

A taste of MOROCCO

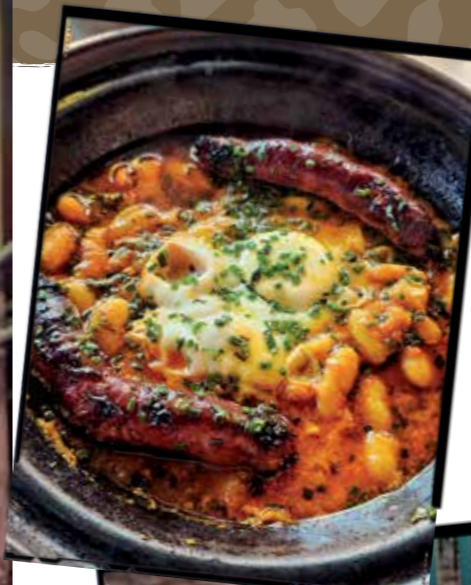
If you want to understand a country, know its food. **Sophie Baker** steps out to get a flavour of Marrakech

There's an electric magic to Marrakech, which pulses with life, fragrance and flavour. As the sun sinks over the dusty afternoon heat of 'the Red City', the medina's labyrinthine alleyways come alive, beckoning visitors to explore a food culture with more depth than most travellers realise.

Tagine and *tangia* are the bold headliners here, soaked up with chunks of handmade bread, and eaten whether it's four degrees or forty. But spend a few days wandering, tasting and soaking in the atmosphere, and you'll discover that Marrakech's food scene offers much more than the traditional tagines and couscous typically associated with Moroccan cuisine.

The Marrakech Evening Street Food Tour run by Moroccan Food Adventures is where I began. A tour like this is a must for first-timers to experience the soul of the city's culinary identity. The excursion starts in the heart of the medina, where seasoned local guides lead the way to hidden nooks, weaving round motorbikes and past food stands with vendors selling their wares.

Our first stop is a stall just off the main square, where we're handed a basket of handmade bread. There are no utensils here; just handfuls of pillowy dough to scoop up everything that follows. First comes the beef *tangia*, slow-cooked in clay with preserved lemon and spices until it barely holds together. A gentle nudge with the bread and it melts



Left: As much as the Evening Food Tour was about meandering the medina on a culinary safari, it was about going slow, lingering and talking to the locals and fellow travellers

Above, clockwise: Food: Loubia, a traditional Moroccan breakfast of white bean stew with sausage; handmade doughnuts before they are rolled in syrup and sugar; chicken tagine

into shreds. Alongside it is roast lamb, served with cumin salt for dipping. The skin is crispy and the meat soft, having been pulled from a coal-fired underground oven, which is tended to by hand each day.

Gathered around an old plastic table, the shared meal breaks the ice for our group, and a good-humoured debate starts. Which is best: the *tangia's* multi-layered depth or the simplicity of the smokey lamb? The *tangia* edges the vote by a whisker.

The next question is crucial: do I eat my fill here, or exercise restraint and save room for what's next? I save room. It's the right choice, because the rest of the night is spent dipping in and out of restaurants and food stalls as we wander the length of the medina.

We nibble on fresh olives from overflowing baskets, doused in parsley and harissa. Next to a group of young boys pooling their coins, a street cart vendor twists fresh dough into rings. We wait our turn to taste what they've been saving for: hot Moroccan doughnuts, pulled piping hot from the oil and rolled in syrup and sugar. Strung onto a piece of twine for

easy eating, they're crunchy, fluffy and sweet, far outshining any jam doughnut I've ever had from an upscale bakery.

After plenty of dough, meat and sugar, it's time to sit down for a quick break from the buzz of the medina. We're handed a cucumber drink, our guide challenging us to guess the second ingredient. It takes a while, but we land, correctly, on orange. The citrus is so delicate that it subtly balances out the notes of cucumber with some barely-detectable sweetness. Though technically a drink, this is a local dessert, gulped down in the sweltering Moroccan summers.

Somewhere in a surprisingly quiet corner of the women's market, I'm handed a bowl of couscous topped with caramelised onions and plump raisins; a labour of love, if ever there was one.

