

Creative Dining

Stand-alone operators and local brands are leading the way for innovation in F&B, with restaurateurs stepping up to the challenge of a more competitive F&B landscape by creating increasingly creative dining concepts to keep up with the emerging 'POP' culture trend.

BY INGA STEVENS

With many hotels choosing to outsource their restaurants to stand-alone operators, including home-grown and local brands, recent predictions of another 1,600 new restaurants entering the U.A.E. market by 2019 confirms that the industry remains on an upward trajectory.

Once dominated by five-star hotels with imported brands from overseas, the U.A.E. now has an emerging culture of local entrepreneurs with original and dynamic ideas to create home-grown concepts. "Although still in their infancy, these brands are gaining traction on a global scale," says Tom Arnold from Bull and Roo Hospitality and Investments, who, along with co-founder Sergio Lopez, runs a number of successful community cafés in the U.A.E., including the Tome & Serge café, The Sum of Us and Common Grounds.

Arnold believes the U.A.E. is a great place for foodies and people that want to make a change in this industry. "We are constantly challenging ourselves with new concepts and ideas to push the boundaries and lead the way for innovation," he says.

As the U.A.E.'s gastronomes revel in this trend towards more personalised F&B offerings, the country's young, affluent and culturally diverse population is pushing Head Chefs across the country to find new ways to deliver menus with more emphasis on nutrition, quality ingredients and new taste experiences. For food entrepreneurs who thrive on innovation and creative thinking, this is a welcome challenge.

For Tomas Reger, Culinary Director of the trendy new Intersect By Lexus Dubai dining concept, innovation accounts for growth in the F&B industry. Following the artisanal eatery's launch in Tokyo two years ago, the DIFC branch combines the concept of simple yet high-quality produce with a novel 'third space' design; a comfortable destination between work and home.

Chef Reger believes it is important to be on par with the latest trends and follow food innovation and technology. "I try to reflect that in my menu with a greater focus on vegetables and grains and using inventive cooking methods such as sous vide or dehydrating."

Latest technologies also played an important part in the kitchen design of Intersect, allowing Reger and his team to have

a fully working kitchen, which would not be possible without the initiative to make the space limitations work.

The developments being made in the organic food industry are another example of the innovative work being done in the region benefitting the economy. According to a 2014 report by Frost and Sullivan, organic farming in the GCC is set to reach \$1.5 billion by 2018 due to changing consumer tastes and habits.

"Innovation is fundamental to everyone involved in the food industry, not only in terms of creativity but also in distribution, health and wellness, and in pursuing a sustainable development agenda for the U.A.E.," says Ali Yousef Al Saad, Acting Director of the Communications and Community Service Division at Abu Dhabi Food Control Authority (ADFCA), and Chairman of the organizing committee for the inaugural SIAL World Summit, which was held in Abu Dhabi in December 2015.

More than 500 attendees from around the region were provided with expert insights into the burgeoning regional organic food market at the three-day SIAL showcase; testament to the growing recognition of the U.A.E. as a regional hub for the food, beverage and hospitality sector.

Monique Marez, Associate Director, International Trade, Organic Trade Association (OTA) addressed the audience during the SIAL World Summit highlighting the UAE's growing position as a key market for organic products. "With the new implementation of domestic organic regulations, including certification by the federal Emirates Authority for Standards and Metrology, the general public will become more and more aware of this product category fuelling strong growth," she explained.

Other trends such as food trucks are a little slower to catch on in the U.A.E. But once they do, there is no stopping them thanks to the passion and drive of the people behind the wheel of this popular global trend. David O'Brien, founder of Ghaf Kitchen, was one of the original entrepreneurs behind the U.A.E.'s food truck movement and is confident that the country's food truck offering will continue to grow.

"It is great to see real artisan and craft products coming up and being served from food trucks and farmers' markets," he notes. "Ghaf Kitchen is a local home-grown brand and has






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a fan following because of its consistency to stand out and leave people with a memorable experience.”

Undeterred by the competition from the emergence of local casual dining brands, international brands already in existence in the market are instead reinventing their business models to keep up with market trends. Mango Tree Worldwide plans to open a bold new flagship Thai restaurant in Dubai with new partners following the conclusion of an agreement with its existing franchise partner at Mango Tree Dubai restaurant located in Souk Al Bahar, ending a highly profitable eight-year period.

According to Mango Tree Worldwide Managing Director Trevor Mackenzie, Dubai is the launch pad for GCC fuelling growth opportunities in the region. “These are exciting times for Mango Tree and we can only see a future full of promise as we look to take our restaurant concepts to the next level and commit to the region for the long term.”

However, despite the burgeoning opportunities, the F&B industry in the U.A.E. is not without its challenges. As competition intensifies, experience and industry know-how is proving more valuable than ever. Also, while good food and original dining concepts may get the customers through the door, bad service and poor execution can see even the most recognised international brands folding under pressure.

With ambitious Government projects such as the World Expo 2020 in Dubai and Abu Dhabi’s Economic Vision 2030 in full swing, and tourism figures in Dubai alone predicted to hit 20 million by 2020, restaurateurs will need to tread carefully to balance the risks of over-compensating with the desire to out-do the competition. For those entrepreneurs with a clear road map for the future of their business, the U.A.E. continues to deliver an attractive business proposition as a gateway to the rest of the Middle East. 

Intersect by Lexus Dubai invites diners to admire a stunning car while enjoying a meal.