

The
TIME OUT
interview

Chef Joe Barza

Since his days at the Johannesburg airport, Chef Joe Barza has become a name synonymous worldwide with progressive Lebanese cuisine.

Words LUCY KNIGHT

What made you want to become a chef?

First it was the need to travel, to get out of the country. I was always involved in the cooking with my mother. It was always her worry, cooking for everyone. When I finished the hotelier school, it was '82 and the school was very poor and I didn't work. I was a warrior, I was fighting. I was a bodyguard for Bachir Gemayal. I thought, 'all this is going to stop and I don't want to end up as valet parking.' So, I had to build my career. I had a friend in Johannesburg with a restaurant and so I went.

What did Johannesburg teach you?

I started in the kitchen at 24 years old - that is quite old. But South Africa was amazing. We were like 400 chefs, 14 different nations in one kitchen. My boss said, 'Listen I'm gonna teach you how to think'. You see in Lebanon, we used to be shy to say we were a chef. When I wanted to marry my wife, I was embarrassed to say 'I am a chef'. Along time ago, there were very few and they were like maids. They didn't believe in the artistic side, or their strengths.

How did gaining confidence change you?

In 1994 when I come back to Lebanon, I said, 'Now, it can't carry on like this.' I wanted the Lebanese chefs to become something. So, I started to work on my look, on my uniform. I started to work on the artistic side, working with Salon Culinaire and then we flew all over and now we are well known.

You've cooked for thousands at a time. What's the biggest number?

It's 30,000 in one day. I cooked for the Le Jour de la Francophonie and I was serving 21,000 people per day.



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What about trading that in for just a little restaurant?

A restaurant of 100 is not going to be a big contribution. I'm gonna waste my money and I'm gonna waste my time. Especially when you put the logo of Joe Barza on it, everyone wants to see me, to complain about the food or not and give me his opinions. I would have to stay day and night. The return on investment to open the restaurant is not going to be as much. Now I am selling my experience, selling my knowledge, my know how, my character. The whole package.

Do you have a signature dish?

So many. You see, I am like a locomotive. Every five minutes I can innovate a new dish.

Did you ever create something that was a disaster?

Of course, of course. One day I mixed okra with ginger and chicken. There is no way I can do everything right.

How do you want to be remembered?

I don't want to pass just like this, I want to leave my traces. I love the Lebanese cuisine, I adore it. But why does hummus always have to be mixed with tahini? Why do I have to compete with the French to make foie gras; that is their baby. The kitchen is 80% love, 10% knowledge and 10% know-how.

What advice would you give to someone wanting to make a career in cooking?

First you need to have big discipline. You have to believe in yourself and even if you are a dishwasher, you need to have confidence. I teach that if you believe in yourself, one day you will become something.

What do you think makes Beirut hot?

People like us, people like you. Big time. We are very aggressive. If you check what I do in one year - Sydney, California, India... and then there is media. Why does the 'New York Times' want to come to write about the food? Why did chef Alfons Schuhbeck, number one in Germany, want to come to find out about our food? Because we have a big treasure and I'm pushing it.

www.joebarza.com



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