

A Love for Bedouin Cuisine Earns Respect for Emirati Chef

By ANGELA SHAH
Published: February 15, 2011

As an adventurous teenager, Ali Salem Edbowa discovered Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia. He would spend entire summers there, loving everything about it — except for the food.

RECOMMEND
TWITTER
LINKEDIN
SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
PRINT
SINGLE PAGE
REPRINTS
SHARE



Enlarge This Image



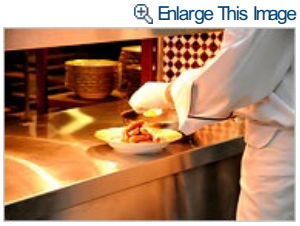
Angela Shah

Ali Salem Edbowa in the kitchen of his restaurant, Mezlai, in Abu Dhabi.

Tired of cabbage-and-potato stews and flavorless cuts of chicken and beef, he called home for guidance. Armed with recipes sent by his mother, the 18-year-old started to whip up modified versions of Emirati comfort food.

His friends in Bratislava told him the dishes were fantastic. "So every day I do something different. I just cook and cook and cook," Mr. Edbowa said. "And from this time, I feel like I have something."

Enlarge This Image



Angela Shah

Cooking for friends that summer in 1992 marked the start of an unexpected culinary career, one that is helping to keep Bedouin culinary traditions alive. Today, Mr. Edbowa is the executive chef at Mezlai, at the Emirates Palace in Abu Dhabi, a restaurant that is a rare culinary outpost focused on Emirati food.

The dining scene in the Emirates features a wide range of options, from five-star kitchens staffed by celebrity chefs to mom-and-pop nooks dishing out homemade Indian or Lebanese meals. Indigenous cuisine had long remained largely confined to home kitchens or ceremonial majlis dinners hosted by members of the royal family.

Next week, Mr. Edbowa and Mezlai will host the "Emirati Royal Dinner" at the Gourmet Abu Dhabi culinary festival, an event that Mr. Edbowa hopes will elevate his profile and that of Mezlai while also spreading Emirati food beyond the Arabian Peninsula.

As the Mezlai kitchen staff prepared for a lunch service one recent day, Mr. Edbowa prowled among them, tasting a pickled vegetable, checking on orders of lamb or reminding one of his chefs to put on his white chef's toque.

"I am at home in the kitchen," he said. "If you give me a thousand, million dirhams, and say you work somewhere in the office, I say, I can't do it. I see myself in the kitchen."

Yet it took Mr. Edbowa more than a decade to pursue cooking as a full-time career.

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com
Privacy Policy | What's This?
Log In With Facebook

What's Popular Now

Don Cornelius, 'Soul Train' Creator, Is Dead



Cancer Group Halts Financing to Planned Parenthood

Google
By switching on 2-step verification you'll have not one, but two security measures.

Today's Headlines Daily E-Mail
Sign up for a roundup of the day's top stories, sent every morning.
Sign Up

MOST POPULAR
E-MAILED | BLOGGED | SEARCHED | VIEWED

1. Op-Ed Contributor: I Had Asperger Syndrome. Briefly.
2. Well: Exercise as Housecleaning for the Body
3. Op-Ed Contributor: Asperger's History of Over-Diagnosis
4. De Gustibus: My Sons, the Sous-Chefs
5. Path Is Found for the Spread of Alzheimer's
6. Critic's Notebook: Till the Last Doughnut and Drumstick
7. Gaming the College Rankings
8. Cancer Group Halts Financing to Planned Parenthood
9. Breast Cancer Surgery Rules Are Called Unclear
10. Sodeto Journal: In Spanish Village, Everyone's a Winner, Almost

Go to Complete List »

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

Cooking is generally viewed as menial labor in Emirati society, he said, something best left to staff.

He worked in the Emirati Army until 1996 when he decided to buy an existing restaurant in Hatta, his hometown on the foothills of the Hajjar mountains in eastern Dubai. His brother helped him come up with the 20,000 dirhams, or $5,445, to buy and convert the small eatery into an Arabian restaurant.

But he did not tell people that along with owning the place, he chopped and poached the food alongside his staff. “I can’t say I’m working as a chef,” he said. Each night, he would change out of his smock and into traditional Emirati clothing. “I go home in dishdasha,” he said. “I put on perfume. No one knows I am working in the kitchen.”

But he found Hatta, a small town located several hours away from the hustle of Dubai, an unsatisfactory place to launch his cooking career. After only a year, he sold the restaurant and took an office job, then went back to the Army.

“I cooked at home; I cooked for friends but I wanted to do more,” he said. “I put it in my mind: I’m going to be a chef.”

Securing his parents’ blessing was easy; getting hired to work as a cook in Dubai was not. “No one would hire a local in the kitchen,” he said.

So he went to his local Tanmia office in Dubai. Tanmia, the National Human Resource Development and Employment Authority, is the organization charged with promoting locals in the work force. Emiratis are outnumbered nearly eight to one by expatriates, who dominate the employment ranks from chief executives to construction laborers.

Tanmia connected him to a job at the Jumeirah Emirates Towers hotel in Dubai. “I would be chopping, learning how to do the mise en place, everything,” he said. “I needed to learn everything.”

1 | 2 NEXT PAGE »

A version of this article appeared in print on February 16, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune.

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
PRINT
SINGLE PAGE
REPRINTS

Get 50% Off The New York Times & Free All Digital Access.

Ads by Google what's this?

Sabra® Super Bowl Recipes
Discover & Share Healthy Super Bowl
Snack Ideas with Sabra Hummus
www.facebook.com/Sabra

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

Cooking and Cookbooks
Food
United Arab Emirates
Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates)

Become an IHT digital subscriber



International Herald Tribune
THE GLOBAL EDITION OF THE NEW YORK TIMES



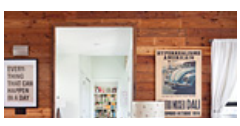
Ads by Google what's this?

Family Dinner Tips
Get Great Ideas For Immaculate
Dishes From Cascade®.
CascadeClean.com/Dishwashing-Tips

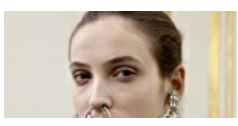
INSIDE NYTIMES.COM

HOME & GARDEN »


MUSIC »


GREAT HOMES »


OPINION »
The Stone: Liberty, Equality,

FASHION & STYLE »


OPINION »


Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com



Hands Up, House: I'm Packing a Cordless



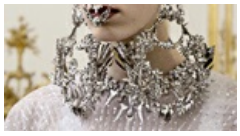
A Smooth Operator in the Name of Soul



Sustainable Design at SOL Austin

Hostility

The inability of conservatives and liberals to get along may be traced back to the French Revolution.



Wonder Women, Highly Metallic



Townies: Where Lupo the Wolf Goes for Dinner

© 2011 The New York Times Company | Privacy | Your Ad Choices | Terms of Service | Corrections | RSS | First Look | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Advertise | Site Map

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com