

Nation building and social change in the United Arab Emirates through the invention of Emirati cuisine

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Abstract

This article aims to analyse how the invention of a national cuisine in the United Arab Emirates takes part in the journey of building the nation, both as a metaphor and as performance of larger political and ideological processes. It analyses the discourses of chefs and professional cooks that are or have been tagged as Emirati food experts. In the Emirati nation building process, the construction of identity is not ‘defined by the other’ against which the image of a common ‘us’ should be reflected. This is also mirrored in the national cuisine in the making, which is developing mostly endogamously. Emirati food both participates in and tells the story of nation building in the UAE, through three overlapping stages of development: traditional, modern and fusion food, which correspond to different moments of the perceived nation development and its fit within Western definitions of both national-states and modernity. Emirati food also helps to create identity borders, by defining who is allowed to taste the authentic flavours, through practices of commensality, and who is able to replicate them in restaurants. This article highlights the connections between nation building, social transformation and food, and explores the ways in which constructions of Emirati cuisine reflect discourses and practices of national belonging.

Keywords

Emirati cuisine, Emirati food, nation building, social change, United Arab Emirates

Introduction

‘Excuse me, what Emirati food do you have in your buffet?’ – I asked repeatedly in every hotel I stayed in (some of them simple, others fancier) during my fieldtrips to Dubai and Abu Dhabi in 2019. Inevitably I would find a waiter caught in surprise – perhaps because

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I didn't look "Arab" with my short hair and my undeniable, albeit modest, Western clothes, or the fact that I was without a local companion. Some waiters even called the manager to respond to my request. But in almost all cases, waiters and managers, offered me 'the hummus, the moutabel, the labneh, and the Arabic bread'. Or 'the manakish, which is the Lebanese pizza, but very popular here, madam'. On some occasions, they admitted not having any Emirati item on their menus and pointing to the ful medames (an Egyptian bean dish), gently informed me '*they* usually eat this'. One breakfast, when I insisted that I had read that there was a regulation that enforced restaurants at 4- and 5-star hotels in Abu Dhabi to offer at least one Emirati dish in their buffet menu, I was offered local 'baith tamat (eggs and tomato)', which the chef would prepare specially for me. When I naively posted the picture of the baked eggs in tomato sauce on my research Instagram account @EmiratiFoodStudies, I immediately received comments and private messages explaining that 'this is not Emirati', 'this is not traditional eggs and tomato' 'this is not even shakshoukha'.¹ Chefs and cooks I interviewed told me a similar story: there was no Emirati food available in restaurants and hotels until very recently and, even today, when tourists want to try the 'local food', they are sent to the nearest Lebanese² place.

Created in 1971, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been undergoing an intensive process of nation building, in a country characterized by rentierism, tribalism, monarchy, and a majoritarian expat population (cf. Findlow, 2000; Ledstrup, 2016, 2019; Pinto, 2014; Potter, 2017). Emirati citizens represent only 11.6% of a population³ composed of more than 200 nationalities (Al Shehhi, 2011, p. 8).

Before that, since the mid-nineteenth century, the UAE were the 'Trucial States', because of an agreement signed between the small sheikhdoms with the UK that both benefited British interests regarding the maritime route to India and consolidated the position of tribal chiefs in the territory (Al Naboudah, 2019; Zahlan, 1978). At that time, Emirati tribes were divided into two main groups, living respectively in the inland (desert and mountains), whose main activities were agriculture in oases and grazing; and in the coastal areas, developing fishing and pearl diving, as well as trade (Al Shamsi, 2019, p. 232).

After the discovery of oil in the mid-twentieth century, what is now the UAE's new-found wealth has made it the fastest growing Gulf state in economic terms (Findlow, 2005, p. 287). The appearance of the country has changed in a generation, not just in terms of landscape and consumption, but in the overall secondary socialization of the younger generations. Nation building and modernization, in the case of the UAE, included literally starting everything almost from scratch: basic infrastructure, health, education, and the creation of a state bureaucracy to administrate them were established in record time.

As Partrick (2009, p. 2) indicates, nation building in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries did not follow the same path of struggle for self-determination seen, for example, in other parts of the Middle East, and it is hard to fit them within the traditional definitions of national identity based on the dichotomy us/the other. Scholarly debate on nationalism in the UAE has identified the influential thesis of Findlow (2000) as key to describing it as a nation that does not need to be 'defined by the other': the British Empire does not appear as the expected 'other' against which the image of a common 'us' should be reflected (Ledstrup, 2019, pp. 10–11). Gellner's (1983) conceptualization

of nationalism has been preferred by scholars working with the Emirati case, because he states that the nation will result from a process of state homogenization, cultural and institutional ‘assimilation’, where differences are concealed and marginal groups assimilated to guarantee a basis of legitimacy to the state. However, the Emirati nation building is far from any narrative of melting pot, and while different cultures coexist in a well-organized manner, there is no possibility of acquiring citizenship and little space for ‘melting’ – which, in the case of mixed marriages, is also extremely regulated.

The narrative of an Emirati nation is based on the premise of a shared cultural ideology that must be preserved by the ruling families. As Shaheem explains, to unify the sheikhdoms, they must be united around traditions and heritage ‘to protect one land and one main cultural body from any otherwise threatening external influences, including disagreeing kingdoms within the Gulf region’ (Shaheem, 2014, p. 29).

This article aims to analyse how the invention of a national cuisine takes part in this journey of building the nation, both as a metaphor and as performance of a larger political and ideological process.⁴ The invention of a national cuisine rests on the ‘banal nationalism’, in the everyday consumption of certain dishes, that provides ‘the mundane attachment, the gentle, comfortable sense of belonging’ (Billig, 1995, p. 6), but also in the active promotion – through governmental and commercial initiatives – of what would be defined and consolidated as Emirati food. A cuisine that, as I will show, is clearly segmented between what is available to citizens and what is presented in the public space for expats and tourists.

Research analysing national cuisines has generally followed the traditional identity building model of ‘us versus the other’. Food is considered an important contributor to the cultural apparatuses that produce the nation, enabling to shape the identities ‘which give meaning to people’s sense of themselves as social agents, especially in respect of national identities forged in opposition to their others’ (Ashley et al., 2004, p. 85). While different works identified several conceptual layers that compose the collective ‘we’ (geographical and symbolical borders that differentiate from the ‘other’), as Belasco (2002) expressed, the dichotomy still stands. To talk about national cuisine in the Emirati case, we face a double challenge: the first one, as mentioned, a model of nation building where we cannot find a clear other to oppose, and where the adoption of foreign ingredients and flavours appears, at first sight, a condition sine qua non, considering 90% of food is imported. As I will describe, the adoption of foreign ingredients is symbolically mediated and reinterpreted concomitantly with the nation and national identity: there are politics of difference, but not necessarily in a dichotomic way. Second, the official process of national cuisine building is not finished yet, therefore any conclusions I can bring here are provisory – especially considering the UAE government tends to refresh its policies, including the national identity and ‘branding the Nation’, regularly (Pinto, 2014).

