

OUT OF THE BLUE

Exploring the twists and turns of Morocco's majestic Marrakech, David Prior makes some surprising food discoveries in the most unexpected of places.

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By the time I arrived in Marrakech it was almost midnight. My flight had been delayed and I missed the transfer to the *riad* (a traditional Moroccan house), where I should have already been luxuriating on the rooftop over a cup of mint tea. Like the rest of the plane's passengers from damp, grey London, I was tired and cranky. Most of all, I was hungry. After hustling for a taxi, I found myself using the international language of exaggerated gestures to my driver. I needed to eat, and quickly – finding my *riad* in the *medina* (old walled city) with its famous labyrinthine streets would be a challenge better faced on a full stomach. The driver winked, chuckled to himself and we zipped away from the airport – to where exactly, I wasn't sure.

As we approached the ochre city, I noticed that the air had grown thick with smoke and the streets were choked with people. With a friendly embrace from my driver I was deposited in what could only be Marrakech's main square, the legendary Djemaa el-Fna – once a place of public executions and still a place of high drama and shocking scenes. Even the most seasoned travellers are immediately overwhelmed by this nightly, millennia-old spectacle of snake charmers, monkeys on chains and mysterious blue-robed Berber storytellers, all weaving throughout the hundreds of food stalls where an array of meats are aggressively grilled and boiled, fuelling the smoky haze through the night.

“The city's main square is a nightly spectacle of snake charmers, storytellers and food stalls.”

With yet more hapless gestures, I found myself perched with an intimidating, but ultimately delicious bowl of snails and a boiled sheep's head. I ate with my hands and sopped up the juices with a pile of flatbread, then watched for hours, sated, as the most exotic of stage shows rolled on around me.

Marrakech is an anomaly. Neither Morocco's capital of politics (Rabat), industry (Casablanca) or culture (Fez), yet still its showcase city. It can be hard to understand on paper, but once you enter the ancient medina it all becomes clear.

Marrakech is Morocco at its most idyllic and authentic. Rising from the arid landscape, the medina walls hem in a hive of activity: a lively maze of souks (marketplaces) spilling over with fragrant spices, jewellery, artisan goods and embellished textiles; hundreds of secret sanctuaries; and an entirely unique way of life that is the result of the confluence of cultures that have passed through this ancient trading post over time.

Although it's only a short flight from London, Paris or Madrid, in every other sense Marrakech is a world away. This combination of proximity, warm weather and a sharp cultural contrast has long made the city a chic destination for Europeans. Iconic fashion designer Yves Saint

Opposite (clockwise from top left): the entrance to the kitchen at Riad Kaiss; the tiled kitchen of Riad Kaiss not only produces beautiful food, it is also one of Marrakech's prettiest; fires being lit to cook the tagines at Riad Kaiss; a display of dates for sale at the edge of the city's main square Djemaa el-Fna; snail soup served in the souk. Previous pages: The Blue Room at the opulent Royal Mansour; seven-vegetable balboula (recipe p 135) on the kitchen windowsill at Riad Kaiss.





Laurent famously made his home here at **Jardin Majorelle** (see box), and he and his coterie established Marrakech as a stop on the itineraries of the international jet set. His home, a charming oasis, is now a museum, but the desire to indulge in Marrakech has grown since he first made it fashionable. It will remain to be seen if the city can avoid becoming too adversely affected by the ever-steadier stream of tourists from around the world.

During the past decade, dozens of luxury hotels have established themselves on the periphery of the medina, each fashioning their own interpretations of Moroccan luxury and hospitality with varying degrees of success. Perhaps the most faithful to the country's style is the **Royal Mansour** – and so it should be. The hotel was commissioned by the royal family and is intended to be a celebration of the most opulent aspects of Moroccan style. The accommodation is a collection of ultra-luxurious purpose-built riads dotted in the grounds of a palatial compound. No expense was spared in its creation. It is perfection, yet it lacks the authenticity and patina that comes with age and authenticity, which can be found more readily in the old city. It follows, however, that Royal Mansour's restaurant, Dining in the Riad, is fit for a king.

DINING OUT

That said, eating in Marrakech (without any guidance) can be sorely disappointing. Regal banquets can be found, as can wonderful street food, although not everyone has the budget

or the iron stomach for those options at every meal. In my first few days, all I wanted to do was walk into a restaurant, any restaurant, and order a variety of tagines, endless mountains of perfectly cooked couscous, and sweets scented with orange blossom water.

I was searching for the Moroccan dishes of US food writer Paula Wolfert's beautiful recipe books; the food that I knew existed but somehow could not locate. My food radar was thrown. Instead, what I found (at first) was a culture that doesn't embrace restaurants, leaving a hungry and adventurous visitor frustrated. It felt as though I were locked out; most establishments tended to have the same staples that varied wildly in quality and were mostly targeted at tourists.

