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If we can sell it



Buying power: (main picture) Guillaume Brahimi will join an Australian food festival in Dubai; (inset) Dubai chefs Uwe Micheel and Jun Cachero try our produce last month

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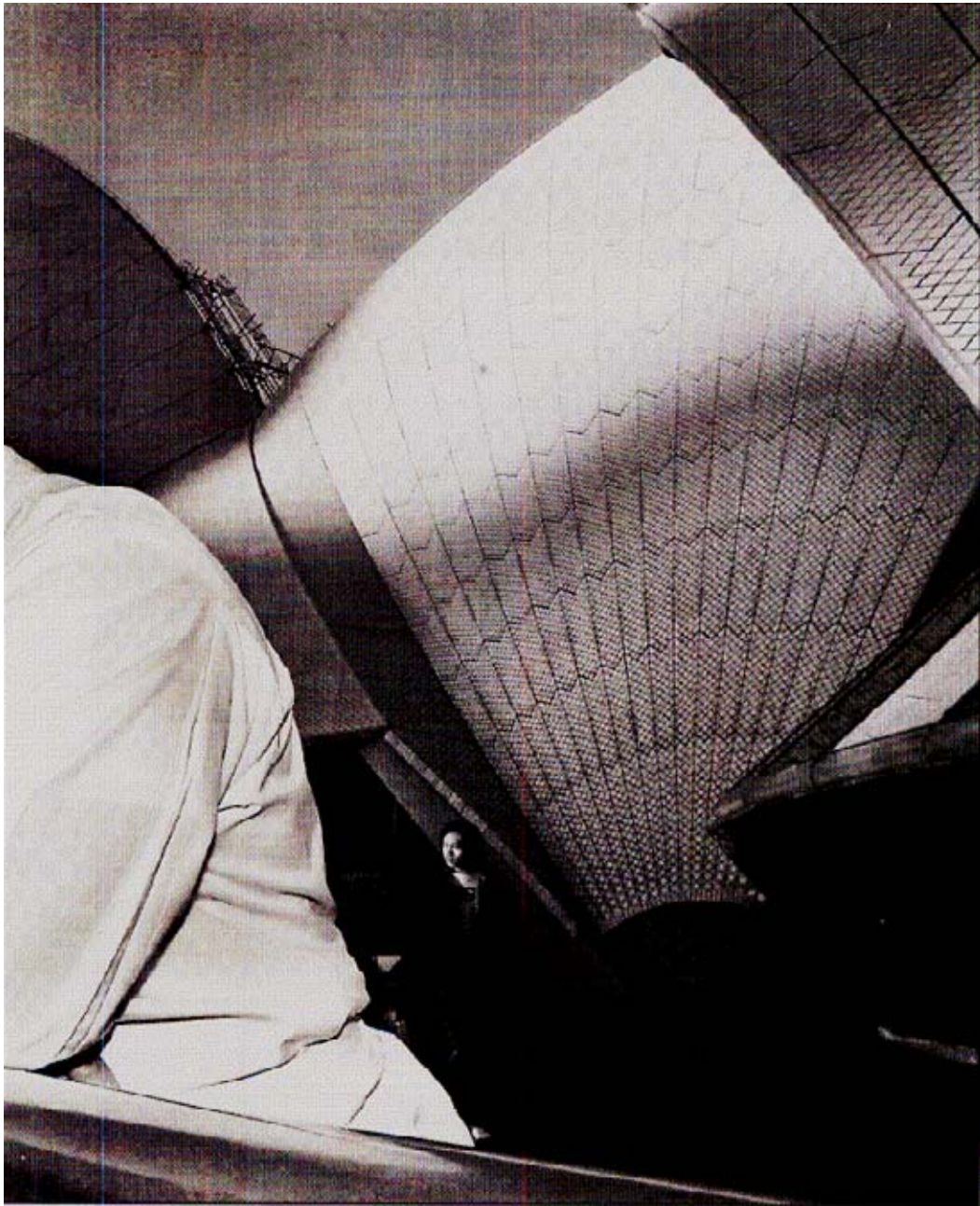
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Australia's finest food and best chefs are in hot demand at the world's fastest-growing luxury destination, reports SUE BENNETT

Barely a decade or so ago, Dubai was little more than a trading hub on the edge of the Arabian Sea. Today, it's a playground for the rich and famous — visited by the likes of Tiger Woods, Elton John and David Beckham.

