

SPOILT FOR CHOICE



Visitors to Marrakech have long enjoyed elaborate seven-course feasts. But insider **Carinthia West**, who has a home there, reveals a new wave of lighter, fresher cooking in beautiful surroundings

WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I am off to Marrakech, a look of dreaminess enters their eyes. ‘Mmm,’ they say, often licking their lips, ‘lucky you... Moroccan food is some of the best in the world...’ I am lucky enough to own a house there, and they are right. Marrakech has long been at the crossroads of the great trading routes, and the cuisine of this pink, dusty, chaotic city reflects every influence, from Berber to African, Spain to the Sahara, where the great caravans brought sugar and spice. Marrakech benefits hugely from this confluence of ideas, and abundance of ingredients in everything from its luscious oranges to its luxuriant mint carried on the backs of donkeys, by traders who still descend from the mountains every day. Every Marrakshi feels the best food is in his home, but for the visitor, up until recently, the city was best known for its plethora of opulent medina Moroccan restaurants – places like Yacout, Le Tobsil, or Le Styliya – where seven courses often accompanied by rattling Glaoui musicians, and afterwards an over-full belly, was obligatory for the visitor. Things have changed, although all these excellent restaurants still exist, mainly for the tourist, the *cognoscenti* and ex-pats visiting or living in Marrakech prefer a new breed of restaurant, one where you are neither stuffed to the gills nor stuffed by the bill. Every day, a new restaurant opens, trendy, traditional with a twist, Japanese, Indian, Italian, even a Beatle-themed restaurant, and we Marrakshis are spoilt for choice. I often think, (shamelessly para-

phrasing Samuel Johnson), that if you are tired of Marrakech restaurants, you are probably tired of life. Following are six of the best.

KASBAH BAB OURIKA

Ourika Valley, + 212 (0) 524 42 02 48, www.babourika.com

Let’s start with the view. Slap in front are the snowcapped High Atlas mountains. The phrase ‘on a clear day you can see forever’ springs to mind. Just under an hour’s journey from Marrakech, out in the verdant Ourika Valley, Kasbah Bab Ourika is the brainchild of British owner Stevie Skinner, and his determination and tenacity to fulfill his vision of Moroccan Kasbah (which means castle) living. Perched on a hill, it is a 10-bedroom hotel (and I urge you to stay here for the full experience) but you may drive out for lunch or dinner by prior reservation. At the moment it is the best-kept secret of ex-pats (mostly Skinner’s many friends), but not for long as its fame is growing. During the annual Marrakech Film Festival, I took British actors Harriet Walter and Brian Cox to lunch there, and they revelled in dishes like warm crispy goats cheese in a light crisp pastry, or roast beetroot salad, all in keeping with the healthy ecological philosophy behind the property. Slow-cooked lamb, or coconut laksas, or grilled polenta with gorgonzola and stuffed mushrooms make you glad you took the drive out, as Kasbah Bab Ourika is the perfect antidote to the hurly-burly of



Clockwise from left: Kasbah Bab Ourika nestles in the Ourika Valley; sundown at Les Bis Jardin; a 'harem food plate' is served at Dar Les Cigognes. Facing page: open-air dining at Kasbah Bab Ourika

Marrakech. After lunch, you will be ready for a hike in the mountains, a swim in the pool or a snooze on a sun-lounger before a dusty car ride back. If we'd been feeling less contented, we might have intervened in the next door table's conversation, where some Australian VIPs were discussing what time the helicopter should land to take them back to Marrakech airport where their private plane was waiting. But we were enjoying the view too much. This is a place to savour.

LE BIS JARDIN DES ARTS

6-7 Rue Sakia El Hamra, Semailia, + 212 (0) 524 44 66 34

Although this is slightly off the main track of most Marrakech restaurants, being on the outskirts of Gueliz, the French 'new town', it is the most stylish new addition to the gastro scene, and gaining a well-deserved reputation amongst the town's VIPs. Designed with high ceilings, plenty of white walls, contemporary lighting, a long low fireplace and a high elegant bar, there is an instant impression of calm and serenity. I had some friends from out of town who are well versed in style (both of them work for Terence Conran) and they proclaimed the decor superb, which is high praise indeed from Londoners. We chose a table with high backed chairs rather than lounging on the warm brown suede banquettes, all the better to appreciate the food. And the food is sublime: *foie-gras de canard mi-cuit*, was served with

crusty toast and an amazing walnut and redcurrant sauce. *Filet de boeuf à l'echalote* literally melted in your mouth, and the desserts, such as *crousti-fondant au chocolat au lait et noisettes*, could have been served from the best restaurant in Paris. We staggered out into the scented air and were whisked into convenient taxis by attentive staff. Le Bis is an elegant new 'high-dining' addition to Marrakech. Take someone you want to impress...

