

# The LIFESTYLE

## FLAMINGO ROOM

*The South African restaurateur **Natasha Sideris** explains to Katrina Kufer how understated dishes focused on ingredients, immaculate organisation and bespoke casual-chic interiors are the key to her "anti-franchise" franchise of cafes and concept stores*



homegrown concepts here are amazing, but there wasn't much in terms of all day casual-chic cafés." After creating loyalty through her initial Jumeirah-based tashas café, Sideris was approached to open a licensed venue. "I didn't want a licensed tashas – we have a following and I didn't want any overlapped associations," she remarks. As a solution, Sideris diversified and introduced concept stores by tashas – most recently in the form of Flamingo Room by tashas, her latest venture, which opened in Dubai's Jumeirah Al Naseem hotel this past September. "It's a completely different entity. I trialed it in South Africa in a small space in one of my restaurants with 40 seats, and saw people were enjoying it, so I opened Flamingo Room in Dubai."

Flamingo Room by tashas is immaculate – peachy-salmon interiors with curved ceilings, gold fish-scale textured walls, clean lines and 200 seats – "Miami cool with African glamour," Sideris quips of the interior,

developed with her long-term collaborators, Australia-based design duo Dewald Srruwig and Neydine Bak of B&S Studio. The South African lean – from every bespoke, hand-woven cushion and the custom-designed tabletops to the servers – celebrates the local talent often overlooked by "everyone thinking Africa is drums and masks and spears," notes Sideris. Furthermore, "You used to be able to have a restaurant, serve good food, and have an interior that is okay or mediocre, but the world is moving so quickly and people become bored easily, so you need to make sure the interior and the food carry equal importance," adds Sideris, who admits she is heavily inspired by interior design. "Natasha has a good eye for design, a classic style that keeps trailing back to her Greek roots: homely comfort, timeless, easy," says Dewald. "Our aesthetic vision for the brand is not informed by current trends, rather, by contemporary adaptations of classical elements and timeless materiality." Incorporating with the beachy setting, a turtle rehabilitation centre donation system, and the South African artists they have worked with for the past seven years, "We wanted the African inspired elements to be glamorous instead of using the traditional aesthetic

we are all accustomed to," clarify the designers. "The result speaks for itself – a lighthearted interior that is a breath of fresh air amongst the high-end white linen food offerings in the area."

B&S Studio's starting point was the Baobab tree, whose white flowers over a short period bloom at night, inspiring an airy, abstract hanging handspun glass installation playing off projec-

tions mimicking arborous foliage and movement. This speaks to the Sideris trademark of unique large-scale sculptures, terrazzo or marble floor with inlay and curved ceilings, which visually connect otherwise disparate aesthetics. Sideris's first venue in South Africa – her favourite for sentimental reasons – was in a city location and adopted a slick look, while the second and third were more suburban or eclectic, matching their neighbourhoods. "They don't tie in too closely though, or else it's Disneyland, but there are always allusions," she says, before adding that all have "a similar DNA".

However, Flamingo Room had an additional adaptation to consider.



Facing page:  
one of the two  
dining areas.  
This page:  
Natasha Sideris

“ALL THE LITTLE DETAILS ARE SO IMPORTANT. IT'S LIKE LOOKING AT AN ORCHESTRA. THE WAY EVERYTHING HAS TO COME TOGETHER”

“I never planned to be a restaurateur,” says Natasha Sideris, founder of tashas, an “anti-franchise franchise.” Twenty-two years – 12 of which have been dedicated to building on the tashas brand – and 19 outlets later, Sideris has become a familiar name in the realm of casual-chic cafés. “It’s basic food,” Sideris claims. “Nothing too clever or fancy, no mise en place, just well-styled, slightly elevated and understated.” However, settling in at any of Sideris’s cafes or concept stores reveals that her vision of the dining experience is far from basic.