Having a local cuisine is possible not just because of original recipes, autochthonous ingredients and authentic dishes, but it requires both specific techniques of cooking and a unique ‘experience’ of eating and sharing meals. It also demands the commodification of food, to be consumed in the global market, that should be promoted by specific professional engagement and political decisions to be able to be internationally recognized as a ‘national kitchen’, both for tourism and economic endeavours, and as intangible culture heritage (Belasco, 2008; Vecco, 2010). In this article, which is part of a wider research

project I started in January 2019, I will analyse the ongoing process of creating a national cuisine in the UAE by focusing on one of the voices in this multidimensional process: that of the chefs and professional cooks that work with ‘Emirati’ food in restaurants, catering, TV shows, cookbooks, and/or have been tagged (either by themselves or by others) as Emirati food experts.⁵

Therefore, I will be discussing the hegemonic version of the national cuisine, as it is portrayed and performed in the public space. Similar to other cases (Karaosmaoğlu, 2007; Matta, 2013), chefs, restaurateurs, cookbook writers are actively engaged in the process of national branding, codification and standardization of the national cuisine (DeSoucey, 2010; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016). But in the UAE they are also working in government-related jobs, and officially represent the country in international festivals and gastronomic competitions, therefore their efforts should be considered as part of the state involvement in the nation building process.

Methodological note

This article is based on a larger qualitative research study started in January 2019 and conducted mostly in Abu Dhabi and Dubai.⁶ Interviews included in this article were semi-structured and recorded, conducted between May 2019 and early October 2020. And while I am directly quoting just a few, the data at the base of this article are taken from interviews with 15 professional chefs and cooks. In some cases, I had the chance to meet them more than once, for a follow-up interview or for informal conversations. With female chefs I shared dinners and lunches in Emirati restaurants. I took ‘Emirati food’ cookery classes with those who offer them, and with many of them I continue to exchange messages by WhatsApp or Instagram, especially during the COVID-19 crisis, when fieldwork was forced to stop due to lockdown. Not all Emirati restaurants I contacted accepted an interview, despite my persistence, either because there was no ‘chef’ available, or because the staff present on the spot when I visited the place felt they had no authority, no authorship (and clearly, no authorization) to answer questions that appear to go far beyond the mere interest in their menus.

Interviews were always in English, which is not the first language of the persons in conversation in these pages. My decisions regarding transcription involved judgements about what level of detail to choose, data interpretation and data representation (Bailey, 2008; Charmaz, 2008), as well as when to disclose identities of the interviewees or not; even though all my interviewees were aware of the goals of the research, the recorder was visible and they could ask me to stop recording (as they did, on several occasions) when they felt they were talking too much.⁷ Transcription was done verbatim, to share the peculiarities of the English, and the Arabic words and phrases, these were kept, to give context and help to interpret the data. Inserts between brackets have the mere purpose of context clarification and translation.

Food and the nation

Watching how the UAE evolves into a modern nation-state through the construction of the national cuisine allows us to observe a tension that is replicated throughout the

narratives of the nation, the policies of public administration and everyday life: the one between modernity and tradition. To fully understand how national cuisine is being built in the UAE, we need to observe it at two levels: first, as part of an overall effort from the government to rationalize (in a Weberian emic version) the national food system, while defining a new version of the nation; and, of course, at the level of more symbolic policies towards defining Emirati values through traditional food and the invention of a national cuisine.

The UAE had devoted a strong focus on food security, which is considered of key importance, since it imports 90% of the food it consumes (Hamza, 2019). Several programmes have been put into place, at least in the last four years, to promote healthier eating and avoiding food waste. By the end of 2019, the government launched the National Nutrition Guidelines, as ‘part of the country’s efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development objectives 2030’ (Ministry of Health and Prevention, n.d.). To be effective, these guidelines require ‘turning its components into a personal goal for each one in the society, making healthy nutrition an intergenerational community culture’.⁸ This discourse is related to what Diwan (2016, p. 12) identifies as an overall move from a ‘welfare state to engender gratitude and loyalty’ towards placing increasing demands on citizens to proactively contribute to the national wellbeing and the local economy by engaging in the private sector, by looking for jobs in the sector or becoming entrepreneurs. Sustainable development, individual responsibility and ‘changing (at least certain elements of) the culture’ are part of the ongoing plan of nation building spurred on by the Emirati government, even though it is not clear how it is going to be operationalized, besides through campaigns and social media.

On 5 May 2020, Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, during an online Ramadan talk on food security, requested his subjects to be rational in the consumption of natural resources and avoiding ‘overspending for no reason [which] is bad [*haram* in the original]’. While he recognized overspending is ‘a cultural habit – one that comes from traditions that is hard to move away from without some challenges. We want to part ways with such traditions that are not useful to us, and not Islamic as well.’⁹ Indeed, the UAE developed rapidly, but the ‘threat’ of Western and modern influence was, in many cases, led or strongly supported by governmental decisions or the leaders’ advice. As different authors have claimed, nationals are a minority in their own country, and they perceive their national culture to be under siege (Khalaf, 2002; MacLean, 2017; Stephenson, 2014). The emphasis on a ‘culturally authentic’ Emirati identity is found in many aspects of UAE society and is the driving force behind museums and architecture that are designed to ‘reconstitute tradition’, as well as state-sponsored cultural and media focus on Bedouin practices, falconry, or pearl diving – offering an ‘utopian image of a simple national past and identity’ (Alqadi, 2015, p. 81).

At the symbolic level, programmes that include food are related to heritage and, mostly, to tourism, and could be described as ‘defensive’. The government and the media have been showing concern about cultural erosion and the degrading of values as a result of sociocultural changes in Emirati daily life. To reinforce local values, different institutions have taken a leading role and are using food as a culturally important medium to highlight culture, tradition and ‘Emirati values’. Pinto (2014) argues that from 2004 on, the government has been encouraging the re-traditionalization of life

practices among Emiratis, and cultural observance was no longer considered a sign of backwardness.

