

What's Cooking, Dalia



Businesswoman, mother, and soon-to-be foodie screen star: [Dalia Dogmoch Soubra](#), the former reigning Cupcake Queen of Dubai, is on the brink of a global Middle Eastern food takeover thanks to her new role cooking for Jamie Oliver's Food Tube and, soon, her very own YouTube Channel...

STYLING: YI-HWA HANNA. MAKEUP: ANGÉLOUQUE TURNER. HAIR: ANNA VACCARO FOR SOH ART & BEAUTY. MANICURE: SOH ART & BEAUTY. THIS PAGE: DALIA WEARS: DRESS: DHSI.GOOD, ELIZABETH AND JAMES AT BLOOMINGDALE'S DUBAI. JEWELLERY: DALIA'S OWN.

*Words by Yi-Hwa Hanna
Photography by Ethan Mann
Illustrations by René Andrew*

Dalia The Style Icon

Dalia Dogmoch Soubra is no stranger to the hustle and grind. After all, this is a woman who follows her dreams with such intense passion that, on the brink of her success, she spent months wearing the exact same jeans-and-white-tee combo that she had lined up against her wardrobe to throw on mindlessly while she, in a sleep-deprived state, shuttled back and forth between her bed and her bakery, Kitsch, in between endless hours of baking and serving hungry customers. “We had crazy queues—I was doing 18 hour days. We had 12 flavours, and if one was sold out, some people would throw a hissy fit,” Dalia says. “One day, my now-husband came in to help, and the place was packed. We had sold out of everything, and I didn’t know what to do. I only had one guy in the shop that day, and I was so stressed that I forgot to put on my gloves when I was taking a tray out of the oven. I’ve never had a worse burn. My husband said, ‘How about telling me you need me next time!’” she recalls. “It can be a vicious circle, when something becomes successful and you do what you love... there isn’t just the glam side, there’s always the grind in the back when it just isn’t that much fun,” she says. It’s hardly what you’d picture when you think of the cute little bakeries so loved by fashionistas around the world, nor the elegant, mellow woman I had sat in front of me. But Dalia wouldn’t have gotten to where she is if she weren’t willing to give it her all, and if there’s anything that

would be the calling card to any project she puts her name on, it’s this beautifully balanced, wholesome and altogether holistic attitude to life.

Dalia is a living, breathing example of the concept behind the book, *French Women Don’t Get Fat*. Raised in Paris, it makes sense that when it comes to her body and what she eats, it’s all about balance and quality: In Dalia’s world, food is one of life’s great pleasures to be enjoyed rather than denied, but the emphasis needs to be on real, authentic food made with wholesome ingredients, whether you’re seeking something fresh and healthy or in the mood to treat yourself with something a little more indulgent. “I eat everything—I don’t make enemies with any kind of food, but I don’t eat processed food. That’s not real food! I do think people have gone a little bit whack with what they’re doing food-wise sometimes these days.. people just need to eat more mindfully,” she says. Once you understand her attitude, it makes sense how a woman who managed to sell sweet treats for a living through one of the Middle East’s most successful cupcake havens still looks like *that*. (Well, she also keeps fit, because with her holistic view to wellness, it’s about nurturing your body from the inside out. While you’ll never catch Dalia being a hardcore gym junkie, she is an avid fan of Pilates to keep her body strong, fit and lean). For Dalia, it was never just about the cupcakes: It’s always been about her true love for good, real food.

