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## 60 seconds with Diala Al Assaad, managing partner at Zyara Cafes and Restaurants

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In an exclusive interview with Hodema for HN, Diala Al Assaad, managing partner at Zyara Cafes and Restaurants, explains why her home-away-from-home concept has stood the test of time

**What prompted you to open the first Zyara outlet in Dubai?**

When I returned from the US in the late 1990s, I was surprised to find that there wasn't a warm, cozy venue in Dubai, where people could get together and chat with friends, eat wholesome meals and essentially feel at home, despite the high number of expats who were now living there. Zyara was borne out of this idea: the first 'home away from home' café concept, created from passion and market intuition. I opened our first Zyara outlet in 1999 and Dany Fakhoury, my partner, joined the business in 2002. Today, we operate three branches across the region.

**What specialties feature on the menu?**

Think of the meals your mother would cook to make you feel loved and cherished, and those are the kind of dishes you'll probably find on our menu! *Mloukhiye* and *kousa* with *warak anab* spring to mind, for example.

**In what way is the trend for delivery and online ordering affecting the food and beverage (F&B) industry in the UAE and your restaurant in particular?**

Delivery and online ordering have steadily increased in recent years and, as a result, food and delivery apps are almost everywhere today. We've had to include this technology in our offerings to keep up with the changes.

**What current F&B trends in the UAE have caught your eye?**

The F&B industry in the UAE is constantly changing and consumers are becoming more demanding. For example, our customers are increasingly requesting healthy food, which has prompted us to add several options meeting this criteria to our menu. Delivery kitchens and micro restaurants are also growing in popularity. However, one tradition that remains the same for most restaurants, including ours, is the Iftar buffet, which we've hosted in the Holy Month of Ramadan since 1999.

**How is the economic slowdown affecting the F&B business in the UAE and the broader region?**

The F&B industry remains dynamic, despite the economic slowdown and increasingly competitive climate. Zyara is still standing thanks to our loyal customer base and our well-researched offering! While Zyara's concept was the first of its kind in 1999, many newcomers have since replicated our approach. My partner and I are still involved in quality control on a daily basis and I believe



Diala Al Assaad

that this hands-on approach, together with consistency when it comes to food and service, has ensured our sustainability more than 20 years on from our launch.

#### What are your expansion plans for Zyara in the short and mid-term?

Dany and I are always looking for opportunities to expand and grow, both locally and regionally. Most importantly, we always try to stay up to date on the latest F&B trends in the region. In the short term, we want to focus on further developing our already successful catering business; with people currently staying indoors, we believe that now is the perfect opportunity to focus on growing this area. I'm convinced that our ability to adapt to constantly changing consumer behavior, putting the customer's demands first when it comes to food and being personally involved in the day-to-day operations, have all contributed to our success over the years. This is why we regularly add new items to our menu, provide ongoing training to our employees and listen to the feedback we receive from both clients and staff. We are currently in the process of developing a vegan and keto menu.



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