



Moroccan makeover

CUISINES HOTEL LA MAMOUNIA'S CHEF ENLISTS A BEVY OF FEMALE COOKS TO REINTERPRET TRADITIONAL DISHES AS PART OF THE GRANDE DAME'S FACE-LIFT. SYLVIE BIGAR REPORTS.

Two towering white-gloved guards stand proud at the entrance of hotel La Mamounia in Marrakech. Beyond the marble steps rise the massive arcaded doors that have welcomed Sir Winston Churchill, Kirk Douglas, Kate Winslet, and virtually every president, head of state, or celebrity who has ever visited Morocco since the Roaring Twenties.

Starting in 2006, Moroccan artisans and craftsmen swarmed the hotel and its four restaurants for a three year renovation, applying their ancient artistry to a luxuriously reinvented Arabo-Andalusian decor. La Mamounia's makeover, dreamed up by the imaginative French designer Jacques Garcia, heralded not only a return to local aesthetic traditions but also a true Moroccan culinary renaissance. ►



Previous pages: Pouring the mint tea is an ancestral gesture made by a hostess to symbolize hospitality and warmth as well as to aerate and cool the traditional libation. Above: Happy banter in Rachid Agouray's (right) kitchen.

Today, Moroccan cuisine informs most meals, from the soft *baghrir*, a pliable crêpe, at breakfast, to the lamb brochettes and salads at the lavish lunch buffet or the Moroccan pastries dripping with honey offered in the afternoon at the *menzeh* (a small pavilion), amidst the olive trees.

At **Le Marocain** restaurant the menu was given a five-star face-lift under the deft hand of chef **Rachid Agouray**, now in his 23rd year at La Mamounia. Agouray started as a commis at La Mamounia at age 16, before stints in Paris under **Alain Senderens**, **Hôtel du Palais** in Biarritz, **Martinez** in Cannes, and **Cipriani** in Venice. In 2009 came a dream assignment: to run La Mamounia's signature Moroccan restaurant, **Le Marocain**.

He thought, "Moroccan food? It's a woman's affair. I saw myself in my mother's, kitchen, tasting her couscous on my fingers and lapping spicy *harira* [lentil and tomato] soup."

"We didn't need to reinvent Moroccan cuisine, which our guests love," adds executive chef **Fabrice Lasnon**, "but we created a second, contemporary menu."

Inspired, Agouray set out to build a new crew and hired 17 women (and three men!), each handpicked for their specialties. Many cooks were friends before they became colleagues, and they brought to the kitchen of **Le Marocain** the oral traditions they learned from their mothers and grandmothers.

Inside the restaurant, blue and green waves of mosaic soar along Moorish columns, painted ceilings, and carved cedar apertures, creating romantic dining niches—a softly lit thousand-and-one-nights decor. The intoxicating scent of jasmine, rose, orange, and *bougainvillea* rises from 20 acres of century-old Mediterranean gardens. The muezzin launches his melodic cry as the North African sunset flows through the *mashbreeyab*, the wooden lattice screen that once allowed Moroccan women to peek at the outside world without being seen.

Myriam Dian, the sous chef, comes from Agadir, close to

the high plateaux, caressed by the ocean wind, where Agouray gets the sweet lamb he spit-roasts. **Raja Hamoui** rules over the *pastilla*, a multilayered phyllo pie traditionally made with squab but offered here with lobster or salmon. **Khamissa El Ghasraoui** prepares the 14 different Moroccan salads that comprise the most popular appetizer. Says **Lotfia Baba**, who prepares the couscous, "For us, the cooks, working with chef Rachid is an incredible opportunity. He is a good soul, patient and always ready to share his know-how."

Over squat *couscoussiers* and conical earthenware *tagine* platters, modulated Arabic and French phrases dart between white-turbaned ladies. Hands and fingers scurry as they roll the semolina and stretch the dough as thin as a muslin veil.

Seated in a cozy shadowy alcove at **Le Marocain**, I inhale the flowery aroma of *ras-el-banout*, the blend of 27 spices that often defines Moroccan cuisine. El Ghasraoui's salads include thin slices of cucumber sweetened with orange blossom water, but confit tomatoes, a red candy, need no sweetener. Local argan oil adds a touch of nuttiness to peppers mixed with garlic and lemon confit; pumpkin compote with almonds is a revelation. Lamb's liver is crispy but moist inside.

Most memorable from the contemporary side of the menu is an eggplant and *tchkechouka* (vegetable stew) mille-feuille with sardines from Essaouira marinated in *chermoula* (a cilantro-based herb sauce) and a green tea crusted rack of lamb served with crispy artichoke hearts and preserved figs. A velouté of *terfez*, the Moroccan answer to the truffle, is sprinkled with more argan oil. The perfectly seared slice of Moroccan foie gras rivals those I have enjoyed in the Dordogne, and hides a sweet-and-sour pumpkin compote with raisins and sesame. Next to the foie gras, a cylinder-shaped *briouat*, a fried phyllo dough turnover, envelops cinnamon and orange blossom-scented rice.

"Moroccan cuisine is perfumed by its ingredients, but define it? Impossible!" laughs author Paula Wolfert, who in 1973 published the definitive *Couscous and Other Good Food from Morocco*. "I'm now working on a book [*The Moroccan Cookbook*] with 150 new recipes I didn't discover until I went back last year."

Tour operator Richard Bunk says, "Moroccan cuisine? It's the Spanish influences around Tangier in the north, with paprika, soft cheese, and honey; grilled lamb and goat meat in the High Atlas; tomato-infused *tagines* in Marrakech; and Portuguese-influenced seafood on the west coast."

Today, old or new, the spice-infused dishes that come out of Agouray's kitchen are marked by generations of women, and now they represent the authenticity that today's travelers seek.

Sylvie Bigar is a New York City-based food and travel writer.



Clockwise from above: Designer extraordinaire Jacques Garcia's magical outdoor patio at Le Marocain. A grand display of ice cream amidst the orange trees. Exquisite Moroccan craftsmanship is evident in the outdoor gallery where breakfast and lunch are served. In the poolside pavilion, the lunch buffet is framed by intricate Arabo-Andalusian wooden lattice. Some of the 14 colorful salads that comprise the most popular appetizer at Le Marocain. Center: Beauty and refinement in the sorbet dessert at Le Marocain.

