



THE GANNET

souking up a storm

Marrakech, the city that beguiled Yves Saint Laurent in the 1960s, remains a magnet for fashionistas to this day – but has its famed gastronomy kept pace?

For any self-respecting fashion designer, a celebrity to inspire their work is de rigueur – Hubert de Givenchy and Audrey Hepburn, Jean Paul Gaultier and Madonna, Marc Jacobs and Sofia Coppola – but it is rare that an entire city can be described as a muse.

Marrakech is that rarity. The late Yves Saint Laurent's obsession with the Red City began in 1966: fascinated by its light and colours, its souks and mosaics, he bought a house and two villas there, and lovingly restored the Jardin Majorelle, one of the city's most visited attractions.

The muse now has a *musée*. The Yves Saint Laurent Museum, adjacent to the gardens and featuring thousands of sketches, *objets d'art*, accessories and items of clothing from the YSL archive, opened last October, lending further lustre to the love affair between the designer and the city. And Marrakech inspires to this day, as a trawl through the modern design ateliers in the medina will confirm.

Has the city's famed gastronomy kept pace? Paul Bocuse once named Moroccan

as one of the world's three great cuisines (Chinese and – *naturellement* – French were the others) but visiting gourmets often tire of traditional restaurant fare:

Tihane is like haggis without the stodge

“tagine fatigue”, you might call it. The antidote is dinner at Le Trou au Mur (pictured), the first restaurant from English hotelier James Wix, the man behind the neighbouring

Riad Farnatchi. It is the most exciting place I have eaten in Marrakech.

Not that it is modernist – far from it. The first-floor dining room is an

homage to the craftsmen of the souk – typically Moroccan rugs and mirrors, fine plasterwork, black and white chevron floor tiling on the floor – while the traditional clay oven is responsible for superb mechoui: various cuts of lamb, cooked slowly with aubergines, carrots, peppers and warm, gentle spices until meltingly tender and richly fragrant.

The menu takes much of its inspiration from the kind of classic, home-cooked dishes whose recipes are written in old exercise books and passed down from mother to daughter. You will struggle to find the following on any other Marrakech menu, apart from the occasional stall in Saint Laurent's beloved Djemaa el Fna night market: tihane (spleen), rather like haggis without the stodge and beautifully sauced with olive, sesame, preserved lemon and yoghurt; or berkoukesh, a homely, delicious kind of tomato-rich couscous, cooked like a risotto.

For the fainter of stomach, there are “international” dishes too – try the Berber shepherd's pie: strips of supremely tender lamb topped with excellent mash – and the wine list features some terrific Moroccan vintages. Most importantly, however, guests can order just one or two courses should they wish; the food arrives promptly, delivered by charming staff; and there is a gratifying absence of belly dancers. Sometimes it takes an outsider to realise the uniqueness of a very special place. Yves Saint Laurent was one: for foodlovers, James Wix is another. **BILL KNOTT**