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# 'It was born to be a champion': How Dubai chocolate conquered the world

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**Invented to satiate pregnancy cravings, Dubai chocolate is a rare combination of creativity, flavours and social media success that has broken all industry records.**

It was a cold, damp evening in Munich in December 2024, but the festive tunes and the twinkling fairy lights at the Marienplatz *Christkindlmarkt* (Christmas market) lifted my spirits. With a mug of *glühwein* (hot mulled wine) in hand, I made my way to the candy stall to get my usual supply of German Christmas cookies. But I stopped in my tracks when I realised that the longest queue was not for *lebkuchen* (gingerbread biscuits baked for Christmas) or the traditional stollen fruit bread, but for a new kid on the block: Dubai chocolate.

That was my first encounter with the viral chocolate in a land far from its birthplace. But by then, Dubai chocolate had already become a global sensation: a rich, sticky and unapologetically extra chocolate bar that had shattered industry records, won millions of hearts and was spreading like wildfire across the world.

A decadent milk chocolate bar filled with silky pistachio cream, earthy tahini and crunchy shards of knafeh pastry, the original Dubai chocolate was launched by Dubai-based **FIX Dessert Chocolatier** in 2022 when its British Egyptian founder, Sarah Hamouda, had an urge to create something unique to satisfy her pregnancy cravings for knafeh and pistachio. FIX called their creation "Can't Get Knafeh Of It".

Can't Get Knafeh Of It took the world by storm when TikTok influencer Maria Vehera posted a rapturous video of herself trying the chocolate bar inside her car in December 2023. The video quickly went viral, attracting more than 125 million views and scores of fans around the world who were willing to do anything to grab a bite. The bar became a craze and was promptly christened "Dubai chocolate".

In an interview with the BBC earlier this year, Yezen Alani, co-founder of FIX, described the international spotlight as "flattering and humbling". However, despite FIX's plans for global expansion, its Can't Get Knafeh Of It bar remains solely available in the UAE, pushing independent chocolatiers and multinational brands such as Lindt and Ülker to mimic the original and produce their own versions to meet global demand. These imitations, also known as "Dubai chocolate", have inundated supermarkets and neighbourhood bodegas all over the world.

Today, Dubai chocolate can be found everywhere, from the online shelves of UAE's food delivery apps and the brimming counters of Istanbul's sweet shops to the packed

aisles of London's Lidl stores and the chaotic alleyways of Mumbai's flea markets. Global demand continues to skyrocket, resulting in worldwide stockouts and an international pistachio shortage. It has spawned waitlists at chocolate counters across Europe and the United States and inspired limited-edition collaborations with major brands like Shake Shack and Starbucks. Supermarkets have begun rationing Dubai chocolate, and people have been caught smuggling the prized bars. In short, the Dubai chocolate craze has shaken the global chocolate industry.

This has opened up a whole new market for artisan confectioners worldwide, including the renowned Maison Samadi in London. Maison Samadi, a UK chocolatier with roots in Lebanon dating to 1872, was the first to introduce their version of the viral Dubai chocolate bars, named "Dubai Viral Style Chocolate" in London. For Nabil Chehab, business development director at Maison Samadi, making Dubai Viral Style Chocolate was a natural segue in their chocolate-making journey. "We were already working on our heritage collection when we discovered the viral Dubai chocolate. It fitted perfectly because it combined a beloved Middle Eastern dessert, the knafeh, which was a tribute to the Samadi family heritage, with chocolate, our core expertise," says Chehab.

## World's Table

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Chehab tells me that the demand for their Dubai Viral Style Chocolate bars has far exceeded their expectations, likely due to the interesting concept behind it. "It's remarkable how the FIX team came up with this innovative idea of having a 'dessert in a chocolate bar' that has now become more enjoyable and satisfying than just a regular chocolate bar," enthuses Chehab. For centuries, food lovers have relished knafeh on its own. Now, Dubai chocolate allows them to sample this well-known dessert inside a chocolate shell, making the experience even more intriguing and exciting.

"The real success of Dubai chocolate stems from its texture," agrees leading Turkish food writer Aylin Öney Tan. "The velvety gooeyness of the pistachio cream doesn't just feel good on your palate; it is also visually attractive. Additionally, the crunchy texture of the *kadayif* pastry from the knafeh makes the dessert even more irresistible."

"Chocolates with a palpable crunch, such as Swiss Toblerone and Ferrero Rocher, have always done well in the market," explains Öney Tan. "Same with Dubai chocolate. Only in this case, the crunch goes an extra mile and primes the chocolate bar for social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram." As Vehera bites into the paint-splattered chocolate bar in her TikTok video, decadent pistachio cream oozes out and crunchy ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) sounds fill the foreground, making it a clear social media winner.

However, "although Dubai chocolate's instant growth has been fuelled largely by social media, the exclusivity of the original bar has kept the interest going," says Monique Naval, senior research analyst at Euromonitor International. The original Can't Get Knafeh Of It bar is only available online at 14:00 and 17:00 through online food delivery app Deliveroo in the UAE. FIX produces around 500 bars every day, and they sell out fast. The limited availability, both temporal and geographical, creates a **fear of missing out**, further increasing interest and demand.

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*“ It is the perfect amalgamation of taste, texture, indulgence and nostalgia. It was born to be a champion – Nabil Chehab*

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"Having Dubai in the name also adds to the chocolate's popularity and hype," says Naval. When people think of Dubai, they think of lavish hotels, glitzy malls, luxurious cars and gold-dusted desserts. Similar "feelings of indulgence drive the success of Dubai chocolate," she adds.

Beyond its viral fame, Dubai chocolate's resonance also lies in its deep Middle Eastern roots – tapping into family traditions of sharing sweets, gifting edible treats and the nostalgic flavours of knafeh and pistachios woven into daily life across the region. For Chehab, the connection runs deep.

"When my wife's great-grandfather, Muhieddine Samadi, started Al Samadi Sweets in Beirut in 1872, knafeh was one of the first sweets he ever sold," he reminisces. "I grew up in Beirut. As a kid, I remember taking the famous Lebanese shared taxi to Al Samadi Sweets daily, picking up a plate of knafeh for breakfast and eating it on my way to my father's shop. Little did I know [at that time] that I would be marrying Samadi's lovely great-granddaughter," he adds, with a twinkle in his eyes.

In an interview with Arabian Business last year, Hamouda said, "I wanted the FIX experience to be different. I wanted people, from that first bite, to relive moments of their past." And for many fans around the world, that first bite delivers exactly what Hamouda intended: an edible journey back to bustling Middle Eastern souks, where merchants sell delicious local sweets and the air is dense with the aroma of pistachios.

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"Sixty-eight percent of the world's consumers want to experience cultures other than their own and that includes a willingness and desire to try new flavours and ingredients," explains Naval. Pistachios – a Middle Eastern staple – are riding this wave too, billed as the **next big seasonal flavour globally**, and appearing in everything from lattes to liqueurs.

At the same time, **Middle Eastern tourism is booming** and Dubai has emerged as a culinary destination in its own right, with some visitors **flying in** just to taste the viral chocolate firsthand. What began as a simple chocolate bar in a Dubai dessert shop has evolved into a global sensation.

"I am not surprised," says Chehab, reflecting on the chocolate's meteoric rise. "It is the perfect amalgamation of taste, texture, indulgence and nostalgia. It was born to be a champion."

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