"Fridays are the only days we eat couscous," our guide says. "It takes hours to prepare, and it's our rest day — the only day people agree to make couscous." On this Wednesday evening, I'm



Noujoum at IZZA: One of the sophisticated restaurants elevating Marrakech's culinary scene, with meals served on its rooftop terrace.

Above: Compressed and pickled watermelon, grape, feta and mint with a *Bab Doukala* (chilli tequila, mango juice and syrup) and sparkling water

Below: Sea bass carpaccio and whole stuffed sea bass

Right: A breakfast spread featuring handmade pastries and breads



IZZA MARRAKECH

grateful that the cooks here are making it outside their traditional schedule, so I can fill up as the night unwinds.

Beyond the markets and the rooftops, Marrakech offers countless culinary revelations. From tiny cafés where mint tea is poured from great heights into delicate glasses, to patisseries displaying intricate pastries baked

with honey and almonds, the city's food scene is a mosaic of flavours and experiences.

Earlier in the week, I had taken a cooking class at the Amal Women's Training Center, a non-profit uplifting disadvantaged women through the art of cuisine. As I mixed marinades for a lamb and prune tagine, carefully tended the coals under the guidance of the women at the centre, and eventually tucked in around a communal table, it felt like I'd been invited to share in their culinary traditions for a few precious hours.

Although it's tempting — and easy — to spend every day in Marrakech eating traditional fare, you'd be missing out on an incredible, thriving food scene unfolding on the rooftops of the Red City. Street food is the raw, pulsing spirit of Marrakech, but restaurants like Noujoum at IZZA are the sophisticated spaces that are writing a new chapter of the city's culinary story.

Tucked away in a quiet corner of the medina, IZZA feels like a secret garden. You step in and wind your way past an art collection reputedly worth millions of pounds, climbing narrow stairs past reading rooms and courtyards to emerge onto a rooftop oasis tastefully decorated in the spirit of Marrakech's hedonist past. Bottle-green tiles, golden lighting, striking monochrome photography and touches of natural wood set the stage.

The offerings here are crafted under the expertise of Head Chef Ahmad El Hardoum, who has over 15 years of experience from renowned establishments in Marrakech, including Crystal Pacha, The Kenzi Menara Hotel, Le Palais Paysan and El Fenn. With a resume of that calibre, the menu is, as expected, spectacular. It reinterprets Moroccan flavours in sophisticated ways, from delicate seafood dishes laced with saffron, to lamb which has been marinated for days, taking on a richness that only

patience can deliver. Charred tenderstem broccoli tossed in harissa butter is served alongside my rabbit ravioli, which comes coated with a preserved lemon and saffron sauce.

The food is so good, in fact, that I eat there twice. The staff tell me that the prawns are a new addition to the menu, and that a local supplier delivers them fresh each day, from an hour outside Marrakech.

Complementing these delights is an equally impressive drinks list. A curated selection of Moroccan wines sit alongside cocktails crafted by a dedicated mixologist from Paris. My favourite? An amaretto sour made with orange blossom and local honey. It's crafted with local botanicals that make it refreshing yet grounded in the *terroir* of Morocco.

Breakfast options are a similar celebration of both traditional foods and the art of reinvention, with a mixture of Moroccan and Mediterranean influences making it onto the menu. Moroccan breads and crumpets arrive with a handmade spread

of *amlou*, made from blended almonds and honey. If kids all over the world had this on their tables, Nutella would simply cease to exist!

For avocado toast converts, there's hearty homemade sourdough toast piled high with local avocados and harissa eggs.

But the standout dish is the *loubia*, a traditional Moroccan breakfast of simmered, smoky white bean stew with sausage, usually of the spiced lamb variety. Though it's rarely found outside Moroccan kitchens, it deserves a place alongside *shakshuka* on global breakfast menus.

Marrakech is a city that you can only really know by tasting it. The food here isn't just bold or delicate, traditional or modern; it's all of that, tangled up in the chaos of markets, the quiet care of home cooking and the unbridled creativity of avant-garde chefs. My journey, from the humble kitchens of Amal to the refined heights of Noujoum at IZZA, was but a glimpse. Marrakech has so much more hidden in its streets, waiting to be found, one bite at a time.

Immersion: Guests participating in a cooking class at the Amal Women's Training Centre



SOPHIE BAKER