

S P I N N E Y S

FOOD

Putting a spin on your cuisine

Issue 36 / March 2011

*Waste not,
want not*

FOOD shows you
how to cut back

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TASTE OF SPRING

Liven up your plate with succulent lamb

Chef
Ariana
Bundy

TEXT VHAIRI WALKER

Sweet sensation

Making dessert for the likes of Tom Cruise, Madonna and Bill Clinton, it's no surprise that Dubai-based Ariana Bundy should pen a book on patisserie. FOOD meets the cookbook author and presenter to discover what's next.

Biography

- Born in Iran, Ariana's father was the famous restaurateur Manoucheher Saadlou, who opened a much-revered fine-dining restaurant in Tehran, and later Beverly Hills.
- Ariana learnt her trade at Le Cordon Bleu, Ecole Lenotre and Fauchon Patisserie in Paris. After this training, she worked her way up at the Mandarin hotel in Los Angeles, where she became head pastry chef and regularly made dessert for film stars and dignitaries.
- Identifying a food intolerance in herself and other family members, Ariana decided to write *Sweet Alternative*, a book on staving gluten and soy-free desserts.
- Next year, the cookbook author will be releasing a new book based on her Persian heritage.

“

It's a dream come true really," says Ariana Bundy at the prospect of interviewing the great French chef Pierre Gagnaire, one of her food heroes – having learnt and loved the cuisine of his country.

Along with authors such as Michael Palin and Kate Adie, Ariana is participating in the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature (March 8-12), where she will also take part in a food panel with the Indian television chef Madhur Jaffrey.

Ariana is no stranger to the small screen herself, having appeared among others, on the British television show *Good Food Live* when she prepared the Persian dish *fesenjan*, a pomegranate and walnut stew.

Born in Iran, her father was the illustrious restaurateur Manoucheher Saadlou. She attributes him, along with her grandmother, to introducing her to the world of food. Saadlou owned a fine-dining French restaurant in Tehran (prior to the revolution), where even the country's ruler of the 'Shah' would dine. The restaurant was classically French with a chef and maitre d' brought in from Paris, and chateaubriands (thick cut tenderloin) served from silver trolleys.

His second restaurant in California was similarly French but with a Californian twist, "it was adjusted to the weather and its people," explains Ariana. "I remember many hours sitting in his restaurant taking it all in. So many celebrities used to come and there were lots of Hollywood charity events."

Despite her eagerness to go behind the scenes, a young Ariana was never permitted in the kitchen. "Young ladies aren't allowed here," her father would tell her. Not discouraging her interest of food though, he would take her to the markets of Paris and explain things with an infectious enthusiasm. "Everything about our early childhood centred around food. The first books my brother and I flipped through were my father's collection on French cooking."



Inspired, Ariana decided to pursue her own career in cooking, which took her to three prestigious culinary schools in Paris – Le Cordon Bleu, Ecole Lenotre and Fauchon Patisserie. “I loved every minute of it, even the times I had to get up at 4am,” she says of her time spent there. “At Cordon Bleu and Lenotre, my teachers were outstanding and would share things with us that took them decades to learn the hard way. On the first day of cooking school I met people just like me who didn’t think it was weird to talk about the texture of chocolate mousses or the moisture level of butter. Once I started work though, things sobered up quite quickly and I had to work efficiently and fast.”

Although specialising in cuisine, Ariana concentrated her efforts on pastry to enable her to open her own store, first working at the luxury Mondrian in Los Angeles to gain experience. Excelling, Ariana shortly became the head pastry chef and was flown to New York to train. The experience was valuable but intense as Ariana explains. “It all happened fast and I got burned out. A few years ago I decided to go back to cooking school and study cuisine and I’m so glad I did because you learn a variety of techniques which you can apply to so many other cuisines, such as the correct way to fillet fish, make sauces, cut vegetables, etc. Pastry on the other hand let me be visually creative with chocolate sculptures, pulled sugars and decoration pieces.”

During her time with the Mondrian, Ariana catered for Hollywood heavyweights such as Tom Cruise, Tom Hanks, Madonna and Nicole Kidman, and was involved in the premiere parties for *Sex and the City* and *Eyes Wide Shut*, in addition to the MTV music awards and even the Oscars.





