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MasterChef takes on the world. First stop: Morocco



Tony Turnbull with chef Keri Moss in Marrakesh

Tony Turnbull

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The show is branching out into travel, with foodie expeditions to global culinary hotspots. We join in Marrakesh

It's normal, when you ask what an unfamiliar meat tastes like, to be told "chicken". For the record, camel doesn't taste like chicken at all. The consensus around our table was that it was more like veal, albeit a veal calf fed on desert wind rather than its mother's milk. Mild, nutty, with perhaps the slightest hint of sweat, but really very good.

The fermented butter was much better than we expected too. True, a delicacy that is traditionally buried in the ground at your daughter's birth and only dug up again on the day she marries comes with low expectations, but this, a considerably less aged version, added a savoury moreishness to both a lamb stew and an unusual dish of quail and shredded pancakes.

The sheep's hoof, on the other hand, took no one by surprise. It was quite as disgusting as we all feared. This particular plate came courtesy of a lunchtime stop on the edge of Marrakesh's main square, Jemaa el-Fna. We had started with bread, olives and a fiery harissa paste, then mechoui — lamb roasted in an underground furnace and served with the cumin salt that serves as ubiquitous seasoning here in Morocco. So far so good, the lamb as good as can be, meat you could slice with a spoon, the skin crisp and charred. The sheep's hoof, though, defeated us all, a tangle of gristle, gelatine and bone that tasted of pure farmyard, and not a very clean one at that.

Still, you don't go to Morocco on a food-themed holiday without sticking your neck out sometimes. Mostly your courage will be rewarded, but it's as well to remember that Moroccan cooking isn't all Ottolenghi-style rose-water and hazelnut chicken or salads scattered with pomegranate seeds. Sometimes it needs a few tweaks to suit Western palates.

Luckily, we had our own celebrity chef on hand to iron out any kinks. A new venture called MasterChef Travel means that we can now travel the world with past winners and finalists from the TV show as our guide. So there might be Dhruv Baker, the 2010 winner, escorting guests around Mexico and India (where he was respectively born and brought up), or Ash Mair, the 2011 Professionals champion, showing you around Spain.

For our five days in Marrakesh, we had Keri Moss, winner of MasterChef: The Professionals in 2012. If she has won over the tastebuds of Michel Roux Jr, she was sure to be able to do the same with us.

MasterChef Travel is very keen to stress that this is not a competitive holiday. No one's going to be sent home early tonight for messing up their tajine, and, to misquote Gregg Wallace, cooking certainly does get tougher than this. In fact, there's not really a great deal of cooking to be done at all, with the only hands-on activity limited to one morning. This is more is a gentle exploration of a destination through the medium of food.

After our three-hour flight from London we started with a wine tasting at the hotel, Dar Les Cigognes, a traditional riad in the Jewish quarter just outside the walls of the old Medina. Up on the roof terrace, with nesting storks standing like sentinels on the crumbling walls of the Badi Palace across the road and the minaret of Marrakesh's famous Koutoubia mosque glowing in the rosy light of the setting sun, we tackled the big questions, such as who could spot the difference between French and Moroccan claret (no competitive element — pah!) and whether we preferred the very drinkable local rosé or white (correct answer: both).

Then we sat down to a meal prepared by the riad's cooks. Cauliflower soup, pastilla — that classic pie of pigeon and almonds dusted with icing sugar and cinnamon — then two dishes I'd never come across before: chicken seffa, a noodle dish from Fez, and Trid, a dish of quail, broad beans and lentils, shredded pancakes and that fermented butter. All quite exquisite.

Every quarter in Marrakesh has a public bread oven, a hammam public bath and a mosque and the next day we were led on a tour of the hidden city that most tourists walk straight past. Unadorned arches in the mud walls revealed teams of bakers pushing the dough brought to them by local families deep into ovens with 15ft long wooden peels. We visited men who stoke the fires for the hammams and as a sideline cook the tanjias, amphora-shaped casseroles of meat that they arrange in the glowing embers. We watched men in the souks prepare ouarkqa, the gossamer-thin pastry used to make brioutes, the cross between samosas and spring rolls that they fill with meat, vegetables or sweetened rice. Moss introduced us to strange ingredients and told us how she would use them to add a twist to classic Moroccan dishes.

Best of all we visited the spice merchants and marvelled at the variety and quality: great sacks of mace, cardamom, star anise, all spice, cinnamon, cassia bark, three grades of paprika ranging from bright red to a dusty ochre, three types of cumin, from Syria, Egypt and Morocco, the latter a lemony, pistachio-coloured revelation, kilo bags of saffron at 25 dirham (£2) a gram, barely a tenth of the cost in Britain. And, of course, ras al hanout, or head of the shop, the house mix of up to 40 spices which marks one shop against another. I will never look at my dusty spice rack the same way again.

That evening we ate at one of Marrakesh's most famous restaurants, Dar Yacout. It was a grand setting for sure, a former governor's house, but the food, a set dinner of chicken with olives and preserved lemon, couscous and more mechoui lamb, was not a patch on what Moss and the cooks at Dar Les Cigognes made with us the next day.

Cooking in Morocco is a woman's work. The only thing men ever make is tanjias, involving, as it does, a trip to the hammam followed by four hours sitting around waiting for the meat to cook. Happily, Moss put us menfolk to better use. While she busied herself Ottolenghi-ing (is that a verb yet? It surely should be) three salads — orange, fennel and aubergine; cardoon, artichoke, broad beans and wild asparagus; and her Moroccan take on a hot-and-sour Thai beef salad, with jerked beef, green harissa and lemon — we learnt the essential art of making couscous. Basically, it's long, quite laborious, and requires hands of asbestos as you fluff up the semolina grains three times during steaming. But it does result in the finest, lightest couscous you will eat. As with the spices, it has ruined for ever the instant stuff I am used to back home.

It wasn't all about the food though. After all, what's the point in travelling to such an enthralling city and then being stuck in the kitchen all day. In between the spice shops and bread ovens we took in two of Marrakesh's palaces. Badi Palace, built in the 16th century for Sultan Ahmed al-Mansour, survived barely a century before being stripped of its adornments, its treasures carted off to a new palace in Meknes. All that remains now are its crumbling walls. After exploring the huge central courtyard with its four sunken orange groves and visiting the water-cooled grain stores, we climbed the terrace for views of the city and the snow-capped Atlas Mountains beyond. As we stood taking it in, a sweet-smelling breeze carried with it both the orange blossom from below and the warm scent of spices from the souk.

Next stop was the Bahia Palace, just inside the medina. This was built in the 1860s as the Grand Vizier's residence and is embellished with all the ornately carved cedarwood ceilings and latticework, colourful tiled mosaic floors and swaths of Carrara marble as befitted such a powerful man. Then there was the madrassa, or Koranic school, with more ornate carving and cell-like rooms still in use by boy boarders until the Sixties.

On another day we took a trip out of town to visit a saffron farm and argan oil producer, but mainly we did what every visitor does and got lost among the souks, filling our bags with bargain spices, jewellery and leatherwork, before winding our way to Jemmaa el-Fna and being mesmerised by the snake charmers and musicians who take it over at dusk. Not even a plate of sheep's hoof could spoil the magic of that.

Need to know

Tony Turnbull was a guest of MasterChef Travel (020-7873 5005, mastercheftravel.com) which has a four-night trip to Marrakesh, joined by *MasterChef: The Professionals* 2012 joint winner Keri Moss, priced from £1,395pp, including flights, transfers, excursions and accommodation with breakfast daily and some lunches and dinners.

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