These efforts could be observed in three areas, both public and semi-public, where Emirati food appears: (1) as a common ground of multicultural conviviality (through restaurants – some of them owned by the royal families – and a number of food festivals and public culinary activities); (2) as gateway for, literally, teaching Emirati customs and traditions to tourists and residents (at Sheikh Mohammed Center for Cultural Understanding, in Dubai, and in a recent number of food tours such as ‘Meet the Locals’ or ‘Emirati House Experience’, all created in 2019); and (3) as heritage to be celebrated and preserved, perhaps the most oriented to locals and residents (in various events at National Museums, National Day festivals, and more particularly the Al Shindhagha Museum which is setting up an entire pavilion on traditional food, to be opened during Dubai2020 Expo in October 2021). In addition, most of the Emirati food cookbooks were sponsored or edited by government agencies, and the restaurants Seven Sands and Mezlai, in Dubai and Abu Dhabi respectively, are related to royal families, and therefore to the nation-state.¹⁰ As mentioned above, the peculiarity of the Emirati case is that the state, both through governmental investment and public policies and in commercial endeavours (via ruling family ownership of the companies behind restaurants), has a very active and decisive voice in the definition of what is becoming Emirati cuisine, as it has in the design, development, building and branding of the UAE as a nation.

Three moments of Emirati food: Traditional, modern and fusion

‘Emirati food is Emirati food’, sanctions chef Khulood, as if she were pointing out the obvious. Her voice is not loud, but clearly audible. Her manner, secure. She knows who she is and what she is talking about – in spite of this, she confessed informally, she prefers it when she has to do ‘presentations’ in Arabic:

The Emirati food is Emirati. Is something [that] is totally different. Nothing is similar to Emirati food. It’s not similar to the Arabic, it’s not similar to the Indian. It’s totally different, even [to] the Gulf GCC countries, also. We have similar recipes or [the] same names of the recipe, but the taste of the Emirati is totally different. Emirati cuisine is Emirati cuisine, that’s what I say. Because some people they say Emirati cuisine is under Arabic cuisine, [but] I say no, never! The Emirati cuisine is the Emirati cuisine.

Following Campo and Campo (2015), Emirati food can be classified as an Arab cuisine, if we consider their four ‘macro-foodscapes’ classification that includes Maghrib, Levant, Egypt and the Gulf cuisine. The authors highlight that Arab food includes a variety of foods and culinary taxonomies present in the Middle East, and that their taxonomy has limitations, since the macro-foodscapes overlap with each other and also multiple local micro-foodscapes exist within them. What is relevant in Campo and Campo’s work, in an apparent contradiction with chef Khulood’s statement, is that being part of an ‘Arab cuisine’ or not is a matter of ‘self-identification’ which is recent: ‘Arab’ food ‘is not an abstraction that can be readily equated with a race or a nation’ (Campo & Campo, 2015,

p. 269) but ‘the outcome of centuries of interaction between Arabs and non-Arabs, coupled with the disembedding of food traditions from their local contexts and their reformulation in a globalized framework of commerce and migration’ (p. 270). Emirati cuisine, as many chefs explained, is part of the Gulf or Khaleeji culinary tradition, as it is different from ‘the others’ in their historical, social and ecological characteristics.

When I asked different chefs what defines Emirati food, I needed to rephrase the question several times, because responses were always evasive: ‘*you have to try it*’, was the short answer to many of my attempts. The case of chef Khulood was different. She has longstanding experience of training chefs in hotels in Abu Dhabi and in representing the country in international events. In her explanation, she classifies the chronological evolution of Emirati food from home-cooking to the international standards of professional kitchens, that allowed it to become a national cuisine:

[Emirati cuisine started] After 1971, after the UAE was created. . . . I will tell you what is the difference between the authentic one, modern one, and the fusion. And how it [became] modern, and [then] to fusion. They had basic ingredients, spices. After Ittihad [unification] they used to bring different ingredients from Europe, or other countries and added to the different dishes. In the past, we didn’t have saffron or turmeric powder. The fusion style, we do it because we want something quick and easy. The different nationalities are also important, if I want to cook [Emirati food] in another country, I have to understand the people. The fusion is important, so we can share our food with other people.

Chef Khulood calls ‘authentic’ those dishes prepared in the different emirates before unification. Other chefs and domestic cooks would refer to them as ‘traditional’ or ‘local’ food. As MacLean explains (2017, p. 160) from Emiratis’ perspective, the discovery of the oil is never mentioned as an important historical event, but the *qiyam al-dawla* (the establishment of the state) and *qiyam al-ittihad* (the establishment of the federation) as the critical dividing line between what many imagine as ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’. And this could be also observed in the culinary field, in Khulood’s narrative. Indeed, she defines as ‘modern’ the Emirati food as prepared after the foundation of the UAE nation-state. In her chronology, it also coincides with economic prosperity and the arrival of new ingredients that improved the local dishes, demarcating both a clear ‘before and after’ division of time that has to do with the political decisions of the leaders, more than with the rapid modernization enabled by the oil-fuelled economic prosperity. Prosperity – carried by the modernization – is a subtle, but central, part of the narrations of the nation and impacts directly on Emirati cuisine. In her explanations, every time she differentiates ‘traditional’ food from ‘modern’, making the latter equivalent to ‘national’, Khulood makes clear that the nation is a wealthy one, since its inception. This could be observed, for example, in the use of proteins and spices in the recipes, or in the popularization of coffee beans (and not just ground sundried date pits) to prepare gahwa (Arabic-style coffee). Similarly, chef Musabbeh AlKaabi, who is a little older than his country, refers to ‘luxury versions’ of local food in their modern version:

Now you are eating luxury machboos, luxury margooga, luxury madrooba, because my cuisine, the one I grew up [with], I cannot have saffron, I cannot have rose water. First of all, because it

was expensive, I did have ghee, because we had a cow, but not this ghee with flavour¹¹ . . . we had normal ghee, pure ghee. But saffron, rose water, cardamom, all those parfums – I call them parfums – food flavours, we didn't have it. First [they were] expensive. Second thing, we were from the mountains, no connection, no trade . . . [therefore, no other ingredients available].

The period of material modernization in the Gulf started in the mid-twentieth century and extended to the early 1980s, when the wealth coming from the oil transformed both the landscape and the social practices, in non-linear and challenging ways (Al Nakib, 2020, p. 59). As part of the nation building saga in the Gulf, processes of modernization tend to be omitted from official discourses that reify the pre-oil period, claims Al Nakib (2020). In the UAE, as Fuccaro explains, 'the grand narrative of oil development' popularized a version of an 'unstoppable march toward progress, civilization, and happiness, with the state in the driving seat' (Fuccaro, 2013, p. 3). Emiratis' official discourses replicate the romanticized version of social solidarity and consensual relations in the pre-oil period (Kanna, 2011), followed by what is a state-led specific process of modernization and the access to a variety of consumer goods (Al Nakib, 2020; Fuccaro, 2013). These narratives are replicated in those of Emirati food development too. Modernization in traditional food, what would be constructed later as national cuisine, is also read as part of an unchallenging and natural movement: the increase in accessibility of ingredients as the result of economic and state-led processes of development.