DAR LES CIGOGNES

Berima 108, Medina, + 212 (0) 524 38 27 40

www.lescigognes.com

If you are lucky and call at the right time, you might just be able to book the one table per lunch or dinner reserved for non-hotel guests (you would be even luckier if you were actually staying at this delightful and well-run medina riad hotel). Its owner, Eben Lenderking, has in fact just written a brilliant cookbook, which, because of the amount of research he put in, took him seven years. His knowledge of food shows in his kitchen. My old London friend, Tom Aslanian, who works as the Food and Beverage Manager at Richard Branson's mountain hotel, Kasbah Tamadot, and knows a thing or two about food, had *b'stilla aux fruits de mer et vermicelles*, and raved about it. The menu changes daily and is not expensive. After a frenzied morning



Left: burnt orange dining at Casanova; above: a chef dishes out at Chez Pascal; right: the Beldi Country Club

in the souks, enjoy the fantastic food while sitting on the hotel terrace (the hotel is named for the local storks which colonise the nearby ruined El Badi Palace), sipping a glass of chilled Moroccan rosé, and you would not want to be anywhere else.

CHEZ PASCAL

96 rue Mohamed El Beqal, Gueliz, + 212 (0) 524 44 74 15
www.chezpascal-marrakech.com

Styling itself ‘*bistrot à Marrakech*’, Chez Pascal’s slightly louche atmosphere (‘a dodgy den’, as one diner put it) and Gallic-Moroccan charm, combined with well-cooked French food at reasonable prices (the *prix fixe* lunch of three courses at 120 dirham is a steal) has made it the restaurant of choice for both French and English ex-pats. There is much to look at visually; one wall is covered with once loved and well-played musical instruments; another with black-and-white evocative photographs of [the owner] Pascal’s previous life in Gabon; another with an array of Panama straw hats; but best of all, the tables are filled with gesticulating French and Arabic businessmen smoking up a storm, chicly coiffured and dressed French women straight from the pages of *Vogue* and hardly a tourist to be seen. If you’re lucky, Pascal will personally recommend a dish or a drink. The *soupe de poisson* is just as it should be, a *filet de sole au saffron* proved tender and delicious, and my guest’s *petit sale aux pentilles* made him think of cosy, wintry nights in France. This is authentic French cooking at its best, and a great place to take the love of your life, and should the relationship be coming to an end, deliver the last immortal line of *Casablanca* over lunch or dinner.

CASANOVA

221 avenue Yacoub el Mansour, Gueliz, + 212 (0) 524 42 37 35,
ristorantecasanova@menara.ma

Opened three years ago by two transplanted Venetians, Casanova is considered the only authentic Italian cooking in Marrakech (there are other Italian restaurants but they are mostly run by Moroccans). From the moment you break into the *grissini* and their *tapenade* you know you are in a place that cares about cooking. All the bread is baked, and the pasta made, on the premises – and it shows. Start with a delicious plate of assorted charcuterie including prosciutto, speck and mortadella, all

imported directly from Italy, or try the *sarde in saor*, a sardine dish that originates from Venice. Owners Diego and Michele pride themselves in producing the finest yet simplest Italian cooking, and the proof of that is that this is where the Italian resident of Marrakech comes to eat, over and over again. You will not find it in most tourist guides, but it is conveniently located to the Majorelle Gardens and the smart shops of Gueliz. Its open-air terrace is quiet at lunchtime, but it is best to book in the evening. No main dish is over 180 dirham, and the pastas, which are delicious, range from 60–120 dirham. Go with a girlfriend after a morning’s trawling through Zara or Galerie Birkenmeyer, as chic shopping bags certainly won’t look out of place in here. Finish off with a great dessert and a grappa and you might decide you have the energy to shop again when they re-open at 4 pm.

BELDI COUNTRY CLUB

Km 6, Route du Barrage, ‘Cherifia’ Marrakech,
+ 212 (0) 524 38 39 50, www.beldicountryclub.com

Owner Jean Dominique Leymarie has long owned this beautiful stretch of land about 15 minutes from the centre of Marrakech, and it has been hugely popular with ex-pats owning homes in the medina without swimming pools. In the heat of the summer (when smart international hotels refuse non-guests a day by the pool) you can drive out here, have a simple lunch of sardines frites or a tomato salad in a shady spot, and swim to your heart’s content in the narrow but Olympic-length pool, collapsing afterwards on comfortable sun-loungers, for an all-in set price. There is also a spa attached, where you can get a manicure or a massage. The good news is, Leymarie has also now opened a more up-market restaurant on the site, with white tablecloths, comfortable chairs, and an upgraded menu, without losing the appeal of Beldi’s casual yet elegant style. Huge tall windows with billowing pale curtains, reveal in the distance, strategically placed collections of earthenware pots, antique doors, or beds of roses, all framed in the backdrop of the Atlas mountains. Here you can relax with your partner, take your family, dine with a friend, or dine alone, no one cares and all are welcome. The Beldi Country Club is balm to the soul after the dust of Marrakech, and now you can also stay here, in any one of the simple comfortable suites, beautifully decorated with antique furniture and rugs, and colours in South American style by resident ceramicist and potter, Julio Miranda Thiel who hails from Chile, but is a long-time resident of Marrakech. Prices are kept to a reasonable 120 dirham a night; stay here and dine under the stars.