



Chefs prepare sushi at a high-end French sushi chain that opened the previous week in northern Tehran. — AFP photos



(Above below) A waitress takes a plate of sushi from the kitchen at a high-end French sushi chain that opened the previous week in northern Tehran.



Iranians order at a high-end French sushi chain that opened the previous week in northern Tehran.



Iranians stand outside a high-end French sushi chain.



A waitress takes a plate of sushi from the kitchen.



Iranians eat at a high-end French sushi chain.



An Iranian woman works behind the counter.



Iranians are served at a high-end French sushi chain.

FOREIGN FOOD CHAINS BRAVE RISKS FOR A BITE OF IRAN

'THINGS ARE CHANGING AT FULL-SPEED HERE. I'M VERY EXCITED TO BE A SPECTATOR TO ITS EVOLUTION'

For years, Iranians have had to put up with the likes of "Mash Donalds" and "Pizza Hat". Now real Western food franchises have finally arrived, but doing business in Iran is not for the faint-hearted. Despite strict international sanctions being eased under a nuclear deal with world powers last year, the Iranian economy remains bogged down by red tape and struggles to attract foreign investors. But a couple of European food franchises have decided the risks are worth taking for a taste of the estimated \$7 billion (six billion euros) Iranians spend in restaurants each year, and which local consultancy ILIA says will double in the next decade.

Spain's Telepizza opened its first outlet this month through an Iranian consortium that plans to pump 100 million euros into expanding nationwide. But one of the first Europeans to really get his hands dirty on the ground is 41-year-old French entrepreneur Amaury de la Serre, who bought the rights to launch Sushi Shop in Iran after falling in love with the country during a visit in 2013.

The first branch of the high-end French chain opened last week in a chic north Tehran neighborhood, marking the culmination of a bruising 18 months of work. "There's a strong government will to bring foreign capital and know-how here, but at the day-to-day administrative level, it's hell," de la Serre told AFP.

'No pain, no gain'

"Everything takes time, everything is complicated. It is very, very difficult to deal with customs. But no pain, no gain. And things are changing at full-speed here. I love this country and I'm very excited to be a spectator to its evolution." Getting the supply chains running was certainly complex—the restaurant uses 150 mostly local suppliers and must ship fresh fish from Norway three times a week. It took a year just to get the license to import Japanese sauces, and navigating Tehran's notorious real estate rackets was a saga in itself.

The government says it is trying to streamline its bureaucracy, but Iran actually fell three places in this year's ease of doing business rankings from the World Bank, down to 120 out of 190 countries. Still, some of the

biggest headaches are back in Europe, where banks are so afraid of US penalties that they freeze accounts at the merest whiff of a link to Iran.

"It's crazy. We went to the French Ministry of Economy and they gave us a list of all the banks that would agree to work with Iran. But when we called them, every single one said no," said de la Serre. Eventually he found a small private bank willing to handle his transactions because they have no links to the US.

Iran's ballistic missile program and what it called Tehran's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East. Conservatives in Iran still rail against Western "cultural infiltration", even if the time in 1994 when the first post-revolution McDonald's was burned to the ground two days after opening seems a distant memory.

Today, Iran's affluent middle class has largely rejected ideology and is hungry for foreign brands, while fast-food has spread like wildfire even in remote villages. And even



Iranians look at the menu at a high-end French sushi chain.

'Then Mr Trump arrived'

But while he remains bullish on Iran's economic prospects, there are enough storm clouds on the horizon to keep him cautious. "We wanted to launch several brands at once, but then Mr Trump arrived so we're taking the foot off the pedal a little," said de la Serre. The US president has worried would-be investors in Iran with his aggressive stance against the country.

Just this week, he announced new sanctions over

conservatives recognize the urgent need for jobs with unemployment at 12.5 percent, and far higher for young people. "Expansion in the fast-food sector is a job creator precisely where Iran needs it most," wrote Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, founder of the Europe-Iran Forum, in a recent briefing note. "After all, many of the world's greatest entrepreneurs got their start delivering pizzas." — AFP

In junta-ruled Thailand, critics turn to comedy

Dissent has been muted by Thailand's ruling generals since a 2014 coup. But there is one area where critical voices still have some space: humor. With political activity banned, internet censorship in force and activists and dissidents detained or summoned for "attitude adjustment", public discontent is being manifested in widely shared cartoons, internet memes, and parody music videos.

"Thais are becoming more open to what critics and humorists are saying about the junta and the military government," political satirist Winyu "John" Wongsurawat told Reuters. Winyu is the co-host of YouTube show "Shallow News in Depth", which uses humor to comment on politics.

Last week, Thai pop band Tattoo Color released a video for their single "Dictator Girl", which opens with a book titled "44

Rules" - a reference to Article 44, a measure that gives junta chief Prayuth Chan-ocha absolute power in the name of national security. "Dictator Girl" includes lyrics such as: "I must accept everything" and "there are no equal rights", not-so-subtle references to the ruling National Council for Peace and Order, which has broadly cowed opponents into silence.

"We're happy that people get it and try to interpret what we meant," Nittakarn Kaewpiyasawad, who directed the video, told Reuters. Also at the forefront of the trend is Facebook page, Kai Maew. Known for comic strips featuring prominent political figures, it has more than 350,000 followers.

It is produced anonymously.

In one of its most popular strips, Prayuth is depicted in a

tank - a nod to the junta's recent military spending - past a farmer struggling with falling commodity prices and a civilian who can't afford health care. Another Facebook page uses memes from the 2004 movie "Mean Girls" to tackle topics including a general election that has been pushed back several times.

"There is more talk, especially about the hypocrisy of the military government. There is laughter, but there is also an impact on people's feelings," said Winyu. Government spokesman Weerachon Sukhontapatipak warned against poking fun at the military government online because it could breach defamation and cybercrime laws.

"Before you do anything, please consider existing laws and regulations first," he said. In March, Veera Somkwamkid, an

activist and vocal coup critic, was charged over a mock poll that parodied the junta's theme song, "Returning Happiness to Thailand". There is also one area where comedy is always off limits. Thailand's monarchy is protected by one of the world's harshest laws against royal insult which says anyone who defames it can be punished with up to 15 years in prison for each offence.

Police have said they will target even those who look at online content critical of the royal family. — Reuters