

Newsworthy

The New York Times, Sunday, October 22, 1995

This unassuming Middle Eastern restaurant is a well-kept secret among neighborhood patrons - and for good reasons. The food is pleasing and inexpensive, servings are generous and the staff is hospitable. Excellent hummus (chickpea puree), falafel, baba gannouj (mashed smoky eggplant), tabouleh or stuffed grape leaves are a fine way to begin. Entrees include ouzi - or puffed phyllo filled with an aromatic mixture of rice, peas, raisins, almonds, chickpeas and cashews - and kebabs of lamb, beef, chicken and shrimp, all served with vegetables, rice and salad. Couscous is also featured with vegetables, chicken, beef or lamb. Here it is made with a light, tomato-based broth with stewed vegetables and Middle Eastern spices. (Diner's Journal: 5/17/91; revisited: 11/15/94)

Chow Choices

This West Village classic offers Middle Eastern food and belly dancing, a formula that is never to be missed by those who want to have a good time and don't mind making fools of themselves. Those who are not overly fond of spectacle with dinner may wish to select their seats carefully. (I opt for the far periphery.) The food is better than average, with a mix of Moroccan, Egyptian, and Eastern Mediterranean. Begin with the usual suspects: an unctuous hummus or a cucumber salad with a mint, yogurt, and garlic dressing. Be adventurous and try the fattoush, a salad of fresh greens with toasted pita bread. Then move on to the couscous or the King Farouk, a stuffed chicken breast obviously named for its size. By the time the music starts, you'll be ready to tap your feet. (Harris) The Village Voice

Middle Eastern Bargain

The Magic Carpet is one of those inconspicuous Middle Eastern restaurants in Greenwich Village that rarely get attention outside of their immediate neighborhood. But Magic Carpet certainly gets plenty there. And for good reason. The food is tasty, inexpensive and copious. Moreover, the staff is cheerful and accommodating.

You can start a dinner with excellent hummus (mashed chickpeas mixed with lemon juice, \$4.25) or baba gannouj (mashed seasoned eggplant, \$4.50). The entree list is extensive. One unusual and enticing dish is ouzi, which is puffed phyllo nearly the size of a rugby ball holding an aromatic assembly of rice, peas, raisins, almonds, chickpeas and cashews. (\$9.50). Of course, couscous is served, vegetable, chicken, lamb or beef (\$8.50 to \$9.50). I sampled the vegetarian version, and it was tasty but unconventional. The sauce was tomato based rather than made with meat juices, and no fiery harissa came with it. (Bryan Miller) The New York Times

It may be "a little frayed around the edges," but this Middle Eastern's "generous", "consistently delicious" food put it in contention for "best deal in the West Village"; weekend "belly dancing is a sight." ZAGATSURVEY 20th Anniversary Edition.

Counter Culture by Robert Sietsema

On the Lamb

Scooping up purplish raw meat in Bay Ridge

As the Ottoman Empire disintegrated in the 1880's the Levantine agricultural economy took a nose-dive and Syrian Maronite Christians flooded into New York. They brought with them their most famous poet, Kahlil Gibran, whose words ("Half of what I say is meaningless...") later inspired John Lennon to write "Julia." The immigrants established a bazaar around the corner of Rector and Washington in downtown Manhattan, abundant with coffee shops, rooming houses,

newspapers, and of course, hookah parlors. a second wave, including Muslims as well, began arriving early in the following century.

Exclusionary acts that defined Arabs as nonwhites stemmed the flow of immigrants until 1965, when the Hart-Celler Act reopened the portals, though it heavily favored professionals over laborers and trades people. Around that time, the bay Ridge Arab community got its start along Fifth Avenue, including Syrians, Lebanese, and Egyptians. The anchor of the community remains the Alsalam Grocery (7206 Fifth Avenue), where you can get an amazing shawarma sandwich dressed with garlic sauce and cornichons. But the restaurants haven't remained confined to their Fifth Avenue corridor, hopscotching south and west as Middle Eastern food has become more familiar and its audience has broadened to include Americans of every ethnicity. On of the restaurants that reflects this culinary Diaspora is First Oasis on Fourth Avenue, which offers a slightly different (and maybe more assimilated) take on Syrian food than the excellent, more traditional Damascus Gate. (7224 Fifth Avenue).

Thus we have First Oasis' fatoosh (\$5.75). Normally, it's a rudimentary salad of toasted pita, tomatoes, onions, and cucumbers laved in olive oil. Here, the flavor palette has been expanded with fresh mint and (gasp!) balsamic vinegar. The dark dressing works magnificently, but the pitas have been reduced to a mere cultural memory - tiny, crunchy cubes the size of pencil erasers. Damn you, Dr. Atkins!

Luckily, carbs are not anathema to the rest of the menu. All the usual mezze (small appetizing dishes) are in evidence, served with warm toasted pitas, including a baba ganoush not quite smoky or garlicky enough, and a much better hummus (\$4.75), which comes liberally irrigated with fragrant oil and dusted with herbs. If you resent hummus' vegetarian magnificence, you can have it perversely topped with lamb (\$7.50). Arab moussaka is poles apart from the Greek variety, less a casserole than impromptu vegetable scramble with eggplant as its focus, offering tomatoes, garlic, and green peppers in supporting roles and well on the way to becoming Sicilian caponata. I'd never seen potatoes in this dish before until I tried First Oasis'. There's also an entree version that, in rapprochement with Greek moussaka, adds mozzarella to the mix. Not a very good idea, though a welcome chapter in the annals of gastronomic fusion.

Any Middle Eastern restaurant stands or falls on the quality of its lamb, and here the restaurant scores a touchdown. The lamb kebabs (\$13.95) are moist, smoky, and heavily laden, but the flesh excels even more magnificently in the Syrian home-style dishes. Ouzi (\$11.95) is a domed filo pie, as brown as the breast of a bathing beauty who's been topless in the sun all summer. Excavating it becomes a labor of love, as you chase herbed rice, cubed veggies, nuts, raisins, and especially, cubes of tender lamb too big for a single bite around the plate. The chicken ouzi isn't nearly as good, but chicken gets its wonderful revenge in makloubeh, poultry/eggplant pairing that concentrates the flavor and texture of both into a single tasty sludge. Alongside, you get a garlicky yogurt dressing like Greek tzatziki, which demands to be dumped on every bite.

You can get the same lamb ground up, sauteed with onions, and encased in a cracked-wheat crust in "kebbeh balls," a Syrian specialty that comes with dabs of baba ganoush and hummus. The gastronomically intrepid should try the uncooked version, which is found among the appetizers. Very fresh meat is finely ground with bulgur, herbs, walnuts, and spices to make a thick, purplish smear that climbs up the sides of the plate. Littering the top is carved vegetables, which can be wielded to scoop up the amalgam. Raw kibbeh (\$5.95) makes you feel like a caveman dining on fresh kill. It was so rich, I took half of it home one evening. (February 13-19, 2008 | Vol. LIII No. 7 | America's Largest Weekly Newspaper | villagevoice.com)