



Food as a Bridge: Gastro-diplomacy,  
Gastro-tourism, and investment in the UK–  
Saudi Relationship

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# SAUDI BRITISH JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

## **Introduction**

A shared meal is one of the oldest instruments of relationship building, and it remains among the most reliable to break the ice and find common ground. Long before a contract is drafted or a memorandum signed, parties from different countries tend to meet across a table, and the character of that table shapes the trust on which later commercial decisions rest. This publication examines how food and dining are coming to influence cultural understanding, tourism, and inward investment across the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia, at a moment when both the appetite for the exchange and the formal architecture supporting it have matured considerably.

The argument that follows is organised into three connected movements, each leading into the one after it. The first establishes why national cuisine has become a recognised instrument of soft power, drawing on the academic literature that has formalised the study of culinary diplomacy over the past two decades. The second turns to Saudi Arabia, where the ambitions of Vision 2030, the work of the Culinary Arts Commission, and the rapid development of a fine-dining sector have placed gastronomy near the centre of the Kingdom's tourism and cultural strategy. The third addresses the commercial dimension, including the design of dining experiences that do not depend on alcohol, the etiquette that British firms encounter in the Saudi market, and the investment opportunities now open to operators, designers, educators, and experience studios. The article then closes with a case study of Al Maidah, the multisensory showcase of Saudi cuisine developed by Kitchen Theory with the Culinary Arts Commission, followed by a closing reflection from Chef Jozef Youssef. The case study demonstrates in a single project the themes that the earlier sections set out in principle.

## **The Case for Food in Trade and Diplomacy**

The intellectual foundation for treating cuisine as a diplomatic asset rests on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power, which describes the capacity of a state to obtain the outcomes it wants through attraction rather than payment or coercion.<sup>1</sup> Where hard power operates through inducement and threat, soft power works through the appeal of a country's culture, values, and ways of living. Food therefore sits comfortably within this thinking because it offers foreign audiences an experience that is familiar, social, and immediately enjoyable rather than abstract or indeed adversarial.

Over the past two decades, scholarship has refined this insight into a distinct field with its own vocabulary and points of internal debate. Paul Rockower, who did much to popularise the vocabulary, separated two related practices. Culinary diplomacy describes the use of food within official diplomatic functions, where a state hosts visiting dignitaries and uses cuisine to set the tone of formal engagement.

Gastrodiplomacy, by contrast, is a broader public diplomacy effort directed at foreign publics, communicating a nation's culinary culture in a more diffuse manner to audiences who may never enter an embassy.<sup>2</sup> Sam Chapple-Sokol offered the definition that the field has largely settled on, describing culinary diplomacy as the use of food and cuisine as an instrument to create cross-cultural understanding, with the aim of improving interaction and cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Juyan Zhang subsequently mapped and compared the national campaigns then in operation, providing the comparative framework against which later programmes, including any Saudi initiative, can be measured.<sup>4</sup>

Food in itself is noted, perhaps intuitively, to act as a perception shifter, adjusting the views of the individual consuming the food in real time. A survey study published in *Public Diplomacy Magazine* found that a majority of respondents reported that eating a country's food had improved their opinion of that country, and that a large share would consider travelling to a place on the strength of its cuisine.<sup>5</sup> The mechanism behind this effect is straightforward, since food communicates heritage and regional identity, requires no specialist knowledge to enjoy, and provides a setting in which conversation flows with less friction than other situations, such as a meeting room. For commercial relationships, where confidence between unfamiliar parties is a consistent hurdle, this is particularly important as the meal lowers the threshold of first contact, and the hospitality that surrounds it signals the values a prospective partner brings to the relationship based on their culture.<sup>6</sup> Dining is therefore a natural way to introduce British audiences to Saudi culture, and an equally natural way to prepare British visitors for the customs they will meet before they arrive in the Kingdom.