Home-made Emirati food is, nowadays, what chef Khulood defines as 'modern' and chef Musabbeh, as 'luxury', and there is no risk of spoiling authenticity when it comes to adapting traditional dishes to certain new ingredients. Emirati bread, fresh cheese, pancakes and sweets are ubiquitous at daily breakfast and fuala (snack or tea-time). Traditional main dishes (namely, machboos) are consumed at least once a week (cf. Al Dhaheri et al., 2004, p. 858), though, of course, certain proteins (goat, camel) are reserved only for more festive occasions. In professional kitchens, chefs are involved in registering, classifying and codifying what is and what is not Emirati in an Emirati dish, in order to establish criteria of authenticity. And what defines authenticity should be checked against what was there immediately before the creation of the country, in 1971:

No-one really knows the authentic Emirati ingredients for specific dish . . . they have no clue. Machboos 'ah, I know machboos'. They put capsicum! We didn't have capsicum, capsicum is not growing here. 'From where you bring capsicum into the machboos?' 'No, I see from . . . ' 'No! Don't tell me because you saw, don't tell me Google. Go back to the country [and ask yourself] is this growing in the country? Because when you are talking about traditional authentic, you have to go 50 years back, minimum. And capsicum, until now, [it] is not growing [here]. So, from where you are bringing it? 'No, I want to give flavour.' 'Don't give flavour, man, because [if you add it] it is not machboos.'

Despite Musabbeh's claim, nowadays UAE produces capsicum (even organic), as well as enough tomato and cucumber for domestic consumption. Rice is considered a basic staple, and a key ingredient for machboos, but never cultivated in the UAE. Authenticity is not necessarily related to a 'factual' history of local production but, as Parasecoli (2019, p. 21) explains for the Italian case, 'to an abstract and idealized model that is in itself the outcome of discursive negotiations, often with important social and political

connotations'. As we are going to see in the final section, the question is not to identify what is grown in the oases or not, but what is cultivated in a palette of flavours and colours that matches an idealized model of the Emirati which defines certain dishes as 'authentic'. Chef Khulood, on several occasions, pointed out that 'there's no green in Emirati food', and stressed that to decide if a dish is authentic, it is necessary to look at the landscape: 'Here is all yellow, orange, brown, sand colours . . . so it is our food, it is the same colours. We don't have green or other colours in traditional food.'

Fusion is a ubiquitous term that refers to the ensemble of elements of different culinary origins, and Emirati cuisine is no stranger to it. Chef Khulood defines fusion in terms of adaptations concerning time (preparation should be quick), simplicity and an appearance that makes dishes appealing to a global audience. Fusion is part of a globalized culinary trend, as Ashley et al. (2004) note, that ultimately homogenizes cuisines within a recognizable pattern of food consumption. Indeed, for chef Khulood, fusion is not just about mixing culinary traditions, but adopting international standards on the order of courses, on portions and presentation:

I cook traditional and modern daily at home. But I never cook fusion style at home, this is for the media or for events when [they] ask me to create something Emirati. You know . . . with the chef, is different: the portion is different, the presentation is different.

Similar to the case of Turkish food described by Karaosmaoğlu (2007), Emirati fusion food includes minimalism and a certain aesthetics in food plating, smaller portions and innovations in traditional dishes, without compromising the original taste. Fusion Emirati, labelled as such or as 'modern' or 'contemporary', is epitomized at Mezlai, at Emirates Palace, and was popularized by Seven Sands before rapidly disseminated among many other Emirati restaurants. In the past two years, I have observed an increasing presence of traditional dishes transformed into croquettes, pastry fillings (mostly as samosas or spring rolls), burgers and risottos, in restaurants, food-vans and food festivals.

Different from Mezlai, oriented to a more exclusive and wealthier clientele, Seven Sands targeted middle-class tourist and residents. In both interviews I conducted, but also in the marketing material, chefs and managers emphasized that they followed traditional recipes 'with a twist', to make food look more appealing, because the original versions are 'not nice' and the form of serving (in communal plates for eating with the hand) is not accepted by the international clientele. They claim, then, that in spite of changing presentation, size and mixing them with ingredients from other culinary traditions (like puff pastry or arborio rice), they were 'not changing the dish', just making it 'modern'. Just as the UAE should adapt to the recognized symbolic formats of the nation and the modern state organization (having an anthem and a flag, but also a separation of powers in administration), food needs to be formatted to certain expectations to be considered a national cuisine. This appeal to 'modernization' could also be interpreted – from the chefs' perspective – as an Eliasian 'civilizing process' (Elias, 1982), in terms of Westernized etiquette and individualized practices of consumption of originally cutlery-free communal dishes, that allows Emirati food to participate in the global market of national cuisines.

As chef Abdullah Alshhadeh explained, while he scrolled down pictures on his phone, showing me the modern plating and small portions he was describing:

For example, I cook the Italian pesto sauce with Emirati ingredients, like Emirati rocca. Another time they asked me to do an Emirati sushi. I used Emirati white rice with local ghee and then I put grilled fish inside and put the wasabi sauce. . . . Ouzi sandwich, lots of things'

Chef Abdullah, who went to a culinary school in his natal Syria and worked in the restaurants of the World Trade Center, before being promoted to head chef at Seven Sands, thinks that, in terms of flavour and recipes, Emirati food is not much different from Indian or other Gulf countries' food. He also considers that Emirati food could eventually become a cuisine, but only with the help of fusion to make it palatable beyond Emirati clientele, 'because this is the only way that other people can like the food, by twisting recipes'. In any fusion cuisine, there are always combinations more legitimate than others, and certain mixings either create tensions or are forbidden, reflecting more encompassing tendencies in the social body of any national community. But basically, fusion is a wild card to enter into 'the flux of national food cultures' which is partially dependent on globalization (Ashley et al., 2004, p. 89).

In the restaurants I visited, as well as the food festival 'Off the Menu: the Emirati experience',¹² the fusion counterparts were 'World cuisines', already established as either national or regional gastronomies that have been globalized – and therefore sanitized of their over-localized features, and reified in a sense of being able to be replicated (and recognized as such) in any restaurant around the world. Fusion, in all these cases, is explained as 'modernizing', and modernizing is practised as Westernizing. Fusion, then, focuses on transporting – or translating – Emirati flavours into well-mannered, recognizable and palatable Westernized formats, so to be standardized as a national cuisine.

