



## It's time to get friendly with the couscousière

By Angela Murrills

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Settle in at a table on the edge of the Djamaa El Fna, the sprawling cacophonous square in Marrakesh, and you can't hear yourself think for the blaring, honking, and braying. Petits taxis, rickety horse-drawn carts, rickety bicycles, ancient white Mercedes—they're all woven together as tightly as a ball of string, along with patient donkeys plodding along, almost invisible under their loads of mint. Meanwhile, in front of you is a tin pot of mint tea and a small, decorated glass to pour it into...

I've been waiting what seems like a long, long time for a Moroccan restaurant to open in Vancouver, and now it has; in fact, we have two if you count Kasbah Moroccan Bazaar and Café (2 Water Street), about 200 camel paces west of Le Marrakech Moroccan Bistro, which even puts mint sprigs in the water dish on the sidewalk outside (for canine "woofreshment").

Both eateries are owned by Leo Fouad and Abdel Elatouabi, who explains: "I'm an Arab; he's a Berber." Both are from Morocco, where Elatouabi served as an executive chef in a five-star hotel in Rabat and more recently ran Vancouver's now-closed Bravo Bistro.

Located at the less touristy end of Gastown, Le Marrakech has been lifted whole from the motherland, from perforated lamps to the staff uniforms, tiled low tables, small stools, and harem-y silk-covered banquettes. Walls are red trimmed with gold, which makes the upper part of the split-level room (downstairs is a bar) all very exotic and luxurious, as is the welcome you get. Hospitality, ingrained in Moroccan culture, starts when a server pours warm rose-scented water from an engraved metal kettle over your hands, then gives you a towel to dry.

### **LE MARRAKECH MOROCCAN BISTRO**

52 Alexander Street, 604-688-3714.

Open weekdays from 11 a.m., Saturday from 5:30 p.m.

As in all Mediterranean countries, food is geared to the group, which means you share. There's also a new vocabulary to learn. The heart of Moroccan cuisine is the couscousière, which looks rather like the Planetarium if it were much smaller and made of pottery. Here, it's used for some of the main courses and again, miniaturized and in duplicate, to hold salt and powdered toasted cumin and harissa. The first batches of the traditional hot sauce that Elatouabi makes with chilies from India and Afghanistan had customers crying for relief. He's since ratcheted down its temperature. Ask for butter and you get something called smen. Ask for, and then about, it.

The comfortable marriage of sweet and savoury is a hallmark of Moroccan cuisine (such as the dates and other dried fruit you often get in tagines), but the oddest combination, to western senses, is the cinnamon and icing sugar that garnish the traditional feast dish bastilla—an upmarket pigeon pie, if you like. They're flavours we associate more with cookies, but they work in Elatouabi's bastilla, its flaky pastry encasing braised and shredded chicken and still-crunchy nuts. (Another version, bastilla b'diala, includes oxtail and dried fruits.) With our first bite, the journey begins...

Salads often launch communal meals around the south and east of the Mediterranean. Here you get a shareable platter of three: unctuous oven-roasted eggplant with lemon called zaalouk; slithery roasted-red-pepper taktouka; and matisha and khiare, a fresh airy dish of finely diced cucumber and tomato dressed with white vinegar. Then comes kefta meshoui, three lean, juicy, lightly herb-seasoned patties served with a dried fruit salad and blueberries. Relief comes all round that we've had the foresight to order only a single main course, a dish of mussels in thick, fiery tomato-based sauce encircling a hill of couscous topped with two whole carrots and three high-octane merguez, which the restaurant has made by Oyama Sausage.

For dessert, try m'hancha (Moroccan dialect for "snake"), little cigars of phyllolike brik pastry rolled around toasted almonds sweetened with orange-blossom honey. Wine from a small but adequate list is poured into traditional tea glasses, or there's beer or perilously quaffable cocktails such as the moro mojito, made with the usual plus blood-orange juice. And of course there's mint tea served with a fat fresh date.

Starters run \$7 for chickpeas with cumin (what Elatouabi calls Moroccan edamame, they're that popular in his homeland) to \$16 for pan-seared scallops and prawns, with mains between \$15 and \$25. Bear in mind that servings are generous. Three of us sharing three starters and the mussel dish, along with two baskets of baguette chunks (Morocco is a former French protectorate) wound up stuffed. We barely had space for the rose-scented water that staff poured over our hands as we left.

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