## **Gastrodiplomacy in Practice**

Several governments have pursued gastrodiplomacy deliberately and at scale, and their programmes offer a tested template that Saudi Arabia is now in a position to adapt. The clearest example is Thailand, where, beginning in 2002, the government set out to raise the number of Thai restaurants overseas and to standardise their quality. The programme combined state-backed financing for nationals opening restaurants abroad, including loans channelled through the Export-Import Bank of Thailand, with the Thai SELECT certification, which marks the authenticity of Thai restaurants internationally. The number of Thai restaurants worldwide rose from a few thousand at the programme's launch to more than seventeen thousand today, with the United States hosting the largest concentration, and tourism to Thailand grew substantially across the same period.<sup>7</sup> The campaign is widely credited with making Thai cuisine one of the most recognisable in the world, an outcome achieved through patient and deliberate state coordination rather than any single intervention.

South Korea pursued a similar strategy with its programme to promote Korean cuisine, or *hansik*, internationally. Announced as a national plan in 2008 and pushed from the following year, the effort tied food promotion to the wider Korean cultural wave known as *Hallyu*, which carried Korean music, television, and film to global audiences.<sup>8</sup> The government created a dedicated institution to run the campaign and set ambitious targets for the worldwide expansion of Korean restaurants. The most striking of those targets, a very large increase in overseas establishments within a fixed period, was not met, and it is therefore more accurate to present the strategy as a statement of ambition than as a delivered, tangible result. The broader effort nonetheless coincided with a marked rise in the global profile of Korean food, assisted considerably by the cultural products that travelled alongside it.

Peru built its reputation through a combination of state branding and a cohesive community of chefs. The national promotion agency began a dedicated culinary push in the late 2000s, and the Peruvian Society of Gastronomy, founded the following year by chefs including Gastón Acurio, gave the movement its necessary organisational weight. The *Mistura* food festival in Lima grew into one of the

largest culinary gatherings in Latin America before it ceased after 2017, and leading Lima restaurants secured places on international rankings that drew global attention to Peruvian cooking.<sup>9</sup> The Peruvian case illustrates both the potential of gastrodiploacy and its fragility, since momentum that depends on festivals and individual figures can fade when those anchors are withdrawn.

Japan took a different route, securing institutional recognition for its food culture as a whole. In December 2013, washoku, the traditional dietary culture of the Japanese, was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, one of a small number of culinary inscriptions and among the few to recognise an entire food culture rather than a single dish.<sup>10</sup> Japan has since supported overseas promotion through schemes that certify Japanese restaurants and cooking skills abroad, reinforcing and ensuring the authenticity of Japanese cuisine as it spreads. The common thread across all four cases is that cuisine became national-brand equity through coordinated effort, combining authenticity certification, festivals, recognisable culinary figures, heritage recognition, and tourism marketing. Saudi Arabia now possesses each of these components, and the following section sets out how they are being assembled. As was noted previously, ensuring that the anchors are fixed and sustainable is critical to maintain the momentum and reach that self-sustaining point at which global society at large is familiar with the intricacies of Saudi Arabian food and culture, and understands its unique place amongst wider global culinary traditions.

### **Saudi Arabia as an Emerging Gastronomic Destination**

The transformation of Saudi tourism over the past several years is key as the backdrop against which the Kingdom's culinary ambitions become tangible. Saudi Arabia recorded an estimated 122 million inbound and domestic visitors in 2025, a rise of around 5% on the previous year, with total tourism spending exceeding SAR 300 billion, equivalent to roughly USD 81 billion.<sup>11</sup> The original Vision 2030 target of 100 million annual visitors was reached in 2023, well ahead of schedule, and the goal has since been revised upward to 150 million by the end of the decade. Tourism contributes close to 5% of GDP at present on the Ministry of Tourism's direct-contribution basis, with broader methodologies placing the share higher, against a target of 10% by 2030, and the wider Vision 2030 programme has lifted non-oil activity to a majority share of economic output while drawing record levels of foreign direct investment and a growing number of international companies establishing regional headquarters in the Kingdom.<sup>12</sup>

Within this strategy, gastronomy has been given its own institutional home through the Culinary Arts Commission. This Commission was established in 2020 as one of eleven cultural commissions under the Ministry of Culture, and it holds the mandate to preserve, develop, and promote Saudi cuisine.<sup>13</sup> Its work to document the national culinary record, gathered under the heading of the Kingdom's culinary legacy, has assembled a substantial body of traditional recipes since the initiative began in 2021, both to preserve the sensory and cultural character of Saudi cooking and to provide a foundation for a food-centred tourism sector. The Commission also stages the Saudi Feast Food Festival, first held in Jeddah in 2021 and now an annual fixture, which brings the regional diversity of Saudi cooking to a broad public.<sup>14</sup> The Kingdom designated 2022 the Year of Saudi Coffee, signalling the cultural weight it attaches to its hospitality traditions and what particular aspects of food and beverages hold particular weight.

