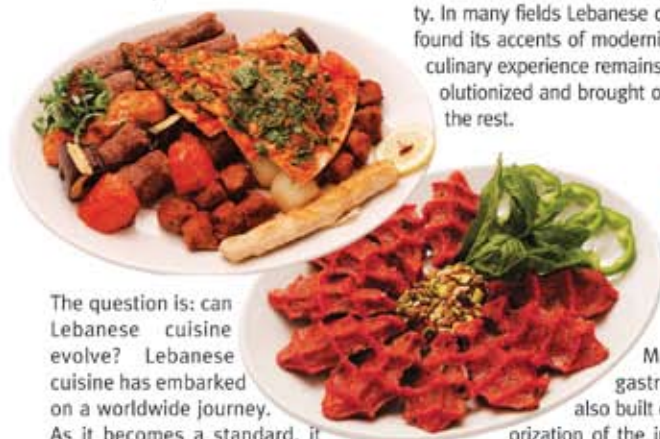
Lebanese cuisine is internationally recognized from the heart of luxurious Gulf hotels and palaces, to neighboring capitals of Mediterranean countries, across Africa, to major cities of Europe and the Americas, all the way to the heart of Asia. Lebanese food is now global and it is teasing the curiosity of both diners and professionals.

Yet, the Lebanese population remains highly conservative, and the culinary space remains untapped. So far all the changes made remain cosmetic. Very few have explored new ways and methods. Instead, the innovations may find a more suitable arena in cities like Paris, London or New York where a new generation of expatriate restaurateurs might find a receptive clientele savvy for novelty. In many fields Lebanese culture has found its accents of modernity, yet the culinary experience remains to be revolutionized and brought on par with the rest.



chefs must explore new horizons using traditional ingredients with new cooking methods; traditional cooking methods with new ingredients and mixes, thus creating a whole new world of possibilities and tending to new customer tastes.

Nobu Matsuhisa did for Peruvian cuisine, Georges Vongrichten for fusion cuisine and Ferran Adria for molecular cuisine. But Lebanese cuisine has ambassadors, such as Al Rayyes and Chef Ramzy, who are still too rooted in tradition. An icon of modern Lebanese cuisine is still missing.



The question is: can Lebanese cuisine evolve? Lebanese cuisine has embarked on a worldwide journey. As it becomes a standard, it becomes open for interpretation by culinary artists and great chefs. And along with the cooking tradition, we observe the expansion of specific ingredients and traditional recipes.

On the international scene a lot remains to be done, and the potential for development is tremendous. Recent attempts made by young restaurateurs in Paris and New York with Lisa's and Elili, are paving the way for a new concept of Lebanese restaurants worldwide. Is it an advantage to be out of the motherland for such restaurateurs? Does it offer them a wider range of culinary possibilities? To date, Lebanese cuisine lacks innovating ambassadors and has yet to find its accents of modernity. The cuisine remains anchored in the hard core tradition, and restaurateurs remain shy when it comes to creativity.

### A change of mentality

Cuisine is the reflection of a society's way of life. Up till recently, Lebanese cuisine remained highly rooted in the rural tradition. Today, with the development of the city life and exposure to international culinary trends, eating habits are changing. And as life becomes more sedentary, the population is changing its consumption habits. A noticeable trend is the appearance of smaller portions of traditional deserts at iconic sweet shops such as Hallab and Doueihy.

“restaurateurs remain shy when it comes to creativity”

Moreover, gastronomy is also built on the valorization of the ingredients and the agriculture. Despite the agricultural tradition in Lebanon, little effort has been made to enhance the organic qualities of the ingredients, their maturation or processing. Until Wadi al Akhdar introduced a line of olive oils labeled by region, little commercial distinction was made between olive oil from the north or south of Lebanon.

### Original recipes

In a recent interview, Dutch food designer Marije Vogelzang, stated that cooking is part of life and as such is a formidable space of creation. Exhibiting at Souk al Tayyeb in Beirut, she used food as a creation material; mixing Lebanese ingredients, she gave a new interpretation and presentation of a traditional mix “arishe wa aasal” (cottage cheese and honey) presented in an edible bread paste bowl.

Cooking is indeed part of life and with the Lebanese Diaspora expanding the natural domain of the Lebanese cuisine has expanded farther. It is now under pressure from the markets it is entering. Difference of tastes for new consumers, alteration of tastes for connoisseurs and availability of ingredients and the cohabitation with other ethnic cuisines, are but a few parameters of this new environment.

While the purists will scream outraged and scandalized, the daring

### An iconic chef

In France, Pierre Gagnaire, a 3-star Michelin chef, regularly uses Lebanese ingredients, such as pomegranate and carob molasses, in his compositions. While Guy Martin, chef at Grand Vefour Paris, uses summak to season some of his creations. French chef Alain Ducasse, with 9 Michelin stars, added Lebanese cooking in his seminars, and the participants, mainly professionals, are now exposed to Lebanese cuisine. Although many speak of Lebanese gastronomy, one cannot find a real Lebanese gastronomic restaurant where the chef plays a central role in bringing forth culinary and presentational creativity.

An internationally famous Lebanese chef is yet to emerge from the professional crowd. The last reference in Lebanese cuisine remains Al Rayyes. By analogy, in the French cuisine it would have been Escoffier or Curnonsky. Paul Bocuse and Alain Senderens did for French cuisine what

### Go west

Every revolution needs a hero. Lebanese music was carried forth by the likes of Ziad Rahbani; but Lebanese culinary revolution has not yet identified a hero. The contest remains open and while there might be several runner ups, no one has been crowned yet. It is indeed noticeable that the only restaurant carrying the name of its chef in Beirut is Italian. The culinary revolution in Lebanese cuisine will happen quickly, as soon as a Lebanese gastronomic restaurant carries the name of its chef. But will such a restaurant be in Beirut? Indeed the heartland of Lebanese cuisine may not yet be ready for drastic changes, and attempts made by the new generation of chefs will remain at the level of experimentation or teasers for the lucky few. At this stage one cannot but wonder if the modernization of the Lebanese cuisine will come from the west.

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