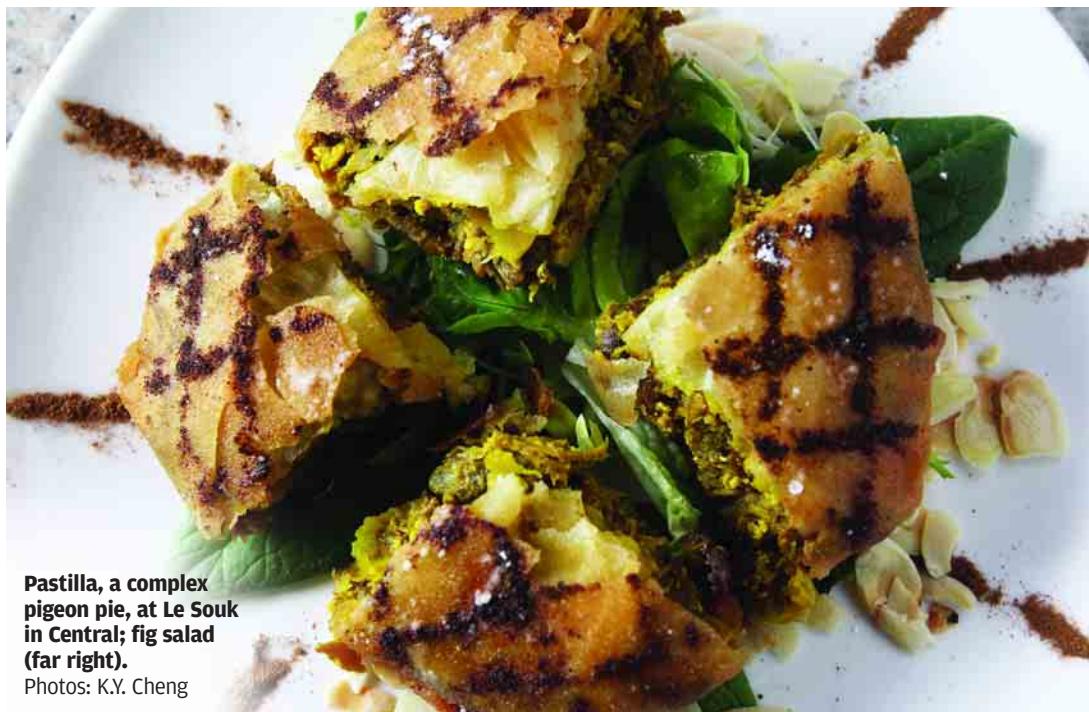


INGREDIENTS MIDDLE EASTERN SPICES

Secrets of the sultans



Pastilla, a complex pigeon pie, at Le Souk in Central; fig salad (far right).

Photos: K.Y. Cheng



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The former spice trading route from China through the Middle East and North Africa to Europe left an indelible mark on the countries through which it passed.

Spices were assimilated with indigenous varieties resulting in piquant, aromatic cuisines.

"Spices are the foundation of Middle Eastern cuisine and have been used for centuries, giving dishes their distinctive flavours. They are crucial in the region's cookery. Remaining close to such spices in our dishes is essential," says Dody Wakim, owner and managing director of restaurants Le Souk and Sahara.

Despite the wide political and geographical differences, culinary authorities such as Claudia Roden treat the Middle East and North Africa as a whole. Roden's *A New Book of Middle Eastern Food*

contains recipes from Iran to Morocco and Turkey to Yemen, as does Greg Malouf's *New Middle Eastern Food*.

"Different areas use different spices, depending on where they lay on the spice route, with native spices tending to feature prominently in the local cuisine. For example, in Lebanon and Syria, they use a lot of sumac," says Malouf, an Australian chef of Lebanese descent and author of six Middle Eastern cookbooks.

Sumac is made from the dried and ground berries of the sumac tree and its culinary use now extends beyond its origins. It was used instead of lemon before the fruit became widely available, and has a distinctly sour citrus taste. It gives a bitter or sour tang to a dish, and adds colour when it's sprinkled on grilled fish, salad, kebabs and hummus. It is a key ingredient in some *fattoush* (toasted bread salad) recipes, and indispensable in *kibbeh* (stuffed meat dumplings),

musakhan chicken (Palestinian roast chicken) and pilaf. It is also one of three key ingredients in the popular condiment and seasoning mix *za'atar*, the others being thyme and toasted sesame seeds.

"The first time I remember seeing sumac was in a market in Izmit, Turkey," says Middle Eastern food fan Matthew Stender. "The heavy smell of spices floated in the air and I was mesmerised by the beautiful spread of colours. The deep reddish brown of the sumac looked elegant in the myriad seasonings."

While individual spices play an important role, spice mixtures are also integral. The undisputed king is the complex *ras el hanout* from Morocco, which is wrapped in mystery as the exact recipe and ingredients used remain a secret closely guarded by spice traders and chefs. It is said to contain up to 100 ingredients, but the majority of opinion puts it in the region of 20.

Olive restaurant in SoHo, which

has a menu created by Malouf, makes its own 13-ingredient *ras el hanout* ("head of the shop" in Arabic). "Moroccan spice blends can be quite elaborate, containing touches of paprika, cardamom, cassia, nutmeg and clove. There is a real sense of wizardry and mystique behind some of the recipes we've come across," says Olive's executive chef, Eric Hendry.