The standout restaurant was **Al Fassia** (55 Blvd Zerktouni, Gueliz; alfassia.com), a curious all-women co-op in the newer part of town. I was told repeatedly on my trip that women are the superior Moroccan cooks, and Al Fassia is a case in point. I am not sure if it was the serene, cushion-strewn interior, the graceful staff or the legendary

b'stilla (pigeon meat encased in flaky pastry and dusted with cinnamon and sugar), but Al Fassia, along with the decadent **Le Tobsil** (22 Derb Abdellah Ben Hessaïen, Bab Ksour), are both restaurants in the city that seem to lure even the locals.

FIVE PLACES TO VISIT IN MARRAKECH

1 Djemaa el-Fna
Storytellers, snake charmers and mobile food carts descend nightly on this ancient square. Not to be missed.

2 Jardin Majorelle
Yves Saint Laurent donated this private oasis, one of his most enduring muses, to the city. Peruse the collection of Berber artefacts.

3 Atlas Mountains
A short drive out of the city, the change of pace from frenetic to serene is a welcome break. Set aside two days for a return hike to the summit.

4 Dyers District
Deep in the souk, this traditional textile artisan zone is still as vividly colourful and authentic as it has always been.

5 Mechoui Alley Located just off Djemaa el-Fna, workers head here for lunch of *mechoui* (whole lamb that's slow-roasted in a clay oven) or pots of *tangia* (spicy meat stew).

Opposite (clockwise from top left): the elegant silhouettes of Islamic architecture dot the skyline; piled spices in the Jewish quarter; the Dyers District; the tranquil courtyard at Riad Kaiss; beef shin & Jerusalem artichoke tagine (recipe p 135).

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RIAD REVOLUTION

“The best Moroccan cooking happens in people’s homes,” explains Eben Lenderking, an English/American ex-pat and owner of **Dar Les Cigognes** and **Riad Kaiss** (see box), two of the medina’s more splendid riads. Eben moved to the city after falling in love with a dilapidated property in the heart of the walled city that has become the celebrated Dar Les Cigognes. When he first restored the house, he became a pioneer of ‘Riad Revolutionaries’, a group of ex-pats that has breathed life into these unique, private sanctuaries. Staying in a riad is one of the city’s essential experiences. The mysterious houses, set around peaceful tiled courtyards, serve as relief from the cheery chaos that surrounds.

Eben is also a pioneer of serving home-style food to his guests, and he immediately became my key to unlocking the city’s food secrets. He is obsessed with the food culture of his adopted country and the kitchens of his riads produce some of the city’s finest meals. For those who love food, the critical decision for any visit to Marrakech is choosing a riad whose kitchen takes care to feed their guests authentic, quality food.

Over the years, Eben has sought out the guardians of traditional Moroccan cuisine to command his kitchens and cook for his guests. Rather than the ubiquitous tagine of chicken, olives and preserved lemon every night, the menus at Cigognes and Kaiss change. For example, during autumn, dinner might feature a lamb and quince tagine served with perfect hand-rolled barley couscous that is steamed three times, known as *balboula*. Both riads have become destinations for food writers eager to learn from the living library of recipes

Eben and his cooks have assembled, and we’re grateful that they have agreed to share some of these coveted recipes with us.

Paula Wolfert consulted the kitchens of Kaiss when she recently updated her seminal work, *The Food of Morocco*, and London-based Israeli chef Yotam Ottolenghi shot the Moroccan episode of his recent television series there.

I was fortunate enough to be guided around the narrow alleyways of the *mellah* (the medina’s Jewish quarter) with Eben, tasting and selecting spices, meat and produce for the day’s lunch. Such is the demand for more knowledge about Moroccan cuisine that Riad Kaiss now offers cooking classes, too. My tutor, Fuzia, equally encouraged and chided me through the process of making real couscous, stuffing courgettes and finding balance with North African spices.

After producing a banquet of five tagines, salads of mint and pomegranate, and a glorious mound of couscous, I had found the flavourful and fragrant food that I had anticipated. However, on the last evening I found myself returning to where my journey had begun, on the square with a sheep’s skull, and watching the comings and goings of one of the most surprising and endlessly exotic places on earth. *Thanks to travel concierge service Boutique Souk (boutiquesouk.com).* ►

WHERE TO STAY

Be treated like Moroccan royalty at **Royal Mansour**; the hotel was commissioned by the royal family themselves. From \$2000/night; royalmansour.com.

La Sultana is the choice for those who want to stay within the medina and enjoy five-star amenities. From \$325/night; lasultanamarrakech.com.

Dar Les Cigognes is a favourite for the wonderful food and a relaxed yet refined atmosphere that any visit to Marrakech should include. From \$235/night; lescigognes.com.

Although **Riad Kaiss** is in the heart of the medina, this charming cousin of Dar Les Cigognes is wonderfully tranquil and secluded. From \$160/night; riadkaiss.com.

The old adage ‘never judge a book by its cover’ has never been more apt than at **Riad Dixneuf La Ksour (Riad 19)**. Situated on a dusty alleyway, Riad 19 reveals itself as a chic and affordable ‘designer riad’. From \$135/night; dixneuf-la-ksour.com.

Dar Karma has been extensively renovated, but having kept its original fittings, retains an antique charm. From \$115/night; dar-karma.com.

