

# To The Table MEA

6th – 8th September

Abu Dhabi

Photography: Richard Pereira

This year saw To The Table extend its series of international forums, dividing Europe and Middle East Africa into separate events for the first time. The inaugural To The Table MEA saw the region's senior decision makers, buyers and suppliers arrive in Abu Dhabi for a carefully curated three days of seminars, one-to-one meetings and high-level networking events.

Playing host this year was Jumeirah at Etihad Towers, the tallest hotel in the Emirati capital. With an array of in-house F&B venues and substantial conference and banqueting facilities, the venue was a stellar showcase of Jumeirah Group, which continues to be one of the region's most influential home-grown hotel brands.

An opening seminar featuring Stefan Breg, director of F&B EMEA for Starwood Hotels & Resorts, and Aidan Keane, founder and CEO of design agency Keane Brands, tackled the every-timely issue of innovation in restaurant design.

An animated session, the two industry heavyweights batted around notions of what innovation ultimately means in the region's F&B sector, exploring guest expectations and what it takes to create an imaginative but lasting design concept.

"When it comes to restaurant design, the region needs to start owning its own culture and creating platforms and concepts through which to showcase it," said Keane, speaking passionately on what he perceives to be the lack of local representation in the restaurant market. "Where are the cool Emirati or Omani venues? And I'm not talking about pastiche.

Where are the forward thinking restaurant design concepts? It's an idea that stands ready to be tapped."

Breg echoed the sentiment, noting that over half of the restaurants in Dubai's key dining districts are franchises. "Where is the unique design?" he questioned.

Later during the first fully programmed day, James Wierzelewski, corporate vice president of F&B operations for Rotana Hotel Management Corporation; Starwood's Stefan Breg; Naim Maadad, CEO of Gates Hospitality; and To The Table staple Jason Myers, CEO of Busaba Eathai, assembled on stage to debate whether home-grown or international brands make for the best restaurants in the MEA market.

Wierzelewski was quick to note that definitions of local are difficult to define in a region with such a substantial foreign-born population. "Local in the UAE, for example, is 80% expat. So we have to tailor our thinking when it comes to what we mean by home-grown and international. Maybe when it comes to hotels we need to be thinking about how to evolve existing models. All-day dining spaces need to be more like signature restaurants than mass-feeding areas," he said, citing Teatro at Dubai's Towers Rotana as an example of the concept in practice.

For Myers, independents continue to drive how 'seriously hotels take F&B', also suggesting that, "while hoteliers still need to think about rooms, a commitment to F&B increasingly lends credibility."

A sit down dinner at the ballroom of the nearby St. Regis



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1. Jumeirah at Etihad Towers, Abu Dhabi
2. Stefan Breg and Aidan Keane onstage
3. A chef prepares Scottish produce at the To The Table MEA closing cocktail party
4. A sommelier shows off the wine selection at Brasserie Angélique

provided an opportunity to further explore the hotel F&B offer of the city, with a fish-led menu featuring poached scallops, salmon timbale and lobster and crayfish cappuccino bisque.

Keen to further display the variety of restaurant options at the Jumeirah at Etihad Tower, the following day featured a chef demonstration from Brasserie Angélique's chef de cuisine Niels van Oers, with an introduction from hotel executive chef Oliver Jackson.

With the largest selection of fine wines in the city, Brasserie Angélique deals in classic French fare and remains one of Abu Dhabi's premier dining destinations.

Sponsored by Scottish Development International, the forum's farewell cocktail party was held at the hotel's 62nd floor bar, where an array of premium Scottish producers presented their products: from regional beers to seafood and cheeses.

Next year sees the launch of To The Table Europe, 25-27 April at the Ritz Carlton Penha Longa in Lisbon. The newly segmented events better positions To The Table to provide a truly regional opportunity for suppliers and buyers to engage, bringing the global roster of To The Table events to three, including Asia, with this year's event running 5-7 October at Grand Hyatt, Taipei.

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