

EATING

top picks

- Al-Mallah (boxed text, p120)
- Bastakiah Nights (p111)
- Eauzone (p121)
- Hoi An (p114)
- Noodle House (p117)
- Rajdhani (p113)
- Ravi (p120)
- Shabestan (p109)
- Thai Kitchen (p110)
- Verre by Gordon Ramsay (p108)

EATING

Dubai's culinary landscape mirrors the imported expat population – Indian, Thai, Chinese, Lebanese – rather than local Emirati culture. In fact, you'll be hard-pressed to find anything indigenous. Unless you score an invitation to a wedding, you're unlikely ever to sample the local speciality, *khouzi*, a whole roasted lamb or baby camel stuffed with rice and spices. You might come across chicken, lamb or shrimp *mashbous* – spiced meat served with equally spicy rice – but they're nothing fabulous, mostly a mass of protein and starch. Blame it on tradition: the Bedouin diet once consisted only of fish, dates, camel meat and camel milk – tasty, yes, but even the Emiratis hardly eat it anymore. Now you spot them lining up at the fast-food chains with great frequency, indifferent to the major increase in Type 2 diabetes locally.

The best food is Middle Eastern, and includes Lebanese, Persian (Iranian) and Syrian. The cooking of the Indian subcontinent is also superb, with nearly 30 distinct subtypes available in Dubai. Asian cooking varies: you'll find good Thai and lots of Japanese (especially sushi), but Chinese is lacking. Likewise European: though Italian restaurants draw big crowds, few merit a critical look. Seafood is wildly popular and the favourite local fish is the tender and meaty *hammour*, a member of the grouper family, which you'll find on nearly every menu.

There are two types of restaurant in Dubai: the hotel restaurant and the independent. Only hotels are licensed to serve alcohol, which is why they house the city's top dining rooms. Alas, because they fall under the umbrellas of giant corporate hotel chains with strict S&P (standards-and-procedures) manuals that effectively flatten individuality, many of these top-end spots lack the individuality and eccentricity you'd find in a first-class Western restaurant. Creativity doesn't flourish in Dubai. Yes, there are standout exceptions, such as Gordon Ramsay's Verre, but even this is part of a small empire run from overseas. Head to the independent restaurants when you want ethnic authenticity and don't mind slumming it; head to the hotels when you want splash and panache – and a big glass of vino to wash it down.

OPENING HOURS & MEAL TIMES

Restaurants are generally open from noon to 3pm and from 7.30pm to midnight; inexpensive cafe-restaurants are generally open from 9am to midnight. *Shwarma* joints open in the late afternoon and stay open well past midnight. Most restaurants open seven days a week, with the exception of Friday lunch, when some smaller local eateries close. In top-end restaurants, most locals book an 8.30pm or 9pm table. For Arabic and Lebanese restaurants with live music, an 11pm booking is the norm, as entertainment usually starts at

10pm and continues until 3am; book earlier for quiet conversation.

HOW MUCH?

Street food, such as *shwarma*, costs around Dh4; an inexpensive curry at a cheap Indian restaurant runs to about Dh10. At midrange restaurants, mains run from Dh25 to Dh40, at top-end spots, Dh65 to Dh150. Alcohol will spike your cheque sky-high. Because booze is only sold in bars and restaurants attached to hotels (generally three-star or better), and a few stand-alone clubs, prices are outrageous (see p128). Expect to pay anything from Dh20 to Dh40 for a bottle of beer, or Dh25 to Dh100+ for a glass of wine, depending on quality and vintage; more at a club. Hotels add a 10% service charge to that amount.

PRICE GUIDE

Reviews in this chapter are listed under each neighbourhood in order of price for a main course, from the most expensive to the least expensive. Here's how we break it down:

\$	under Dh50
\$\$	Dh50-100
\$\$\$	over Dh100

BOOKING TABLES

Make reservations for hotel restaurants; at the indies, it's generally not necessary or possible. Be prepared to give your mobile number, and expect a call if you're late. Make weekend bookings – Thursday and Friday nights, and