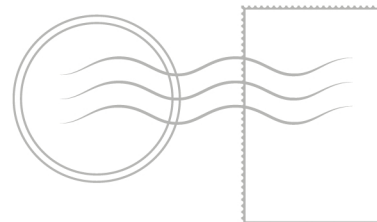


POSTCARD

Amman



Cookery classes at Beit Sitti cooking school are as much about local culture as local food, finds **Katie McGonagle**

Stepping through the door of the cooking school at Beit Sitti, a name that translates as 'grandmother's house', the setting looks strangely familiar. I'd watched Richard Ayoade, aka TV's *Travel Man*, cooking up a storm in this very kitchen on my flight over to Amman, and the homely scene is exactly as pictured.

Copper pans and black-and-white photos line the walls, albeit with a bright orange Smeg fridge thrown in for a splash of colour, and fresh, shiny aubergines and tomatoes – ingredients that have clearly never seen a supermarket or a piece of plastic wrap – overflow from ornate ceramic bowls.

It's everything you'd expect of a family cooking school set up by three sisters in memory of their grandmother, and still displaying many of her much-loved possessions.

Now, Beit Sitti brings together women from across the Middle East, many of whom have few other opportunities for work, to pass on the secrets of their favourite recipes to visitors keen to understand more about the region.

It's a hands-on experience. We get chopping right away as Maria Haddad Hannania, one of the sisters, explains more about Arabic cuisine, passing round mysterious spice mixes and encouraging us to taste them and identify the ingredients.

She's as generous with her insights into local life as with the huge dollops of tahini she pours into an enormous bowl of homemade hummus – a staple for every Jordanian meal, we soon discover – creating an open, honest atmosphere where no question feels too silly to ask.

We char aubergines over an open flame to make smoky dip *moutabal*, and shape our own bread and bake it in an outdoor oven. One brave volunteer then steps up to turn out our main dish – a feast of seasoned rice and succulent chicken called *maaloubeh*, which is cooked on the stove then flipped upside down to be served – which he pulls off with a flourish, before we head outside to dine on trestle tables draped with gingham tablecloths.

Cooking and chatting together – Western tourists alongside hijab-wearing local women, American teens alongside 60-plus retired couples – has been a bonding experience for the first night of our Intrepid Travel tour.

It was also a quick and enticing introduction to the 'real' Jordan, which is exactly what this cooking school sets out to do. **TW**



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the Beit Sitti cooking
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TOP: A cookery class at Beit Sitti **ABOVE:** Founder Maria Haddad Hannania (left) with Intrepid Travel guests

PICTURES: Katie McGonagle