The cultural weight that the Kingdom attaches to its cuisine is recognised well beyond its own borders. Several elements of Saudi culinary heritage appear on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage lists, among them Arabic coffee as a symbol of generosity, the majlis as a social and cultural space, the date palm, and the cultivation of Khawlani coffee beans.<sup>15</sup> The dishes and ingredients that carry the national

story are also well defined. For example, Kabsa, a spiced rice dish prepared with meat and aromatics including black lime, cardamom, cinnamon, and saffron, serves as the national dish, accompanied by jareesh, mandi, dates, and the cardamom-scented Arabic coffee known as qahwa.<sup>16</sup> These are the materials from which a distinctive national cuisine is being presented to domestic and foreign audiences alike.

The commercial dimension of these developments is already visible, and indicates a market prepared to expand in both the scale and composition of the sector. The Saudi foodservice market was valued at approximately USD 30 billion in 2025 and is forecast to approach USD 45 billion by 2030, with full-service restaurants representing a substantial share of that total.<sup>17</sup> The Kingdom was home to more than 132,000 registered food establishments as of 2023, the largest concentration of them in Riyadh Province, which gives some sense of the base on which this growth is building.<sup>18</sup> Valuations of the market differ between research houses, so any single figure should be read alongside the methodology behind it, yet the direction of growth is consistent across them. The most prominent marker of the sector's maturation arrived with the inaugural Michelin Guide Saudi Arabia for 2026, launched in partnership with the Culinary Arts Commission, which named 52 restaurants across Riyadh, Jeddah, and AlUla, including 11 Bib Gourmand awards, with star distinctions to follow in the 2027 edition.<sup>19</sup> Internationally recognised chefs have entered the market, among them Daniel Boulud and Michael Mina, joining a hospitality pipeline created by the giga-projects.<sup>20</sup> Developments at NEOM, Red Sea Global, Diriyah, and Qiddiya carry significant food, beverage, and hospitality components, with Diriyah alone planned to include more than one hundred restaurants, supplying the physical capacity that earlier national gastrodiploacy programmes often lacked.<sup>21</sup> This ensures that in the locations most likely to be visited by tourists, Saudi Arabia is already somewhat prepared to manage demand and, in the case of Diriyah for example, food is pre-planned as central to the pull and viability of the giga projects.

### **Carrying Saudi Dining Abroad and Adapting to it at Home**

The exchange, of course, runs in two directions, and each calls for preparation, a clear plan, and clear expectations. In the outward direction, Saudi Arabia has begun to carry its cuisine to international audiences in this deliberate and organised way. The Culinary Arts Commission operates a dedicated international exchange and food-diplomacy programme, and its "Taste of Saudi Culture" pavilion appeared at the Taste of London festival in Regent's Park for three consecutive years to 2025 and returned again from 17 to 21 June 2026, welcoming visitors with Saudi coffee and introducing dishes such as jareesh, haneeth, balila, and mutabbaq through live cooking by Saudi chefs.<sup>22</sup> The same pavilion concept has travelled to Sirha Lyon, one of the largest professional gastronomy fairs in Europe, placing Saudi producers and chefs in front of an international trade audience. These appearances follow the gastrodiploacy template described earlier, presenting national cuisine to foreign publics in a convivial and accessible setting, and they give British audiences a first encounter with Saudi food without the need to travel.

