

Morocco's culinary capital

Lara Brunt TAKES A CULINARY TOUR TO SEEK OUT FASSI AND FRENCH CUISINE IN THE MEDIEVAL MEDINA OF FEZ.

MARRAKECH MAY GET MOST OF THE attention, but for more than a millennium, Fez has been Morocco's most captivating city.

Founded in the late eighth century by Sultan Idriss II, the sprawling medieval medina was made a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1981. Made up

of over 9,500 narrow lanes, it is baffling and bewitching in equal measures.

Fez is also the culinary capital, with Fassi cuisine famous across the kingdom. "It's said that a man who marries a Fassi wife is the luckiest man alive," says tour guide Michele Reeves from Plan-It Fez.



Originally from Melbourne, Michele has lived in Fez for six years with husband Youssef Abdelmoula and their two children. Together with British business partner Gail Leonard she runs culinary and cultural tours of the city and beyond.

We opt for a walking tour through the atmospheric food souks (markets). Sunlight streams through the palm-frond roof as we weave our way past still-steaming bread stalls and fragrant spice mounds towards the honey souk.

“Honey is very significant in Islamic culture,” explains Gail. “Bees have their own verse in the Koran; in another, Allah says honey cures all ills.”

We taste 10 raw honeys, all organic and

naturally flavoured by placing hives near plants such as orange blossom and eucalyptus. The fig honey is incredibly sweet and runny, while the bitter tasting arbutus is used as an anti-inflammatory.

We make an impromptu honey sandwich, with warm *khobz* (crusty bread) and *smen*, an aged butter that keeps unrefrigerated for up to two years. Creamy and salty, it tastes a bit like Parmesan and complements the sweetness of the honey.

A minaret reverberates with the muezzin’s melodic call to prayer, signalling midday. As we make our way towards street food stalls in the Achabine area, we pass djellaba-clad locals and dodge donkeys, the only transport in and out of the car-free medina.

We stop at a hole-in-the-wall eatery for a bowl of *bessara* (hearty fava bean soup) and snack on *maakouda* (spicy potato cakes), but gladly pass on a steaming vat of cows’ tongues. Dessert is a sticky French pastry, a legacy of colonial rule from 1912 to 1956.

The following day we join a cooking class at Café Clock, a hip hangout owned by Mike Richardson, a former maitre d’ at top London restaurant The Ivy. Our group of six chooses a menu of *zaalouk* (spiced eggplant salad), *harira* (lentil soup), *seksou t’faya* (cous cous with caramelised onion, raisins and lamb), *b’stilla* (fish in flaky pastry), and *blighat b t’mer* (date and pastry rolls).

After stocking up on fresh ingredients in the souk, head chef Souad Maidja introduces >>

Sunlight streams through the palm-frond roof as we weave our way past still-steaming bread stalls and fragrant spice mounds.



This page, clockwise from top left: Every neighbourhood in the medina has a communal bread oven; Stuffed camel spleen in the food souk; Honey tasting in the honey souk; Piles of fragrant spices used in Fassi cooking. Opposite page: Chef Soud adding some spice to a dish at Café Clock cooking school.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLEN PEARSON



us to the sweet and savoury flavour combinations that characterise Fassi cuisine. She laughs and jokes, exuberantly encouraging us to smell and taste as we go. The finished dishes are delicious, from the smoky eggplant to succulent lamb.

Café Clock feels a world away from the madness of the medina. The eclectic townhouse is a haven for travellers and young locals alike, offering lessons in calligraphy, music and dance, film screenings and talks on local culture.

The menu is Moroccan fusion, with dishes like pumpkin bessara soup, but most people come here for the camel burger. Washed down with a date milkshake, the burger is lean, juicy and justifiably famous.

More upmarket dining can be found in

Fez's sumptuous riads, traditional houses with an interior courtyard.

Built at the turn of the century, Dar Roumana leaves us in a slack-jawed stupor. The courtyard features colourful *zellij* (mosaic tile), intricately carved plaster, wrought-iron balconies and soaring cedar ceilings. The Yasmina Suite is just as glorious, with a four-poster bed and private balcony overlooking the medina.

Australian Vanessa Bonnin manages the guesthouse with her French husband, Vincent. A classically trained chef and graduate of Michelin-starred restaurants, Vincent serves up Mediterranean cuisine with a Moroccan twist.

"Vincent uses plenty of preserved lem-

ons, they go wonderfully with fish and in salads, plus another great fish accompaniment is chermoula, a Moroccan herb and spice mix," says Vanessa.

"A favourite fusion dish is roasted pousin with pomegranate molasses and rose petals – he makes a stock of molasses when pomegranates are in season," she says.

Tonight, we feast on zingy gazpacho with soft chunks of local goats' cheese, nutty wild rice salad with preserved lemon, and veal sirloin so silky my knife slides through it.

Keen to support local producers, Dar Roumana only serves wine from the nearby Meknes region. We plump for a gris, a light rosé with a lingering floral flavour. In the candlelit courtyard, we toast to a spectacular city.

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This page, clockwise from far left: Café Clock; The narrow streets of the medina; Fresh olives for sale in the food souk. Opposite page main image: The sprawling medina with the green roofed Kairouine mosque dating from the ninth century. Opposite page inset: The Yasmina Suite at Dar Roumana.

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PHOTOGRAPH BY VANESSA BONNIN



GETTING THERE

Emirates flies to Casablanca via Dubai daily from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth. Return economy fares start from A\$2,073 and business class fares from A\$7,904. Flight time is 20-24 hours plus stopover. emirates.com Ouarzazate Unlimited operates private car transfers to Fez from €190 (about A\$272) one-way. Travel time is just under four hours. ouarzazate-unlimited.com

WHAT TO DO

Souk tasting trail is priced from MAD960 (about A\$123) per person. plan-it-fez.com **Clock Kitchen cooking class** is priced from MAD600 (about A\$77) per person. cafeclock.com

WHERE TO STAY

Dar Roumana Suites are priced from €85 (about A\$121) per night and the Yasmina Suite from €145 (about A\$207) per night including breakfast. Three-course dinners are priced at MAD350 (about A\$45) per person excluding drinks. darroumana.com.



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