

v hands were shaking as I tried to peel the skin off my tomato and make it into a perfect rose as demonstrated by our dada (traditional Moroccan chef), the lovely Amina.

I was the least kitchen-savvy at our cooking school at La Maison Arabe, a five-star hotel in the heart of the Marrakech medina – and it showed. Aware of my nervousness, Amina was by my side whenever I needed help - which was often. The only time I was happy to go it alone was when we were able to eat the lunch we'd prepared.

Amina guided us through the making of three traditional Moroccan dishes in the hotel's impressive 10-station kitchen school. On the menu was a delicious chicken tagine, a zaalouk salad of roasted aubergines and tomatoes, and a taktouka salad of roasted green peppers, tomatoes and spices.

Each student had a television screen at their work station so they could watch the cooking techniques close-up, but I personally preferred our dada's hands-on help.

While supervising her students, Amina also whipped up a Moroccan bread and made an almond pastilla (a traditional Moroccan pie made with delicate layers of filo pastry) for dessert.

Once our dishes were ready and garnished to the dada's approval, we received official "Certificates of Excellence". I felt a fraud. Mine should have read "Certificate of Attendance", or some such euphemism.

We then moved to a private dining room beside a lovely courtyard where our wine waiter, Hamid, served excellent chardonnay, syrah and rosé from vinevards near Casablanca and Meknes, to complement our delicious lunch.

Hamid, like all those we met on our eight-day Ancient Kingdoms tour of Morocco, was charming, welcoming and hospitable. Kiwis have much to learn from this ancient society where all visitors are treated like royalty.

Cooking workshops manager and professor of English, Mohammed Nahir gave us an interesting talk about the history of Moroccan cuisine, including the importance of spices and the origins of pastilla, the pie Amina made for our dessert. We discovered it was a special occasion dish brought to Morocco by the Moors from Spain in the 16th century.

He also described the elaborate two-hour process involved in making couscous, a staple Moroccan food. Any cook found to be using instant couscous would be jailed, Mohammed said, winking.

Many of my favourite flavours - figs, dates, garlic, olives and cumin to name a few – feature prominently in Moroccan cuisine and I decided the dishes Amina had taught us could form the basis of my fledgling recipe portfolio. My husband, who does most of the cooking at home, would be impressed.

After lunch, we were shown around La Maison Arabe which has an illustrious past. In the 1940s, its restaurant was the first to open to foreigners, entertaining the likes of Sir

Winston Churchill and Jackie Kennedy, After extensive renovations, the establishment debuted in 1998 as the first riad hotel in Marrakech. Many riads - traditional Moroccan houses that feature an interior garden – are used as hotels, and there are now more than 900 in the city.

Lavishly decorated, La Maison Arabe has two restaurants, a wellness spa, an off-site country club and 26 sumptuous rooms opening onto courtyards with outside lounge areas and an exquisite swimming pool. The soft lighting in the passageways caught my eye. If the fittings had not been firmly attached, I would have smuggled a few into my suitcase. I was also tempted to kidnap Amina and take her home to run Moroccan cooking schools in Gisborne. She would be a hit with my foodie friends.



Insider's guide to Marrakech..

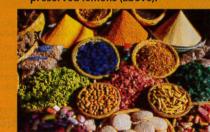
GETTING THERE: Fly Emirates, emirates.com, from Auckland to Casablanca BEST TOUR: The Innovative

Travel Company, innovative travel.co.nz, is a New Zealand-based travel company, specialising in group and private tours to DON'T MISS: Marrakech's

vibrant Djemaa el-Fnaa Square, a UNESCO World Heritage site. BEST BARGAINS: Handbags shoes, carpets, ceramics at the souks.



Chef Amina (top left) talked us through the dishes we made including a tagine which included one of Justine's favourite flavours





THE PERFECT PLACE TO RELAX

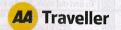
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