Opposite (clockwise from top left): the Royal Mansour’s arrival gift to guests of traditional sweets, including dates, figs, apricots, chocolate and pâté de fruit (fruit pastilles); Djemaa el-Fna at dusk; chickens for sale in the souk; Moroccan hospitality is often accompanied by sweet mint tea; a door to a private riad in the Royal Mansour.





seven-vegetable balboula

Serves 8

2 tbs olive oil
 2 onions, cut into wedges
 2 garlic cloves, crushed
 3cm piece ginger, finely grated
 1 tsp ground turmeric
 2 tsp ras el hanout* (see Cook's Notes)
 1 tbs tomato paste
 1L (4 cups) chicken stock
 2 turnips, peeled, cut into wedges
 1 cup (175g) dried broad beans, soaked* (see Cook's Notes)
 1/4 savoy cabbage, cut into wedges
 4 carrots, quartered lengthways
 2 tomatoes, quartered
 3 zucchinis, quartered lengthways
 250g butternut pumpkin, peeled, seeds removed, cut into 3cm pieces
 2 small eggplants (about 800g), quartered lengthways
 500g barley couscous* (see Cook's Notes)

Heat oil in a large, deep saucepan over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic, ginger, turmeric and ras el hanout, then cook, stirring, for 3-4 minutes until fragrant. Add the tomato paste and cook for a further 2 minutes.

Add the stock, turnip, broad beans, cabbage, carrot and enough water to cover the vegetables. Bring to a simmer and cook for 7-8 minutes. Add the tomato, zucchini, pumpkin and eggplant, then season and cook for a further 20 minutes or until the vegetables are tender.

Meanwhile, cook couscous according to packet instructions, then place in a large round dish and make a well in the centre.

Ladle some of the vegetable mixture into the well, then arrange the remaining carrot, eggplant and zucchini in a star shape on top of the couscous. Pour over some of the sauce, then place the remaining sauce in a bowl to serve.

beef shin & jerusalem artichoke tagine

This dish is best cooked in a tagine with a traditional earthenware lid, but you could use either a deep casserole or large, deep frypan with a lid.

Serves 4

1/4 cup (60ml) olive oil
 1 tsp each ground ginger, ground turmeric, ground coriander and ground cumin
 700g boneless beef shin* (see Cook's Notes), cut into 3cm pieces
 1/2 onion, finely chopped
 3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
 2 cups (500ml) beef stock
 250g Jerusalem artichokes* (see Cook's Notes)
 Juice of 1 lemon, plus wedges to serve
 1 tbs honey
 Couscous, to serve

Combine the oil, ginger, turmeric, coriander and cumin in a bowl. Add the beef and turn to coat in the marinade. Cover and chill for 1-2 hours to marinate.

Heat a tagine or deep casserole or frypan with a lid over high heat. Season the beef, then cook, in batches, for 3-4 minutes until browned all over. Reduce heat to medium and return the meat to the pan, then add the onion and garlic. Cook, stirring, for a further 2-3 minutes until fragrant.

Add the stock and bring to a simmer, then reduce heat to low and cook, covered, for 1 3/4 hours or until tender.

Meanwhile, peel and chop artichokes into 2cm pieces and place in a bowl of water with lemon juice – this prevents discolouring. Drain and add to the tagine with honey. Cook, uncovered, for a further 15 minutes or until artichoke is tender and sauce is slightly reduced. Season, then serve with couscous and lemon wedges.

MOROCCO ON A PLATE

The influence of the country's imperial kitchens in the major cities has meant that Morocco's cuisine is wonderfully diverse.

Morocco's most famous dish, the tagine, is named after the earthenware pot in which it is cooked. There are countless regional and seasonal variations beyond the typical chicken with preserved lemon, including beef shin with Jerusalem artichoke.

Likewise, couscous comes in a number of varieties, including *balboula*, barley couscous that is steamed three times.

Beyond preserved lemons and saffron, Morocco's fragrant cuisine is enlivened with orange blossom water, cumin and harissa, the local chilli paste.

Street food is a sport in Morocco. When choosing your vendor, look for places with clean oil and follow the locals.

Cook's Notes

- * Ras el hanout is a Moroccan spice blend from specialty spice shops and selected delis.
- * Soak dried broad beans in water for at least 4 hours before cooking. If desired, substitute 1 cup (150g) podded fresh or frozen broad beans at the end of cooking to heat through.
- * Couscous is commonly made from semolina (durum) wheat; however in certain parts of Morocco, it's made from barley and known as balboula. Barley couscous is from selected delis. Substitute regular couscous.
- * Ask your butcher to remove the bone from the beef shin (you will need 700g meat).
- * Jerusalem artichokes have a rich, nutty flavour and are available in winter from selected greengrocers. **d.**

Opposite (clockwise from top left): seven-vegetable balboula (recipe above); a butler lights the way in the corridors of La Sultana hotel; flatbread baking in an ancient *furan* (communal oven) in the mellah (Jewish quarter); preserved lemons and olives for sale in the souk; the iconic curves and ornate motifs of Islamic architecture decorate the city's many twists and turns.