

EGYPT HOSPITALITY

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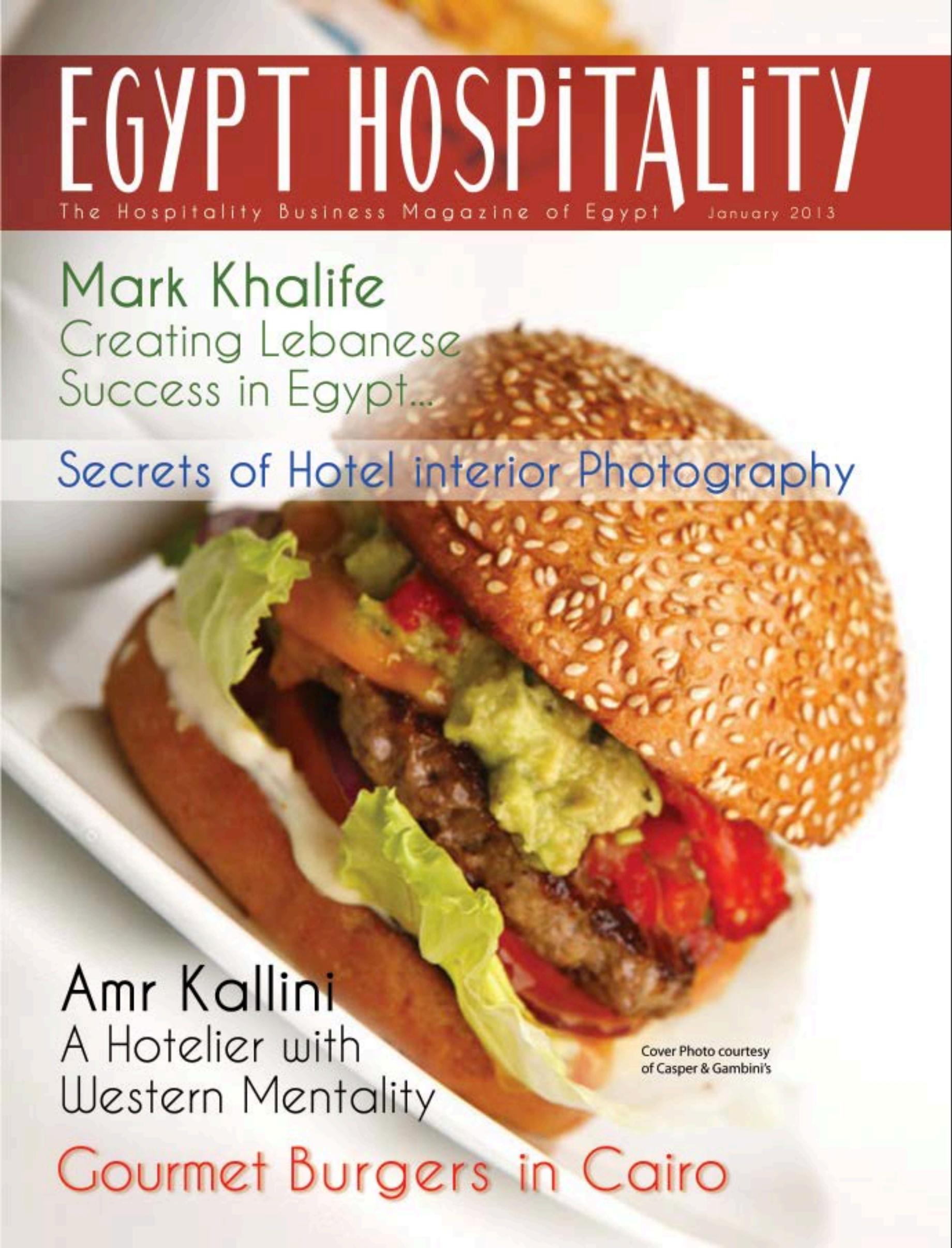
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THE NEVER-ENDING BOOM OF ASIAN FOOD

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The Asian food trend has proven consistent over the years in most regions of the world. Although this type of cuisine usually refers to typical dishes from South East Asia, it actually encompasses very different cooking traditions from China, India, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, Polynesia, Korea, Singapore and even Hawaii. What they all have in common are the main local ingredients, such as spices or exotic fruits.