In the inward direction, an understanding of dining custom is part of basic commercial competence for British firms entering the Saudi market. Hospitality in the Kingdom is structured around recognisable practices. The majlis serves as a communal space for receiving guests, meals are frequently shared from a common platter, food is taken with the right hand, and the offering of dates alongside qahwa follows an established sequence in which the server pours from the dallah, serves the most senior guest first, and refills the small handleless cup until the guest signals that enough has been taken by gently shaking the cup.<sup>23</sup> Generosity is expressed through abundance, and of course, halal requirements apply throughout. None of this is difficult to learn. A visitor who arrives unprepared risks giving unintended offence, while a visitor who arrives briefed conveys respect before a word of business is spoken. Cross-

cultural hospitality training and structured briefing therefore carry a practical commercial value for firms preparing to operate in the Kingdom, and they form one of the areas in which British educators and consultants can contribute directly.

The technical knowledge that allows a culinary experience to communicate culture across borders is a discipline in its own right, and it is one in which Kitchen Theory has particular expertise. The following account of multisensory experience design and gastrophysics is contributed directly by Chef Jozef Youssef of Kitchen Theory.

Gastrophysics is the study of how people experience food and drink through the senses, the mind, and the surrounding environment. Flavour is not created by taste alone. It is shaped by aroma, colour, texture, sound, temperature, memory, expectation, social setting, and storytelling.

In practical terms, multisensory experience design asks how every part of a meal can support the same idea. A projection can establish place. A soundscape can create mood. An aroma can trigger memory. A texture or service ritual can connect the diner physically to a cultural practice. When these elements are carefully aligned, the meal becomes more than a sequence of dishes; it becomes a narrative that guests can see, hear, smell, touch, and taste.

For Kitchen Theory, understanding people's sensory, psychological, and cultural relationship with food is what allows us to design experiences that go beyond great food or sensory spectacle. The aim is to tell stories and shape experiences around meaningful narratives, allowing people to connect with culture, memory, place, and one another through food. Delicious food remains at the centre, but the wider experience is designed to make the meal more immersive, memorable, emotionally resonant, and educational - this is what we call edutainment.

The scientific basis for this approach has been developed over many years in collaboration with Professor Charles Spence of the University of Oxford, whose work on the multisensory perception of flavour has documented how colour, sound, aroma, shape, and tableware systematically alter the way food and drink are experienced.<sup>24</sup> The practical implication for cultural communication is considerable, because if flavour is shaped by setting, ritual, and expectation as much as by ingredients, then a carefully designed experience can carry a culture's heritage, hospitality, and values to an audience that has never encountered them, which is precisely the task that gastrodiplomacy sets.

## **Designing for Alcohol-Free Dining**

Because Saudi Arabia is an alcohol-free market, and because a great many SBJBC events follow the same standard, the design of dining experiences that do not rely on alcohol deserves dedicated treatment. British and wider Western dining culture has long treated wine and spirits as part of the experience itself, and an event that removes them without thought risks feeling diminished to audiences accustomed to their presence. The more useful question is how an event can remain appealing to those audiences while treating the absence of alcohol as a design decision rather than a constraint. The following account of that discipline is contributed directly by Chef Jozef Youssef of Kitchen Theory.

Alcohol-free dining should not be understood as the absence of wine or spirits. At its best, it is a positive design discipline in its own right. A successful non-alcoholic pairing can work through acidity, sweetness, bitterness, spice, aroma, texture, temperature, and ritual. These are the same tools that make any pairing feel complete, balanced, and memorable.

This is particularly relevant in the UK–Saudi context. In Saudi hospitality, coffee, dates, spices, herbs, scent, and generosity already carry deep cultural meaning. They do not need alcohol to create ceremony or significance. In Al Maidah, Kitchen Theory explored this through the Mushroubat Apothecary, where guests were served non-alcoholic drinks inspired by medieval Arabian recipes in a space designed to engage touch, sight, smell, and taste. The Saudi Coffee Sensory Gallery then extended this idea through sound domes, aroma installations, and guided date tasting, showing how an alcohol-free experience can still have complexity, theatre, and cultural depth.

