

Moving to Abu Dhabi was not a difficult decision for Michèle Müller. "I'd set my sights on working for the Hyatt chain of hotels," she says. "So when I got an offer to work at the biggest Park Hyatt in the world, it was too good an opportunity to miss."

The role in question was that of chef de cuisine at the Abu Dhabi Park Hyatt hotel, where the 32-year-old, originally from Berlin, would oversee the running of the hotel's Beach House restaurant and train and supervise a team of nine chefs. She arrived in September 2011, two months before the hotel's grand opening.

"When I walked in to the Beach House it was just an empty room, a building site really."

Joining a restaurant at such an early stage was a new experience for Müller. It did, however, allow her to exert a level of control she had not enjoyed before. "I had a lot of influence on how the kitchen was set up, which is great," she says. "I decided what type of pots we'd use and how many, what spoons we needed and so on."

What did slightly intimidate Müller, however, was the task of finalising the Beach House menu, which has a Mediterranean theme. "The dishes had already been decided when I arrived, but the exact ingredients needed to be sourced. So I had to learn what brands were available in Abu Dhabi and meet and negotiate with the various suppliers out there."

While pork is available to buy in Abu Dhabi, the Park Hyatt had made the decision not to sell it, due to halal restrictions on its consumption. "This was challenging as pork is used quite heavily in Mediterranean food, so I had to source suitable substitutes – smoked beef bacon, for instance."

The Beach House's menu is something in which Müller takes great pride. Originally conceived by her superior, the executive chef, the menu has undergone several changes and now mainly comprises her own dishes. "Really, I think it's a good idea for [the chef de cuisine] to be in charge of all of it," she says. "At the end of the day, it's me cooking and it's me training the chefs and it's me standing behind the food."

It is perhaps this unapologetic streak that helped Müller forge such a successful career in a notoriously male-dominated industry; at the Abu Dhabi Park Hyatt, Müller is one of just 12 female chefs, out of a total of 95. "When guests hear [I'm female] they say, 'What? It's a woman?'" Müller laughs. "And when they see me, it's a huge surprise for them." But this overt sexism does not seem to concern Müller. "I just smile and laugh about it," she says.

When pressed on inequality in the



German chef Michèle Müller on the beach near Park Hyatt Abu Dhabi hotel

Silvia Razgova

Expat lives *From Berlin to Abu Dhabi*

Queen of the desert

Head chef describes working in a male-dominated industry. *By Cherry Casey*

United Arab Emirates, Müller refuses to entertain the idea that her gender has held her back any more in the Middle East than in Germany. "Once you have proven yourself to your team and to the people you work with and even to your guests, there's no more surprises," she says resolutely. "I don't get better treatment because I'm a woman, definitely not, but they're not disrespectful to me just because I'm a woman. It's no different here to any other country."

Müller doesn't claim to be immersed in the traditional Emirati way of life. Her guests at the restaurant are mostly international and she admits that she doesn't need to speak Arabic for her job. More than 50 per cent of Abu Dhabi's population are expats.

Abu Dhabi is not Müller's first taste of the Middle East: she worked in Qatar from 2007 to 2008. Yet the chef is more guarded in her enthusiasm for Doha. "It was different. Different to Europe and everything I knew. But I think a lot has changed since I was there, and it's now a livelier destination than it was."

Liveliness is important to Müller, who often goes to ladies' nights where alcohol is freely available, with her preferred clubs including Left Bank and Eight in the Souk Qaryat Al Beri district. "It depends where you go, but you could have free champagne for the first two hours in one place or for the whole night somewhere else," she says.

More sedate entertainment options

are available and Müller enjoys going to the ballet at the Emirates Palace Auditorium.

Home to Müller is the Al Khalidiyah district, where she lives in a 25th-floor apartment provided by the Park Hyatt. "I can see the whole of Abu Dhabi from my window," she says. Müller also has a driver to take her to and from work, but the traffic is an aspect of Abu Dhabi that she could happily live without. "It is crazy," she says, believing that the low price of petrol (approximately 28p per litre at time of press) is in part to blame for the number of cars on the road.

While Müller enjoys the convenience of Abu Dhabi's city life, she admits that there is less sense of history. "I used to love roaming around the

Buying guide

Müller's verdict . . .

Pros

- Abu Dhabi is set to become a cultural hub with the Louvre Abu Dhabi opening in 2015, Zayed National Museum in 2016 and Guggenheim Abu Dhabi in 2017
- Good wildlife and outdoor activities
- The gastronomic scene is superb

Cons

- Temperatures can reach 43C
- Terrible traffic jams

What you can buy for . . .

- **£200,000** A two-bedroom apartment in the Al Muneera neighbourhood with one en-suite bathroom and a private balcony
- **£500,000** A three-bedroom apartment in a 49-storey block by the Al Reem Island marina. The building complex has a gym and pool
- **£1m** A four-bedroom, four-bathroom property with a large garden, close to Saadiyat public beach

souks and traditional markets in Qatar, which I miss doing now," she says. The weather can also be problematic. "I really think sunshine lightens your mood, but I do sometimes wish you could turn the temperature down and I sometimes miss the rain and the snow."

Müller has not lived in her native Germany since leaving 13 years ago, but speaks fondly of her upbringing. "I was born in Berlin but my parents moved just outside, to a town called Bernau bei Berlin, when I was 13. I still went to school in the capital, however, and spent all my spare time there."

Cooking played an intrinsic part in her life when growing up. "As kids we started baking really early, when we could barely see over the table. I remember the first time I properly cooked: my parents had gone for a walk and while they were out I called a school friend, saying, 'I want to cook lunch and this is how I think I should do it . . . Can you check with your mother that sounds right?'" When my parents came back, a traditional lunch was ready: meat, vegetables, potatoes and meat loaf . . . it had all gone to plan, tasted good and from there cooking became a really big passion."

Müller does not feel German cuisine has influenced her own style of cooking. Rather she attributes much of her success to a "German way of thinking".

"The way I was trained was to be incredibly organised, and everything down to the salt and pepper needed to be in its right place. I think that has really helped me in my career and it's definitely how I train others to work."

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