

MEET THE CHEF: SAMAAH HILAL



According to chef Hilal, "When people ask what my profession is, I never say chef, rather, I answer 'cook'. All I care about is the love and respect people who try my food express. I don't want to make something special, I want to make something different." This approach, he explains, dates back to an era before refrigerators or even electricity, when ingenuity was a necessity

What did you learn during your tenure at Le Notre?

I was very lucky to have worked with the renowned pastry chef, Gaston Lenôtre, the founder of that Parisian school. The approach there was based purely on a hands-on experience, rather than theory. I stayed at the school for four years, unlike most students who usually only sit for one or two three-week courses. Due to this unusually lengthy stay, I was allowed an all-access pass, which was of phenomenal value to my education. What I learned was to respect the person I'm working with. This was especially important back then, since the entire student body and staff enjoyed a close bond. The point is, it's easy to follow instructions to achieve the best possible result; but the real challenge is creating a system that allows all involved to maintain this level of quality. This is crucial when operating with a multi-national workforce under pressure. The challenge would be to facilitate the flow of the operation and in so doing, minimize the running cost as much as possible. I also learned how to develop the

most efficient system and how to customize, or in some cases, build the tools required that are not always readily available. This led to me dabbling in kitchen and cooking tool design.

Can you brief us on your food consulting company and the difference your approach makes?

I consider myself a developer, not a consultant. It's of paramount importance to me that when I take on a new assignment, the client understands this is not a business deal, rather a long-term partnership. At a specific point, I won't consider the project, irrespective of the financial returns.

What were some of the key changes you introduced to the restaurants you ran and what of future plans?

I always say that there needs to be specific emphasis on Lebanese cuisine. My main concern is to work on something I love and am interested in. I want people to become part of an exceptional eating-out experience, rather than only eat good food. At La Crêperie, for instance, both the location and setup were wonderful, and we further complemented that by offering exceptional table and metal ware of my own personal design, which was not available elsewhere. We are also currently working on transforming the space into three restaurants. The original space is reserved for international cuisine. At the entrance, we created what we called Jnayet La Crêperie, which is completely independent, and, in winter, we will reintroduce Les Caves de La Crêperie that will become an Arabesque lounge, possibly offering a variety of performances. We are handling everything related to F&B for Sky Management and La Creperie, while hopefully, we'll launch SAX in Dubai next year, alongside two additional projects with Sky management that are in the pipeline.

IN BRIEF

Michelin-starred chef Thomas Keller partners with Alshaya International retail franchise operator M.H. Alshaya Co. announced its franchise partnership with acclaimed chef, Thomas Keller, to launch the first three Bouchon Bakeries outside of the US in Dubai, Kuwait and Qatar. Keller, the award-winning American chef, restaurateur and cookbook author, opened the first Bouchon Bakery in July 2011. It offers classic French breads and a selection of artisanal breads and classic desserts. Keller is the first and only American chef to have been awarded simultaneous three-star Michelin ratings for two different restaurants. He currently holds seven Michelin stars: three at Per Se, three at The French Laundry and one at Bouchon Bistro. alshaya.com

Nicolas Audi launches at Le Yacht Club-Beirut

Renowned Nicolas Audi officially launched its food and beverage concept for Le Yacht Club-Beirut, a members-only venue situated at the heart of the capital Beirut. Known for his dedication to culinary excellence and immaculate service, Audi spent almost one year engineering a tailor-made menu that would fit Le Yacht Club-Beirut clientele. A second concept will soon see the light, this time at Zaitunay Bay level. The two concepts are the only Nicolas Audi addresses in Beirut. nicolasaudi.com
leyachtclubbeirut.com

China Grill Dubai appoints David Kikillus as chef de cuisine

Starting his career in 1990, executive sous chef at Weisses Rössl in Austria, Kikillus has climbed the rankings taking on roles at prestigious restaurants across the world to include, Photo, Sol Y Vida and DK Avant-Garde. Considered one of the most innovative young chefs internationally, his tenure in Germany secured his place as the qualifier of the "Chef of the Year" and throughout his time in Austria, he earned a Five-Star Diamond Award while working at Weisses Rössl as executive sous chef. chinagrilldubai.com