In chef Abdullah's opinion, both younger Emiratis and foreigners look for more appealing dishes, and this is something that traditional Emirati food, in the most traditional form, could not offer. In the chef's voice, and in the marketing material, Seven Sands discourse clearly represents the official new branding of the nation, in terms that 'blending of modernity and tradition has been presented not as a contradiction in terms, but rather as part and parcel of the Emirates' distinctiveness' (Pinto, 2014, p. 238). In this sense, tradition and modernity are not presented as opposite but as coexisting in tension through different arrangements that would be evaluated and measured, in diverse contexts, by diverse social actors, to decide if they are Emirati enough, or not. 'Tradition with a twist', as Seven Sands markets its food, means presenting not a nostalgic version of an idyllic past as in ethnic restaurants like Al Fanar, but an updated version of the traditional values by 'twisting' them into a modern, Westernized fashion. In the vision of the restaurant, fusion could appeal both to international customers and to the younger generations of Emiratis that, according to the manager, represent an important share of their guests. But it also allows Emirati food to be 'civilized' and easily recognizable and marketed by global hospitality and tourism as a more palatable (Morris, 2010) national cuisine. The three periods of Emirati food evolution that chef Khulood clearly identified, then, are a natural development resulting in what Kanna (2011) denominates new orthodox narratives, where family, the traditional village and the Bedouin tribe – ethnically,

linguistically and religiously homogeneous – act as a symbol of pre-oil community that the rulers are guarding and protecting. Modern and fusion Emirati food is, far from being a heresy or a risk to authenticity, part of this narrative of nation building where modernity it is not at odds with tradition, but reinforces the orthodox values, by making decisions on what and how is served in restaurants that are either owned by the ruling families or connected to government officials.¹³

A national cuisine, for whom?

Being able to eat Emirati food as a foreigner is a very recent experience, because Emirati restaurants, as such, only started to appear in the last decade.¹⁴ German chef Uwe Micheel, who wrote a cookbook and founded an Emirati restaurant in Dubai, remembers when he started working in Dubai in the early 1990s:

. . . when guests came in and ask[ed] me for local food, we sent them normally to Lebanese or to Iranian restaurant[s] because during the first years I didn't know what Emirati food was. Then I started to ask Emiratis and at that time there were two kitchens here, where you could order local food. The restaurant had only two plastic chairs and two plastic tables in front of the kitchen, they called them 'local kitchen' . . . where Emiratis go, they pick it up and take it home.

In chef Uwe's opinion, those humble local kitchens – a mixture between a rotisserie and a blue-collar restaurant that would be loved by today's foodies – were not a place to recommend to his 5-star hotel tourists two or three decades ago.

Considering the investment in the tourism industry (Hawker, 2005, p. 6; MacLean, 2017), it is peculiar that until recently there were no Emirati restaurants, and, more interestingly, that many Emirati restaurants failed or needed to be reinvented into something else to survive. To answer these questions, we can start by asking for whom these restaurants were preparing Emirati food. Two explanations are possible, and non-exclusive.

On the one hand, the use of public space suffered dramatic changes with the rapid urbanization and the massive arrival of 'new' foreigners that did not necessarily know how to behave in the Gulf, making local citizens, particularly women, avoid public spaces (Jarach & Speece, 2013, p. 125). The first restaurants in the UAE were opened to cater to those expats who cannot cook for themselves. As Campo and Campo pointed out, in the mid-twentieth century the local foodscape included 'European continental fare, American fast foods, north and south Indian dishes, as well as Levantine and Persian cuisine' (Campo & Campo, 2015, p. 277), together with South Asian establishments. While, until very recently, Emiratis did not go out to dine for leisure. And when they started to do so, they wouldn't go to a restaurant to eat food they could enjoy more cheaply and better at home, but choose something considered more sophisticated, different or 'cool' – comparable to what Morris (2010) describes for the case of Maori food in New Zealand. Therefore, Emiratis did not miss their food not being represented in the various eating establishments. In addition, the experience of authenticity in an ethnic restaurant is different if one is part of the culinary culture portrayed. Sharing meals in Emirati restaurants with Emirati chefs, in some cases, showed me how difficult it was for

them to have a pleasant experience, and that in some cases they considered it not authentic or even phony, similar to the Australian Outback restaurants shown by Wood and Muñoz (2007).

Bristol-Rhys (2019, pp. 3–4) claims that in the early 2000s, while Emiratis were common in shopping malls, it was rather rare to see them in restaurants and venues associated with the foreign population¹⁵ because these were associated with the consumption of alcohol. Even for men. As chef Musabbeh explained to me, his family was upset when he got his first job in a professional kitchen not because it was a subaltern job (as was the case with other Emirati chefs) but because he was working in a non-halal place. According to Bristol-Rhys, the massive presence of Emiratis – men, women, families and married couples – in cafes and restaurants is as recent as the last decade.

Locals eat local at home. ‘To try real Emirati food, you have to visit an Emirati house. You are not going to find the authentic flavour in restaurants’, I was told by every single Emirati I met when I told them about my research. However, eating home-made Emirati food was easy for the foreign residents either. Not even for those who had been living in the UAE for decades, because it is very unlikely for a foreigner to be invited into an Emirati house. First of all, because of the barriers (demographic and cultural) to meet and befriend locals in a country where they are a minority. And because of cultural differences (language, gender segregation), it is very uncommon for a foreigner to be invited as a guest into an Emirati home. Indeed, Shaheem (2014, p. 30) explains that while the UAE has been welcoming to expatriates and quite successful in accommodating different cultures, ‘the Emirati community remains relatively separate from the expatriate communities’: to maintain their cultural values is ‘one of the most important priorities for the government and their people’. The barrier to domestic commensality, then, preserves the ‘most authentic’ only for those who are Emirati citizens. If, as Hamad (2016) claims, food is ‘a means used to bridge the gap between different cultures’ (p. 66), the only space to cross this bridge are the Emirati restaurants, as ‘means to discursively grounded cultural exchange between cultural groups’ (Clair et al., 2011, p. 137). But they are not good enough for Emiratis to frequent or invite their guests.

The short explanation local chefs gave me was that Emirati food is authentic only at home because restaurants use cheap ingredients (in particular, cheap spices) and they have foreign cooks¹⁶ who don’t know how ‘real’ local food tastes, as I am going to discuss in the section below.

