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From Fast to Feast Ramzan Traditions in Dubai

Nobody lays out a feast during Ramzan like they do in Dubai. We criss-cross from the 5-stars to the streets to outdoor tents in quest for the finest Emirati food

Text: **Fareeda Kanga**

In Dubai the holy month of Ramzan is observed by all Muslims and the country makes adequate arrangements for all those fasting during this time as well as those who visit for tourism. Not only Dubai's citizens but Muslims and tourists from all over the UAE converge in Dubai because of the ambience, arrangements and array of

mouth-watering food available, from fasting to feasting!

Be it in the street markets, swanky hotels, homes or even the special outdoor tents – nobody puts out a Ramzan feast like the Emiratis, both for *iftar* and *suboor*. The former is the meal served at sunset during Ramzan to break one's fast, whilst the latter is the final meal before the day's fast begins.

"Muslims traditionally break their fast with dates and water or a yogurt drink. After *Maghrib* prayer (sunset prayer) they have a full-course dinner consisting of soup, salad, appetisers and mains," says Chef Ali El Bourji, Atlantis The Palm Dubai.

But whether you are fasting or not, this is a great time to sample the delicious fare available on offer all over from small roadside



Luqaimat

Ingredients

- For batter**
2.5 cups flour
1 tbsp yeast
2 to 2 1/4 cup warm milk
3 tbsp yogurt
3 tbsp cornflour
1 tsp salt

For syrup

- 1 cup sugar
1/2 cup water

Method

For batter
Sift dry ingredients into a bowl. Add in yogurt and milk, mix until mixture is not watery and not too thick. Just somewhat thicker than a pancake batter consistency. Rest this batter, allowing it to rise in a warm place for half an hour. Heat oil. When hot, drop a tsp of the batter and cook until just golden brown. Drain the oil and place immediately into the sugar syrup and toss it well, allowing it to coat the dumpling.

When coated completely, remove and place on serving dish. Serve warm. Garnish with pistachios.

For syrup

Boil water and sugar together on low heat without stirring (so that it'll stay clear) until it reaches the point where it cools on the spoon, and forms a thick, sticky consistency.

You'll likely find lamb, beef, goat, fish and rice in any of Middle Eastern themed eateries as well as the selection below:

Hummus (chickpea and sesame paste).

Tabouleh (bulgur wheat with mint and parsley).

Ouzi (roast lamb with rice and nuts)

Warak Enab (stuffed vine leaves).

Dates (there are more than 30 million date palms in the UAE).

Shawarma (spit-cooked meat in *pita* bread with thick garlic sauce).

Khameer and **chebab** (local bread often eaten for breakfast with eggs).

Falafel (fried or grilled balls of herbed chickpeas).

Hamour (local grouper fished from Gulf waters).

Luqaimat (Crispy deep-fried batter dumpling balls served with syrup).

Cold mezze with Arabic bread.

Hummus, moutabel, tabouleh, labneh.

Hot mezze with Arabic bread, beef *kofita*, cheese *sambousek*, *kibbeh*, *fulafel*, chicken *shish taouk*, *Harira* soup with lamb and Arabic bread.

Lamb Mandi

Ingredients

- 1 kg lamb meat shanks • 3 onions, chopped • 5 cups meat broth • 2 tbsp *ghee* • 1 tsp cinnamon • 1/2 tsp cardamom, grounded • 1/2 tsp nutmeg • 1/4 tsp cumin • 1/3 tsp black pepper • 1/2 cup raisin (*sultanas*) • 2 garlic cloves, diced • 2 dried lemon (*loomi*)
- fried nuts for garnish • 1 heated charcoal piece

Method

In a large bowl, mix all the spices listed in the ingredients with some oil, then rub the

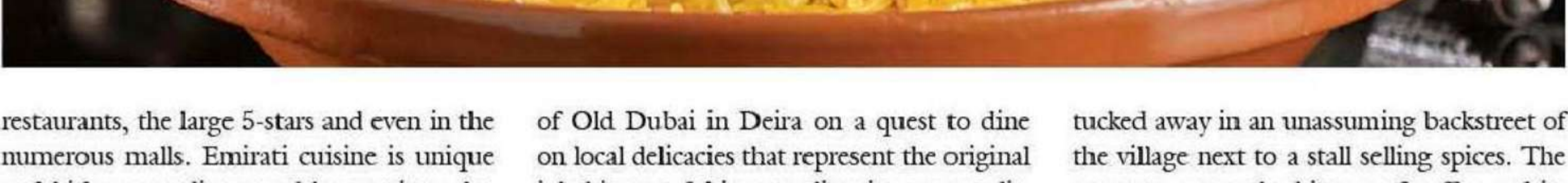
shanks with half quantity of the mixture. Cook the onion and garlic in some *ghee* until lightly golden. Add the shanks and cook from both sides until golden brown. Remove the shanks from the heat. Keep aside.

In the same pan, cook the rice with the remaining spice mix and

the onions.

Add the boiled broth, dried lemons and *sultanas*. When boiling, transfer from the pan to a baking dish and cover with foil. Make holes using a fork and place the shanks on the top of the foil. Then again, cover the baking dish with foil.

Place the baking dish in a pre-heated medium oven and let it bake for 75 minutes. Remove the foil, and place the charcoal piece in a bowl, sprinkle with some butter or oil and re-cover to allow the rice to take in all the smoke from it. Serve sprinkled with nuts and chopped parsley.



restaurants, the large 5-stars and even in the numerous malls. Emirati cuisine is unique and hitherto undiscovered by tourists who tend to gravitate to the western restaurants popular in Dubai.

