



Sometimes described as the “soul food” of the Middle East, Emirati cuisine is about more than your standard shawarma, tabbouleh and mixed grill. The popularity of Levantine cuisine means that while we’re never at a loss for excellent Arabic restaurants, it can be a challenge to find, and explore, the unique flavours of authentic Khaleeji food—even for those of us who live in the GCC. Read on through our starter guide below, and you’ll be able to tell your harees from your luqaymat in no time. We can even tell you where to find it, too!

ARSEEHYAH

A comfort food in every sense of the word, this simple dish is a classic. Made with short grain rice cooked down until it’s soft and almost pudding-like, this dish is peppered with chunks of deboned chicken boiled until it’s soft enough to fall off the bone. Generous sprinklings of cinnamon powder, cardamom and pepper add flavour, while ghee adds a buttery texture. The ghee does make it rather heavy, though, so like any other great comfort food, we’d save this for winter evenings shared with friends, eaten in reasonably-sized portions.

BALALEET

Noodles for breakfast isn’t just an East Asian thing—it’s found in the GCC, too! Balaleet is a traditional Emirati breakfast favourite, and is perfect for those who love a sweet and sour combo. Cooked vermicelli noodles sweetened with a bit of

GCC cuisine: more than just kebabs.

Local Flavour

While we’re always happy to dig into a creamy hummus or a fresh fattoush, this month, in honour of the UAE’s 43rd National Day, we’re celebrating Emirati and Khaleeji cuisine.

By Yi-Hwa Hanna

PHOTOGRAPHY: SHUTTERSTOCK

sugar are spiced with cinnamon, cardamom, saffron and sometimes a touch of ginger, or rose or orange blossom water, then served topped with a simple, thin egg omelette.

CHABAB

A yellow-tinged pancake that's often eaten slathered with cream cheese (or an egg—or both), Chabab is typically made with flour, eggs, sugar, and milk. Dashes of cardamom, saffron and other spices add flavour (and give it its colour), and eaten warm with date syrup, it's the foodie equivalent of a morning hug (and in our opinion, the UAE's answer to the roti or crepe).

HAREES

While admittedly this isn't the most beautiful of dishes to the unfamiliar eye, Harees is a firm favourite in many local households and you'd be hard-pressed to attend an

Emirati occasion without it present. Made with cracked wheat, this is a grain-based dish laced with lamb or chicken that's been cooked until it's absolutely tender. The entire thing is blended down until it's smooth so all of the ingredients and spices (such as pepper, salt and cinnamon) are evenly absorbed. Harees has the consistency of a pudding (and freezes well) and is eaten as a side dish or main at any time of day.

KHAMIR

This simple, puffy bread is made with yeast, flour, milk and sesame seeds, and is best served warm and golden brown at breakfast, with a nice hunk of fresh cheese.

LUQAYMAT

The doughnut of the Gulf, these sweet desserts are often confused with India's gulab jamun. The little dumplings are made with butter, milk,

sugar, flour, saffron and cardamom, then deep fried before being drizzled with a syrup (typically a sugar syrup, although it can also be made with honey or date syrup). We don't need to tell you these aren't exactly the healthiest or lightest treats in the world, but these majorly indulgent desserts are absolutely delicious eaten fresh on special occasions.

MACHBOOS

Also known as Al Makboos, this meat and rice dish is typically made with cubes of boiled red meat flavoured with spices and lime. The rice is studded with saffron before being added to the meat along with a mixture of cooked vegetables, including onions, tomatoes, peppers and more, in layers. As the dish is slow-cooked on a low fire or in an oven, it becomes very tender—almost like a cross between a stew and a biryani. While it's very flavourful, it's also quite

heavy so we'd suggest tucking into this one when you're craving a hearty, meaty meal.

MARAK SAMAK

This fish stew is best made with a thick, plump and firm white fish. Once the fish is marinated in a garlicky, gingery mix, it's then flash-fried so the outside is golden brown, before being slowly cooked in a tomato-based soupy stew that boasts an explosive variety of spices including everything from garlic and chillies to tamarind and coriander. Serve with rice.

MHAMMAR

We've seen this dish made with lamb, chicken *and* fish, but the premise is always the same: the meat of choice is braised slowly with an assortment of spices, simmered for hours and then served with rice or potatoes. It's positively bursting with layers of exciting flavours, and we love serving it with a side dish of cooked vegetables. ■



TASTES TO TRY

Want to try some Khaleeji food but not sure where to head? Here are some great options:

ALFANAR: Named after the traditional kerosene lamps used to light UAE homes in times gone by, this fully Emirati restaurant offers traditional interiors and waterside views from its terrace. Visit alfanarrestaurant.com.

ALHADHEERAH: One to take out-of-town guests to, this is the ultimate Arabian experience. Set in the desert at Bab Al Shams (the "floors" are actually sand), it offers live cooking stations of both Emirati and non-Emirati food along with a live show of dancers, horses and singing. Call 04 809 6194.

BIKERSCAFE: No, that isn't a typo. This bikers' haven not only serves up juicy burgers and diner-like classics, it also offers a mean Emirati breakfast (try their Balaleet to keep you going all day) and other locally-inspired dishes. Visit bikerscafe.com.

KLAYYABAKERY AND SWEETS: From date omelettes to karak (strong tea), you'll find a huge variety of Emirati treats (and quirky decor) at this sweet spot. Call 04 325 5335.

LOCALBITESCAFE: As its name suggests, this is a great place for locally-inspired bites. Head there for breakfast to enjoy Arabic breads and seriously cool interiors. Call 04 325 5335.

SHEIKH MOHAMMAD CENTRE FOR CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: Head here for one of their cultural meals and you'll have a truly traditional Emirati experience in a windtower house. Visit cultures.ae.