



LEBANESE CUISINE: the twists & the turns

Greg Malouf

Celebrated Lebanese chefs, both inside and outside of Lebanon, are building on the cuisine's complexity and creating innovative Lebanese dishes that meld old and new. But what's next for this famed cuisine?

According to Michelin-starred chef and author Greg Malouf, "...contemporary Middle Eastern food hasn't really come into its own within the Middle East itself, where they are still mainly focused on tradition."

With the recent inauguration of his modern Middle Eastern restaurant, Clé, in Dubai, Malouf is at the forefront of change. Born to Lebanese parents and raised in

Melbourne, Malouf himself, having trained in Australia, Italy, France, Belgium, Hong Kong and England, has been exposed to a wide range of culinary influences. Says Malouf, "Since I was quite young, and when I started training as a chef thirty years ago, I always wanted to lift Lebanese food out of its ordinary comfort zone and put it on a pedestal." Clé does just that, with dishes such as salmon *kibbeh nayee*, hot yogurt soup with chicken threads and corn, and whole confit salmon tarator with coriander, walnuts and tahini Sauce – to name but a few of Malouf's most popular creations.

Ripe for change

Philippe Massoud, chief executive officer and executive chef of award-winning Ilili and Ilili box in New York City, also sees the current time as one ripe for change.



Philippe Massoud

Massoud grew up in Beirut during the war, leaving to live with an aunt in the U.S. when he was 14. He says, "When an artist only worries about survival, his color palette and inspiration is rather limited to the confines of his survival. Now that we [Lebanese] are no longer in a constant war, we have the ability to hope and imagine a future where we can create. Simply put, the war of Lebanon had us all hostages. We worried about survival, and now we worry about the future and how we can make it better. This applies to our commitment to the culinary arts. I was very fortunate to move to the US, and that gave me a head start."

That head start has resulted in imaginative dishes, including duck shawarma with figs, pecan karabij with maple *natef* and savory versions of *katayef/atayef*, that have garnered Massoud and Ilili rave reviews. "We want to do the traditional as

best we can and, by that, I mean we re-evaluate recipes and production methods to constantly inject new techniques to hopefully elevate the flavors and textures of a dish. We also don't box ourselves in [to concentrate on] the traditional dishes, but try to work with all the ingredients available in the terroir [the land], and compose dishes that are 100 percent," adds Massoud.

Terroir drives Lebanon-based culinary consultant Joe Barza as well whose creativity is imbued with a deep respect for roots, as demonstrated in dishes such as baked fish crusted with *kishik* (sun-dried yogurt), or hamburgers adorned with grilled *akawi* cheese and tahini sauce. In the future, Barza expects to see new dishes that utilize inventive combinations or techniques whilst also holding on to the essence of what defines Lebanese cuisine.

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Philippe Massoud





Joe Barza

The proud history of Lebanese Food



Joe Barza

"Food itself is an identity, and it is a reflection of the people. Creativity in cuisine is par for the course in a country whose people invented the world's first alphabet, and is bolstered by the globe-trotting ways of the Lebanese. The diversity of this culture and the exposure of the people to many historical factors that happened, not just in Lebanon but all over the world, is what has made our cuisine so exceptional."



Philippe Massoud

"Lebanon is the only country in the region that has four seasons, four climates and, more importantly, a very vibrant creative labor force. Food and culinary evolution go hand in hand with the geography and climate."



Greg Malouf

"It's location as the gateway to the Mediterranean and its function of linking the cultures of the East and West, Lebanon has stylized its cuisine to appeal to Western palates. It inherited, from the Phoenicians, the art of trading and the ability of pleasing and, from the Arabs, their hospitality. It would be an understatement to say that food revolves around the life of the people of the Levant."

Words of advice

Malouf encourages the current generation of chefs to remember that "Lebanese cuisine isn't just about the regulation falafel, *baba ganoush* and *tabbouleh*. It's much more than that, and it needs to be elevated to a greater status than it currently is."

Massoud also has a few words of advice: "The future is very bright, and I can't wait to see what the younger generation of professionals is going to do. I encourage them to think big, fail many times, and succeed a few times. That is what cooking is all about..."

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