

Dubai Food Festival Celebrates the city's entrepreneurs with its made in Dubai shortlist

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Thanks to its global reputation as a foodie's dream destination, Dubai's thriving gastronomy scene has attracted the hospitality trade's most entrepreneurial visionaries who have created a raft of unique restaurants, cafés and dining ventures. So many exciting and innovative concepts have been born and bred right here in the city, as an array of local, regional and international chefs and restaurateurs have harnessed the entrepreneurial spirit which has contributed to Dubai's rapid and unprecedented industry growth and development.

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This growth is being spearheaded by Emiratis who are leading lights of independent, home-grown concepts that offer a fresh take on a range of cuisines. From Japanese inspired seafood by Ahmed Saleh and Adnan Al Ali to modern Emirati cafes such as Mitts & Trays by Amna Al Hashemi as well as Project Chaiwala by Ahmed Kazim and Justin Joseph and Akiba Dori Samer S. Hamadeh, the city is dotted with cool, creative venues that embody traditional Emirati hospitality and Dubai's willingness to push the culinary envelope and celebrate its world-renowned diversity.

Of course, with the city being home to more than 200 nationalities, expat entrepreneurs from the Middle East, Asia, Europe and the Americas that have taken the city to their hearts (and stomachs) have been busy cooking up their own restaurants and concepts, offering even more choice to diners in the city, with gourmet globetrotters like Joey Ghazal, Nick Alvis and Scott Price, and Reif Othman all providing an international flavor to Dubai's diners.

To celebrate, Dubai Food Festival has released a list of entrepreneurs in the city behind some of the city's favourite homegrown eateries.

Café Culture:

Arabian Tea House

The story of the man behind the Arabian Tea House is no less intriguing than the place itself. Emirati Ali Al Rais established the brand after travelling for 20 years around the world. 'The idea behind setting up the tea house was to relive the past. It was the perfect way to showcase my city to people from all over the world,' he said. First opened in 1997, Arabian Tea House remains an oasis of peace and calm where tourists and locals come to enjoy the local Emirati cuisines that take them on a journey back to the city's past.

Mitts & Trays

There's a reason you feel instantly at home at Mitts & Trays. Founded by Emirati Amna Al Hashemi, a baking enthusiast, the brand conjures up memories of unforgettable meals, carefully conceived and always with a personal touch.

The Espresso Lab

As a child, Ibrahim H. Al Mallouhi would sit beside his grandmother while she roasted coffee and then help serve guests the freshly-prepared brew. Years later, Ibrahim pursued an education in sourcing, producing and selling speciality coffee and travelling to work with coffee farmers. A vision for a café of his own took shape and in 2012, The Espresso Lab was born.

Project Chaiwala

It started when two entrepreneurs, Ahmed Kazim and Justin Joseph, noticed a gap in the market for the most consumed hot beverage in the region, "Karak Chai". They travelled to the tea estates in Darjeeling, India and the streets of Kolkata to understand what makes the perfect cup of Chai. After hundreds of cups of Chai at the street vendors, known as "chaiwalas" they returned to reintroduce tea drinking culture to Dubai, and Project Chaiwala was born.

Destination Dining

The MAINE Oyster Bar & Grill

Founder & Managing Partner Montreal Gastropreneur, Joey Ghazal, founded The MAINE Oyster Bar & Grill in 2015, Dubai's first homegrown New England seaside brasserie. Inspired by the summers he spent vacationing on the East Coast, Joey transformed an undesirable garage location at the edge of Dubai's coastline into a city hot spot, which has since won multiple awards and accolades.

folly by Nick & Scott

In the ten years that they have spent in Dubai, longtime friends and colleagues Nick Alvis and Scott Price have played a pivotal role in shaping and developing the region's dining scene. Following the launch of two successful prior restaurant ventures, the duo created and launched Folly from scratch in 2017, and have since garnered widespread praise and a raft of awards.

Bait Maryam

Owned and created by Jordanian chef Salam Dakkak, Bait Maryam prides itself in delivering authentic homestyle Levantine cuisine based on her mother Maryam's recipes from the divine lands of 'Belad Al Sham' to the modern and cosmopolitan city of Dubai.

Akiba Dori

Serial entrepreneur Samer S. Hamadeh opened anime-inspired haunt Akiba Dori in the wake of other successful dining concepts in the city, from Stereo Arcade to Couqley. Having launched music, film and entertainment ventures, his current focus on all things culinary means he is set to expand Akiba Dori across the UAE and internationally.

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Casual Bites

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After opening her first restaurant Switch in 2008, Deem AlBassam developed a passion for creating dishes that were both delicious and visually appealing. She joined forces with her friend Amal Al Marri in 2013 and launched SALT, a pop-up burger van that catapulted them into the limelight. Since then, the duo has launched successful ventures including Parker's, Grind, Public and Somewhere – and they're not done yet!

Pitfire Pizza Dubai

Husband and wife team Bill and Michele Johnson turned their backs on corporate careers to follow a passion for pizza. Since their arrival in Dubai in 2007, the pair have craved an authentic taste of their New York home – a slice of pie. They started testing dough techniques in their garage in 2010, and inspired by their early experiments, launched Pitfire Pizza four years later.

The Mattar Farm

Hattem Mattar is the world's first Arab pit master and founder of Dubai's only artisanal smokehouse, The Mattar Farm. The famous chef and his live fire menus have popped up all over the country and has even represented the UAE at The Smithsonian and at the world's largest BBQ festival in Brazil. Quite rightly, for a project that started on a farm, Mattar puts the spotlight on local produce and livestock, and lauds third culture cuisine.

Pickl

He may be only 34, but Steve Flawith has seen Pickl mushroom with seven outlets opening in quick succession since its launch in 2019. A self-confessed burger lover, the Brit wanted to lead the resurgence of simple cooking, executed flawlessly. As a home-grown Dubai brand, the hospitality pro believes the community plays a pivotal role in shaping Pickl's unfolding narrative.

Fusion Flavours

BOCA

Omar Shihab, the Dubai-born-and-bred Jordanian visionary behind BOCA, was keen to represent the UAE's rich biological habitats, farm produce and ocean bounty in the restaurant's concept. He wanted to erase the notion that we live in a 'barren' land while reiterating the country's abundance.

REIF Japanese Kushiya

Reif Othman is a Dubai-based Singaporean chef whose clever twists on Far Eastern dishes – with a nod to French and Italian cuisine fundamentals – have garnered many awards. In 2019, he launched his first homegrown outlet Reif Japanese Kushiya, and a second restaurant, Kushi by Reif was opened in June 2020, making him one of the few restaurateurs to expand operations during the pandemic.

Note: All dining experiences, events and activations during DFF will follow prevailing safety protocols and social distancing guidelines to ensure a safe experience for all.

For more information and a full update on DFF activities, please visit www.dubaifoodfestival.com and @dubaifoodfest on social media channels.