Renowned for the region's best night life, its 60-plus four- and five-star hotels are almost constantly fully booked, with a staggering seven million bedrooms sold annually.

In total, there about 280 hotels, with 40 five-star venues under construction. All of those guests need to dine, of course, and now Australia has its sights set on putting the best of our produce on Dubai's dinner plates.

It's a perfect destination for our food and wine — not too big, so huge volume isn't required, but quality, at which we excel, is paramount and buyers are prepared to pay. Or rather, their well-heeled customers aren't fazed by the consequently extravagant bills.

Already we sell exports worth \$130 million but it's estimated that this figure could be tripled. Australia's campaign began about 18 months ago, led by the Government-funded industry organisation, Nation Food Industry Strategy Ltd (NFIS).

"We are recognised for having very high-quality food produce — just like our wine really — and we had to look at a market where price is less of a differential and quality is important. Dubai was the place," says NRIS communications manager Bonita Mersiades.

"It has one of the highest concentrations of five-star hotels anywhere in the world — they are being built all the time — and it has the world's only seven-star hotel. Interestingly, September 11 did two things: it encouraged wealthy Arabs to holiday there more than they used to, plus you have the extraordinarily wealthy English, French, Germans, Italians and Russians going there."

Her organisation began by talking to, and building relationships with, Dubai chefs and importers. NRIS then invited executive chef Paul Lenz, of the One and Only Royal Mirage Hotel in Dubai to visit Australia for 10 days last November. He travelled from Adelaide to Port Lincoln, Melbourne to Sydney and south-east Queensland.

"He tasted wagyu beef, grass-fed beef and said Sydney rock oysters were the best he had ever tasted anywhere," Mersiades says. "The kingfish was the best he'd ever seen and, when he went back, it really helped us create the market, create the demand."

In January, an Aussie barbecue was staged in Dubai for local chefs to launch premium beef, veal and lamb into the city. It went so well, sales began next morning.

Seafood was next on the agenda and prominent Sydney chef Peter Doyle, of Est Restaurant, spent a week in Dubai staging a masterclass and cooking Australian produce including scallops, barramundi, mud crab and octopus. "It's a pretty amazing place," he comments. "It's a really good market to break into because they are all after premium quality produce."

Eight executive chefs from Dubai were invited to visit this country, including the Sheik of Dubai's executive chef, in charge of 2000 meals a day at the palace, and an Emirates Airline chef. The airline makes 75,000 meals daily out of Dubai — a figure expected to hit 120,000 within five years.

At the conclusion of a whirlwind Aussie journey, the chefs presented a wish list of local products they would like to buy. Between 80 and 100 companies were nominated.

"They are buying almost everything you can think of," says Mersiades. "They totally love the fruit and vegetables, wagyu and certified angus beef, white rocks veal, olive oils, our ice cream and cheeses, biscuits, chocolates and tonnes of seafood."

They have also asked for wines to be taken over in September — the next stage of the campaign. To date, only three Australian labels are sold into Dubai, a dry city where the sale of alcohol is restricted to hotels.

As well as wine, dairy will be a focus when five of our chefs help stage a week-long Australian food festival in Dubai: Peter Doyle of Est; Guillaume Brahim, Guillaume at Bennelong, Sydney; Geoff Lindsay, Pearl Restaurant, Melbourne; Phillip Johnson, Ecco Bistro, Brisbane; and Lew Kathreptis, working at the Royal Mirage, Dubai.

"We will showcase the greatest produce. It's a great job," says Brahim. "They are trying to create the Monaco of the Middle East there and when they came here and saw our produce, they were blown away."

The week's activities should be the icing on a particularly rich new cake.





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Wish list

- Asked to nominate Australian produce they wanted, the Dubai chefs included:
- Sydney rock oysters
 - King George whiting
 - smoked salmon
 - mud crabs
 - N'Joi extra virgin olive oil
 - Serendipity ice cream, Sydney
 - Whisk and Pin muesli, Blue Mountains
 - Dandaragan olive oil
 - Anvers chocolates
 - Weiss frozen foods
 - oranges
 - grapefruit
 - brie cheese
 - venison
 - Wagyu beef
 - squab pigeon
 - potatoes
 - onions
 - walnuts
 - cherries
 - lamb
 - Mt William wines
 - Lindrum wines
 - Peter Lehmann wines



Arabian might: Dubai diners won't blanch at paying for top-quality produce