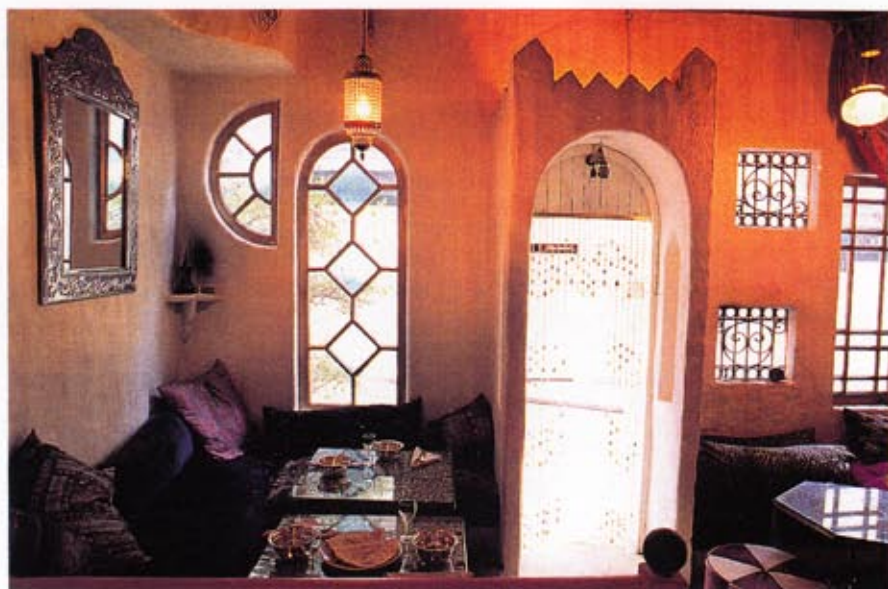


# NOSHING WITH NICHOLE



Nichole Garnaut calls it "simple," but those who have spent any length of time in the Territory realize that the 97 Group has created a concept that is far from straightforward; instead it has established an institution that has taken the restaurant industry in Hong Kong by storm.

It is a constant frenzy of activity and entertainment plus a flood of new ideas that keeps Mecca 97, Post 97 and Club 97 buzzing; cabaret shows, performance art, comedians and singers are all on the menu.

One could be forgiven, therefore, for assuming that customers frequent 97's establishments for the ambience and entertainment, rather than on a quest for fine food. However, manager and patron of the 97 Group Nichole Garnaut declares, "Happily we can say that's not the case." Not only does the atmosphere seem to be just what the public wants but so too does the cuisine. Award winning head chef Jennifer Grieve is in charge of the food in all three venues and has worked with the 97 Group for two years, during which time she has constantly refined the menu to cater for diners' changing demands. Re-

Through its insatiable energy, the 97 Group maintains a unique position — one step ahead of the rest.

By Philippa Patton

nowned throughout town for her breakfast grill-ups, it seems ironic that Grieve serves so many light, simple dishes at Post 97, but as she points out, the taste of the nineties is towards more healthy, vegetarian dishes. "Fresh food is my basic ingredient," she says. Cuisine is predominantly Mediterranean, with a particular bias towards Italy, where Grieve made a recent visit.

Post 97 caters for everybody's edible urges: "We can accommodate anybody at any time," says Grieve. With round-the-clock service on weekends, customers can tuck into substantial

main courses in the evening, tasty snacks in the early hours, through to eggs Benedict for Sunday brunch. There is even a hearty soul brunch serving southern fried chicken for those who have had a serious night on the town. Post 97 is a venue as popular with locals as it is with expats.

The ambience in Mecca 97 is far from European, with its richly colored floor cushions and Middle-Eastern drapes. It was the first Middle-Eastern restaurant to open in Hong Kong and Garnaut describes its success as "my biggest surprise;" she envisaged having far greater difficulty establishing such an alternative venue and cuisine. However, it was a sellout from the start and now, even at lunch time, Mecca 97 is a crowd puller with a reasonably priced five-course buffet which includes a choice of dips, salads, main courses and Middle-Eastern pastries. "Value for money, that's always high on our list of priorities," states Garnaut.

Breaking into new pastures has always been 97's forte, and they are on the verge of doing it again by opening an outlet in Quarry Bay. In a relatively unexplored area, it is a brave step to take but as Garnaut says, "There is a large workforce in Quarry Bay during the day and vast residential areas to cater for in the evenings." Named Life A Space, the new restaurant will maintain many of the familiar 97 characteristics but its emphasis will be more towards a local market. Robert Wynne Parry will manage the restaurant and Jennifer Grieve will continue in her capacity as executive chef, working between Lan Kwai Fong and Quarry Bay, but an Asian head chef will be employed and the cuisine will be sixty percent western and forty percent Chinese. Nichole Garnaut is clearly very excited about the location, covering over seven thousand square feet in the Aik San Factory Building. Of the latest venture Garnaut declares, "We're going to have to be good." She, like the rest of Hong Kong, however, are left in little doubt she will be just that.