In this sense, it is not just professional training – or not *any* professional training – that will provide the specific expertise to be able to cook Emirati food. Chefs Uwe and Abdullah went to ‘Emirati ladies’ houses’ to learn how to prepare traditional dishes, as part of their training on authenticity. ‘What it tastes like’ should be taught by an Emirati mother – or her deputy, which could be a Bengali or Indonesian cook, already trained by her. Emirati mothers start to become an archetypical character, similar to the ‘nonnas’ Parasecoli (2019) discusses for Italian food. They are the guardians of true flavour and the ones that can create it, keeping the secret of their *bzar* to the point of preparing it out of the sight of the entire family to avoid sharing the formula, and taking it to the grave.

One chef complained of having had to transform his Emirati restaurant into a generic Middle Eastern one to survive. He was one of many chefs (including locals) that pointed to ‘*the Emiratis*’ as the main obstacle for Emirati restaurants to succeed, for two main

reasons: on the one hand, locals don't chose local-food restaurants to invite their guests to, 'they prefer to bring them to eat sushi or steak'. Indeed, Emiratis are proud of their lavish hospitality, and to show appreciation to the guest, food offered is going to be copious, but not necessarily Emirati: what is understood as more fashionable, more sophisticated and, clearly, more expensive, would be served.

On the other hand, food at restaurants won't ever be comparable to that prepared at home – and in particular when it comes to high-end restaurants, it will be rejected for being too pricy. Emirati cuisine at restaurants is trapped in a tension between the style of home-cooked food – which has still not overall been marketed to the international appetites of gastronomic tourists, or is served in themed restaurants oriented to the low-budget tourists, who are not necessarily interested in flavour, but more the experience – and a generic 'fusion' that might not convince the locals, either by the taste or the price tag. Emirati food, then, becomes a hidden gem, something that is *not really* available for tourists and that only a few chosen expats would experience, since, as many locals told me, only in an Emirati house is it possible to try 'real' Emirati food. In restaurants we might find what Abarca (2004) defined as 'pseudo-ethnic food', local recipes adapted to the outsider, limiting to the home the 'authentic' food as a way of preventing cultural appropriation. Nation building processes require the construction of identity limits, of closure. Defining the limits this process is, for Laclau (1996), to point to what is beyond them, as an external difference, a radical exteriority and a potential danger. And while 'the external other', as explained above, is not a clear reference for the UAE case, the endogamic process of state homogenization based on a unique shared cultural ideology requires maintaining the borders of culinary citizenship as clear and as fixed as the legal borders.

About parsley, garlic and other spices

Why I cannot say tabbouleh is Emirati? – asks me chef Khulood in her vehement tone that usually makes me feel like a bad student – Because we don't have parsley in our country, easy! Why we don't have colour in our food? Because we don't have much vegetables! Our country does not have many ingredients. So, when you see the food you can see how is the country, just by looking at the colours and the ingredients. That's why most of the food we have is dry.

Conversations with professional chefs and local residents, as well as scholarship that analyses the historical development of the UAE (Kazim, 2000), highlight that before the creation of the UAE, there was not just the limitation of ingredients – due to ecological reasons, creating variations among the coastal, the mountains and the oasis areas¹⁷ – but also very specific cooking techniques, related to Persian and Indian traditions. As Campo and Campo (2015, p. 277) explain, differentiation among the different Arab macro-foodscapes is a result 'of historical contingencies, sociocultural differentiation, irrigation techniques, and cropping patterns, interaction with non-Arabs, geographic contiguity and patterns of migration and acculturation'.

All chefs interviewed agreed that the singularity of Emirati food could be found in how it combines the spices it receives mainly from India and the Gulf. As chef Ali Ebdowa explains, highlighting that cooking techniques also vary:

Arabic food and Emirati food are different because of the spices . . . The technique of cooking is different. This is what sets it apart from Middle Eastern food. Only food from UAE, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain is similar.

Khaleej food (which includes the Gulf countries mentioned by chef Ali) is clearly separated, by Gulf chefs, from the generic Middle Eastern, which includes, in Roden's (2000) definition, Iranian, Arab, Turkish and Moroccan. The latter share certain ingredients such as olive oil, onions and garlic and chickpeas, and both foods and spices overlap across the Mediterranean and Middle East (Clair et al., 2011, p. 146). In contrast, Khaleej food shares spices, ingredients and cooking techniques with Persia and India. And this is clearly reflected in the national and regional flavour constructions.

For Woortmann (2006), taste is the most important element in a national cuisine, which acts as one of the references of the perceived identity. In her account, flavours (and therefore, taste) would be as 'essential' as identity and the nation. Common flavours are key for the nation because they allow us to recognize common experience and to create a visceral perception (cf. Tranka et al., 2013) of the community. In the case of the chefs, the task involves also a responsibility, because by reproducing these flavours they are performing and re-creating an authorized and legitimate version of the nation. Therefore, seasoning is a key task, and one that requires more than simple technical training or the capacity of recognizing the flavours and following instructions to combine them. As an experienced chef and professional trained palate, chef Uwe explained that he is able to tell when someone not Emirati is preparing the local dishes, because of the overpowering of certain spices:

When I was in Abu Dhabi and we were working in the buffet I could tell who was cooking the dishes depending on the people. If they were cooking the margooga too spicy, I could tell that the cook was not Emirati. Emirati food is not hot, is just to give a little kick in the palate. Same, like, cinnamon: you won't taste it in the forefront, but it has to be there, it is in the blend of spices.

However, while Uwe is able to recognize Emirati flavours, and to differentiate the 'authentic' from a good try, he humbly admits he cannot equate his spice mix with the bzar he used to buy from an old lady in the northern emirate of Ras al Khaimah. There is something that only those who have eaten bzar seasoned food from the cradle could bring to the kitchen. But they are not working in the kitchen. Chefs complain that, since most of the people who work in the hotels are foreigners, they don't know what Emirati food tastes like and, worse, in many cases they don't understand the subtleties in the cuisine's simplicity. When it comes to national cuisine, sensory citizenship (Tranka et al., 2013) becomes mandatory. And the socialization in the senses to discern 'authentic' flavours and smells is not available to the non-Emirati, not even as an acquired taste. As Alqadi explains (2015, p. 80), the UAE 'has been persistently interested in constituting an ethnically homogenous citizen population and an ethnicity-based "national" identity, which has required "clear" distinctions', and this applies both to formal legislation and to banal nationalism, through the (almost) impossible domestic commensality.

