

Clockwise from main, watermelon salad; vine leaves with cranberries; pumpkin and burghul pie with a tangy spinach and chickpea filling



Healthy date 'Snickers' bites and coconut energy balls Photos Uschi Irani



Lama Jammal teaches nannies to cook healthy recipes in English and in Tagalog through a translator

HELPING HAND

Hairnets in place and aprons on, a group of about 20 women are hard at work in a cooking studio in Dubai. The atmosphere is relaxed, and laughter fills the air as they slice and chop. This is no run-of-the-mill class, however, as these ladies are not learning to cook for themselves, but for their employers.

At the helm of the operation is culinary aficionado Lama Jammal, founder of Mamalu Kitchen, who spends her time animatedly floating from station to station, training nannies and helpers to make home-cooked dishes, healthy snacks and children's school lunches.

Mamalu Kitchen has always had a very clear mission: helping mothers and feeding families. The idea came to the Lebanese entrepreneur a few months after giving birth to twin boys. "It was Ramadan," Jammal says, "I had a 1-year-old son, two babies and a fasting husband, and I wished I had some help in the kitchen. That's how Mamalu was born."

"Many working mothers simply don't have the time to spend on cooking. In this region, many are fortunate enough to have help, so we can delegate," she says. But Jammal knew that the move was a potential risk. "I knew I did not want my classes to turn into some kind of butler service. I wasn't sure what kind of response I would get."

However, the risk paid off. Jammal has since taught hundreds of helpers, in both English and Tagalog with the aid of a translator, with some very positive results. "The best part is hearing from clients who had never sat down at a table together before, and are now eating as a family," she says. "I receive photos from nannies showing me dishes they have made. It's very rewarding."

Shamsa Baker, an Emirati mother of four, enrolled her children's nanny, Hanzel, into classes and noticed a transformation in her home. "I love being able to teach my nanny to cook all the foods I want to make for my children, but don't necessarily have the time, because some days I am so busy with school pick-ups and meetings," Baker says. "And now my kids eat their vegetables without a fuss."

Hanzel, who is from the Philippines, in turn saw this as an opportunity to learn new skills. "Mamalu courses were fun but informative, especially from a healthy, safety and food hygiene aspect."

Another repeat client of Mamalu is Fatima Mazrui, managing director of The Change Initiative, which provides sustainable solutions for the community, business and government. The mother-of-four's nanny, Nelia, has also attended several Mamalu classes. Mazrui stresses the importance of home cooking from an environmental and economic aspect. "The

► Lama Jammal of Mamalu Kitchen wants to put healthy, home-cooked meals back on the table, writes Maysa Alrawi

classes have shown my family how to recycle and upcycle food, minimising wastage. Grocery budgets are also kept under control. Lama is the fairy godmother of home cooking."

Nelia, also from the Philippines, says she enjoyed the sense of camaraderie. "I've made friends. The classes were fun and it was easy to learn," she says. "Because the recipes were [taught] in Tagalog, they were simple to make."

Jammal, who spent her childhood shadowing her mother in the kitchen before getting her degree at Swiss hospitality management school Gfion, specialises in simple, Mediterranean-inspired fare. Her signature dishes include classic Middle Eastern recipes with a twist: vegetarian pumpkin kibbeh and cranberry vine leaves. She has amassed a significant social media following and recently launched a YouTube channel, sharing themed content, recipes, tips and tricks for newlyweds, bachelors and mothers alike. Jammal is also set to open a cooking studio in Dubai at the end of the year in Nakheel Mall on Palm Jumeirah, running classes for corporations, helpers, parents, couples and even teenagers leaving home for the first time for university. "I want to create a movement," she says. "By engaging every single member of the household, we are enabling a lifestyle change in the region."

And a change has been a long time coming. "It is estimated that about

40 per cent of children in the UAE are either overweight or obese," Dr Sherif El-Refee, a consultant paediatric endocrinologist and diabetologist at Imperial College of London Diabetes Centre, told *The National* last month. Home-cooked meals can play a significant role in bringing the numbers down, according to nutritionist Zeina Maktabi of Up Close and Healthy.

