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*DESIGN INTERIORS FASHION ART LIFESTYLE

OCTOBER 2010

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Isabella Rossellini by Robert Wilson:
see Isabella pucker up using the acetate film inside

Nada Debs

Furniture designer ▶

By rights, Nada Debs deserves to be confused. Born and brought up in Kobe, Japan, where her textiles-trading family has been living for three generations, she studied at the Rhode Island School of Design in the US and worked in London for seven years before moving 'back' to Beirut, a city she barely knew, in 1999.

But if she is, she does a marvellous job of not letting it show. Heir to two very different cultures, Debs has chosen a design path that seeks to marry the highly decorative Middle Eastern tradition with the pure forms and austerity of Japan. Evidence of this quest is everywhere: in the way she dresses; in the way her business card fuses angular Kufic script and flowing Arabic; but most of all, it is evident in the furniture and objects she designs.

These can be found in the two Nada Debs stores she runs on opposite sides of a street in Beirut's Saifi Village. One, opened a couple of years ago, features accessories such as inlaid trays and mirrors, while the newer store is devoted to bigger pieces, sophisticated sofas and commodes from her East Is East collection. Also on display is Debs' new armchair, 'Arabesque', carved with a mesmerising geometric pattern.

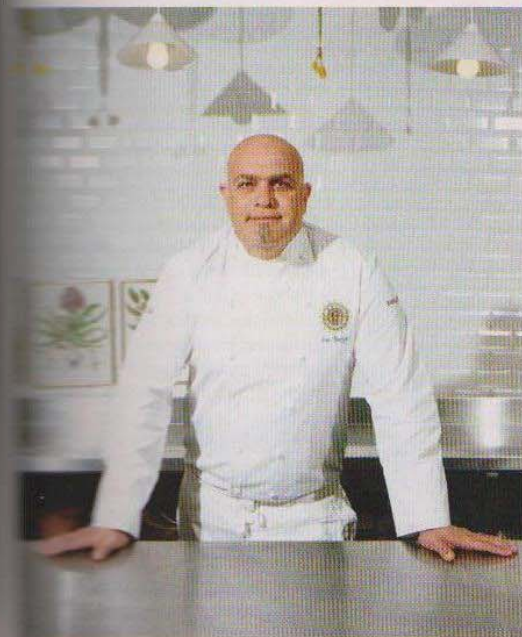
'In Japan, you see this kind of geometric work. It looks almost Middle Eastern. It's funny how there are similarities,' says Debs. 'Sometimes, I don't know where I am. I'm lost in translation. OK, not lost. More like I'm in the process of evolution.'

www.nadadebs.com



TAKING THE CHAIR

This picture, designer Nada Debs in her 'Arabesque' chair at her new store, which features a wall of concrete tiles bearing the pattern she uses as a business logo. Below, chef Joe Barza in Tawlet, a Beirut restaurant known for its open kitchen, where each day a different chef (sometimes Barza) cooks a traditional meal.



Joe Barza

Chef ◀

For people who love to eat and express a fierce pride in their culinary heritage, the Lebanese have not always been keen to recognise the talent of those who spend their lives preparing food.

Joe Barza knows that better than most. After realising in the early 1980s that his then civil war-time career – perhaps best described as 'colourful' – had no long-term prospects, he threw himself into the only other thing he could imagine doing: cooking. As he slowly worked his way up the ranks, Barza learned two important lessons. First, the Lebanese love nothing more than Lebanese food, but can't agree on what it should taste like. Second, Lebanese diners were loathe to give credit to a Lebanese chef – but bring in a French or Italian chef and they would do cartwheels to express their admiration.

After a spell in South Africa for some 'real training', Barza returned to Beirut in

1994 a fully fledged head chef. But he quickly found that however much he had changed, Beirut had remained the same. Undeterred, he made regular forays into the dining room to chat to diners, and began to update the Lebanese menu: 'We've been making the same food for thousands of years. But why does hummus have to be made with tahini? What if I use za'atar [a herb and sesame seed mix] instead?' His changes are subtle, but even tiny tweaks can have a radical effect. The result is contemporary Lebanese food – Hummus 2.0, if you like.

Now executive chef of the Chase restaurant chain, Barza regularly travels the country in search of new ingredients and recipes. 'We have excellent produce in Lebanon – fresh herbs, pickles, preserves – but many people don't know about them. I find things I never knew existed.'

www.joebarza.net, www.chase.com.lb

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