



Made to mezze

It's Middle Eastern, but not as you know it. Maha merges a slick, masculine interior with culinary authenticity for a captivating experience. John Lethlean can't wait to return.

Timing is everything, and the restaurant game is no different. Any other time, the launch of a place as thoroughly conceived and realised as Maha would hog the headlines, clog the bloglines and set the tom-toms beating. Maha is an immensely satisfying new place from a modern young chef/restaurateur with a foot in the traditional camp. In the absence of Greg Malouf and MoMo, this chic semi-basement place promises to do for Lebanese/Arabic/Middle Eastern food what mega-successful The Press Club in Flinders Street is doing for Greek. It's even co-owned by the same people, including George Calombaris.

In fact, any aspiring first-time restaurateur might look at Maha, with its slick and masculine architecture, extensive wine list, snappy waiters and clearly thought-through, powerfully executed food and ask in a somewhat depressed tone, "Has the bar been lifted this high?"

But back to timing: who knew the amps at Crown were going up to 11 at almost the exact same time as chef Shane Delia threw open the doors to his first restaurant? How can you compete with Maurice Terzini and Robert Marchetti at Giuseppe, Arnaldo & Sons, uncorking an instant classic vintage with a triumphant homecoming story thrown into the mix? What chance have you when Guillaume Brahimi, darling of Sydney's harbourview set, opens his first subsidiary across the river at just about the same time?

It's just the way the cards have fallen, and Melbourne finds itself deluged by "significant openings". But it doesn't matter a damn when you're at a table deep within the clubby, somewhat blokey bowels of Maha,

a catchy title that just happens to be the name of the Maltese chef and co-owner's Lebanese-Australian wife. With a foreign-food vocabulary (shahen kbeer, al meshwi, mouabalet and so on), emphatic flavours and sense of tradition reinterpreted, Maha is a little bit mystifying and a little bit captivating, too.

You may not understand the language, but the food here, coming as it does from a chef who's been doing classical fine dining most of his career, is clarity itself. For his first venture, Delia has, like Calombaris, thrown off the shackles of his time at Sofitel's Le Restaurant (the once-fecund breeding ground for serious young chefs, which closed in 2005), subsequently moving to the Yarra Valley's Eleonore's Restaurant at Chateau Yering. In much the same way Calombaris went back to his Greek roots (with a twist), Delia has gone from roasting crowns of rabbit and serving them with complex sauces to making Lebanese fattoush. And let me tell you, that bread salad is excellent.

Delia also has a stab at whimsy, a flirtation with modernity: one of his mezze is a Moroccan glass of smoked ocean trout with an apple and cardamom foam. A visually impressive component of his dessert spread is a stainless rack of three baby waffle cones stuffed with a rosewater-hinted chocolate ganache and topped with different ice-creams, such as halva.

But the real strength of Maha is the air of culinary authenticity it brings to a chic dining establishment. From the kerkeder (a red hibiscus-based apéritif) on the table when you sit for the soufra banquet to the amazing Lebanese iced tea to finish – a towering

tumbler of Darjeeling-based tea with peppermint, pomegranate molasses and pine nuts – there's a real sense of the 'somewhere else' about dining here.

Maha's tabloid-shaped menu is divided into small and large dishes, grills, sides and desserts. And by day, as Zegna-suited refugees from the stock exchange slide onto banquettes to talk up the market, these categories provide grist – mezze, followed by steak with coriander and lemon crushed potatoes, mustard hummus and fattoush, then coffee and back to the desk for another round of Watch the Dow Jones.

By night, however, when Melbourne's CBD is increasingly the country's most vibrant eating and drinking precinct, I'm prepared to bet most will opt for the soufra, a banquet in four quarters made up of things adapted from the menu and others you won't see on paper. It's a tour de force of generosity that will defeat some women and the odd bloke, too. And I know women who like to eat.

The soufra is a shrewd way to sample broadly and is great value for money, which may help compensate for some fairly avaricious wine prices. Each table is set with a dish of house ras el hanout (a spice mix), pink salt and a never-ending stream of small frisbees of warm unleavened bread. Following the slightly bitter, slightly sweet kerkeder, the real show begins.

One of the most memorable dishes is the first to arrive. The poached egg perched on saffron risoni is garnished with micro-herbs (of course) and chicken 'crumbs', a crunchy/chewy/spicy scattering similar to a savoury praline that looks like burghul. Then, from an elegant brass jug carried on the obligatory traditional Lebanese tray, comes a creamy lemon and chicken broth not dissimilar to the avgolemono (Greek chicken, egg and lemon soup). It's fresh, rich, traditional and modern all at the same time, a wonderful example of the way a clever chef can add layers of interest.

The next part of the berid mezze (aka small cold dishes) comes on the obligatory timber presentation board. Along with the refreshing trout and apple combination, a dish of baby octopus is cured in that hibiscus juice, grilled and tossed in a combination of pine nuts, mint,

dukkah and fefel, a harissa-like chilli paste thickened with bread, leaving the whole dish piquant rather than fiery. The same paste accompanies some black olives.

Then there is a cubed feta marinated in honey with orange-blossom water and dried mint, and with its own wafers of sesame baguette, a luxurious chicken-liver parfait redolent with cinnamon alongside a fig and date purée and a cocaine line of dukkah. This with a constantly replenished supply of warm bread.

Next is the sokhoun mezze, the small hot dishes. Whole sardines, for example, stuffed with more of the fefel, wrapped in vine leaves, chargrilled and served with a spicy tomato-based sauce dotted with raisins and chickpeas, and finished with fresh mint.