"Besides being able to control exactly what goes into food, home-cooked meals bring the family together," she says. "You can turn grocery shopping into a fun activity. You would be surprised at how many children don't know what an autbergine looks like. There is also the mental health aspect of sitting down together, boosting confidence and increasing bonding time."

Still, there is a long way to go. "Even with home cooking," Maktabi says, "it isn't always the best methods that are being used. There is a lot of deep frying. Sometimes, families may delegate meals to the house help. They may add more fat or salt than they should."

"There is definitely a trend towards healthier options in the region and awareness is growing, but the key bottleneck is the cost and price."

Jammal advocates everything in moderation and a diet of whole, easily digestible foods that hark back to previous generations. "Healthy doesn't have to be extreme, I cook

Jammal advocates everything in moderation and a diet of whole, easily digestible foods that hark back to previous generations

the way our grandparents used to, but with substitutes. I don't deep fry. I use coconut oil. I'm a family chef, so I don't believe in cutting out food groups. The idea is to share easy, fuss-free recipes. I also teach how not to scratch pans to prevent the release of toxins, to cook with oils with high smoke points and what kind of salt to use," she explains.

Jammal credits the rise in child obesity to a love of fast food, the iPad generation who love to snack and the convenience of food-delivery services. Yet, she is optimistic about the future. "The new millennial generation is spending more time on well-being, people now prefer experiences to material things. They want memories and they want to invest in themselves; cooking is part of that."

Jammal hopes Mamalu will one day be a household name, a one-stop-shop for food solutions. The helper classes were just the beginning of her journey. "I am my own market," she says. "I am all about food solutions and I want to share them with people living parallel lives to me. I know they work, because I have tried them."

One such solution is Jammal's recently launched frozen food range, Eazy Freezy, which is available to purchase on her website. Jammal insists the line isn't at odds with her philosophy and won't replace cooking, but will provide additional help for busy families.

The range of 13 preservative-free products include quinoa-encrusted chicken tenders, children's burgers with hidden vegetables and her signature dishes, all recipes she has taught in her classes. "My frozen range is for my clients. It's not for everyday use, but let's say it's Saturday and you're at the beach all day. There is no time to prepare lunchboxes so you can use our Smiley Face pizzas; or it's Thursday night and you have last-minute guests coming for dinner, you can stick a spinach pie in the oven, make a salad and you're done."

"Batch cooking is essentially what I have always done. I did it a lot when I was pregnant. Growing up in war-torn Lebanon, we needed to have a lot of food in the freezer, maybe to feel safe."

It is that feeling of safety that drives Jammal to want to empower others to lead a healthier lifestyle, to feel protected against illness and, above all, to create a sense of community. "No one is born a great cook, one learns by doing," Jammal says, quoting American chef Julia Child, before adding: "If you think you can't cook, you can. Anyone can."

More information is available at www.mamalukitchen.com

Sample a selection of street treats from around the world

RESTAURANT REVIEW
Soul Street
Dubai, Five Jumeirah Village

Having a taste of home is a comfort most of us cherish and fondly remember. For many UAE residents, memories of home are intrinsically tied to local delicacies they might have taken for granted in their native countries - and street food plays a big part in these recollections. Soul Street at Five Jumeirah Village is an amalgamation of these memories rolled into a unique venue that offers patrons a destination away from the main buzz of Dubai's inner city.

Usually, when one thinks of food venues, JVC doesn't naturally spring to mind, but that is changing as the city grows, with more neighbourhood eateries catering to localised residents who want a tranquil escape from driving across town. Soul Street has this in bounds.

What to expect and where to sit

The venue, situated on the fifth floor of the newly opened hotel in the centre of JVC, has a unique layout that hugs the circular architecture of the building. A round bar greets you at the entrance, where a dedicated mixologist whips up cocktails inspired by the different cuisines represented. Soul Street is essentially a sharing restaurant and serves reimagined dishes associated with street vendors from Latin America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The restaurant decor, too, follows this journey with a layout that is broken into regional cues.

