

Fast Foodies: How Salt Helped Spark The U.A.E.'s Food Truck Craze

Amal Al Marri and Deem Albassam were among the first to bring food trucks to Dubai, turning Salt into a fixture in the U.A.E.'s culinary scene—thanks in no small part to their mastery of social media.

These days, you don't have to go far to find a food truck in the U.A.E. They dot Dubai's waterfront and feature prominently on major thoroughfares, cooking up everything from Indian street food to gourmet tacos. There's even a floating burger boat plying Dubai's waterfront, and a reality web series covering local food trucks that airs on YouTube.

Still, the increasing number of restaurants on wheels creates a bit of a traffic jam. "Everyone's copying everyone," says Amal Al Marri. She's the 27-year-old co-founder of Salt, one of the U.A.E.'s original food trucks.

Dishing up gourmet sliders, fries and shakes out of a converted Airstream trailer since 2014, Salt is a fixture at Dubai's Kite Beach, one of the Emirate's popular seafronts. It has attracted diners including members of Dubai's royal family, regional celebrities, tourists and locals alike. That popularity allowed Al Marri and her 31-year-old cofounder Deem Albassam to open seven additional Salt locations across the U.A.E. Last year, they expanded into Saudi Arabia with a location in Khobar, and they added another in Riyadh in early 2018.

It wasn't always like this. When they first parked Salt's trailer at Kite Beach almost four years ago, food trucks were largely unheard of in the U.A.E. They struggled to get approval from the Dubai Municipality, which didn't have firmly established procedures for licensing a food truck, and was concerned about safety and hygiene issues.

After six months of delays, the frustrated pair took a risk, and decided to roll out their food truck without a license. They had already built up interest in Salt with an innovative social media marketing campaign, and felt they would lose momentum and interest if they waited longer.

Without revealing it was a food truck, they had teased Salt's arrival on Instagram. They sent people salt shakers, and asked them to post pictures with the hashtag #findsalt. The strategy worked. "Everybody was waiting for Salt," says Al Marri. "People wanted to know what Salt was." So, they fired up the grills.

About 60 people ate at Salt the first day. The municipality didn't shut them down, so they towed the trailer to different locations around Dubai, tasking followers to #findsalt on social media. A month later, Salt finally got a license, and they parked at Kite Beach permanently.

While food trucks have long been popular in countries such as the U.S., U.K. and Australia, they only recently gained prominence in the GCC. The origins of the trend date at least ten years ago, when the ice cream truck Desert Chill began visiting festivals and events in the U.A.E. A handful of entrepreneurs and restaurant chains followed with additional food

trucks, but it wasn't until the last three years that momentum really picked up.

A big addition to the industry came in 2016, when Meraas, a Dubai conglomerate, created Last Exit, a flashy roadside park featuring a variety of culinary trucks. It's since created three more food truck parks around the U.A.E. If that weren't enough, foodies can indulge their cravings at festivals organized by TruckersDXB. "[Food trucks] have become a permanent feature in the U.A.E. food retailing space," says Mahboob Murshed, managing director of Dubai's Alpen Capital, an investment banking advisory firm producing coverage on the regional food industry.

Al Marri sees food trucks and popup eateries becoming more common because they allow restaurateurs to test concepts and gauge demand before investing completely in an idea. "You feel it's less risk; it's experimental," she says. "It's very difficult to open a full-fledged restaurant." Still, operating a food truck isn't easy either. Last year, Moti Roti, a well-known Pakistani food truck that had been around in Dubai since 2012, shut down. Its founder Tahir Shah found it difficult to create a profitable business with a food truck, thanks to regulations.

At the beginning of 2017, Dubai revealed formal regulations for food trucks, which limit the places and events they can operate. That forced Moti Roti to compete more intensely with other food trucks. Regulations also prevent trucks from cooking raw foods, forcing Moti Roti to work with a restaurant or commercial catering kitchen to handle meal prep, creating higher overhead costs. "We are still early in the game and it will take time for regulation to develop to allow roaming trucks, which can sell daily at will," says Shah.

Summer months are also tough for business, as scorching temperatures force people indoors. Al Marri concedes the summer is a struggle, but claims Salt makes up for it during the winter months.

Salt still remains by far the most popular food truck based on its social media followers. It has 160,000 followers on Instagram. By comparison, Last Exit has 38,000 Instagram followers, while Calle Tacos and Gobai Food Truck have less than 3,000.

Meanwhile, Al Marri and Albassam have smartly diversified. In addition to Salt, their Independent Food Company operates Parker's, a cafe offering sandwiches, finger foods and desserts, with two locations in the U.A.E. and one in Saudi Arabia. They also have a chain of coffee shops, called Grind, and they run Switch, a casual dining restaurant Albassam ran in Dubai prior to teaming up with Al Marri.

Their company employs 600 people, and they've been profitable since 2015, says Al Marri. They're cooking up two new concepts currently, including a pastry shop they plan to launch around May 2018.

Al Marri believes one reason Salt remains successful is that she and Albassam maintain very hands-on roles. They haven't hired managers to oversee their restaurants. As creative director, Al Marri handles marketing, branding and design, while Albassam oversees food development and operations. A Forbes Middle East 30 under 30 nominee, Al Marri never planned to be in the food business. "I got trapped," she says.

Born and raised in the U.A.E., she studied interior design at Zayed University. "I'm very picky when I go into a space," says Al Marri. "I like to reimagine it." In 2011, a friend introduced her to Albassam. A native of Saudi Arabia, Albassam opened Switch in 2009,

after earning a degree in marketing from the American University in Dubai.

The two hit it off, starting an events planning company with three friends. “We clicked,” says Al Marri. They hatched the idea for Salt, after wondering if a food truck could help with event marketing. They were also bored by the U.A.E.’s culinary scene. “Everybody is looking for something that is mysterious and new,” says Al Marri. “They want an experience.”

Nostalgia was another inspiration. Al Marri remembers a different city than the gleaming metropolis of today. “We used to go to the park, we used to go to the beaches,” she says. Now, going to air-conditioned malls and cinemas have replaced those pastimes. She felt a sense of simplicity was lost. Parker’s, their second venture, is a pop-up in Dubai’s Al Khazan Park. She and Albassam self-funded their operations.

With Parker’s, they also relied on social media to stir up anticipation. They staged a citywide scavenger hunt, hiding keys in parks and messaging clues on social media. Only people who found a key could get into the restaurant. Al Marri says they get franchise requests for Salt, and could expand faster, but they’re picky. “Any concept we launch, it has a story behind it,” she says. “It’s not just a restaurant.”

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