“My pleasure is in making people happy. No one should be in hospitality if they don’t have a love for people,” Sideris explains, recommending watching Simon Sinek’s TED Talks. “He talks about your ‘why’ – why people do what they do. Our ‘why’ is making people happy and making sure we have a team of people with inbred hospitality.” Recounting how the dining-out dynamic has changed in recent decades, transforming from a special occasion outing to a normalised daily given, “Because of this, there are a lot of restaurateurs interested in just making money. My goals are good quality food, making people happy, being proud of myself, motivating my staff, and enjoying what I do. Then you’ll make money,” asserts Sideris.

And this approach gets noticed. With 16 outlets in South Africa alone, Sideris opened three in the UAE – one in Abu Dhabi and two in Dubai with two more in development – and has been approached by developers in Australia and the UK. But her desire for quality keeps her close to home. “They are geographically too far away, and I’m a control freak!” she laughs. Selecting the UAE was based on similarities to Sideris’s home: “The culture is similar, in terms of mall culture and expats.” But following her first visit in 2006, Sideris noted, “Dubai has everything – but there was a gap in the market for what tashas does. The





The bar in the entrance area replete with succulent pastel shades

“I MAY HAVE DREAMS WHEN I’M 60 OF OWNING A 20-SEATER AND DOING MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY. BUT WOULD I EVER DO IT? NO. WE WANT FOOD FROM THE HEART.”

“It is the first international concept store for the tashas brand,” says Dewald, and Sideris points out some of the finer details that came with exploring the new dimension to her culture: “We were a café, but this is a more elevated chic experience. Take the table size – tashas is 800 x 800, but now we do sharing concept so we had to change the table size.” This attention to detail – her “mania”, she jokes – allows Sideris’s brand to stand apart. “All the little details are so important. It’s like looking at an orchestra, the way everything has to come together.” Coming from a family of chefs and restaurateurs, her parents were early, if unintentional, influences, despite her three-year foray into studying psychology. Sideris’s father was a renowned steak house owner in South Africa, and she recalls his finesse operating the floor, and her mother’s propensity for “driving us mad!” with her particular insistence on the carpet fibres all facing the same direction. “She used to say, ‘Don’t say that, because one day you’ll be like me!’” Sideris chuckles. “Mothers’s curse!”

The inherited tendencies mean all details are on point – including the unnoticed ones. “Every salt and pepper shaker faces the same way – salt towards the water, pepper to the kitchen. When you walk in and see a tidy service station, a beautiful bouquet of flowers, uniform condiments, a book to look at... All of those little touches subconsciously create a neat and organised space, and thus a relaxed environment,” highlights Sideris. “The way the staff are dressed, the music, the plating – everything has to come together, hard.” Admitting they do get it wrong on occasion – “the human element” – Sideris’s perfectionism is grounded in realism. “Restaurants are a business of repetition. People might have a lot of enthusiasm getting into restaurants, but successes are short-lived if you aren’t maniacal about details and don’t realise you have to repeat it every day,” she explains. “It takes a lot of stamina. It becomes a habit, and I’ve always said to myself, if I lose the energy to

pick up a piece of paper on the floor of the restaurant or make a comment on underdressed food... If I turn a blind eye, that’s the day I’ve had enough and I sell. That’s when I’m hands-off.”

Deeply involved in every element of being a restaurateur – food, interiors, music, venue, service, menus – Sideris suggests Nicholas Lander’s *The Art of the Restaurateur* as an excellent resource to understand the critical differences between restaurateurs – the “conductors” – and chefs. Though focusing on the big picture supports the authenticity and quality of tashas, the passion for the kitchen still rumbles. “My mom was a fantastic cook, my grandmas, and my dad. We had cooking styles from Mozambique, Portugal, Greece and Cyprus – never Sunday without someone cooking a meal,” she recalls, her tone changing. “In terms of taste profile and flavour, our menus focus on the ingredients as the heroes. Being too clever with technique isn’t my style – it would feel insincere. I may have dreams when I’m 60 of owning a 20-seater and doing molecular gastronomy, but would I ever do it? No. We want food from the heart.”