Behind the bar is the European section, followed by Latin America. Tucked away behind a majestically muralled pillar, one finds the Middle East section that segues into India and a richly decorated East Asian seating area, complete with shuttered street shops and a full cherry blossom tree with lanterns. This where we choose to set up base, although the swing set bench in Arabia and the rickshaw table in India are both excellent contenders.

The menu

The selection of dishes is at first daunting, with the choices presented in a tabloid-sized menu that takes the format of a newspaper. Our knowledgeable and very keen server, Atul, takes us through the options, and here is where the concept of Soul Street starts to shine. The menu has three sections broken up into salads and cold bites, hot bites, and big bites. It's a web of mouth-watering options that reminds one of weaving through a dense city to find that perfect street vendor you read about on TripAdvisor.

The guacamole (Dh45) arrives at our table first. This one, though, has a hint of truffle that blends well with the soft avocado and salsa, and can be eaten scooped with tortilla chips made in-house. Next up is the tostones (Dh35), pan-fried plantain crackers topped with black bean sauce, pico de gallo, pickled cabbage, baladi cheese and chipotle aioli. This one comes with three on a plate, although most starters can be ordered with four diners in mind. Check with your waiter before ordering, though, to make sure everyone at the table gets a portion to try. Next up is an Indian classic, Mumbai pani puri (Dh40), served with masala, mint-flavoured water and tamarind chutney, flavours that burst in the mouth in an interesting fashion. We also try the flavourful raj kachori (Dh35); a staple of chat shops in India, this semolina shell is packed with sweet yoghurt, pumpkin mash, and tamarind and mint chutneys. Dig into it as soon as it arrives, before the juices are all soaked into the shell, which makes it soggy.

For mains, we go with the lobster. Served in a paper tray in an authentic vendor method, the fresh 220-gram lobster tail is cooked, diced with coleslaw and stuffed into a bun until it's bursting. Prepare to get your fingers dirty if you want to enjoy every mouthful. The dish is served with homestyle-cut fries that make it filling and reminds me of diners along the North American coast.

Dessert is worth saving some space for. We try the churros (Dh40), which come freshly made and piping hot, dipped

Standout dish

Soul Street brings together different flavours, both traditional and innovative, from a range of regions. And it does this without being gimmicky in its approach. The food is well prepared and blends with the atmosphere to create a relaxed dining experience best shared with friends over a beverage. The menu is engineered to be shared as one would in the street if you were exploring a destination with friends. It's why the tacos el trio (Dh70) with its offering of beef, shrimp and chicken, packed into soft home-made tacos with tangy sauces and salsa to match, is a must-try. The Wagyu beef pho (Dh75), hailing from Vietnam with historical influences from China and Europe, is another hearty meal that will fill any belly happily, while the Philly cheesesteak (Dh75), served in a plump potato bun with abundant cheese and peppers, will be a firm favourite with sandwich-lovers.

A chat with the chef

Chef Jagjit Singh is a native of Delhi and has been in the UAE for the past four years. He draws heavily on inspiration from his team of chefs that span the breadth of his menu. "We have a chef from Mexico, we have people from Thailand, we have a guy from Nepal and, of course, from India. Since we have all come together and we have the food from our countries, we are trying to create a menu we can all enjoy together," he says.

Chef Singh recommends the kathi roll made of omlette-coated roomali roti stuffed with chicken tikka, the fragrant tandoori lamb chops with mint sauce and, to round up the meal, the mango with sticky rice.

Price point and contact information

The big bites range from Dh45 to Dh115. Coupled with the starters, which are between Dh35 and Dh65, one can easily spend more than planned. This, though, is quickly taken care of at the table when the bill arrives. After all, this is a sharing concept. Soul Street is open from 5pm, and tables can be booked on 04 248 9989.

Antonie Robertson

This review was conducted at the invitation of the restaurant



Kunafa cones, above left, and tacos el trio



The restaurant combines the decor of the regions that inspire its offerings Photos Antonie Robertson