

FAREWELL Fine Dining

As more and more independent eateries crop up across the city, we look at where Dubai's foodie loyalties lie and why the once-thriving fine-dining scene is under threat.



There's no two ways about it, Dubai's culinary affinities are changing. The days of awe-struck diners scrambling to get a booking at the latest Michelin-star opening are a thing of the past, replaced instead by a snaking queue outside the city's newest hipster café. Indeed, caviar and truffles have been replaced by raw coffee beans, quinoa and beanie-wearing baristas. But with the likes of Tom&Serg and Bystro leading the way, was Dubai's hipster café revolution inevitable?

Well, in a word: yes. Since 2007, Dubai's population has expanded from 1.5 to 2.4 million, of which 85 per cent are expat. This rapidly increasing population, coupled with its broad cultural diversity, is almost unique to Dubai and has led to the city becoming a breeding ground for entrepreneurship, individuality... and, apparently, great coffee.

"The city is expanding beyond the malls and Sheikh Zayed Road," says Nathalie Haddad, founder of Nathalie's café, a quirky space located in Sports City specialising in healthy, wholesome foods and quality coffee. "In the past, it was all about bringing in the franchises, whereas now it's about home-grown businesses. The market became so saturated with the same kind of places that, despite all the choice, everything was far too similar. I think that's what created the need for independent cafés."

If you've ever driven the length of Sheikh Zayed Road, you'll know exactly what Nathalie is talking about. With greasy fast-food brands monopolising coffee

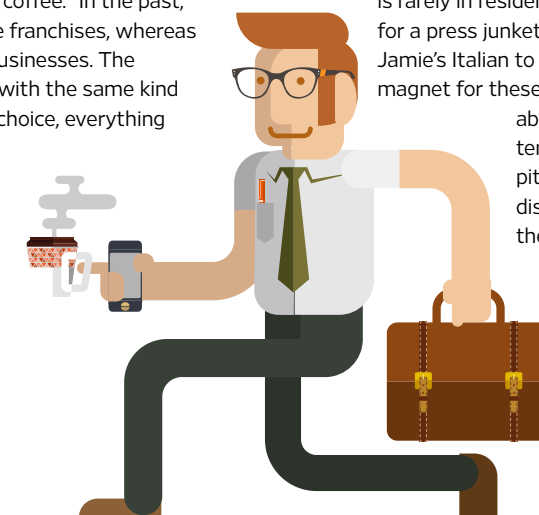
shops, and golden arches crowning every corner, chains now dominate the city's once-sandy skyline. In much the same way, the city is home to the highest density of restaurants opened by Michelin-starred chefs in the Middle East. Much like the big-name brands, there are plenty of upmarket choices; the problem is they often lack personality.

Increasingly, the attachment of a decorated chef's name is just that: an attachment. The person whose name is written above the door is rarely in residence and, aside from the occasional flying visit for a press junket, is almost never seen behind the stove. From Jamie's Italian to Social by Heinz Beck, Dubai has become a magnet for these glorified brands - its tax-free benefits and abundant wealthy clientele proving all too tempting. It's the slightly sterile hotel lobby, the pitiful smattering of weekend diners and the distinct lack of authenticity that has increased the public's appetite for something different.

"People are drawn to original concepts, especially those that are home-grown," says chef Yves de Lafontaine, the culinary mastermind behind Dubai-favourite The Farm. "I am seeing more and more



Hipster cafés like Tom&Serg and The Sum of Us are popular with those looking for quality food without the pretentious air of fine dining.



Tom Arnel and Sergio Lopez are slowly taking over the culinary scene in Dubai



"Gone are the days when fine dining in Dubai meant great food. Now there are numerous restaurants serving up fresh, tasty fare at affordable prices."



Above: Nathalie's café specialises in healthy, wholesome foods and quality coffee



independent restaurants opening all over the UAE. They often don't have large marketing budgets and therefore take to social media to promote themselves with unique, appealing campaigns. There's an increased ability to reach consumers directly."