This also speaks to a wider shift in the UK and other Western markets, where attitudes towards alcohol are changing. The rise of low- and no-alcohol drinking reflects a broader interest in health, wellbeing, moderation, and more conscious forms of socialising. Reducing alcohol consumption is increasingly seen by many people as part of a healthier lifestyle, while excessive alcohol consumption is widely associated with both physical and mental health risks. As fewer social occasions are centred solely on "dinner and drinks", audiences are looking for more stimulating, memorable, and engaging experiences to fill that same social space.

For Saudi cultural and business events, this shift creates an important opportunity. Alcohol-free hospitality does not need to be framed only through religious or cultural restriction; it can also be positioned through wellbeing, inclusivity, creativity, and contemporary guest experience. A Saudi event can confidently choose not to serve alcohol while still offering guests something sophisticated, generous, and sensorially rich.

For diplomatic and business settings, this matters. Treating non-alcoholic drinks as an afterthought can make some guests feel less considered. Designing them with the same care as a wine pairing creates a more inclusive table, while also opening a richer conversation about culture, hospitality, health, and sensory experience.

The market evidence supports this reading of consumer behaviour. Research from IWSR records that the no-alcohol and low-alcohol segment grew strongly in the United Kingdom across 2022 and 2023 and is forecast to continue expanding through 2028, with much of the category's innovation arriving through zero-proof variants of established brands, a clear sign that quality rather than mere abstinence is driving the category.<sup>25</sup> This shift extends well beyond younger drinkers, since research by KAM found that around three-quarters of British drinkers report actively moderating their alcohol intake to some degree, a figure that has risen year on year and equates to tens of millions of adults.<sup>26</sup> Saudi Arabia remains an alcohol-free market, with prohibition firmly in place for the general public and confirmed for major forthcoming events.<sup>27</sup> The convergence of a maturing global appetite for sophisticated non-alcoholic dining with the Kingdom's established prohibition means that alcohol-free hospitality aligns with a leading edge of contemporary fine dining rather than standing apart from it, and the science of flavour perception developed by Professor Charles Spence and applied by Kitchen Theory provides the means to make such hospitality genuinely premium.<sup>24</sup>

## **The Investment Dimension**

The commercial opportunity that follows from these developments has been sharpened by a significant change in the trading relationship. The United Kingdom and the Gulf Cooperation Council concluded a Free Trade Agreement in London on 20 May 2026, making the United Kingdom the first G7 country to secure a comprehensive trade deal with the bloc.<sup>28</sup> The agreement is expected to remove tariffs worth several hundred million pounds a year on UK goods exported to the Gulf, much of it on the first day of implementation, and to add billions of pounds annually to the UK economy over the long term. It covers

goods, services, financial services, digital trade, investment, government procurement, and the movement of people, and it includes provisions on professional mobility and the recognition of qualifications that bear directly on hospitality and professional services. The agreement remains subject to signature and ratification before it enters into force.

The current bilateral relationship with Saudi Arabia provides further context. Total trade in goods and services between the United Kingdom and Saudi Arabia stood at £16.6 billion in the twelve months to September 2025, with UK exports of £13.2 billion weighted heavily toward services, where the United Kingdom recorded a surplus of £7.0 billion over the period.<sup>29</sup> Both governments have stated an ambition to raise bilateral trade to £30 billion by 2030. For British firms, the appetite created by the Kingdom's drive to build a hospitality and tourism economy reaches well beyond restaurant operators and into the larger ecosystem. Designers, experience studios, food and beverage consultants, and hospitality educators all have a part to play in a market that is being built quickly and to a high standard, and the entry of international chefs and hotel groups sends a clear signal that the trajectory is already established.<sup>20</sup> This appetite is matched by the physical scale of the build-out. Saudi Arabia held around 167,500 hotel keys as of the first quarter of 2025, and total hotel supply is projected to reach 362,000 keys by 2030 as part of a hospitality transformation valued at roughly USD 110 billion, with the large majority of new supply concentrated in the luxury, upper-upscale, and upscale segments that tend to commission experience-led dining.<sup>30</sup> The provisions on services and mobility within the new trade agreement lower the practical barriers to participation for precisely these categories of British expertise.

### **Case Study: Kitchen Theory and Al Maidah**

The themes set out across this publication are brought together in a single project, which allows the argument to rest on a worked example rather than on abstract reasoning. The following account of Al Maidah is again contributed directly by Chef Jozef Youssef of Kitchen Theory.

