

# COOKING WITH COUS COUS

CULINARY TRAVEL SOARS TO NEW HEIGHTS AMID THE COLOUR AND SPICE OF MOROCCO'S GOURMET COOKING CLASSES. STORY BY ERIN O'DWYER

**L**ucrezia Mutti is the very model of a Milanese woman. Her sleek frame – in black turtle neck, suede skirt to the knee, opaque stockings and velvety Mary-Janes – seems more suited to the Corso Bueno Aires than the bustling laneways of the oldest food market in Marrakech. But instead of designer labels, she clutches two green capsicums.

“Traditionally men have done the shopping here,” she says. “But really, they aren’t any good at picking out the best produce.”

An hour – and several baskets of vegetables, herbs and spices – later, we are following Lucrezia back into the walled Medina, craning to hear her pearls of culinary and social insights over the din of donkey carts and mopeds.

“Men have traditionally done the cooking too,” she informs us. “But times are changing. Women have just got the right to divorce.”

We have spent the past few days lounging around the sun-drenched rooftop of Lucrezia’s artfully decorated *riad* Dar Attajmil, drinking mint tea and consuming house specialties such as the richly spiced tagine of lamb and green pea. Now it is our turn. Lucrezia directs the action while resident chef Fatima Ezzahra gets down to business. Along with traditional slicing and dicing techniques to bring full flavour to the ingredients, she shares the secrets of her grandmother’s recipes. We bumble along beside her, kneading dough for the soft-crust Moroccan bread that later will soak up the sauces now simmering on the stove.

Dar Attajmil is choice among the swathe of cooking schools opening across Morocco. Culinary travel is on the rise, with the newly formed International Culinary Tourism Association observing a dramatic increase in luxury hotels offering cooking classes. But few other destinations do luxury quite like the exotic North African kingdom. And no other cuisine blends native Berber slow cooking, with influences from Spain, Portugal, the Mediterranean and the Middle East.

Spices are the building blocks of Moroccan cooking, but we are intrigued to find flavours best known from the curries of the sub-continent – cumin, turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, cardamom and saffron – taking pride of place alongside pickled lemons and preserved olives better known to southern Italy. Few chefs use tagines ▶





Dar Attajmil food

or traditional earthenware urns any more, preferring the convenience of the pressure cooker. But presentation and attention to detail being what it is in Morocco, the colourful conical pots are still used for serving almost everything from jams to stews.

At Dar Attajmil, Fatima Ezzahra shares four recipes with us. Chicken mqualli with pickled lemon and olives; sweet tomato and pepper salad; slow-cooked lentils with cumin; and fried marinated aubergines. We learn how to salt the chicken to reduce its fat, and how to deseed tomato (for the sweet salad) and grate it for the aubergines. Our best work comes when we sit down to eat. We do not go hungry. And afterwards we are grateful that it is only a few steps to the cushioned daybeds in our private terrace downstairs.

The trick to culinary travel is still finding the time to relax, especially if indeed your male companion does not cook. Increasingly, luxury-cooking tours are scheduling travel to Morocco, but these are highly structured and can sometimes stretch beyond a few days. Hotels and villas that offer cookery courses among their other services are perfect for travellers with less time on their hands as well as those who also want to see the sights. For a hands-on cooking experience, try the lavish La Maison Arabe near Bab Doukkala Mosque, just outside the Medina walls. The exclusive boutique hotel has only 17 rooms and suites, each with marble bathrooms, fireplace and private terrace. Here guests are taught by the *hotel dada* or housekeeper. Three-hour cooking classes are limited to eight participants and conducted on the third floor of the Kasbah. Each student has their own cooking station and mosaic mirrors capture the action up front. Vegetables

and herbs are picked from the hotel's kitchen garden and prepared into tagines, briouates and pastries. Afterwards, try the Hammam – the hotel's intimate steam bath is strewn with rose petals and, unusually, offers body scrub treatments to couples.

About 250km, or four hours drive south from Marrakech is Dar Ahlam – a traditional villa among palm groves at Skoura on the edge of the Moroccan desert. Dating from the 19th Century, the Kasbah was renovated five years ago by its Parisian owner. Suites have views to the Atlas Mountains and are decorated with local antiques and silks. The extensive menu has been designed by French chef Frederick Grasser Hermé and her famous pastry chef husband Pierre Hermé. Morning cooking classes with the residential chef are included in the rates. Non-cooks can spend their mornings on walking excursions – in the Gorges of Dadès, Valley of the Almond Trees, or the Valley of Roses.

For a week-long cooking course, try the Rhodes School of Cuisine. Accommodation is at Dar Liqama, in La Palmerie, a palm grove about ten minutes drive from Marrakech. The villa is surrounded by lush gardens, and plush bedrooms are decorated in traditional style. In the specially designed demonstration kitchen, students learn lamb tagine with prunes, couscous with seven vegetables, almond biscotti and the ubiquitous mint tea. Nine lessons are spread across the week, aimed at giving students confidence to cook at home.

Also offering week-long courses is the beautiful Villa Margot, an eight-suite villa named after the owner's daughter and situated around a swimming pool just outside Marrakech. Limited to ►



La Maison Arabe

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eight students, the course covers a lot of ground. There are 15 different starters, four types of couscous and eight tagines. Exclusive hire is the usual mode of Villa Margot, making it the perfect gourmet getaway. Private light air flights to golfing greens around the country are on offer for those who would prefer to work on their swing than their simmer. After all, as Lucrezia says, men no longer cook in Morocco. ■

#### LUXE LIST

**DAR ATTAJMIL**, RUE LAKSOUR, QUARTIER LAKSOUR, MARRAKECH. Triple ensuite room with private terrace, from €150 per night. Exclusive hire €400 per night, sleeps eight. One-day cooking courses from €50 per person. Two day courses include cooking with a Berber family in the Ourika Valley, from €150 per person. Details, [darattajmil@menara.ma](mailto:darattajmil@menara.ma), [www.darattajmil.com](http://www.darattajmil.com)

**VILLA MARGOT**, ROUTE DE L'OURIKA, MARRAKECH. Senior suite with private terrace from €310 per night. Exclusive hire €2500 per day for 16 people. One-week cooking course from €150 per person. Details, [info@villamargotmarrakech.com](mailto:info@villamargotmarrakech.com), [www.villamargotmarrakech.com](http://www.villamargotmarrakech.com)

**LA MAISON ARABE**, DERB ASSEHBE, BAB DOUKKALA, MARRAKECH. Deluxe suites with private terrace and fireplace from €400 per night. Cooking class from €50 per person per day. Details, [maisonarabe@iam.net.ma](mailto:maisonarabe@iam.net.ma), [www.lamaisonarabe.com](http://www.lamaisonarabe.com)

**DAR AHLAM**, PALMERIE DU SKOURA, OUARZAZATE. Deluxe suites from €950, villas from €1380 per night. Meals, transfers and cooking with the chef included. Details, [darahlam@leverderideau.fr](mailto:darahlam@leverderideau.fr), [www.darahlam.com](http://www.darahlam.com)

**RHODES SCHOOL OF CUISINE** – DAR LIQAMA, LA PALMERIAE, MARRAKECH. Suites from US\$2,395 per person for one week. Meals, transfers and cooking classes included. Details, [info@rhodeschoolofcuisine.com](mailto:info@rhodeschoolofcuisine.com), [www.rhodeschoolofcuisine.com](http://www.rhodeschoolofcuisine.com)