Flamingo Room’s menu includes a seafood pasta with crayfish – “my dad’s recipe from Mozambique” – a fresh lobster Catalan with tomato, brioche breadcrumbs, parsley, and “meat, of course, I’m South African! Ribeye on the bone, herb butter...” Sideris says if diners want a real taste of what she loves to cook at home though, wait for Avli, (“court-yard” in Greek), her upcoming DIFC outlet. “Traditional Cypriate-Greek dishes. Big salads, open flame meats, meat turning on the skewer, souvlaki... Rustic, rustic food.” But Sideris’s favourite for a last meal? “Rusk salad made with barley rusks, fresh tomato, cucumber, red onions, capers, olive oil, lemon juice. Fresh but hearty, that’s what I’d have,” she concludes before quickly adding, “But I love yoghurt. I wouldn’t want to die without yoghurt.” ■  
[tashascafe.com](http://tashascafe.com)

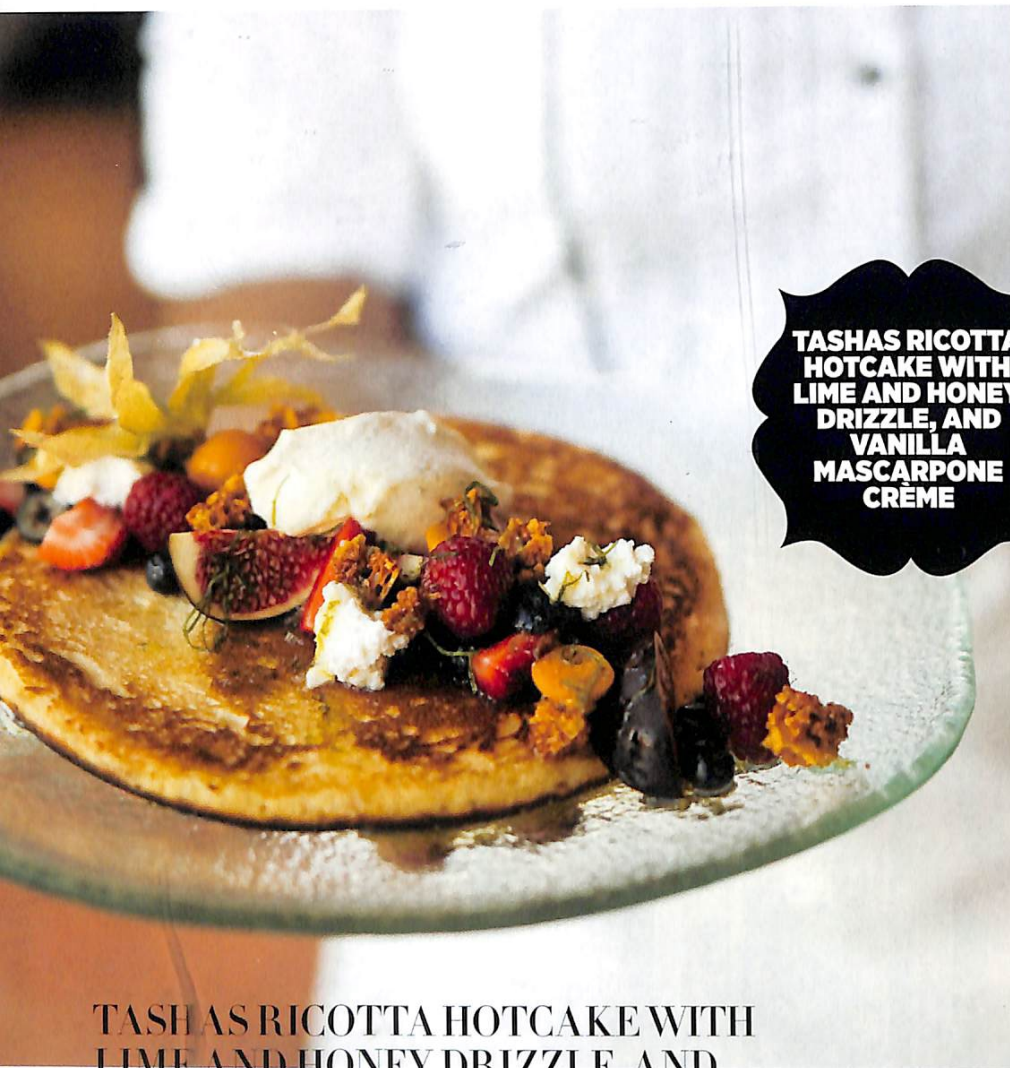


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The entrance to the boutique