To get an idea of how busy restaurants get during Ramzan, we visit *Seven Sands*. On a daily basis, Executive Chef Bassel Ibrahim and his team of 12 prepare 33 dishes for the daily *iftar*. This restaurant is amongst Dubai's most popular eateries, serving authentic Emirati cuisine at its locations at *The Beach* at JBR and at the stunning *Ettihad Museum* in Jumeirah.

Bassel believes the interest in local cuisine is growing in Dubai. "Emirati food is booming right now," he says. "You wouldn't have seen an Emirati restaurant in Dubai five, six, seven years ago. The UAE is a multinational country and they want to show all the people from different nationalities that their cuisine is strong, flavoured and varied." From *Seven Sands* we headed to the heart

of Old Dubai in Deira on a quest to dine on local delicacies that represent the original inhabitants of this now glittering megapolis. This part of Dubai takes its old-world charm as water taxi called *abra*s ferry people to and fro. The food, too, is more authentic and less commercialised.

"What comes to mind when most tourists think of Emirati or Arabic food is usually just *hummus* and *shawarma*," explains Imamullah Khan, a local restaurateur in the *souk*. And although these dishes are extremely popular, there is an array of Arabic treats waiting to be discovered by the world!

For another truly local experience we decide to visit the *Coffee Museum* in Deira.

Coffee has been a part of Middle Eastern culture for almost as long as it has been in existence as a drink. Dubai's heritage district, Al Fahidi, welcomes the country's first ever dedicated coffee museum. I took a tour with founding partner Khalid Al Mulla who takes us around the traditional Emirati style home

tucked away in an unassuming backstreet of the village next to a stall selling spices. The museum traces the history of coffee and its role in Emirati cuisine as well as displays implements and grinding machines from eras gone by. We sip a delicious local brew with dates on the side and enjoy this typical feast-to-fast beverage!

After our trust with street food we decide to go for an upmarket treat and check out one of the tents that offer both delicious local food and live music.

We find ourselves at *Astoria*, the beachside tent at Atlantis The Palm Dubai for an *iftar* feast where counters piled high with *bavares* (boiled, cracked or coarsely ground wheat), to live cooking stations serving grilled meats welcome us; you cannot find such an experience elsewhere. The tent seats 1000 guests at *iftar* and 2000 at *suboor*. It also offers live Arabic music and tea and card games for relaxation and the perfect setting for breaking one's fast with friends



Emirati Chicken Majbous

Ingredients

- 1 kg fresh chicken
- 1/2 tsp *bazār* (Emirate spice mix)
- salt to taste
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1/2 fresh tomato, chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 whole dried *loomi* (black dried lime)
- 1/4 stick cinnamon
- 2 green cardamoms

1 onion, sliced and browned in *ghee*

1 cup Basmati rice

Method

Cut the chicken into pieces (but don't use the breast meat as it is too dry when cooked in this method). After rubbing the chicken all over with *bazār*, brown it in *ghee*. Once browned, add all the remaining

ingredients, except for the rice and simmer for 15 minutes, covered, on low heat. Finally, add the soaked rice to the pot, which has been soaking in water for 2 hours. Cover and simmer the rice for 20 minutes, then remove from heat to stand for 10 minutes.

Plate the rice, top it with the chicken and serve hot.

and family.

So what exactly is the story and evolution of Emirati food?

"The Arabs had little to work with in terms of ingredients because of the arid nature of the desert but yet have managed to innovate and produce some outstanding dishes. Bedouins survived on dates and camel milk – which led to the creation of some mouth-watering desserts," says Imamullah Khan.

Although camel meat is no more a regular feature on menus, other staples like sheep, goat and certain fish form the backbone of the diet.

The cornerstone of Emirati cuisine is based on the UAE's trading heritage with spices such as cinnamon, from across Asia and the Middle East, dominating from the days when Dubai was a small trading port.

Dates, nuts and dry fruits as well as

limes are integral ingredients in many dishes. Fish is a mainstay of many local dishes, with *Al Madraaba*, a mix of salted fish, spices and thick sauce being one of the most popular while rice is ever present and is most often served with saffron, nuts and dates. A meal typically begins with *mezze* – both hot and cold. Popular *mezze* starters include *labneh*, a traditional dip of strained yogurt and *Warak Enab*, which consists of rice and vegetables cooked in fresh vine leaves. Melt-in-your-mouth cheese *sambousek* follows in the hot *mezze* – much like a cheese *samosa*.

For desserts, the delicious dates are often found in most sweets as is the traditional *umm ali*.

Desserts tend to be elaborate affairs with dates, pistachios, puff pastry and sugar syrup as main ingredients. Popular desserts

include *umm ali*, a delicious bread and butter pudding, which has a unique story behind its strange name.

A Sultan, who started to feel peckish during a hunting trip in the Nile delta, stopped for food at a poor village along the way, the locals called upon their best cook, UmmAli, to feed the hungry monarch. She filled a large pan with the little they had – scrapings of stale wheat flakes with bits of nuts – and put it in the oven together with milk and sugar. It was so well received that the sultan went back again and thus the dessert became known by its creator.

Baklava and *luqaimat* – fried dough balls dipped in sugar are other irresistible gems providing a heavenly treat and a fitting finale to an Arabian night.

From fast to feast is an experience to savour in Dubai during the holy month.