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EUROPE

## Marking Ramadan's End in a Big Way

By Don Duncan

Updated Sept. 9, 2010 12:01 a.m. ET

DAMASCUS—As Muslims prepare to celebrate Eid ul-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of the holy month of Ramadan, many restaurants across the Arab world boost their meat orders by a few crates. But every year, Damascus Gate restaurant—officially the world's biggest, in the outskirts of the Syrian capital—boosts its orders by the ton.

At 6,014 seats and occupying a seating area of 54,000 square meters, Damascus Gate holds the Guinness World Record for the largest restaurant in the world. And it is during Ramadan, which ends this week, and the festival of Eid that follows it, that the restaurant does its brisk trade.

During the month's dawn-to-dusk fasting, Damascus Gate remains sleepy. But once the sun sets, it springs to life with families and friends converging to break the fast together, in a meal called *iftar*. In a matter of 30 minutes, from around 7 p.m., Damascus Gate goes from no diners to full capacity.

"Normally in a day we have two tons of meat and 3½ tons of chicken," says restaurant manager Mohanned al-Samman, 25 years old. "Seafood, not so much," he says, adding with a grin, "when we say 'not so much,' we're talking half a ton."

Mr. al-Samman took over management of the restaurant in 2004 from his father, Shaker, a Syrian business tycoon based in Kuwait.

The Guinness accreditation process is rigorous and the criteria many, including total number of seats and a minimum space requirement between those seats. As a result, figures pertaining to the size of the establishment now roll off his tongue: "40,000 spoons, 40,000 knives. Over 100,000 plates. Each day we go through 2,500 bottles of water, 7,000 cans of Pepsi, two tons of lettuce."

The restaurant, which has mostly outdoor seating, features waterfalls, fountains of various shapes and sizes, and replicas of archaeological ruins inspired by Syria's ancient city of Palmyra.



During Eid, when tables can turn over four times in a night, the rolling population of Damascus Gate can swell to well over 20,000 in an evening.

"It's like we have our own independent state over here," Mr. Al-Samman says.

Handling these volumes is an army of 1,800 workers, 800 of whom work serving tables. "I know it's the biggest restaurant in the world, but that's not why I come here," says diner Mohammed Hussein el-Bash, 60, from Jordan. "I come because I'm very happy and comfortable here. And because it's the biggest restaurant, I know that whenever I come I'll be sure to find a table."

Write to Don Duncan at [wsje.weekend@wsj.com](mailto:wsje.weekend@wsj.com)

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