

## A CHEF OF HONOUR

Back home I was always a fan of a very famous Australian rock band, Crowded House. These guys are pretty much Australian rock royalty and just about every Aussie knows the tunes to a few of their songs. One of their tracks is about the city of Melbourne, the 'four-seasons-in-one-day' city. If you've ever been there you'll truly understand how well Melbourne lives up to this reputation, as on any given day you can leave for work in freezing near-Arctic temperatures, break for lunch to find clear skies and a hot sweltering sun, and finally be riding the bus home in the pouring rain of a revenging storm. That's Australia though; it's a country of geographic and climatic extremes, droughts one minute and floods the next.





The problem with extremes is that it's impossible to be prepared for everything. So you're thinking, 'OK, but the weather in Marrakech is much more stable. I can be pretty sure that whatever clothes I leave with in the morning are going to be suitable for the whole day'. True. Marrakech certainly doesn't have the volatile environment of Melbourne, climatically speaking, but socially – now that's another kettle of fish!

On one hot summer morning we were presented with a dilemma. We had already set off to spend the day capturing images in and around the souk. Now everyone knows you don't dress up for the souk, those hardened and experienced salesmen can smell money from a mile away, and when I mean smell money, they could probably even identify what scent of expensive perfume you're wearing. The problem was that our architect friend, Moulay Said, had organised for us to photograph and interview Ludovic Gomiero, the chef from the Selman, Marrakech's newest opulent hotel. Everyone knows you don't turn up to a place like the Selman looking as if you've just spent the last eight hours in 40-degree heat haggling over \$3 in four languages!



The Selman is the creation of young Moroccan brother and sister duo Abdeslam and Saida of the Bennani Smires family (in a country of royalty where surnames mean something, this one is certainly one of utmost importance). Their passion for luxury and for purebred Arabian horses (groomed Arabian horses were even on display in purpose-built gardens throughout the grounds) was immediately obvious. Greeted as if we were guests of honour we were guided through the lavish facilities of the hotel to offer before being introduced to their French, Michelin-trained executive chef, Ludovic Gomiero.

Ludovic was a tall, bald, smiling Frenchman. He happily talked to us at length about his training with Michelin-starred chef Michel Bras, his experiences working around the world and his passion for combining one of the world's most sophisticated cuisines with one of the world's most exotic. Ludovic talked of how he constantly challenges his team with his innovative techniques and of how his chefs and the food of Morocco are constantly forcing him to re-evaluate his own approach to cooking. In a moment of creative genius, I suggested it would be great to get a photograph of him on horseback. Ludovic however didn't seem to share my vision, 'unfortunately the horses have been put away for the night', he replied.



Ludovic led us in a cracking pace back to his kitchen leaving no chance for us to request the horses be brought back out. Feeling more at ease back in the comforts of his new state-of-the-art kitchen, like a proud father he introduced us to his team, an all-Moroccan collection of male and female faces who sprung into action to begin preparing the spiny lobster tagine that we had requested to photograph. It was all hands on deck – I'd never seen so many chefs huddled around one pot – testing, tasting and making sure the lobster was cooked to absolute precision. As Ludovic explained, many of the chefs in his kitchen had no formal training, 'they bring with them their knowledge and passion for Moroccan cuisine, that's all they need, and I share with them new ideas and methods so they can work in a commercial kitchen'.

As we move to the impressively decorated dining area to take photos and taste Ludovic's delicate combination of rich and complex flavours, a very striking woman strides down the length of the elaborate hallways before introducing herself and calmly sitting down with us to learn more about what we are doing. It turns out her name was Madame Najat Bennani Smires, the mother of the two owners – lucky I'd packed a smart shirt.



## BACHELOR'S STEW

We'd spent a few mad days in Marrakech with chef Fatna from the Riad Dar Les Cigognes - cooking, photographing and eating meals. We were already riding high, so when we heard our next recipe - one of the great traditional Moroccan dishes called the tangia - was to be cooked down the road in the hammam (public bath house) we couldn't wait for what was in store. I could already see it: Sophia, me and our full-bodied guide Fatna, all in our birthday suits, exploring the origins of traditional Moroccan cuisine.

Fatna sat at a low table with her tangia pot (the same word refers to the meat dish) which looked like a Grecian urn with a wide belly, narrow neck and handles on both sides. A gentle smile surfaced as she stuffed it full of a variety of cuts of lamb, casually sprinkling pinches of saffron, cumin, sea salt and pepper, a tonne of garlic, glugs of argan oil and topping it off with a whole preserved lemon. She wrapped the top of the pot in baking paper and announced in Arabic that it was time to head off down the road for our steamy lunch. I grabbed my camera and towel.

As I stood clutching my towel at what looked more like the suspect back door of the hammam I began to wonder how this was all going to play out. At that moment Fatna knocked and the door was swung open by a slim, smiling man named Mohammed who ushered us down some old crumbling stairs to a dark, dirty room coated in man-sweat and charcoal... hmmm. Not really the hedonistic vision of bountiful food, splashing water and overflowing bath foam I had envisioned. But then again, we were in Morocco and not ancient Athens.

Mohammed took the tangia from Fatna and buried it in a pile of hot ashes next to a fire that was burning in the corner of the room then told us to come back at the end of the day. What? That was it?



Walking back to our riad in a state of disappointment mixed with mild relief, Fatna explained to me that this was really one-pot cooking at its best. They called it 'bachelor's stew' as it was popular with single hardworking men as they would go to the markets in the morning, have their tangia filled with the ingredients of their choice and drop it under the hammam where the hot fires heated the baths directly overhead. At the end of the day they would return to the hammam to wash and relax before picking up their perfectly cooked tangia and heading home for a delicious meal for one.

So the day didn't end in the steamy way I had predicted but single lads - heed this advice: if you cook this on your next date, I guarantee you won't be cooking for one for too much longer!

1.8kg/4lb lamb shoulder, cut into large sections  
Large pinch saffron threads  
Large pinch ground cumin  
8 cloves garlic, peeled, bruised  
1 preserved lemon, pulp discarded, rind rinsed and sliced  
¼ cup/60ml/2fl oz argan oil or vegetable oil  
Sea salt flakes and black pepper, to season

tangia

## slow-cooked beef stew

SERVES 8

Marrakech, founded in 1062 and known as the Ochre City, is the birthplace of one of Morocco's defining dishes, the tangia. While this ancient fortified city has become fashionable with glamorous tourists, the tangia still remains the choice of local unmarried working men, earning it the nickname of Bachelor's Stew. This dish is 'one-pot cooking' at its best.

Place all the ingredients tightly into a tangia pot. Season with salt and pepper. Cover the tangia opening with a piece of non-stick baking paper and secure around the rim with kitchen twine to tightly enclose. Pierce the paper a few times with a skewer, then cover the tangia with a tight-fitting lid.

Transfer the tangia to an open fire pit and surround the pot with coals and hot ashes. Cook for at least 8 hours or until the meat falls easily away from the bone. Thickly shred the meat and serve warm.

### VARIATION

You can cook the beef stew in a large covered pan in an oven preheated to 160°C/315°F for 4–6 hours or until the meat is very tender.

COLOUR OF MAROC

