



STORYBOOK



STREET FOOD & THE CITY

Street food serves as the UAE's unofficial universal language, providing a sense of community and connection to the more than 200 nationalities that call the country home. By Christabel Lobo

IT'S NO SURPRISE that food and community are inextricably linked in the UAE. From the very first waves of South Asian and European expats in the mid-20th century to the country's diverse 9.28 million residents today, food has served as an important social connector, imparting international spices and flavours into the local cuisine and creating a sense of permanence in a highly impermanent country.

With expats making up more than three-quarters of the population, the UAE has become a truly cosmopolitan

community, transforming Dubai and Abu Dhabi into gastronomic hubs for global nomads to gather and experiment.

It is here at the crossroads of three continents where cultures collide and coalesce, giving rise to unique foodways that are just as diverse as its people.

Uniquely UAE

The best way to explore the UAE's distinctive culture is to connect with its soul. And in the case of Dubai and Abu Dhabi, that means heading into the heart

222 Clockwise from top left: Spice Souq (p51), Dubai; Bur Dubai Souq (p70); shawarma seller; karak chai





of the city to get a taste of its vibrant street-food culture.

Cafeterias across both cities showcase delicacies from neighbouring Gulf states like Oman all the way east to India and the Philippines, providing a window into the multicultural tapestry of its residents. Predominantly run as takeaway-only spots – a testament to the country's love of convenience culture – these no-frills spaces are staffed by South Indians (mainly Keralites) who can just as easily switch from Arabic to Hindi and English to Urdu and even Russian.

An order of an egg sandwich, Emirati *rigag* (wafer-thin flatbread) or flaky, Kerala-style *parotta* stuffed with cheese and a crumbled packet of Chips Oman crisps can end up being so much more than just a filling budget-friendly snack. The star of the show is Chips Oman, a ubiquitous 40-year-old brand of Omani potato chips known for its signature flavour profile – it's slightly hot, slightly tangy and slightly salty – crunch and accompanying dose of nostalgia.

Take a bite into any iteration of this cult-favourite dish, which can run you as little as Dhs5, and you'll discover the smorgasbord of life here – it may be part Indian–part Omani–part Emirati, but one thing's for certain: it's a homegrown staple.

The Ancient Spice Route

Archaeological ruins in the UAE help paint a picture of life in the region prior to the discovery of oil and union of the seven emirates. In Jumeirah, remnants of a caravan stop dating back to the Abbasid dynasty indicate a long-distance trade route passed through the city, linking the thriving civilisations of Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) with the Far East.

Frankincense, pottery and copper moved east, away from the Arabian economies, while silk and spices travelled west from China and Southeast Asia, often via the Indian subcontinent. Merchants didn't always just pass by; many settled here, bringing with them cooking techniques and ingredients that eventually began to shape and infuse the local cuisine.

The influence of this centuries-old exchange can be tasted in popular cafeteria dishes today – spices like cardamom, coriander seeds, cumin, cinnamon, nutmeg,

cloves and saffron are now considered integral flavours in Emirati cuisine thanks to a lengthy history of trade in local ports.

For a taste of the subtle process of diffusion in local food culture from different parts of the world, order a plate of *chebab* – a small serving from the popular Abu Dhabi chain Luqaimat and Chebab will cost just Dhs11. This is the Emirati version of pancakes, made from a pourable yeast batter and seasoned with cardamom and turmeric from the subcontinent and saffron from Iran. You'll often find it served for breakfast or during Ramadan with *dibs* (date syrup), cheese and honey.

Karak Chai Culture

Often dubbed the country's 'unofficial national drink', karak chai is a staple in the daily diet of Emiratis and expatriates alike. This sweet and creamy cardamom-infused tea traces its origins to the South Asian masala chai, arriving in the UAE with Indian emigrants during the 1960s oil boom.

Today, tiny tea shops dot neighbourhoods across the seven emirates, with experienced *chaiwallas* preparing their highly sought-after concoctions, a blend of tea, evaporated milk, sugar and a secret mix of spices – the word 'karak' translates to strong or hard in Hindi.

Enjoyed all throughout the day, this steaming hot cup is a surprising social unifier – you'll often find co-workers grabbing this cheap, Dhs1 staple before work in the morning or young friends enjoying a late-night meet-up sipping on glasses of freshly brewed karak from the comfort of their cars.

Much like its street-food counterparts, karak chai has become a quintessential part of the country's culture, highlighting how the UAE's street-food scene has absorbed culinary influences from its sizeable expatriate population. The streets are a culinary kaleidoscope, showcasing a mix of global flavours, from shawarma stands and Filipino panaderias to Indian *chai-wallas* and Lebanese bakeries.

And, in a country that's known for its luxe fine-dining restaurants and extravagant gold-foil-wrapped dishes, street food serves as much more than just a budget snack or drink. It's a delicious echo of the smorgasbord of life here in the UAE.