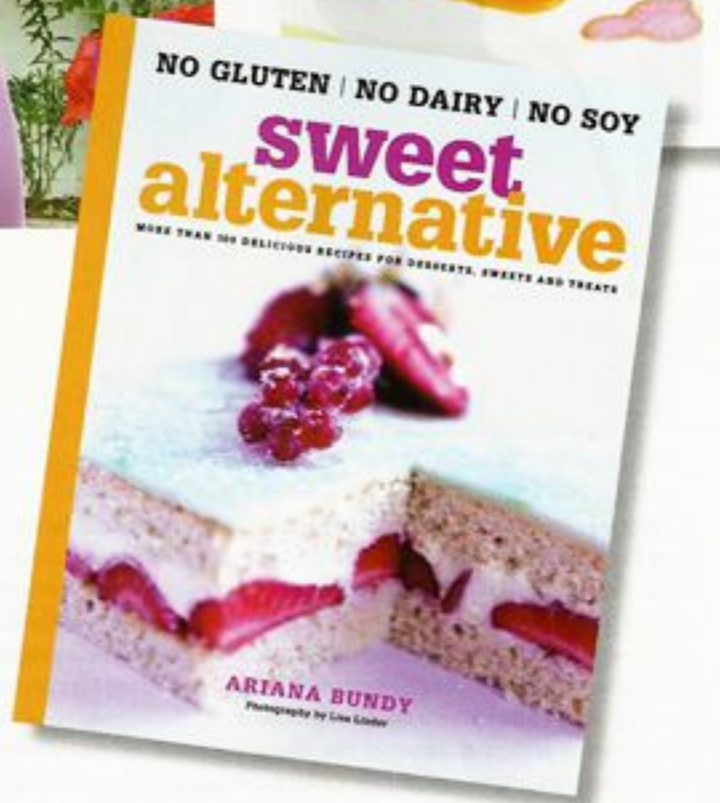
"It was fabulous because we worked in unison," she says of the experience. "Every night we'd think we wouldn't make it but we would and with flying colours. We did go out and mingle a bit but it was mostly about working and creating the experience for them, so the focus was on the food rather than who was out there."

Working in a notoriously male dominated environment was never going to be easy for a young woman but Ariana rose to the occasion. "I think what I did was not go into the kitchen and say I'm just like one of the lads which helped me a bit. I suppose I gently and diplomatically became part of the team even though there were times I wanted to shout out like everyone else. But all in all it was a very enjoyable experience but not something I could have done long term."

Having left the professional kitchen some years ago, Ariana divides her time between Dubai and France with her husband Paul and young son Dara. She has since written the book, *Sweet Alternative* – the first gluten, dairy and soy-free dessert cookbook – in light of her mother and brother's gluten sensitivity and her own dairy intolerance. "I've created everything from classic French fares such as Genoise cake, macaroons and crème patisserie to chocolate chilli cookies, muffins, Persian chickpea cookies, Thai beignets, gelatos, truffles and flans – everything I love to eat and make, but missed eating myself!"

Over the years Ariana's cooking has evolved due to living in so many countries (London, Paris, New York, Singapore, San Francisco, Rome, Austria and Switzerland) as well as a change in her lifestyle. "My style has changed throughout the years and since discovering my food intolerances and having a young baby, I'm looking at different ingredients. I now know the way I feel is directly related to what I eat."

For Ariana, this means food that is healthy, fresh, diverse and based on French techniques, but also comforting, easy and beautifully presented



meals, confessing: "My dream is to be a grandmother one day, to sit around a big table in the countryside with all my family around me, having a fabulous alfresco lunch, just like in the movies!"

In the meantime, Ariana is looking forward to releasing a cookery book next year that focuses on her Persian-American roots. "I think all that travelling made me more aware of our differences but also our similarities," she explains. "I believe in cooking without borders, but at the same time in keeping the historic and the authenticity of a country's cuisine. So if it is fusion, then say it is fusion and if it's traditional then mention it. I'm obsessed with knowing about where a certain dish comes from and how old it is."

Of course Iranian food is traditionally rich in its history – something Ariana is more than happy to explore with her new book. ■

See Ariana at The Emirates Airline Festival of Literature on March 12. Visit www.emirateslitfest.com for more details.