



How did you start as a chef?

I didn't really ever "start". I was a bodyguard, a warrior in the Lebanese war. In 1980 I left the militias and I felt lost. I said to myself: "I have to start somewhere." Because I was already old, I had no alternatives. The age of 24 in the kitchen is old, usually people start in food at 16 – but maybe it was a good thing, as I had maturity. I went to the Hotel School of Arts here, and then I started to work day and night at the Rimal Beach Resort: in the day for free, nights paid.

What was your big break?

In 1982 I moved to South Africa. I worked with my friend as a waiter in a pizza place, and then by chance after six months I met somebody who said I should be in the kitchen, and I moved to a huge catering company.

How was it in South Africa?

In Lebanon in the 1980s, the chef was a piece of s**t, was someone who imitates – a cook was like a maid, uneducated and doing regional cooking. But it's a different culture in South Africa: one day my colleagues asked me to go for a beer, but I said I had to change my clothes, as I was wearing a chef's jacket. My boss told me I should be proud in my chef's jacket. I thought how far we were in Lebanon from this – here, they trusted only French and Italian chefs.

When did you return to Lebanon?

I came back in 1994, with enough knowledge to start to make a difference. It was the "spring of Lebanon" and most restaurants were headed by French or expatriate chefs. I was lucky because I started to work with big chefs, I would write to them and do internships. I am a self-made man: there was a lot of struggle, pain, and research. But slowly, slowly, by imposing myself on people, I started to cook, first with other chefs and then for myself. I believe that what one man can do, another man can do.

And what kind of food do you cook?

I don't want to do the best pasta – I cannot do pasta better than an Italian chef or foie gras better than a French chef – I want to get rid of all this baggage. Our food in this country is a treasure, and I put all my knowledge and creativity in Lebanese cuisine. You could call it fusion Lebanese cuisine – but I call it giving the product its value.

What food was important to you in childhood?

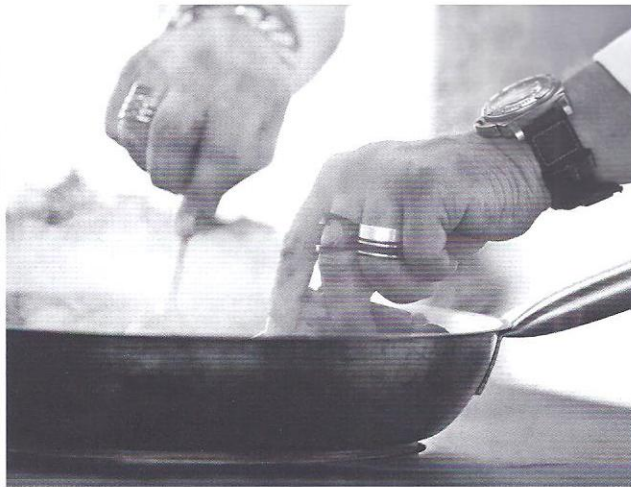
From the food we eat in festivals to what our mothers and grandmothers make, we are in direct contact with the people we

Joe BARZA

A CELEBRITY CHIEF WITH AN OUTSTANDING PASSION FOR FOOD

Born in Tyre in 1963, Joe Barza cut his teeth in the cooking world in South Africa, and returned to Lebanon in the '90s. With his bold **Lebanese fusion cuisine**, and a personality to match, Barza's star rose fast; he now heads a catering company, Bread & Roses, as well as being the region's most colourful TV chef.

Photos: Roger Moukarzel.



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cook for. The best meal of your life is your mother's meal – and she's not a cook, but she does it for her kids, out of love. When I recently visited the Culinary Institute of America, I told them whenever I cook kishik or burghul or moghrabieh, I imagine an old woman cooking: my mother, my grandmother, all Lebanese women, the Lebanese mountains. I see the wrinkles, the scarf; this is what I imagine when I cook. There is a lot of emotion.

Does your mother like your cooking?

My mother still now doesn't believe that I'm a chef. To her I'm just her boy. She still sometimes cooks for me – and I never cook for her, she won't allow me to! If I give her any remarks about her own cooking as a joke, she curses me and tells me: "Let someone else cook for you!"

What food do you miss when you're away?

I do 40 to 50 trips a year all around the world; it's not a problem, I respect all food. I live the food in whatever country I'm in like I'm in my own kitchen, so I don't miss any food. I love fish though, because I'm from Tyre – although I grew up in Beirut, I used to see my father's fishing rod in the house, and hear stories about my grandfather.

What is the secret to Lebanese cooking?

I don't think there's a secret to any kind of cooking – except that the secret is how much you love it. Now, with the knowledge you have immediately from the Internet, you can look up how to bake, you can have the answers so easily – there are no more secrets. My strength is that I never hide anything – the more you give, the more you learn. In Lebanon it used to be the case that each time you ate hummus, you got a different hummus, because each place hid their recipe – they were scared that if they gave away the recipes, they'd lose customers. But I think that the more I give away my recipes, the more I'm thirsty to learn create new ones.

Why do you think people like to watch you on TV?

I know what I want: I've been clever with the TV shows that I choose. Not every TV show asked me to work with them, because I cannot be a performing monkey. I was in 30 episodes of "Sofra Deymeh" on LBCI after 22 episodes of "Star Chef" on MBC, and I've now done two seasons of "Top Chef" – I think what attracts the people is my personality. I'm tough because I love what I do: I have no problem giving you s**t if you make mistakes, because I want to get the best out of you.

Has TV changed your career?

Not really. I know how to market myself – how to make myself different in this world. I'm invited now to go to Casablanca, and tomorrow I'm cooking for an event at Hayat Park in Dubai: why do they choose me in particular? It's because now everyone knows Joe Barza, I have made my own particular mark.

What's it like to be a TV star?

I'm stopped on the street – but I'm a humble man. Last time I saw a nice saying for living, I put it up on Facebook: "Be nice to people on your way up, because you might see them on the way down." In our profession, we cook even for our enemies, for prisoners – for everybody.

Where do you cook in Lebanon?

We cook for all kinds of people: we do weddings, events, we do the canteens for Byblos Bank headquarters, for ALBA and AUL universities. Each place has a different type of food – my priority is the customer. My priority is to satisfy the people.

Do you have any advice for young chefs?

I respect the creativity of young chefs – they just have to respect the food.

What do you have for breakfast?

Each day I have something different for breakfast. Wherever I am, I go straight into the kitchen, and I start to eat, to taste – I build different tastes before I put anything on the plate. I'll take shanklish and avocado, I'll mix, I'll build it up. I'm aggressive with tasting, I never stop. For example, for breakfast today, I tasted some of the rice my chefs are steaming; I put some baby marrows in the beef another chef is braising and tasted it again; the lady in the kitchen is doing potato salad and I tasted that – and now I'm having an orange juice with you! I don't know if I have the discipline to sit and eat a proper breakfast – anyway, my life has no discipline at all!

Your favourite drink?

A drink with good company!

Are you happy with what you've achieved?

I am proud. Proud of the revolution that I have created in myself, in the chefs in the region and in my country. And the most important thing is: it's not what we know; the challenge is what we don't know.

WRITTEN BY VICTORIA LUPTON