

La Serre brings bistro culture to Dubai

In August last year a new restaurant opened in Dubai to rave reviews praising both its design and its cuisine. The driving force behind La Serre Bistro & Boulangerie is chef Izu Ani. Jim Banks spoke to him about how he formed the vision that got the restaurant voted no.1 by Esquire in their 'Middle East Top 50 Restaurants in UAE 2014'





Overlooking the Rosinox kitchen, La Serre's guests can share the experience of their dishes being created

Behind the beautiful two-storey glass façade of the Vida Downtown Dubai hotel on Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Boulevard lies a restaurant that takes **the best of France's food-loving ethos** and transplants it perfectly into the city's cosmopolitan culture. La Serre Bistro & Boulangerie embraces the best of traditional cooking and innovative cuisine, and it is the latest labor of love for head chef Izu Ani. La Serre has two distinct elements. On the ground floor is a traditional Parisian boulangerie, which opens early in the morning to serve freshly-baked bread, viennoiserie and a light breakfast menu.

“The kitchen sets the quality standard of the restaurant”

Throughout the day it offers lunch, salon de thé and dinner options. The bread and croissants would grace any French restaurant, though the style is a blend of European and Middle Eastern. Upstairs is a bistro, with lunch and dinner menus inspired by Mediterranean cuisine, as well as a bar. The bistro – with its chef's table – has a laid back, intimate feel and caters for a diverse mix of Dubai society, reflecting the desire of its designers to embrace all parts of the local culture. “The restaurant has a price point, but I want to be inclusive,” says Izu Ani, head chef at La Serre. “We serve rich people or people who save up to be able to appreciate great food. You can eat here for less than £10 or you can spend £1,000. More important than price is the fact that food is for sharing with people. Breaking bread together creates a magical moment.” La Serre certainly makes a bold statement, with impressive external design and an interior strongly inspired by a Parisian style of décor. It is further evidence that Dubai's gastronomic scene is becoming more sophisticated.



Ani's journey to Dubai

Chef Izu Ani already had a glowing reputation in Dubai, having been executive chef of Dubai's popular La Petite Maison. At 37, he retains the enthusiasm and drive of a teenager. Born in Nigeria he moved to the UK with his family at the age of five. He left school at 15 with relatively few qualifications. Soon Ani found a job at The Square in London, which had two Michelin stars. From there began a journey that took him to some of the finest restaurants in France – the three-star L'Auberge de l'Île and the two-star La Bastide Sainte-Antoine. “I spent five years in France and ended up at the second oldest three-Michelin starred restaurant in the world, cleaning vegetables. That was important because I could see how everything intertwines and I understood that you have to

La Serre means greenhouse, so the restaurant has a feeling of being light, fresh and open

At La Serre's boulangerie it's possible to have breakfast or a quick snack throughout the day



respect your ingredients,” says Ani. Ani then worked in Spain in the kitchens of Michelin-starred restaurants such as Mugaritz, Arzak and Akelafe, then returned to London to become head chef at Vanilla, before moving to Dubai. In partnering with Emaar Hospitality Group to create La Serre, Ani could play a key role in all aspects of the design for the all-day diner, calling upon his passion for fresh produce and his belief that cooking and dining are essential parts of any country's culture.

“Food is for sharing with people. Breaking bread together creates a magical moment”

“You have to enjoy cooking. To be a chef you have to live it and recognise that your job is about giving pleasure to someone else. That is what I learnt in France. Every culture's cuisine has its own look and flavor.” he says. “Choosing the right cuisine for a restaurant depends on where you are,” he adds. “In hot countries you need light food or salads, but in a cold country like England you need mashed potatoes and pie. I've cooked in Michelin-starred restaurants all my life, so I understand what quality and service mean. For me, **my Michelin star is when people say 'thank you'.**”

Chef Izu Ani calls upon his passion for fresh produce

Kitchen and menu in harmony

The bistro menu at La Serre blends French, Spanish and Italian flavors. Its quality is based on the importance Ani places on sourcing of fresh, organic ingredients from farmers and artisan suppliers. Ani has blended his many influences to suit the cosmopolitan clientele of the restaurant, while respecting the needs of the local culture. “As I am in Dubai now I find that a lot of Mediterranean food is perfect. I am off to Peru soon. I like to challenge myself, I am always looking

The Rosinox cooking suite integrates a multifunction bratt pan, a tempura, a fryer and a French solid top



to do things to the best possible quality, for new opportunities,” says Ani. “I can bring in different influences here because, while you can't be seasonal in Dubai in the same way as you can in Europe, it is located between Europe and Australia so you can bring in summer cuisine from both. Doing that allows you to get the best ingredients and that helps to keep things simple. Simplicity and clarity are what defines the cuisine here,” he adds. The clarity and openness that Ani prizes so highly come through in the design of La Serre's open kitchen, which invites diners to experience more than the flavors of the food. “La Serre has an open kitchen so people can wander in and say ‘thank you’ or tell you that the food is terrible. I don't hide myself or my food. If something is wrong I work hard to make it better. I am never fully satisfied,” explains Ani. “La Serre means greenhouse, so it has a feeling of being light and fresh and open. If you pour sauce onto a dish you hide it, but the philosophy here is to have everything to be seen and to have its own identity. It is important that we stick to our principles, and that means going back to basics. I always say that I am a lazy chef because if you find good ingredients you don't have to do much to them.” As important as the quality of the ingredients is the design of the kitchen. “A lot of restaurants fail because the kitchen is not set up well,” says Ani. “The kitchen sets the quality standard of the restaurant. If you have 200 covers a night, every night of the year, you need a set-up that can support that. The design of the kitchen must reflect your ethos.”



