



TALES OF ADVENTUROUS GASTRONOMY

Sensory Overload in Morocco

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“The heady smoke and exotic aroma of herbs catch my attention: Somewhere, a cook is brewing an intoxicating pot of snails.”

A Berber man dressed in a red tunic with a monkey on his shoulder approaches me. “Would you like to hold him, Miss?” I politely decline with a smile and snake my way through the labyrinth of food stalls and hordes of persistent vendors.

In the chaotic square of Djemaa el Fna, a whirlpool of herbalists, snake charmers and henna painters converges, erupting into a cacophony of shouts, honks and ringing bells. Bright neon light illuminates the chaos into a sea of reverberations. It reminds me of an open-air circus, except that *this* sets the scene for everyday local life. I am here in Marrakesh with a group of food-loving friends to soak up the much-talked-about culinary scene and explore its stimulating bazaars.

Like a magnetic centrifugal force, Djemaa el Fna is the core of all activities in Marrakesh’s medina (old city). Standing before the city’s iconic Koutoubia Mosque, the massive *souk* (Arabic market) is a jumble of interweaving alleys and artisan shops. Literally translated to mean “Assembly of the Dead,” the hive of activities ensures North Africa’s busiest square is not the least bit gloomy.

For the uninitiated, Djemaa el Fna is an overwhelming sensory overload. My mind is aroused by raucous sounds and sights, but it is the heady smoke and exotic aroma of herbs that catch my attention: Sprawled across the outdoor food maze, a cook is brewing an intoxicating pot of snails.

“*As-Salaam Alaykum.*” The chef greets me in Arabic. “I’ll have a bowl, please,” I answer with much enthusiasm. After all, I’m no stranger to bizarre eats—growing up in Southeast Asia has prepared me for odd food. My group of travel mates, on the other hand, prefers to steer clear.

Several forceful strokes of stirring later, a bowl of slug-gish, wriggly snails in dark gravy is served. The arousing scent is heavy with spices. Tugged under their heavy shells, the snails stare out at me with giant antennas for eyes. They are bigger than the European *escargots*, and juicier.

Dragging the squirmy brown creatures out of their shells with a toothpick, I wolf them down one at a time, slurping the flavorful gravy simultaneously. “Is that seriously good, or are your taste buds just not working?” Ivar, my less courageous Icelandic travel mate, remarks sarcastically.

This is merely a gentle introduction to our intrepid



gastronomic journey. No stomachs will be spared, I warn my mates.

As the last ebb of sunlight fades in the distance, the food bazaar takes on a life of its own, rumbling with even more fervor than before. We continue navigating the maelstrom of pushcarts and blazing smoke to hunt down more exotic fare.

Each makeshift food stall is numbered with a handwritten sign above our heads. Ahmed, our friendly chef at the snail stand, is No. 6.

Rows upon dizzying rows of grills blind us with a mishmash of colors. Stacks of yellow, green and red spices are piled sky-high, alongside red-and-green marinated meat skewers. Purple and brown olives swim in giant plastic bowls. Thick, lathery meat stews simmer slowly in traditional clay pots.

The ubiquitous clay pot, *tajine*, is an essential Arab culinary tool, specially designed for slow braising. Its flat and circular base is topped with a conical-shaped cover, powering up the natural condensation process.

The day before, at the famous restaurant Chez Chegrouni, we had sampled authentic *kefta tajine* (beef-balls stew) and a popular local offering—pigeon pie. Crusted in light, brittle pastry puff skin, the pigeon pie was unfathomably good; I could barely stop at three.

Back in the rambling food maze, slabs of fresh silver grouper and tuna strewn on ice are thrown onto the sizzling grill upon request. “Our sea bass are the freshest! *Nihon jin desu*

ka? Are you Japanese?” Competition is fierce as vendors contend for customers, each sprouting a different foreign language to cajole tourists.

Much has changed over the decade with the development of tourism in Marrakesh, but the fascinating colors, aromas and vivacity are unequivocally Moroccan. Djemaa el Fna is dominated by camera-toting tourists, yet the rudimentary food stalls are rarely frequented by foreigners. Hygiene might be one of the reasons, but few restaurants can rival such authentic fare.

Slithering our way into the market, we come face to face with the ultimate bizarre food: stewed sheep’s heads lined up haphazardly on metallic tables—eyes, teeth and ears fully intact. There’s no sight of the sheep’s fur, but cartilage, bones and tongue jut out from each animal’s cranium. We stare at the outlandish sight for what seems like an eternity, as if waiting for the sheep to bleat loudly in pain.

“You have to try some! Sheep brains are very good for men!” The chef at stall No. 12 jostles us toward the row of decapitated heads. He even scoops up a spoonful of black gravy with brainy bits swimming in it for us to sample. Sheep brains as an aphrodisiac? We shake our heads in unison, taking off in all directions.

Stomachs rumbling, we decide to stick to the conventional comfort food. At stall No. 34, blazing flames are clouding up the sky with smoke—this should be good. I order several *brochettes de viande* (“meat skewers” in French)

right off the sizzling barbecue.

We start our meal with a bowl of *harira* soup—an essential item in any Moroccan meal. Bubbling with the smells of pepper and coriander, the lentil and chickpea broth rallies our appetite. Soft-baked pita bread is served with the soup, a culinary practice introduced by the French.

We watch the chef at work, his kitchen sprawled in front of us. The *brochette* is smothered with a constellation of condiments and roasted on a charcoal-fueled grill. The chef then skillfully turns up the fire by showering the *brochette* with oil, sending the flames roaring. Within minutes, the meat is cooked inside out, slightly charred on the outside but delicately tender inside. As I dig in, thousands of contrasting flavors explode in my mouth.

For our last treat, the cheeky chef dishes up an extra platter of minced meat. “But we didn’t order this.” It’s for free, he says with a smile. He keeps his lips locked, though; we are left to decide for ourselves what it is. I ecstatically devour the tender *viande*—no, not beef. Neither is it lamb. It’s got a subtle hint of herbs. It’s juicy, red meat, with a soft and tofu-like texture. Bull testicles? Sheep brains? Who knows?

The night ends with a question mark. I’m sure the answer will be revealed someday, but until then, I’ll be savoring the memory and keeping the mystery locked in my taste buds. **W**