**TASHAS RICOTTA HOTCAKE WITH LIME AND HONEY DRIZZLE, AND VANILLA MASCARPONE CRÈME**

**TASHAS RICOTTA HOTCAKE WITH LIME AND HONEY DRIZZLE, AND VANILLA MASCARPONE CRÈME**

Serves 6  
Prep & Cooking Time: 20 minutes

**Hotcake**

- 540ml milk
- ¼ cup of ricotta
- 4 eggs, separated
- 2 cups of flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 3 tbsp white sugar
- ½ tsp fine salt

**Lime Honey Drizzle**

- 100 ml honey
- 2 limes - zested finely and juiced

**Vanilla and Mascarpone Crème**

- 1 vanilla bean, split lengthways and seeds removed
- 250g mascarpone crème
- 2 tablespoon powdered sugar
- 4 teaspoon milk
- Selection of fresh fruit and berries for toppings

**Method:**

1. In a large bowl, whisk together the flour, baking powder, sugar and salt. Separate the eggs.

2. In a separate bowl, combine the ricotta, milk, egg yolks and vanilla seeds.
3. Add the dry ingredients to the ricotta mix, and stir to combine. Set aside.
4. Whisk the egg whites until firm peaks form, and gently fold into the egg yolk mix. Cover with cling film and place in the refrigerator.
5. Prepare the lime honey, by mixing the honey with the lime zest and juice.
6. Place the vanilla seeds, mascarpone, milk and vanilla in a small bowl. Stir with a whisk until smooth. Place in the container and refrigerate until you are ready to use.
7. Heat an 8inch pan on a medium heat, and add 1 teaspoon of butter, and leave it to melt.
8. Add a ¼ cup of the hotcake mix to a pan, and spread out until to cover the base of the pan.
9. Cook for 3-4 minutes until the underside sets and is golden brown, flip the pancake and cook for a further 2 minutes
10. Serve immediately, topped with fruits of your choice, drizzled with lime honey, and topped with vanilla mascarpone.

**TASHAS MUSSELS MARINIÈRE**

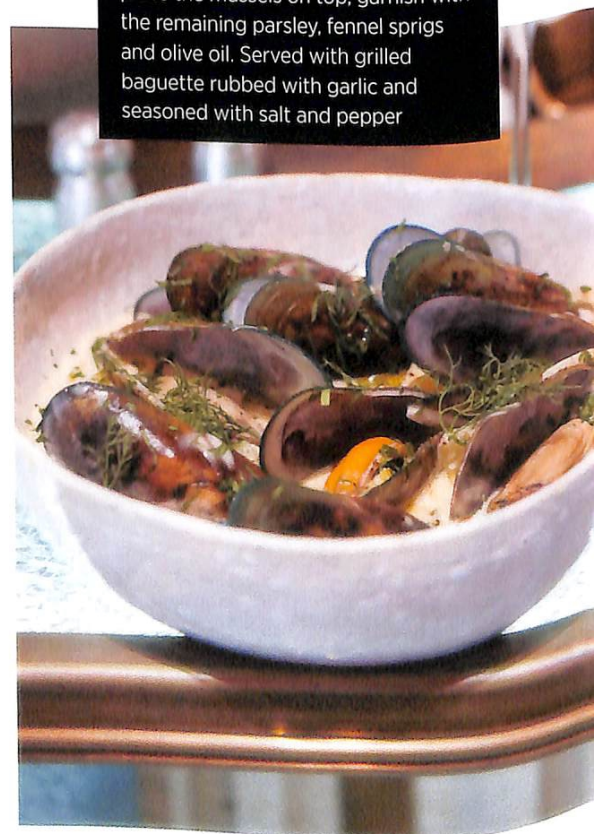
Serves 2  
Prep & Cooking Time: 45 minutes

