

SOUK

DINING

Comptoir Libanais is a colourful take on Middle-Eastern cuisine. Dine in, or try these Arabian delicacies at home. Giselle Whiteaker performs a taste test.

Restaurateur Tony Kitous is a force to be reckoned with. He is credited with single-handedly – apart from the teams manning his kitchens – putting glamour back into Middle Eastern cuisine. He's been fuelling the surge in popularity of Arabian flavours for over a decade, with his London-based Levant and Kenza restaurants and his High-Street Comptoir Libanais canteens. The popularity of these casual eateries can't be understated – they're popping up everywhere, from Heathrow Airport to Bluewater Shopping Centre in Kent.

"Lebanese cuisine has always been popular but it has never had the opportunity to be made accessible to the Western world," says Kitous. "It is only in the last few years that a few operators started this Middle Eastern food revolution and to be honest, it's long overdue. It's a no brainer that it has such a broad appeal – it's healthy, light, fresh and vegetarian friendly. Mezze is amazing for sharing and it's very simple and affordable."

Kitous wanted to make Arabic food as accessible as Italian, and he's succeeding. When my friend Steve and I drop in to the Soho canteen it's packed, the hum of exuberant chatter adding a buzz to the proceedings. The brightly-lit open-plan space is all about splashes of colour; bright orange tables match the uniforms of the waiting staff and a pop-art style mural adorns one wall. It's so unashamedly upbeat that it's almost like walking into a comic book.

There's a touch of the souk, with embroidered handbags, silver teapots, and ingredients for home cooking lined up on shelves, begging to be bought. Naturally, there's also a rack of Kitous' new Comptoir Libanais Express cookbook, crammed with 80 recipes which combine fresh vegetable dishes with simple grills, flat breads, grains, herb salads and dips. "I always wanted to create a Middle Eastern cookbook that helps educate and promote our food and culture. The first cookbook was so popular and helped many people understand more about our traditions as well as giving them the confidence to make Lebanese food at home. The second book was a response to the many requests of our guests to learn more about dishes that are not commonly seen in restaurants. I've made sure that all the dishes are simple to make at home to suit the busy lifestyle we all lead," explains Kitous.

Today though, we are here to dine. We're leaving the cooking to the efficient staff, who fly around the kitchen whipping up their special brand of Arabian goodness in minutes. Our starters arrive so quickly that I'm still on my first sip of the crisp white wine from Lebanon that was recommended by our friendly server.

"Lebanese cuisine is divided into many categories: *mezze*, which is for the Lebanese what tapas is for the Spanish; grills, salads, stews, pulses and a huge selection of sweets and desserts. There is a



heavy use of spices to season and marinate dishes as well as for salad dressings and dips. There are certain ingredients that are not commonly used in British dishes, such as tahina, zaatar, sumac and pomegranate molasses,” explains Kitous.

We’re keen to sample dishes that feature these uncommon ingredients and we choose a selection of traditional mezze to whet our appetites: falafel (chickpea patties), cheese sambousek (bite-sized pastry-wrapped cheese) and a trio of dips – hommous, labneh and baba ghanoush. Every morsel is mouth-watering. The dips are full of flavour, the falafel are deliciously moist and the sambousek parcels dribble satisfyingly tangy cheese into our maws and erupt with a warm bite, courtesy of the accompanying chili sauce.

“Our dishes are very authentic but like any other cuisines from all over the world, there are always innovations and we will never stop,” says Kitous. Based on these mezze, every word rings true. The foundations are traditional, but the accompaniments add the unmistakable Comptoir flair.

We’ve already discovered the downside to Arabian eating – we’re fast filling up and we’re only a third of the way through. Given our shared passion for dessert, we decide to split a main to save digestive space, and we opt for *moussakhan*, a portion of chicken spiced with pomegranate and cinnamon. The delicate piquancy of my rose and rum dacquiri acts as the perfect palate cleanser.

The chicken looks quite ordinary. It’s accompanied by a mound of rice and a side portion of *fattoush*, a sumac-tinged crisp salad. Our expectations are low as we take our first bites. As my taste buds kick into overdrive I watch Steve’s reaction. His eyes widen as he chews, savouring this teaser. “First I thought lemon, then I thought barbecue. Then I didn’t know what to think,” he says excitedly, diving in for another helping. The sticky pomegranate gives an unusual tang to the moist meat, which dissolves in the mouth, leaving a cinnamon puff as the aftertaste. It’s delicious and we devour every last molecule.

The dessert menu features an intriguing combination of traditional Arabic treats and more avant garde fusion flavours. We determine the light, fat-free frozen yoghurt, with banana, honey and toasted sesame seeds will finish things off nicely. When it arrives, our server places an additional plate on the table – a wedge of orange and almond cake. “You just have to try this. It’s amazing,” she says with a wink. She’s right. While the yoghurt dish is sumptuously soothing, the moist wheat-free cake is also a delight.

Kitous is spot on. The joy of Middle-Eastern cuisine is in its simplicity. As we turn our backs on the bright lights of Comptoir Libanais, we are completely sated. I already know which Comptoir dish we’re trying next time – it’s the cinnamon-marinated quail on page 146 of the cookbook I have tucked under my arm.

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but the accompaniments add
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For more information about Comptoir Libanais see www.lecomptoir.co.uk



Tony Kitous (right) in the kitchen



The end of the night at Comptoir Libanais in Soho



A plate of mezze

SPICED MUSHROOM AND PINE NUT OMELETTE

Done well, omelettes can be deliciously satisfying and hugely indulgent. Think of the eggs as a blank canvas – they're simply a base to which you can add all kinds of ingredients. There are infinite varieties of omelettes in Lebanon which could constitute a book. Here Tony Kitous has gone for a version that uses his favourite tastes and textures, but you can experiment with your own.

Ingredients

Serves 2

Olive oil, for frying
 2 large field mushrooms
 2 spring onions, roughly chopped
 15g pine nuts
 2 tsp ground coriander
 2 good pinches of dried chilli
 2 good pinches of chopped thyme
 6 large eggs
 Small handful of chopped coriander
 Salt and ground black pepper

Heat a little oil in a large frying pan, with a lid, over a medium high heat. Cook the mushrooms, stalk-side up, for about 10 minutes, until they soften and colour. Lift them out of the pan and on to a plate, then add a little more oil to the pan and stir-fry the spring onions and pine nuts until softened and golden. Give the pan a good shake to flip the ingredients around, then return the mushrooms to the pan. Scatter over the ground coriander, chilli and thyme and give everything a good stir again with a wooden spoon so the vegetables are well flavoured with the spices.

Crack the eggs into a large bowl, throw in a good pinch of salt and whisk together. Pour into the pan, tucking the runny egg in and around the vegetables.

Use the wooden spoon to draw the setting egg away from the edge of the pan and allow the runny egg to fall into it and cook. Continue to do that until the omelette is looking thick and rippled all over. At this point, clamp a lid on top, turn the heat down low and allow the top to set.

Scatter over the coriander then divide into two and serve.

