



Chef chat

How did you get interested in international cuisine and what inspires you?

I was probably 15 years old when I realised my passion for cooking – whether it was spaghetti bolognese, grilling a steak or roasting a chicken. Two years later, I started my culinary journey at the school of hospitality of Monte Carlo. I thought I knew everything there was to know about cooking, but

Chef Aztaj, Executive Chef at Anantara's Eastern Mangroves Hotel & Spa in Abu Dhabi talks international cuisine and store cupboard staples

then I moved to Miami and was exposed to so many different flavours and cuisines, and then coming to the Middle East in 2006, the amazing local cuisine inspired me to add an Arabian flair to make my cooking style truly unique.

Which ingredients do you always have around you in your kitchen and why?

Olive oil, because it is the healthiest choice out of all oils, it's a wonderful flavour enhancer and works with so many foods – it's great for sautéing, grilling, making vinaigrettes and marinating. And a really good quality sea salt. Good seasoning holds the power to transform, and adding a good dash or two of salt helps the flavours jump out.

If you had to choose, what are your favourite dishes?

At the moment, it's my wife's lasagne, although the best dish I've ever tasted would have to be the frozen red curry and lobster salad at Sra Bua in Bangkok. I tend to stay away from strange dishes as I am not big fan of bizarre food, but I used to serve frog legs on my menu when I worked in France. At the moment I'm cooking a lot of Arabic food for Iftar. I love Emirati dishes such as this Arabic lentil soup (see recipe) which is so simple in its ingredients and preparation, yet so flavourful, and Djaj Maklouba – a wonderful Middle Eastern specialty made with rice, chicken and vegetables. This dish translates to 'upside down', because when the meal has finished cooking, you take the pot and flip it upside down onto a large serving platter where everyone helps themselves.



Shorbat adas Arabic lentil soup

SERVES 4

- 1 litre vegetable stock
- 280g red lentils
- 50g red onion, chopped
- 25g carrot, chopped
- 25g leek, chopped
- 25g celery, chopped
- 25g potato, peeled and cubed
- 10g garlic
- 100ml extra virgin olive oil
- 20g butter
- 6g fresh thyme
- 5g cumin powder
- 1 tsp cooking cream
- 1 lemon, cut into 8 and grilled
- 1 Arabic bread, cut into cubes and fried until golden
- Salt & white pepper

METHOD

STEP 1 Wash the lentils and soak in water for 20 minutes.

STEP 2 Take a pre-heated pot, add some extra virgin olive oil and butter and let it melt, then add the chopped onion, garlic, leek, celery, carrot, thyme and potato. Sauté until partially cooked.

STEP 3 Strain the lentils, then add to the sautéed vegetables and mix together. Add the vegetable stock, bring to the boil, and skim the foam. Simmer for 20-30 minutes until lentils are tender.

STEP 4 Add the cumin powder, salt and white pepper. Blend soup until smooth.

STEP 5 Pour the soup into a bowl, drizzle with cooking cream and serve with grilled lemon and fried Arabic bread.



Djaj Maklouba

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

- 300g aubergine
- 300g plain rice
- 1 tsp turmeric powder
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 75g cauliflower, cut into small florets
- 300g sliced potatoes
- 2 tsp sliced almonds
- 2 tsp pine nuts
- 1kg chicken cut into pieces
- 200g white onion
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tsp seven spice
- 4 cloves garlic
- 2 tsp cinnamon powder
- 2 tsp cumin
- 100g chopped parsley
- Salt & pepper to taste

METHOD

STEP 1 Peel and cut the aubergine into thick horizontal slices and marinate in salt for two minutes. Wash in water to get rid of the salt, and then drain the slices on paper towels.

STEP 2 Soak the rice in warm water with a little salt and turmeric powder for 30 minutes.

STEP 3 In a large saucepan, heat the oil and fry the cauliflower, sliced potatoes and aubergine slices until golden brown.

STEP 4 In the same pan, heat the almond pieces and pine nuts until they are fried and set aside.

STEP 5 Place the chicken into a large pot and cover with water. Add in an onion chopped into quarters, the bay leaves the seven spices and cook until the meat is done, approximately 30 minutes should do it.

STEP 6 Remove the chicken and season with salt, saving the broth for later in a bowl.

STEP 7 In the large pot (the one used to cook the chicken), add the cauliflower florets, potatoes, eggplant and chicken, spread the garlic cloves over the chicken, and then add the rice over it all.

STEP 8 Pour the chicken broth, add some salt and additional turmeric powder, cinnamon powder and cumin powder. Make sure the stock just covers the rice (2cm over the rice is ideal).

STEP 9 Cook on a high heat for seven minutes, and then cover and simmer for 40-45 minutes.

STEP 10 When the water has fully evaporated (and the rice is fully cooked) take the pot off the heat and leave to cool. Flip the pot onto a serving plate and carefully remove the pot.