The mix is used in many dishes, including the traditional tagine and *pastilla* (an elaborate pie, usually pigeon). It is often used with meats and game, stirred through couscous or added to salads and soups.

"We do a take on French steamed mussels, but put an exotic twist into the dish with golden *ras el hanout*," Hendry says.

Wakim prefers to buy his premixed. He is also not afraid to bend the rules. "Because the spice mixes are so distinctive, you can create a new dish that still holds true to its cultural roots. An example is our Moroccan paella, inspired by

FIG HEAVEN

Le Souk's fig salad

Serves 2

**2 fresh figs, cut in half
7 grams butter
14 grams honey
A dash of black pepper
A squeeze of lemon juice
150 grams goat's cheese (crumbled)
Green leaves**

Dressing

**15ml balsamic vinegar
7 grams mustard
7 grams salt
7 grams black pepper
A squeeze of lemon juice
A splash of orange juice**

- Put the butter, honey, black pepper and lemon into a frying pan over a low heat and cook for one minute.
- Add the figs and cook for a minute longer.
- On a large plate, place mixed green leaves of your choice.
- Put the cooked figs on top of the leaves and pour the sauce on top of the figs and leaves.
- Spread goat's cheese over the top and finish with the dressing.

Spanish paella, to which we have added *ras el hanout*."

Playing a prominent secondary role to spice is honey, which has been used in savoury dishes in the Middle East for eons. "Honey [and fruit, and sweet spices like cinnamon] adds depth and warmth. It also helps to balance richness and heat. Persian *khoresht* dishes, which influenced the development of the North African tagine, use honey or molasses and fresh or dried fruits to balance the rich flavour of the meat, usually lamb," says Malouf.

Today, it is often found in lamb and chicken dishes, and a range of tagines in combination with fresh or dried fruit (figs, apricot) and its culinary partner, cinnamon.

Stender says: "The sweet richness that only honey can provide perfectly balances the robust and succulent flavours in Middle Eastern cooking. I personally enjoy lamb, slow-cooked with thyme and honey and served on rice or with flat bread – a dish like a Turkish kebab."



The event showcased 114 wines from 68 countries. Photo: Nora Tam

EVENT RENDEZVOUS WITH FINE WINE

Tippled pink by the end of the night

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Since last week, visitors to Paris have been able to sample 110 wines by the glass at brasserie Les 110 de Taillevent, sister restaurant to the famed two-Michelin-star Taillevent.

The two restaurants have an owner in common with Bordeaux winery Chateau Phelan Segur, which was represented at Monday's *South China Morning Post*-organised Rendezvous with Fine Wine. That event showcased 114 wines from 68

wineries, including four that had been awarded 100 points by either Robert Parker or James Suckling.

While most were from the Bordeaux en primeur of 2009, there were also wines from other French regions, Italy and Chile.

Wine lover and financial adviser Melanie Nutbeam was drawn to the Domain Lebrun Pouilly Fumé 2010.

"As a New Zealander who has drunk lots of sauvignon blanc, I love the refreshing flavours," she says. "It was interesting to try a French sauvignon and compare its complexity and balance. It compared extremely well."

Nutbeam, who has studied wine to an advanced level with the Wine & Spirit Education Trust (WSET), was also a fan of the Chateau Rayne Vigneau Sauternes, describing it as "full, long and very fresh".

However, most of the attendees were there for the reds.

Aymeric de Gironde of Chateau Pichon-Longueville describes the

2009s as "already soft, very structured". A wine this young could be tight, but according to Gironde, this vintage is "very lush and round. In 2009 it was not very hard to make a good wine." He attributes the quality to the freshness of the fruit.

Gironde says one of the rare features of 2009 was being as good for white wine as for reds.

Tan Su-ming, a financial adviser who has been interested in wine for about two years and has been taking

WSET courses, initially liked the Pavie from St-Emilion in Bordeaux. She says it is "very elegant and classic, very balanced".

Later on in the evening, Tan had switched to the Smith Haut Lafitte Rouge, one of Parker's 100-pointers. There was also a large queue for Le Miccine winery from Tuscany. The winemaker is Paula Papini Cook, a Canadian of Scots-Italian heritage who fell in love with Italy as a teenager and moved back there to make wine, obtaining a double master's degree in viticulture and oenology en route. Her Chianti Classico Riserva 2008 was particularly impressive – the 100 per cent sangiovese wine is aged in 350-litre French oak barrels that give it soft tannins with subtle wood.

At the next table, Diego Garay explains that the Sena Winery in Chile is at the right elevation and distance from the ocean to produce classic Bordeaux blend grapes. The wine has Chile's highest Parker

rating at 95 and, according to Garay, an ageing potential of 10 to 15 years. With this wine, the Bordeaux blend includes cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, malbec and petit verdot, but also carménère, a grape not used in Bordeaux for 100 years.

That changed last year when Henri Lurton of Chateau Brane-Cantenac planted carménère vines on a small plot of prime land. Lurton says that the experiment was to see if it was possible to overcome the problem of ripening the grapes, a process that takes longer with carménère than with other types. "If they are not ripe, they are very green with lots of herbal aromas." The small crop was successful enough to end up as less than 1 per cent of the blend used in the 2011 vintage.

Lurton's 2009 second range wine, Baron de Brane, was complex and spicy with lots of fruit and flowers on the nose. He calls his top range Brane Cantenac easy to understand, which is unusual for a great vintage.