Usually, this is the best weapon in the arsenal of the humble café. Unlike the lofty, archaic disassociation bred by high-end eateries, independents are keen to talk to their customers directly. The very nature of their business models means that social media and word of mouth are the best ways to enhance reputation, and to attract loyal customers. Of course, another way these cafés are making sure people keep coming through the doors is their food. "We have observed a rise in the number of foodies in the UAE over the past two years; people are becoming increasingly interested in what they eat and where it comes from," says chef Yves.

"There has been an evident shift away from chains and fine-dining restaurants to independent cafés. Casual, healthy and delicious cuisine is taking over the food scene. Millennials are looking for food that tastes great, doesn't break the bank and is sourced responsibly. Gone are the days when fine dining meant great food. Now there are numerous restaurants serving up fresh, tasty fare at affordable prices."

Like many of the independent restaurants around Dubai, The Farm boasts a menu focused on healthy, sustainable dining. Listening to its customers, it has avoided deep-fried foods and heavily salted snacks (which are all too abundant in the city), and opted instead to offer classics with a healthy twist, taking into account dietary requirements and intolerances – of which the foodie scene is catering to with enthusiasm.

Other innovators within the hipster café scene that adhere to the same, health-conscious mantra include Tom Arnel



Quirky cafés have been cropping up all over the city with an emphasis on serving good food in a relaxed environment



and Sergio Lopez. Best known as the founders of Al Quoz's converted warehouse hangout, Tom&Serg, the duo are arguably the biggest names in the city's café revolution – especially when you add the celebrated openings of sister restaurants The Sum of Us and Common Grounds into the mix. One district at a time, they're slowly taking over the culinary scene in the emirate.

"Dubai is a young and hungry city with huge potential. It's basically evolving with world trends. I wouldn't say it's just going through a café revolution, I'd say it's more of a coffee and food awareness movement," said co-founder Sergio Lopez, who believes the city's café culture isn't far from ranking on a global scale. "It won't be long until Dubai competes on an equal basis with some of the best-known cities in the world. Of course, Europe has been developing its food and coffee for many years, so they have a bit of an advantage – as have the US and Australia."

This much is true. In terms of global positioning, Dubai is playing catch up. But as with anything the city does, there's a real sense of possibility. "Dubai is the place to be and the place to keep trying and taking risks. It's a very open city supporting the growth and the future of new brands and young entrepreneurs that believe in themselves and the product they create," continues Lopez.

But there are challenges that come with this. We live in a desert state and, naturally, that poses issues when it comes to sourcing fresh, local produce and establishing a viable business model. Undoubtedly, when compared to the likes of London, Melbourne and Paris, the UAE's independent foodie scene is on the back foot. In Dubai, the balance between consistent produce and realistic price points is a difficult one to a master, as many café owners will attest.

"You can't just try and replicate the latest overseas trends here, because generally it just doesn't hold up financially," says Josh Benson, founder of Bystro – an arty little café in Al Manara serving a simple, creative menu, raw coffee and superfood smoothies. "Setting up out here is not cheap; this is probably one of the reasons the market was dominated by ordinary paint-by-numbers café brands. As more people set up who have a true passion and genuine interest in doing the best possible job they can do, we're hoping the public will start to naturally gravitate to them and become part of the growing process."

In a way, the "growing process" that Josh speaks of is the perfect way to define Dubai's independent café movement. More than revolution, this is evolution. The influx of hipster eateries indicates something much bigger; it's a cog in the wheel of change, ushered in as part of a burgeoning cultural scene – also seen through the city's art galleries and independent music movements. It's on the cusp of exploding. More than any number of Michelin stars, independent cafés are ushering in an era of cultural change and playing a role in shaping Dubai's culinary future. So grow that hipster beard, order a raw coffee and settle in for the long haul – the independent café is here to stay. ☘

Text by Simon Harrington. Photos by Shutterstock