- 20 large mussels, in shells, cleaned
- ½ small onion cut into slices
- ¼ fennel bulb cut into slices
- ½ large celery stick cut into chunks
- 6 pieces of lemon peel
- 2 clove of garlic, roughly chopped
- 40g butter
- 2 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 4 pieces of bay leaf
- 600ml fish or vegetable stock
- 120g crème fraiche

**Garnish**

- 4 tbsp chopped parsley
- Sprigs of fresh fennel

1. In a medium size pot, melt half the butter over medium heat. Add the onion, fennel, celery and garlic. Sauté until soft. Deglaze the pan with a touch of stock, add the thyme, bay leaf and remaining stock.
2. Increase the heat to high and bring to the boil. Add the mussels and "steam" for 8 -10 minutes.
3. Remove the mussels, sprigs of thyme and bay leaf from the stock. Stir in the crème fraiche and half of the parsley.
4. Pour the sauce into a bowl and place the mussels on top, garnish with the remaining parsley, fennel sprigs and olive oil. Served with grilled baguette rubbed with garlic and seasoned with salt and pepper





# TASHAS DECONSTRUCTED MUSHROOM LASAGNA

Serves 2

Prep & Cooking Time: 30 minutes

240g exotic/wild mushroom Mix  
6 sheets of fresh Lasagna  
4 tsp truffle oil  
2 tbsp butter  
2 tsp thyme fresh, chopped  
120ml porcini or mushroom stock  
2 heaped tbsp of crème fraiche  
Parmesan, grated or shaved  
Chopped chives

1. Melt the butter in pan on a medium heat. Once the butter starts to bubble add the truffle oil. Add the mushrooms and fry until tender, season with the fresh thyme, salt and pepper. Add the porcini stock and set aside.
2. Cook the pasta until al dente. Bring the pan with the mushrooms back to heat and add the pasta, toss a few times, until the stock starts to thicken.
3. Using tongs or a spoon, layer a sheet of lasagna on a plate or in a pasta bowl, and top with a third of the mushroom mix. Repeat the process until you build your deconstructed lasagna.
4. Top with a heaped tablespoon of crème fraiche, loads of fresh Parmesan and chopped chives.
5. To take this dish to the next level, add shavings of fresh black and white truffle



**TASHAS  
DECONSTRUCTED  
MUSHROOM  
LASAGNA**

# TASHAS CAULIFLOWER STEAK WITH POACHED EGG

Serves 4

Prep & Cook Time: 20 Minutes



## Cauliflower steak marinade

2 tsp cumin  
8 tbsp of olive oil  
1 tsp dried chili flakes  
8g lime zest  
80ml lime juice  
Pinch of salt and pepper  
Mix and set aside

## Salsa

2 Avocados, cut into cubes  
4 tbsp of red onion, finely chopped  
1 tbsp lime juice  
2 tbsp olive oil  
1 tbsp of coriander chopped  
A pinch of Salt and pepper  
Mix and season well

200g baby spinach  
10ml olive oil  
1 tsp Lime zest  
A pinch of Salt and Pepper  
4 eggs

## Method

1. Pre-heat your oven to 180C.
2. Prepare your cauliflower by cutting it into steaks, about 2 centimeters thick. Rub liberally with the marinade. Place a non-stick pan on medium heat and place the cauliflower steaks into the hot pan.
3. Fry until golden and slightly charred on both sides. Transfer to an oven tray and bake for 8-10 minutes until soft. In the same pan, add the 10ml of olive oil, teaspoon of lime zest and the baby spinach. Wilt the spinach and season with salt and pepper. Keep covered, and set aside.
4. In a small pot, bring hot water to the boil, and poach your eggs for 6 minutes.
5. Remove the cauliflower steaks and plate, top with the spinach, salsa and the poached egg. Drizzle with extra olive oil, sprinkle with extra dried chili and fresh lime zest.