DUBAI, BITE BY BITE

For a different taste of the UAE's capital of glitz, follow a food tour into the old part of town, where everything from Yemeni to Ethiopian cuisine awaits

BY ANGELA SHAH



UP FOR GRABS Left: Fresh-from-the-oven *manakish* (Lebanese pizza) at a Diera outlet of the Breakfast to Breakfast chain. Below: Arva Ahmed leading tour.



SHEBAN NAIM

Arva Ahmed is Dubai's most ardent, if unofficial, culinary anthropologist. In an afternoon, we wander the oldest neighborhoods of Dubai and unearth, taste by taste, the essence of the trading post it used to be, when fleets of dhows would arrive from Africa, India, Persia, and the far corners of the Ottoman Empire.

"People think of Dubai as a soulless city," she says. "But its old streets are woven with food history and culture. We're talking about the flavors of the Mesopotamian and Indus and Nile valleys; of Maghrebis and Abbasids and Gulf Bedouins."

Ahmed, an Indian citizen, grew up in Dubai and considers its Deira neighborhood home. I first met her a few years ago when she began her food blog "I Live in a Frying Pan," which was also when I was tiring of modern Dubai's overhyped and overpriced dining scene. A mutual friend and I had started a supper club targeting holes-in-the-walls in old Dubai. That friend introduced me to Ahmed, who just happened to be looking for guinea pigs for what would become her **Frying Pan Adventures** (*fryingpanadventures.com; US$95 per person*), a series of themed food tours that she launched earlier this year.

They make for fascinating walks. Her Arabia Foodie Pilgrimage encompasses Bedouin, Persian, and Levantine cuisines—everything from the simple desert nourishment of chicken *mandi*, eaten Yemeni-style with hands while seated on cushions in a tent, to *manakish* (Lebanese pizza) to a sumptuous Iranian *chelo* kebab served with bowls of *fesenjoon* (a tangy walnut-flavored stew) and *zereshk polo* (rice laced with barberries). In between tastings, Ahmed stops her group at a spice souk for a primer on how to pick out the best saffron.

Equally tantalizing is her hour-long North African Food Safari, during which guests can sample a lamb-and-apricot tagine while also discovering how and why a certain aphrodisiac was once part of the spice mix. And in between bites on the Little India on a Plate tour, Ahmed holds forth on the religious laws that govern Indian food habits, the remarkable versatility of gram flour, and how chicken tikka masala, a curry-shop staple, dates back to the Mongol conqueror Babur Khan.

When we visit a sweets shop specializing in *jalebi*, Ahmed reads from a cookbook published 1,000 years ago, a poem about an Iraqi version of the sweet. "From the 10th century to 2013, it's the exact same thing in front of me," she says. "These are the connections I want to make."