

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Celebrity Saudi chef shares cultural, culinary traditions at Baked Alaska

Review and photos by
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Through the lenses of food and culture, Badr Zuhair Fayeze — a world-renowned chef who put on a cooking demonstration at Baked Alaska Restaurant last month — compared the United States to Saudi Arabia, his home country.

“There’s not a lot of difference between us,” Fayeze said. “We all eat and grieve and bleed the same way. We’re all human.”

Fayeze’s presentation — held in the restaurant’s glistening, industrially chic Annex, which is equipped with an open kitchen — was part of the Astoria restaurant’s ongoing Chef Outta Water series.

“Saudi (Arabia) is a huge melting pot of different cultures, from traders to merchants to immigrants,” he continued, speaking to a standing audience and Facebook Live broadcast.

“We have a lot of influences from a lot of places, especially from India and Pakistan and Indonesia, and the eastern parts of Russia. The eastern parts of Russia are Muslim and come (to Saudi Arabia) for pilgrimage ... Lebanon, Syria, Egypt are neighbors. All of these countries brought their food with them, and it became part of ours.”

Sound familiar?

Such exploration and exchange of culinary traditions between the North Coast and the larger world is Chef Outta Water’s goal.

“The point of these events is to do outside-the-box things that we can’t generally get away with in our regular restaurant,” said Chris Holen, Baked Alaska’s executive chef and co-owner. “We want you to go on these adventures with us, get out of your comfort zone.”

The series will continue intermittently throughout the year, with each installment bringing a special



Celebrity Chef Badr Zuhair Fayeze, left, and Chef Chris Holen, co-owner of Baked Alaska Restaurant.

focus. On the docket are programs revolving around cider, foraging, a pair of Australian chefs and more.

Tickets to those events run \$150 per person, or \$125 for members of the Dining Club. Chef Fayeze’s event, however, was free, sponsored by the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture.

As a celebrity chef — he was a featured judge on “MasterChef Arabia” — Fayeze is a bit of rarity in his native land.

While he found ease and interest in the kitchen at a young age, Fayeze said the culinary arts are viewed as something of a “second class” profession in Saudi Arabia, one usually reserved for immigrants. As such, chef Fayeze — who attended culinary school in France, Austria and Asia — was anxious to prove to his parents his chosen career path was noble and worthwhile.

“My first mission: Don’t fail,” Fayeze said. “Second mission: Raise the standards of Saudi cuisine.”

“Saudi (Arabia) is a very young country,” he explained. “We get married pretty young. Both parents work and families eat out a lot,

always in a rush, eating fast food ... We’re up there with the U.S. in obesity and diabetes and all these illnesses that can easily be avoided if you just eat properly.”

“If you want change, you have to address the masses,” he added, “not the elite.”

Besides his restaurants, Fayeze is doing that by baking bread, a staple of the country’s diet that has been an afterthought of relatively poor quality.

“We are having really strong movements (in Saudi Arabia) for organic and locally grown produce,” Fayeze continued. “Is it enough? Not even close. But it’s nice to see this. It’s nice to see that people are being health-conscious, and that people are trying to find a good-quality tomato.”

Fayeze shared these stories rather nonchalantly while preparing the meal that would feed the thirty-plus audience members. The dishes were loosely based on Saudi cuisine, many incorporating the spices Fayeze said constitute Saudi Arabia’s “major five”: cardamom, cloves, cinnamon, cumin and coriander. As much as his home country, though, chef Fayeze’s meal reflected his polyglot influence.



Clockwise from top: lavender couscous, vanilla butternut squash ravioli, lingcod and rice.

Seasoning by eye and to taste rather than with measuring cups, Fayeze created four components: white basmati rice, imbued with tangy fish stock, that turned brown; a couscous with lavender; a savory butternut squash ravioli boasting vanilla; and a lingcod with an acidic, tahini-based sauce.

Fayeze shared the inspiration behind each component and gave a basic outline of preparation. As smells emerged from the open kitchen, he took questions.

At one point, Fayeze was asked what trends he sees emerging around the world, and the future of food.

“Going back to basics is big,” he said. “The Italians have always done it. They love their food. Don’t touch their food! I don’t blame them. So is it for the French and a lot of Europe.”

The finished plates, with the rice, couscous, ravioli and fish were passed out to the audience. While complex — thanks to the “major five” spices and many more — the meal was humble and elemental, elevated by the wisdom of subtle, expert seasoning. These

were hearty, healthful, whole foods — save perhaps for the buttery ravioli, whose curry and vanilla perfume was vexingly intriguing.

Speaking on global trends, Fayeze said, “What I’ve seen is a whole slowing down.”

“And you need to slow down, because work will never end ... I got to this realization a year-and-a-half ago. I got in an accident and I was out of service for two months, and the world still turned and people worked and nothing exploded...”

“And then I realized: I’m going to stop this 20-hours-a-day work thing and really slow down and cook more for my family, spend more time with my kids. And people can wait. Because, before you know it, your kids are getting married and having grandkids, and life will just pass you by. And that’s not what we’re here for.”

It was just the kind of meal he made us that evening. And while the flavors all had histories and stories to tell, they were but an entry, a reason for us all to gather, to share, to learn, to be nourished, and to recognize our common ground.