Derek Horn FCSI is a director of SeftonHornWinch. Derek has a reputation worldwide for his hotel kitchen design and speciality restaurants. He has particular flair and success in the creation of ‘guest experience’ features and chef staging

UK-BASED CONSULTANCY FIRM SEFTONHORNWINCH DESIGNED THE KITCHEN AND FRONT OF HOUSE AT LA SERRE BISTRO & BOULANGERIE DUBAI. DEREK HORN FCSI FROM SHW EXPLAINS HOW THOSE DESIGNS WERE BROUGHT TO LIFE.

Emaar Hospitality Group asked us to develop, with Chef Izu, a world-class French restaurant on the first floor and a boulangerie on the ground floor. It will provide part retail sales and sit in service complete with pavement seating and with a very **visible kitchen** and **bakery production**. The brief was largely dictated by Izu's belief that Dubai needed true French breads, viennoiserie and pastries. We had an excellent working relationship with the interior designer, Bishop Design, Dubai. The biggest challenge was the space allocation, particularly at



At La Serre chef Izu has selected Rosinox for its robustness and reliability

ground floor for the production bakery areas. Ventilation and ceiling height constraints added to the challenge which we overcame using a combination of a vented ceiling and special canopies. The right ergonomics were achieved through Izu relating each of his departments and his own chef requirements when ‘on station’ and preparing his mise-en-place before service. Storage and functions were reviewed and planned using the limited spaces available. **Energy savings** could only be achieved by using manufacturers whose equipment was supporting efficient and insulated containments.

BESPOKE SOLUTIONS

The **Rosinox cooking island** was custom made for this project and we designed this with Izu and his brigade to ensure they stayed ‘on station’ for most of their individual service function. Rosinox also produced a tempura fryer that has been most successful. In the case of the La Serre bakery it is planned that, when the time is right, it will be also supplying two or three other hotels locally and that will justify the expenditure. Certainly if there are not the professional bakers in any region that a hotel can buy externally, then having ‘in house’ is the only option but it does add significant cost to any development. Having spent a great deal of time with Izu visiting and tasting breads from France, we suggested that Izu join us in visiting the Sirha show and we found all the machinery and ovens within Ali Group companies which included mainly **Pavaille, Bongard, Bertrand-Puma** and **CFI** for refrigeration. **Rosinox** was a natural selection also and we designed both major ranges at the show.

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Rosinox worked closely with chef Izu and Derek Horn to develop a customized cooking suite

Q&A WITH ALAIN PÉRU, PRESIDENT AND CEO AT AFE BAKERY



What was the brief for the bakeries aspect of the La Serre Bistro & Boulangerie?

The bakery had to be optimized and compact. The aim was to make original French products like baguettes and croissants within Italian standards - very high class.

What client needs had to be taken into account?

Chef Izu already had a clear idea of "how the bakery will be". We gave him some advice about the best match.

What challenges did you encounter?

As it's in a hotel we had to be sure that all equipment could fit through all corridors. The ovens and the retarder proofer arrived totally disassembled and had to be assembled on site. We re-measured each part of the largest equipment, such as the mixer bowls. All the equipment was then able to fit through a standard door.

Which bakery brands from Ali Group did you install and why?

Pavailler ovens were the perfect match for this project. They have the know-how about brasseries and five-star hotels all over the world. CFI provided the refrigeration and Bertrand-Puma the dough processing machines.

Was any of the bakery equipment custom made for this project?

No, but there is one particular piece of equipment that you won't find in other bakeries in Middle East. It's the liquid leaven machine named Fermentolevain FL from Bertrand-Puma. It's a machine to produce traditional leaven containing organic yeast cells in order to give a unique flavor to the bread.

What do you think of the new trend of having a bakery lab inside high-end hotels?

It completes the standout of the hotels. Delicious pastry in the morning and good breads on the tables for lunch and dinner is something you expect when you are staying in a five-star hotel. It also gives the hotel the opportunity to reduce costs and please their clients 100%.

The Pavailler Opale style range electric deck oven combines traditional baking and modern energy efficiency



The Bertrand-Puma compact resting cabinet and moulder provide perfect shaped dough pieces

www.pavailler.fr
www.bertrand-puma.fr
www.froid-cfi.fr



La Serre's bakery lab offers delicious pastries in the morning and fresh bread for lunch and dinner

"I took a lot of time to design the kitchen at La Serre. I designed the cooking suite and the bespoke island for food preparation. You have to create the right flow to ensure that you meet your goals for productivity and quality," he adds. The kitchen at La Serre features a charcoal and wood-burning oven, a tempura section, and a pasta section with an induction hob to get water boiling fast and maintain the right temperature. One of the best-selling dishes, burrata, has its own section, though this is currently a makeshift production area with a trolley. The burrata section shows that even the best-designed kitchens need to have their layout altered because no one can fully anticipate what customers will choose. Facilities need to be flexible enough to adapt. Furthermore, the design of the kitchen is only as good as the people who use it, so Ani prioritized the matching of the right layout and equipment with the right talent. "I've been through a lot of kitchens and I know that you always have to tweak the design to respond to the demand. I also know that chefs need to be involved. Once the kitchen is in place it is all about the team. You can't do anything on your own. I've been blessed to work with great people, and everyone who works here makes a difference," he says.

"You have to enjoy cooking. To be a chef is about giving pleasure to someone else"



Rosinox developed 3D drawings of the cooking suite to allow chef Izu to have a real view on the kitchen