From The Heart

“Food these days is trendy. Nowadays, everyone seems to



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Dalia The Cupcake Queen

be into food, fitness or fashion—it's the three F's—but when I was growing up, it wasn't like that. In Paris, it was like a right. You wouldn't eat badly, and it was something I was used to. My mum is a wonderful Middle Eastern cook. I'm Syrian, and my mum's *mutabbal* is the real deal—and Syrians are known for good food—so I'd get that at home," she explains. "I'd eat well, but I also had this severe identity crisis growing up," she continues. While Dalia is fully Syrian by blood, her father left Syria at a young age and started his own business in Germany. He met her mother during his regular travels back to Damascus, Turkey and Beirut, and the family became German nationals. Although Dalia was born in London, they moved to Paris when she was two. "Because I was so young, they stuck us in a German school. At home, we watched German TV and spoke German, but we still ate Syrian food," she says. While this diverse background is what makes her resonate so well with the melting pot of cultures in her audience as a chef nowadays, ironically, it was this struggle to define her cultural identity that turned into one of her biggest assets. "I'd go to school and open my lunchbox and have *molokhia* in there, and that would ooze garlic and flavours that are so 'us' but not so German, and I'd envy my friends' lunchboxes. I just wanted that ham and cheese sandwich. My mother is a fabulous, gorgeous woman and she's always well put together, but when she'd come to PTA meetings I'd want her to look like the other mums.

My mum would always be a little more glam, with rolling R's in her accent, and it was like my weakness. It's brutal, because kids are tough and back then, so were the parents. We weren't invited to birthdays—they thought we were a bit different," she says. "I wanted what they had, so baking is where I started. As a kid, you



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Dalia The Chef

love cakes, crepes and muffins. I became obsessed with cookbooks and taught myself how to cook things that my mum wouldn't. Even today, my mum still cooks incredible Middle Eastern dishes, but tell her to throw together anything Western and it'll be mediocre unless she follows my instructions! As an adult, though, you appreciate that," she adds. "Food was my escape. It was my comfort zone, and the one place I could do what I wanted, mixing all of my flavours," she says. Now, it's this multicultural background that she considers one of her greatest strengths: "It's what makes us understand people in a different way—it's a forte versus a weakness." Dalia's own kids now go to German school and she makes dishes like poached salmon with parsnip puree for their lunchboxes, but her son still says he wants the same things other kids have. "It's like going back in time!" she laughs.

Business Savvy

Despite all of her success in the world of food, Dalia's background is actually in business. Although she wanted to go to culinary school, her father insisted she studied something more "educational." Dalia considers herself lucky to have a father who, despite being a proudly Syrian man, unlike a lot of Middle Eastern fathers, always treated her and her sister equally to her two brothers when it came to their education and career. He didn't want her to become a chef at first, and Dalia made her way to New York City to study international marketing, advertising, real estate and finance at NYU straight after finishing high school in Paris. "I don't care what anybody says, back then,

in New York, the food situation was terrible. Especially when you came from Paris, where you'd pay 30 Francs and have the meal of a king. I got to NYC and I was appalled—I could deal with the restaurants and cafes, but what I couldn't deal with was the supermarket. I'd go in and say, 'Where's the cheese section? That stuff over there is plastic!' Imagine coming from a fromagerie in Paris... So I got more and more into cooking. I searched for speciality stores, moved right next to Dean & DeLuca, and spent all of my money on food and cookbooks," she said. Dalia made a deal with her dad: Out of his 11 siblings, half of them had gone to the USA and never came back, so Dalia promised that if she went to study there, she would eventually move back closer to

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Dalia The Fit Chick

SHE'S NOT A
HARDCORE GYM
JUNKIE, BUT DALIA
IS AN AVID FAN
OF PILATES AND
NURTURING YOUR
BODY FROM THE
INSIDE OUT

home, whether that was Europe or Beirut, where her parents had moved to by then. And she kept her word: After working in real estate in Beirut for a year, she was miserable, and decided to start a cafe with a childhood friend using her savings. Her dad was completely against it: "You have a degree with honours, and now you're selling cakes?", he'd say—so it was a big deal. In Beirut back then, you either had a Chili's or a street *man'oushe*—there was nothing in between, none of the homegrown concepts you'd find today. My friend Racil—she was just named one of the emerging designers to watch out for from the Middle East by *Vogue*!—wanted to run a boutique with upcoming designers. That was her passion, and I wanted to do food," Dalia says. They paid for a space in an old Lebanese house in Beirut's

Gemmayze area—"Ten years ago there was nothing there yet, people thought we were nuts"—and banged out their concept store. The kitchen was the bakery, the living room was the cafe, and the bedroom was the boudoir. It was their haven, all made from scratch, and put together with things they had learned to love along the way. For Dalia, that was tartines with a nice green salad on the side from Paris, carrot cakes from New York, and German cheesecakes. It did so well that customers flew in from all over the Middle East and shipped items back home. Yet despite this being on the brink of the *Sex And The City* cupcake craze, and their products turning into best-sellers, the dream had to be halted: "...then the war happened in Beirut," Dalia says.