Maha's soufra banquet is a tour de force of generosity that will defeat some women and the odd bloke, too.

Slippery semolina ravioli reflects the chef's Maltese roots. Filled with ricotta, they come with a dark, cumin-heavy tomato and toasted hazelnut sauce and a garnish of Maltese goat's cheese. Semi-cured and chargrilled quail pieces form the basis of another salad that's tossed with a little elongated leaf called bah'le I've not seen before, sliced bastourma, quartered figs and shanklish (sheep's cheese). The lot gets a sweet dressing down with an orange-blossom vinaigrette. The final element is a traditional Lebanese skewer of lanced small maahani (spiced lamb) sausages, served with cumin-roasted pumpkin and yoghurt.

You need to be in the mood for this edible tsunami because the al meshwi (grilled meat and fish) course follows. And if it weren't for the sheer style of Delia's cooking, the good produce and the balance he gives things, you might be tempted to merely play. I was not overly enamoured of a piece of cumin and honey>



Mezze by Maha
Clockwise from top left: The slow-roasted lamb shoulder comes to life thanks to a Middle Eastern spice mix; the dining room; lemon and chicken broth.

Proud to present
Served on a timber board, the mezze selection includes honey-marinated feta and baby octopus cured in hibiscus juice. Top right: Co-owners Shane Delia, left, and George Calombaris.

PHOTOGRAPHY MARCEL AUCAR

MELBOURNE REVIEW



La dolce vita

Doughnuts with Turkish delight centres, a ganache-filled ice-cream cone trio and fresh watermelon with honey-infused laban.



MAHA

21 Bond St, Melbourne, Vic,
(03) 9629 5900. Licensed.

Open Lunch Mon-Fri noon-3pm;
Dinner Mon-Sat 6pm-10.30pm;
Supper Thu-Sat 10.30pm-3am.

Prices Soufra banquet \$75,
entrées \$3.50-\$10, mains \$18-\$38,
desserts \$15.50.

Noise Gentle, excellent acoustics.

Wheelchair access No.

Plus Warm and generous, with
strong technical cooking skills
applied to mostly rustic, gutsy food.

Minus A bit too blokey.

Vegetarian Customised menu
available on request.

roasted poussin stuffed with couscous, dates, raisins, pistachio and fresh mint. It's a cut-down version of a main from the menu and might work well as a whole bird dissected at the table. Better is a whole grilled snapper finished with a thick paste of basil, coriander and felfel butter and lots of toasted pine nuts and fresh lemon – a very simple and traditional thing.

But alongside the aforementioned fattoush, the memory of Maha's slow-roasted lamb shoulder refuses to die. Cooked wet (with chicken stock) on the bone at a low temperature, the result is tender, gelatinous meat coupled with a glossy, sticky, dark exterior. The meat's not tricked up, but merely rubbed with Delia's sweet and fragrant house ras el hanout spice mix for 48 hours before it's roasted and served with reduced roasting stock that's taken on magical flavours – a sticky, lamby juice with an indeterminable Middle Eastern accent. It all comes in a stoneware pot with roasted spiced potatoes, garlic and baby onions.

The final round gives the chef a bit of latitude and a forum to juxtapose tradition and fun. His versions of Greek loukoumades (orb-like doughnuts) have a soft Turkish delight centre, a bit of a play on the jam-centred doughnuts of old. As a stand-alone dish, they'd be served with pistachio ice-cream, but as part of the soufra, there's fresh watermelon with a pine nut and orange-blossom syrup, fresh mint and a honey-infused laban. And those whimsical ganache-filled ice-cream cones. And pistachio and date shortbreads dusted with praline. And Lebanese shot glasses of house-made lemonade, with chopped mint and pine nuts. It's a convincing presentation and speaks more of the chef/co-owner's commitment, generosity and enthusiasm than many such start-ups.

In fact, Maha may just be a textbook model for getting a sophisticated new restaurant off the ground and feeling like it's been part of the city's fabric for years: put a committed chef with a desire for his own place together with the financial resources of a backing group with management experience. Hey, it worked for George Calombaris. And this time, yet again, the timing may just have been perfect after all.*

and also...

BUSH BABY GROWS UP

One of the greatest battles restaurateurs face outside the city is attracting wait staff. Good wait staff, that is. Not so at Bellbrae Harvest, a little gem tucked in the bush 15 minutes from booming Torquay. Great service goes hand-in-glove with chef James White's clever, slightly Middle Eastern/regional menu. A lovely package worth the detour. 45 Portreath Rd, Bellbrae, Vic, (03) 5266 2100.

BACK TO THE BOT

Founder Chris Lucas may be gone but chef Stuart McVeigh is back. McVeigh last worked for Botanical's Paul Wilson in 2006 and his return to the big man of Melbourne cooking has only reinforced the power of this dining room. New dishes keep coming, signatures get refined and yes, the prices keep going up, too. But if you've been hesitating because the place was sold, don't. Botanical remains a great place to eat. 169 Domain Rd, South Yarra, Vic, (03) 9820 7888.



The Bot's Paul Wilson (left) and Stuart McVeigh.

ALL HAIL TAXI

Like Botanical further up the Yarra, Taxi Dining Room is being owned and managed by a much larger conglomerate without any signs of ageing. Much of the successful transition is down to head chef Michael Lambie, who has stayed on board at this modern lightbox overlooking the city. Lambie does far more than cook; he's a catalyst. Prices have (inevitably) risen but the experience remains impressive. Transport Hotel, Federation Square, Melbourne, Vic, (03) 9654 8808.