Al Maidah was a ten-day multisensory and immersive dining experience developed by Kitchen Theory in collaboration with the Culinary Arts Commission under the Saudi Ministry of Culture and presented as a flagship event at Saudi Feast in 2023. The project set out to communicate Saudi Arabia's culinary heritage, regional biodiversity, hospitality traditions, and gastronomic future to a domestic and international audience through the lens of gastrophysics.

The experience was designed as a journey rather than a conventional dinner. Guests first entered the Mushroubat Apothecary, a modern Arabesque space serving non-alcoholic beverages inspired by medieval Arabian recipes. This was followed by a Saudi Coffee Sensory Gallery, where sound, aroma, and date-tasting installations introduced guests to the rituals and sensory language of Saudi hospitality. The journey culminated in a six-course chef's table, with each course linked to a specific cultural theme including poetry, calligraphy, sustainability, heritage, and innovation.

Kitchen Theory's role was not to reproduce Saudi dishes in a literal way, but to work with Saudi chefs, artisans, scientists, and cultural experts to reimagine Saudi culinary culture through contemporary fine dining. Courses incorporated local ingredients, regional flavour references, storytelling, projection mapping, soundscapes, scent, and tactile rituals. Shared courses and dishes eaten by hand reflected Saudi customs of generosity and communal dining, while sensory details such as Taif rose-scented towels and the final burning of bokhour helped anchor the experience in culturally resonant hospitality.

As a case study, Al Maidah demonstrates how culinary diplomacy can move beyond presentation into participation. Guests were invited not only to taste Saudi Arabia, but to encounter its regional diversity, rituals, stories, and values through all the senses. In doing so, the project offers a practical example of

how gastronomy can act as a platform for cultural expression, professional development, and international dialogue.

The significance of Al Maidah is reinforced by independent scholarship. The experience is documented in a peer-reviewed paper, "Gastrodiplomacy Through Gastrophysics: A Multisensory Showcase of Saudi Arabian Cuisine," by Jozef Youssef, Mawadah W. Bajrai, and Charles Spence, published in the *International Journal of Gastronomy and Food Science*.<sup>31</sup> The paper records that the apothecary's non-alcoholic beverages were developed with Professor Daniel Newman of Durham University, a specialist in Arabic studies, and that the sensory gallery was led by the Saudi sensory and consumer scientist Mashaal Alhumaidan, with each of the six courses linked to a facet of Saudi culture. It concludes that the project exemplifies how gastrodiplomacy can be enacted through experiential gastronomy, engaging the intellect and emotions of diners while promoting cross-cultural understanding.<sup>31</sup> The case study therefore rests on measured, evidenced ground rather than on promotional material, and it gives SBJBC members a concrete account of how a culinary experience can carry both cultural and commercial weight.

The authority that Kitchen Theory brings to this work has been built over many years of practice at the meeting point of cuisine and academic research. The studio was founded by Jozef Youssef, who trained at The Connaught, The Dorchester, and The Fat Duck before turning to experimental and experience-led dining, and the studio has then worked with Professor Charles Spence for more than a decade to translate research in gastrophysics into multisensory dining.<sup>32</sup> That combination of culinary practice and academic enquiry is what allowed the studio to present a national culture to an international audience in a form that was both rigorous and emotionally resonant.

A closing reflection on the purpose of this work is offered by Chef Jozef Youssef of Kitchen Theory:

*"Food is one of the most immediate ways we encounter another culture. Before we understand the language, the history, or the politics of a place, we can understand something through its hospitality: how people welcome guests, what they serve first, what they share, what they scent the room with, and what memories they attach to particular flavours.*

*With Al Maidah, our responsibility was not simply to create a beautiful dinner. It was to listen carefully, work with Saudi chefs and cultural experts, and design an experience that allowed guests to feel the generosity, regional diversity, and imagination of Saudi cuisine. Multisensory design gives us tools to do that because it allows culture to be communicated through atmosphere, ritual, aroma, sound, touch, and taste. When those elements come together with respect and intention, food becomes a form of cultural communication."*

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