Fresh Beginnings

They decided they needed to fold or put everything on fast track, and they settled in Dubai. "From the second I put my foot down here, I loved Dubai," Dalia says. They set up their boutique on Jumeirah Beach Road—which at the time, was no easy feat: "It was a nightmare back then! Now things are different, but back then dealing with finding a good commercial spot there was really tough. And looking for something that would be owned by [an Arab] woman who wasn't traditional, that was a whole other set of issues. Governmentally though, I must say you're very well protected here." And the rest, as they say, is history. Dalia's food blog, which was one of the first in the region, did so well that she began writing for magazines and eventually published her own successful cookbook too. Ten years later, Kitsch had branched out into a virtual cupcake empire, and they had even launched Kitsch Concept, a healthy eatery focusing on wholesome, natural dishes that boasted everything from tasty zucchini noodles to paleo muffins.

Organic Growth

Despite all of their success, it was time to move on, and last year, Kitsch was sold off. Dalia's journey towards her next big step grew organically, much like everything else she has done: She'd filmed a TV show for *My Dubai My City*, and someone had proposed the idea of a YouTube channel to her, but she simply hadn't had the time. "I sold it thanks to my investment banker husband's advice. I don't think I'd have done it otherwise—Kitsch was my baby, but he was right. I was getting other opportunities and I wasn't able to grab them. It wasn't that I didn't have the time, per se, but it was that I wasn't giving it the full focus that I needed in order to flourish. Even if you have 24 hours in a day, your creativity... there's juice in you! And you have to figure out what you want to focus that passion on," she says. Her next field to conquer? The world of food on TV. She was hand-picked to represent the Middle East on Jamie Oliver's Food Tube, and she is immensely grateful for what's the opportunity of a lifetime for any passionate chef and foodie. It's not just the exposure that excites her—it's what she can do with it, helping bring Middle Eastern food to the masses, and the chance to teach people all over the world part of our culture through the kitchen. "I feel like the world either knows us for excessive luxury or something awful in the news these days. Food is about bringing cultures together," she says. It isn't easy in the spotlight: As someone redefining what it means to be a modern Arab woman, Dalia has some backlash from those who say the fact that she isn't covered, or has a tattoo, is "haram"—but there's also the flip side where she's getting the opposite kind of feedback from the thousands of women she's inspiring, all over the world. "Bringing people together is about showing them their similarities," she says, explaining that if she can show people that our part of the

world isn't as different as they might think, through the kitchen or encouraging people to line their pantries with new flavours that are so familiar to us like sumac, for instance, then perhaps we'd all be one step closer to a more empathetic world, at least when it comes to our plates and culture. To get there, it's about bridging that gap between the traditional and the modern, just like how Dalia lives her life. "They won't associate with Middle Eastern food if you need to drop an entire lamb in honey and stick it under the ground for hours. You need to make it accessible for them, and modern life. It's part of helping people to redefine our modern day Arab culture," she says.

We have no doubt that Dalia's YouTube channel will be just as effective in causing ripples in the foodie world. "I've been wanting to do it for a while, but I wanted to do it properly—I didn't want to just throw it out there with just a few little videos here and there and nothing solid. It needed to be something proper, regular, and that would last," she says, ahead of its impending launch. And her new lifestyle also means that Dalia has more energy to nurture the other parts of her being: She's a staple on the UAE social scene, a hard-working businesswoman, and a devoted mum, too. If what she whipped up for dinner with friends, enjoyed on their home terrace the night before we met, is anything to go by, we can't wait to see it: "I made bone marrow with buttered rustic bread, and grade 9 sirloin Wagyu beef, with a beetroot mash. To balance it out, this morning, a green smoothie and a green salad have been the order of the day!" she says. If *Dalia's Kitchen* isn't already a household name to you, we're pretty sure it soon will be, and we can't wait to get a taste of it. ■

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