Chef Khulood explained that, at the beginning of her career, when she was working in one of the Jumeirah hotels, one Lebanese chef told her that he didn't like her food, and he complained about the dry lemon added to the madrooba and that her harees tasted plain. What he didn't understand, in her account, was the delicate alchemy of flavours that only an Emirati, who had learned it at home, could understand and master. Chef Musabbeh had a similar experience with another Arabic-speaking cook regarding harees:

One day, I was doing training for a company to teach how to prepare healthy Emirati food. So that time I have to do harees, you know harees: very basic 5 ingredients in the recipe. You cannot add, you cannot take out: water, salt, meat, harees [barley] and cardamom. That's it. You know what he brought? I gave them a full book with the recipes: ingredients plus the method. Everybody had one. He was Egyptian. I put the mise en place [with all the ingredients ready to cook] and what he brought? Garlic! I said 'what's this garlic?' He said 'for harees. You forgot to put on your recipe.' 'I am teaching you, my friend! I am the first Emirati chef.' I swear, I will never forget this, he brought garlic!

This excerpt from Musabbeh's interview is a condensed and multi-layered exemplification of the definition of national cuisine, the policies toward healthier eating in the country, the professional kitchen dynamics, the culinary differences between the Gulf and the Arab world regarding basic flavours, and the tensions within two differently overlapping hierarchies: the one proper to the professional the kitchen, and a subtle, ethnic one, which allowed the Egyptian apprentice to bring garlic to the mise en place. I cannot analyse them all in depth here, but I would like to focus on two elements.

First, what was put into question is that knowledge is given by birth: Musabbeh is the 'first Emirati chef'. And while he might laugh and self-deprecate with a female foreign interviewer through his anecdotes about the failures in the process of acquiring self-taught culinary skills as a young man who, because of his gender, had never been allowed into the kitchen, the expertise gained of tasting his mother dishes – dishes she apparently also cooked at Sheikha Latifa's, when she visited Hatta – gives him the highest and uncontested authority.

Second, the apprentice was Egyptian, and that chef Musabbeh remembers it and mentions it, is not a casual comment. The apprentice's entitlement – and the chef's rage – should be understood in the context of UAE–Egypt mutual national representations. The garlic affair was an attempt by the apprentice to put into play a subtle game of values that at the moment and by current representations would allow an Egyptian to teach an Emirati how to do things correctly, based on the representations that the former are better educated than the latter.¹⁸

It is not by chance that parsley, capsicum and garlic are part of the palette of flavours related, with others, to the Levantine cuisine. And that many Syrian and Lebanese graduate cooks are employed in many hotel kitchens – as well as from India and other countries, but not necessarily having all gone through professional training – probably disputing more or less subtlety, more or less openly what tastes better, as I showed above. Senses are key mediators of the national experience to arbitrate what authentic food is, and who could be a reliable judge of such. At the same time, senses reinforce the mutual exclusion between the local and specific Middle Eastern migrants, revealing taste as 'a

fundamental aspect of national regimes that associate certain flavors with patriotic relationships' (Tranka et al., 2013, p. 19). As Tranka et al. argue, a notion of 'sensorial citizenship' is established when certain smells, senses and flavours become an index of belonging to a nation or a community. If hummus wars (Avieli, 2016; Ichijo & Ranta, 2016) talk about the tensions between the Arab world and Israel, the different use of spices and herbs brings the tensions between the Gulf and the Middle Eastern within the Arab world to the UAE professional kitchens.

For both Khulood (who published hers in 2012) and Musabbeh (who claims he is writing his now) cookbooks are indispensable to leave the 'authentic recipes and the true flavours for the future' generations. If there are efforts at codification, control and definition of national cuisine, including defining what the authentic ingredients and spices are, it is because the risk of losing something that is believed to be 'essential', 'original' or 'singular' exists, and this could happen in the very core of a professional kitchen as well.

Emirati cuisine: A process in the making

Emirati nationalism would not easily fit within the literature on nation building, which refers to a set of notions including geographical borders, a common set of cultural markers (including language and a narrative of origin) and a certain definition of their members, vis-a-vis the depiction and exclusion of a 'radical other' (Laclau, 1996). In the Emirates case, differences are regional, and the master narrative that dominates the nation building (but has not totally been consolidated in the cuisine, yet) is the Bedouin saga, and the groups to be assimilated – marginal or not – are the tribes. The nation building narrative does not mention the foreigners that compose a group so extensive and heterogeneous that cannot fit the identity dichotomic mirror game of 'us' versus the 'radical other'. Globalization, as proposed by Ledstrup (2019), is also an uneasy foe: as I have shown here, sometimes the traditional values are in fact undermined by the government in its attempt to modernize and rationalize the state and its subjects, and the very meaning of what it means to be Emirati has been changing, not just as a result of the country's rapid transformations, but also as a result of the specific discourses and policies of nation building promoted by the state (Ledstrup, 2019; Pinto, 2014). At the same time, however, policies of citizenship in the UAE, as in the rest of the Gulf, are well-defined: there are citizens and there are non-citizens in a non-ambiguous, dichotomic and clear-cut distinction (Vora & Koch, 2015, p. 547), and the possibilities of trying, learning and reproducing 'authentic' Emirati food seem to be limited to those who hold the national passport.

Observing the elaboration of a national cuisine allows us to follow similar processes of back-and-forth, of incongruences and of multilayered refractions with multiple others to create, in this case, a national culinary identity. Multiple others are hierarchically organized – in discourses and in practice, contextually – considering how they affect the food Emiratis consider their very own. Flavours and ingredients, but also vocabularies, that travelled from India or Iran, recipes and cooking techniques that are shared with those with whom there were no borders before, like Kuwait, Qatar, Oman or Bahrain. And other flavours and ingredients that appear as odd, in spite of being from nearby countries with whom language and religion are shared.

The nation is always a fluid, impermanent construct, which requires constant symbolic and legal reinforcement, while negotiating identity limits; and this is no different with any national cuisine. The untraditional way of defining the nation in the UAE is also present in the journey of defining an Emirati cuisine, which is inextricably linked to a process of globalization (Ashley et al., 2004, p. 89) that tends to standardize national cuisines within a predefined, well-mannered, recognizable and palatable model.

While the UAE is able to offer a well-ordered conviviality for more than 200 nationalities, with their cultural backgrounds and their own cuisines represented in the restaurant market, the bridge that Emirati food could offer to approach locals and expats is a difficult one to build, at least at the moment. Emirati food creates a clear divide to preserve a definition of national belonging by limiting who is allowed to try the delights of full citizenship, including the ‘authentic’ flavours of the national cuisine.

