



fakhreldine

Bethan Ryder on London's luxurious Lebanese

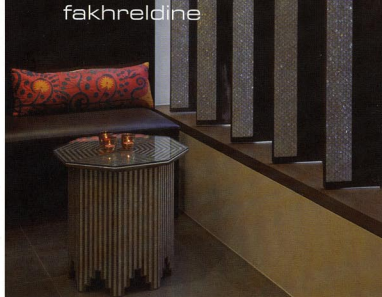
En route to Fakhreldine, I mentioned my destination to a friend, who, raising her eyebrows in surprise, said "But it's been there for years!" Indeed it has, for 22 to be exact, but not in its new, sexy modern incarnation. The Fakhreldine of old, a traditional Lebanese restaurant gilded and cluttered in appearance, has given birth to a style-conscious, brighter and younger model. Producing this new £600,000 creation was a team effort, although the inducing was down to Omar Ayache and Omar Mazhar, co-owners of the reborn Fakhreldine.

Both were City high fliers. Ayache's father owned Fakhreldine, which had opened in early 1980s and the pair often discussed what they could do with the somewhat fading restaurant. "Originally it was very smart and the restaurant still attracted Arabs on vacation and a high amount of Europeans but we had lost some of the Lebanese customers," says Mazhar. "It had become run down and although the food was still good, it was no longer considered a destination restaurant." Mazhar was particularly keen on the project. Successful banking career aside, he'd long nurtured a passion for architecture and design and was eager to take Fakhreldine forward in to the 21st century, whilst retaining "something of the Orient about it".

You get the feeling Mazhar's enthusiasm was catching. It wasn't long before Ayache, who had already flexed his restaurateur's wings by founding the Italian restaurant Diverso, just below Fakhreldine, gave him the go ahead to come up with a

new design concept. Mazhar invited two architecture and design firms to compete for the project, with disappointing results. "One scheme was too worked, you can't put an Ali Baba's cave in a modern 1960s building, you have to respect what's outside," says Mazhar. "The other company just didn't understand what we were trying to do." It was then that he realised award-winning architects Stiff + Trevillion, creators of restaurants Satsuma, Yellow River Café and Otto, would be perfect for the job: "Mike Stiff had designed my flat and I really enjoyed working with him, we're on the same wavelength." Mazhar promptly whisked Stiff off to Beirut and Damascus for a research and buying trip. "It was a really useful experience," says Stiff, "in terms of understanding traditional crafts of the area and getting a feel for the culture, all vital things for the new concept to work." Lebanese-born Mazhar was raised between London and Beirut and it was the exciting developments there that inspired him. "If you look at any typical Lebanese restaurant it's all kitsch and gold and often borrows from French design, there's been no change for 50 years, whereas Beirut is moving forward, there is new radical design and people are embracing it. I wanted to do the same here, create something modern whilst using traditional crafts."

The concept has been executed beautifully, with some gorgeous details, such as the mother-of-pearl inlaid louvers and walnut panelling, silk fabric Moucharabiya screens bearing Levantine motifs and evocative graphics, by Rana Salam, that



convey Fakhreldine's Middle Eastern heritage in a modern style. Although these elements immediately catch the eye, it is Stiff + Trevillion's simple but effective architecture that allows such features to shine. The 'before and after' transformation is quite miraculous.

Stiff + Trevillion opened up the space and maximised the views of Green Park. It's almost a case of where there was dark now there is light, at least natural light instead of heavy Italian 1970s style chandeliers. "The ceiling was coffered for 5 huge chandeliers and there is very limited ceiling height but we evened it out and took it up as high as we could," explains Stiff. "We also lowered the eye-line of the windows, which compacts the glazing, conceals the blinds and lighting and actually makes the interior feel higher." The existing positions of the kitchen, toilets and entrance were retained, but the entrance staircase was opened up and a previously concealed window at the top of the entrance stairs uncovered, flooding the reception area with natural light.

Stiff + Trevillion have organised the space well. "The room is distinctly three areas," explains Stiff, "the bar, central organising space which is metaphorically like a courtyard, a Dar, and then the 85-cover dining room." Cantilever worked closely with Stiff and Trevillion to develop the sleek, peninsular bar which along with the Dar (lounge area) forms the centrepiece of the refurbishment. Dars are a typical feature of traditional Lebanese domestic architecture, at Fakhreldine a more casual Dar menu is served in this area. This comprises of various dishes from more basic 'Finger Foods' and nibbles, such as sumac (spiced potato wedges), through to Iranian caviar, jumbo shrimps and 'Fork and Knife Food'.

The illuminated bar façade displays a striking aubergine hue silk material (the aforementioned Moucharabiya screen) by Govinda Hempill, laminated between glass, a green version of the same material has been effectively used to brighten up the street entrance too. A bronze bar top, another material popular in traditional Lebanese design, completes the contemporary but authentic look. It is the lustrous aubergine panels lining the walls and concealing the service areas that really enrich the space. "They're finished with an acrylic veneer



from Page Lacquer which is 2mm thick so they have a piano quality finish", says Stiff. You can certainly see your face in them and not only does their reflective quality add depth to the space but all things being very carefully considered, aubergine is also a very Middle Eastern colour.

Much of the furniture is bespoke, enhancing the well-crafted feel. Mazhar commissioned Nada Debs to create the mother-of-pearl tables in reception and up-and-coming Parisian furniture designer Francois Champsaur, a former Christian Lacroix employee, to create the bar stools and low chunky Dar tables with bronze pediments which can be adjusted to various heights. Dining chairs were supplied by Succession, Stiff + Trevillion modified one of their models, reducing the back and lowering it to comply with their overall vision. "We set a line level with the banquettes," says Stiff, "the horizontal idea was in order to focus the view out to Green Park." It works.

My favourite feature is the mother-of-pearl, which catches the light like rainbow fish scales. The louvers were hand-crafted in Syria; metal thread beaten in the shape of the pattern into local walnut timber and then mother-of-pearl filed to fit the shapes. Elsewhere they've been incorporated into Black American walnut wood panelling. RCA graduate Rana Salam's graphics are also impressive. A friend of Omar Ayache's, she was commissioned to design a logo loosely based on Arabic script, she developed their brief into a more abstract logo that looks inherently Levantine. It lends itself well to architectural motifs, Stiff and Trevillion have incorporated it into the staircase balustrade which is rusted steel, with the Fakhreldine logo laser-cut to form a decorative border.

And it's not just style, the substance is there too in the form of chef Karim Haédar, who the two Omar's lured away from his own restaurant, Au 29, in Paris to become head chef. All set to revolutionise Lebanese cooking he's already won a star from toughie critic Fay Maschler. So are they looking for a Michelin? Not especially, Mazhar says "the new Fakhreldine is more about being proud of what we've got but also keeping up with times and being accessible to all", although he admits with a grin, "well, obviously it would be the cherry on the icing."