From China to the world

We started discovering Asian dishes thanks to Chinese merchants traveling to the Americas, especially California. The signature recipes involved meat and fish, sweetened with fruit and sugar sauces. The “Chinese” fortune cookie and the “Japanese” California roll were then invented. As well as the dishes, the distinctive decor helped create an identity. The mix of traditional Chinese interiors and Westernized architecture became a signature style as well. Chains, such as Trader’s Vic (created in 1932 in California) and Tikki Bars started expanding outside the United States. The boom of ‘world food’ at the end of the 1980’s gave a little help to the Asian trend, spreading it all over the globe. With this worldwide success, different categories of restaurants emerged and, from mid-range, the concepts started developing with a high-end and trendy touch like the Buddha Bar.

Adapting to local taste

Consumers gradually started becoming familiar with Asian flavors and tastes, and local developers in Western countries started developing ‘fusion’ menus, which mixed various cooking techniques and ingredients in the same plate. Today Asian cuisine has fully gained world recognition, thanks to famed chefs such as Jean-Georges Vongerichten and his restaurants in Paris and New York namely, Spice Market and Jean-Georges, in which he mixes Asian spices with traditional French dishes. Nobu of famous chef Nobu Matsuhisa is another example of fusion cuisine mixing Asian and Peruvian recipes.

The boom of sushi places in the region

In the rest of the region, where Asian cuisine has arrived a bit earlier than in Egypt, the trend has always been influenced by





"8" at Four Seasons Nile Plaza

Western markets. The current fashion of 'minimalism' in restaurants explains the success of sushi places, which spread massively in the GCC. This trend encouraged the development of a signature interior design, with a sushi trail. Yabani in Beirut is also known for its original and daring setting. This craze for sushi places tends to overshadow other types of Asian restaurants, which are seen as more typical when not outdated. Some specific dishes such as the Chinese steam cooked dim sum or the noodles have their aficionados though, and help trigger the revival of other Asian recipes. Some dishes even remind customers of Middle Eastern mezzes, with the food served in cups along with plates and saucers to encourage sharing. The Thai Kitchen in Dubai's Park Hyatt Hotel is one of the examples, with its three open kitchens around which you can sit. Dubai and Beirut are currently the cities with the widest choice of Asian restaurants. This development was supported by the large Asian expatriate communities in Dubai, who provided skilled staff.

Egypt: a recent trend

In Egypt the trend picked up more recently, about ten years ago when the country opened up to foreign cuisines. Many local and international investors saw the opportunities of this vast market, composed mostly of young people with a thirst for novelty. Besides more and more Egyptians travel the world now, and come back with an increased interest and knowledge in non-Arab types of food. Cairo has thus become the country's center for international cuisine. With more culinary informed clients, the Cairo restaurant market now welcomes

hip restaurants and clubs with a foreign touch. Chef Chinn is to be credited for a large part of the Asian food blooming popularity in Cairo. Half Egyptian, half Chinese-American, he has made a name for himself by developing a menu of world cuisine with Asian influences. He has since opened namesake restaurants Hanoi and Saigon, where locals rather see him as a 'Westerner'. In Cairo many restaurants have opened across town, such as the Asian fusion themed Saigon restaurant at The Fairmont Nile City, and the new Cantonese Chinese restaurant "8" at the Four Seasons Nile Plaza and Lai Thai at Four Seasons First Residence. Downtown you can also find the Bird Cage at Semiramis Intercontinental which serves Thai food. Nearby the now popular Chop Chop serves various Asian dishes from sushi, to dim sum and noodles. In Zamalek the latest hip place is Mr Wok, run by Egyptian chef Wesam Masoud.

Clients can create their own dish, by choosing a carb (rice, egg or noodles), a protein (duck, chicken), a sauce and extras such as onions or corn.

The Asian fast-food genre has also taken on the trend, opening branches in the capital and the main regions, with Panda House Express. And, like in every city where there is an Asian community, restaurants specifically for migrants have opened up. Most are located in the Maadi area, home to the expatriate Asian community. One of the most popular is China Winds, where customers can experience typical Chinese dishes that haven't undergone 'Westernization', such as pickled chicken feet, lily bulb soup or braised camels' hooves. There is another one near Al-Azhar mosque: the Uyghurs where the second largest population of Chinese Muslims live in Cairo. For years, young religious Uyghur students have come to study at the Islamic university. And the place is probably one of the most typical of the capital city, as the outside sign is in Chinese and the menu does not offer an Arabic translation. For local clients, the owner has created photo albums with the pictures of the dishes, so they can point at what they want to order. Now that the trend of Asian cuisine is well settled in Egypt and the region, the new challenge is to give menus a more distinctive touch, by differentiating Thai from sushi, dim sum from curry. All these traditional recipes are still mixed in the minds of local customers, who broadly refer to them as 'Asian', when in Western markets their specificities have already been recognized for a while.



"8" at Four Seasons Nile Plaza