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Notes

1. Later on, I learned that Emirati baith tamat is a simple, but delicious, preparation of scrambled eggs, with sautéed onions, and fresh chopped tomatoes, seasoned with salt, black pepper and local bzar (spice mix) and samen (ghee). Definitely not what I was served that morning.
2. My research in Dubai and Abu Dhabi shows that there has not been much change since Stephenson’s (2014) work, and that Emirati food is infrequently available. Moroccan and Lebanese restaurants dominate the scene – even in local hotels – and they are still introduced to tourists as ‘local’ food. Self-defined Emirati restaurants have appeared more recently, though many of them also closed within a couple of years, even before the crisis in the gastronomic sector caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Martín, forthcoming).
3. Data retrieved from World Bank website. There are no public data or a national census for the UAE since 2005; the last estimate from the World Bank is for 2019, when the UAE total population was 9,770,529 – 69% of which are male. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=AE> (accessed 20 September 2020).
4. Food is a medium for the expression of the social hierarchies and tensions, and plays an important role articulating imagined communities (Anderson, 1991). While I am discussing the role of food in nation building, the limits of this article do not allow me to include another literature review here. I discussed nation and nation building elsewhere (Martín, 2000) and recommend the summarized discussion in Ledstrup (2019) on the Emirati case, and the review done by Ichijo and Ranta (2016) on food.
5. I have also interviewed chefs that do not work with Emirati food on an everyday basis, but have been trained in Emirati cuisine for specific occasions (Ramadan or Eid at 5-star hotel restaurants, or Oriental and Middle Eastern kitchens in 5-star luxury hotels, or because of

- particular government programmes), and I am relying on these data as well, though not quoting them directly and maintaining their anonymity as much as possible. For this research, I have interviewed Emirati cookbook writers and housewives who kindly taught me how to cook traditional dishes. In both cases, since they are not professional chefs, I am not including them here.
6. The ethnographic research includes participant observation in heritage festivals and national day festivities; taking cookery classes with Emirati women in their homes; participating in food-related events such as SIAL or Emirati cookbook launches, etc.
 7. Following Potter (2017, p. 29), and the ‘urban legends’, I was also told when I moved to the country that public criticism is not tolerated and the lines between citizens and migrants/expats are sharply drawn. The impossibility of permanent residency is being used as a tool to keep populations in line: there are no protests, no unions, and even certain kinds of opinions online could be subject to fine or imprisonment.
 8. www.mohap.gov.ae/en/MediaCenter/News/Pages/2224.aspx (accessed 6 September 2020).
 9. The online Majlis [council] titled ‘Nourishing the nation: Food security in the UAE’, was published in the media, widely shared on social media and immediately subtitled into English. www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/sheikh-mohamed-bin-zayed-calls-for-end-to-culture-of-excess-to-protect-food-security-1.1015943 (accessed 6 May 2020).
 10. The imbrication between the royal families and the nation-state has characterized ‘GCC states as “families with flags”, demonstrating how central tribalism remains to political and social life’ (Freer & Kherfi, 2020, p. 11; see also Pinto, 2014, p. 238). With respect to the official voice and ‘ownership’ of the Emirati food scene: Seven Sands restaurant (whose chefs and managers I interviewed) is part of the World Trade Center, and Jumeirah Group (chef Musabbeh AlKaabi and chef Sahar AlAwahdi work in luxury restaurants that belong to it) is part of holdings owned by the AlMaktoum Royal Family in Dubai. Mezlai (at Emirates Palace Hotel in Abi Dhabi, where chef Ali Ebdowa worked) was created at the request of ‘the Sheik’ AlNahyan to showcase Emirati culture to foreign high dignitaries. The Meylas restaurant is owned by the sister of the Minister of Culture. Chef Khulood Atiq works at the Emiratisation Sector in the Department of Culture and Tourism of Abu Dhabi. Chef Uwe Micheel is the head of the Emirates Culinary Guild.
 11. He refers to the addition of spices and flour to ghee that is currently used in domestic and professional kitchens and differentiates Emirati ghee – generally prepared using the family or signature bzar – from Indian ghee, found in any supermarket, which is unspiced.
 12. During this food festival, organized in Dubai in 2019, Emirati chefs participated as guests in four top-end restaurants to offer fusion menus, mixing Emirati food with world cuisines, which included a generic Asian and European Mediterranean food. The four guest chefs defined what was Emirati in their collaboration on the menu in singular ways. And whether other Emiratis consider these fusions respect their culinary heritage is the object of a forthcoming article.
 13. Menus in these restaurants need to be approved by the authorities. In one restaurant in particular, it took more than six months to include new items (including several fusion dishes) on the menu due to a long bureaucratic authorization process.
 14. Prior to that, the Arabian Tea House had opened in Dubai in 1997 serving ‘traditional food’, using what the owner claims to be his mother’s recipes, but they never used the term ‘Emirati’ until recently and only in the last year or so have they included it in their marketing. For a long time, Al Fanar (which opened in 2014) was recognized by many locals as the only restaurant serving Emirati food, and it defines itself as ‘the UAE’s first and only restaurant offering traditional Emirati cuisine’. Nowadays the chain has seven branches, including one in London.
 15. This might have changed more recently, especially in Dubai. AlMutawa (2020, p. 47) argues that Emiratis enjoyed Western oriented establishments because it ‘reminded them of Europe’ or they found them to be ‘high-class’.

16. A recurrent concern in the hospitality sector is the underrepresentation of Emirati nationals working in the industry, where 99% of private sector jobs and 91% of public sector jobs are held by expats (Langton, 2008 in Stephenson, 2014, p. 733).
17. Dates, bread and labneh were basic staples. Fish and seafood were consumed on the coast, and in the oases they have access to a wider variety – thought still limited – of vegetables, but other proteins like goat or camel meat were consumed, in dishes which include rice and barley, only for the wealthiest and on very special occasions, like a wedding or Eid celebrations, where also coffee and a variety of flat breads and date-based sweets were served.
18. One of the main problems for the UAE is the lack of highly qualified Emiratis in professional positions, which policies of Emiratization and a massive investment in higher education are trying to overcome. By the end of the twentieth century Egypt was a role model and provider of a highly qualified Arab-speaking workforce for the incipient state organization in the recently formed UAE, particularly in higher education (Findlow, 2005, p. 290).

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Eloísa Martín is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the United Arab Emirates University and the Vice-president for Publications of the International Sociological Association. She has been working on qualitative research in sociology of culture for more than 20 years, especially on religion, popular culture, fandom, and more recently, food studies. Since January 2019 she has been leading a research project on Emirati food and culture and was awarded an Al Qasimi Foundation Faculty Grant to extend her research fieldwork nationally. Dr Martín has been editor of academic journals for more than two decades, including *Current Sociology*, and currently she is the editor-in-chief of the Springer Books Collection *Popular Culture, Religion and Society: A Social-Scientific Approach*. She was visiting Full Professor at the Free University of Berlin (2017–2018), and visiting scholar and lecturer at 30 universities in 25 different countries around the world.