

United Arab Emirates

by **Stefan Breg**, director, Tribe Restaurant Creators

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been busy buying things recently; the QE2, Travelodge, Hakkasan, Manchester City and Portsmouth football clubs make up a diverse shopping list.

At Tribe, we keep a close eye on restaurant trends and I was recently asked exactly how good the restaurants in Dubai and Abu Dhabi are and whether the restaurant scene matches Dubai's bling image,

Dubai as you know, is the city of the tallest, the biggest, the longest and the meanest of just about everything. You may hear people say it is a pretty good place to eat and drink but exactly how does it stack up against the world's best restaurant cities?

Well, we don't yet have Michelin-star ratings here. There might be a handful of restaurants that would feel they deserved Michelin's attention. Our potential Michelin heroes might include Pierre Gagnaire, Matt Pickop at the Verre, Vineet Bhatia and Gary Rhodes at the Grosvenor House.

This year has also seen the arrival of some real 'heavyweights' which could also make the potential list; Zuma, Giorgio Locatelli, Michel Rostang, Santi Santamaria and Nobu. Casual dining has also taken a step forward with the opening of Vapianos and a thumping launch by Carluccio's.

But does the UAE compete with the best in the world for eating out? What if there were a Premier League of food cities? Would Dubai be a Man United or a Chelsea? A Fulham or a Hull City? Would the UAE fight for the Food Premiership title with London, Paris and New York or battle for food relegation with Dublin, Moscow or Glasgow?

The absence of Michelin and Zagat ratings means that Dubai cannot really claim a top tier spot. This honour would perhaps go to Tokyo with more Michelin stars than any other city followed by Paris and London. In the United States, you cannot overlook the diversity of New York and the new concepts that spring up especially in Chicago, Dallas or Miami.

So, where does Dubai excel in eating out? Sure, the range of eating out places is good. There is food from something like 50 countries here although the notable absence is local food, ie Emirati restaurants. Arabic food (mostly Lebanese and Iranian) is consistent if a little too predictable with the notable exception of Café Blanc, Khan Murjan, Almaz by Momo and a few others.

Hotel domination

However, there is one over-riding characteristic that makes Dubai different – nearly all the top restaurants are in hotels. That is good and bad – there is always a valet to park your car but nothing escapes the fact that these swanky restaurants are all heavily corporate. The tell-tale signs are the hotel names on the bottom of the receipts and the presence of dodgy name tags with job titles like Executive Assistant F&B Manager.

The recent What's On? Awards in Abu Dhabi featured 54 nominations for the 18 food awards – and just three restaurants were independent of a hotel.

Frankly, these hotel restaurants lack the one factor which in other cities makes or breaks a good restaurant; the patron....the governor....the big cheese....the owner. If you ask for the manager in one of these Dubai hotel restaurants, you will end up talking to someone with F&B in their job title. I want to see the manager! The owner! Who owns this place?!

There are some impressive monuments to design in Dubai notably Karim Rashid at Switch, Okku at the Monaco and Roberto Cavalli's impressive Cavalli Club.

At Tribe, concept creation and design pay our bills but even I know that service can salvage a poorly designed restaurant. Great design and food do not always compensate for poor service.

Where's the passion?

Over the years, the key innovators in world food have been these great owner-operators. Names that range from the great chefs to the individuals who have taken eating out and made it into a top leisure activity. Each of the great concepts has been delivered by individuals with a passion for serving food either because it is their purpose in life or because they have school fees to pay.

Nothing beats the attention to detail and awareness of the owner/operator rather than an F&B manager who is working hard but invariably looking for his next job in the hotel. In Dubai, Café Ceramique, Shakespeare, More and Lime Tree Café are great examples of concepts created by individuals without corporate shackles who have been able to express real individuality. And get this; at least one of these examples was created by a woman – but that's a different subject.

Don't get me wrong, there are some good hotel restaurants in town but Dubai needs more independents; the city needs what Oliver Peyton, Terence Conran and Gordon Ramsay did to London over the last 20 years.

There may be signs of change in Dubai on the horizon; the opening team at Nobu was impressive and with Zuma – they have both made a good start at matching their internationally-renowned service standards. The dilemma with the owner/operator in the UAE is the cost of renting retail space and the reluctance of the dominant mall developers to work with anyone other than the big brand owners.

Oh good, another coffee brand

Like many countries, there are signs of 'brand fatigue' in mall food; people are getting tired of seeing the same coffee brands, the ubiquitous Lebanese restaurant and the fake-Italians. Food authenticity is something of a myth in Dubai when there isn't a soul who's even been to Italy let alone suffered an Italian grandmother's wrath for over-cooked pasta.

Some of our malls remind me of the UK's famous 'chavs'. Like Ali G, these chavs wear all the logos that they can buy all at the same time in the illusion that they are the height of fashion. These logos and brands just do not 'hang together' and look like our mall food courts: the celebration of culinary aerobics. Would a customer ever design a food court?

What's next in Dubai?

The recession has obviously slowed openings in 2009 but despite this, the first Armani Hotel will open by year end and there is talk of Jamie Oliver, Hakkasan, the Ivy and Alain Ducasse plus another creation from Raymond Visan of Buddha Bar. Further in the future are MGM Grand's market entry, plus W Hotel, McLaren and Baccarat Hotels.

But what about Abu Dhabi, I hear you say? We at Tribe have a huge affection for this city but there's some way to go before it catches up with Dubai. Recent openings like Etoile at Emirates Palace and Bord Eau at the Shangri-La have kick-started Abu Dhabi's food scene after a few quiet years.

The future is bright in Abu Dhabi and the restaurant scene is a key part in the city's drive to become a major tourist destination. This year's inaugural F1 Grand Prix should also spark some new restaurant openings with seven simultaneous hotel openings and Ferrari World to follow in the Summer of 2010. Our cousins in Abu Dhabi are shrewd developers and they have aspirations to be a 'world city' by 2020 complete with a tripling of population, a Guggenheim Museum, the Louvre and Formula 1.

And the Premier League of food? Well I think Man City is a good analogy for UAE restaurants; a lot of money spent on big players and high expectations this season. My money as always, is on Chelsea.