

DINING OUT

Enjoy the flavors of Lebanon at Shadi's

By Diane Severin | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 04, 2014



Ashta and aassan with fruit & ice cream.

We're lucky here in the United States; we can travel the world by dining out. For a vicarious trip to Lebanon, I dined recently at Shadi's, a North Andover restaurant owned by Michel and Hind Asmar.

Shadi's humble exterior did not prepare us for the scene within, tastefully decorated in an understated way. We could hear the unobtrusive strains of Middle Eastern music, including that of the classic Lebanese singer Fayrouz.

Our gracious server, Stephanie, showed us to our table and later guided us through a cuisine that was unfamiliar to most of us. Resisting the impulse to try it all, we ordered several appetizers: baba ganoush (\$7.50), baked kibbe (\$8), makanek (\$9), and stuffed grape leaves (\$8).

When our appetizers arrived, we learned something. While many international cuisines feature explosive, intense flavors, Lebanese cuisine is one of subtlety. The flavors are all there, but intertwined in a companionship that celebrates their togetherness.

The baba ganoush, a kind of eggplant purée, was creamy and lightly flavorful. Scooped up with the fresh pita bread, it melted in the mouth in a delightful way. The stuffed grape leaves were not overpowered by lemon juice. The baked kibbeh, a mixture of ground beef and lamb combined with cracked wheat and a stuffing, was compact with a uniform texture. Again, it was a lovely marriage. (Raw kibbeh, a rarity in this area, is served only on Fridays and Saturdays.)

We didn't know what to expect with the makanek, described as "Lebanese sausage, pan-fried and served in lemon butter." We were pleased by what arrived. Rather than bound in a casing, the makanek was a roll of coarsely ground beef with a hint of lamb. The pan frying creates wonderful carbonized crispy bits.

We moved on to the dinner menu and again opted for a variety — Lamb on a stick (\$17), chicken hashwee (\$15), haddock with tarator (\$17), and baked haddock (\$17).

The main course arrived with our chosen sides (salad, fries, rice, and vegetables). The haddock with tarator was prettily fashioned into an oval, covered with mildly spicy homemade tahini sauce and dotted with sliced almonds. The combination of tahini on fish was a surprise, but a delightful and tasty one.

The chicken hashwee was new to us. Patrons had requested this Lebanese comfort food so often that the Asmars put it on the menu. The ingredients — a beef-lamb mixture with spices, rice, and pulled chicken — are cooked separately and then molded into a bowl for plating. The pulled chicken was drier than I anticipated (I've only had pulled meat soaked in barbecue sauce). Stephanie suggested eating the hashwee with the tangy homemade yogurt.

I know that many people are crazy about lamb, but after once spending a summer abroad at an English college eating mostly gamey mutton, I can take it or leave it. This lamb, though, was so tender and flavorful that I ordered one to go. Call me a convert.

Baked haddock was the one American dish we ordered, and the consensus was that it tasted good.

Of the sides, the squash was not spiced, something we're not used to. The side salad was dressed Lebanese-style, with oil and lemon juice and a slight hint of mint.

For dessert, the apple crisp and the vanilla ice cream were nice, but the Lebanese version of baklava and the ashta and aasan with fruit were standouts.

We were used to eating baklava drenched with syrup, the center layer sliding out and the syrup dripping down our chins. Not the case with Lebanese baklava. The phyllo layers are brushed with sugar water, leaving the top and bottom crusts slightly moist and completely intact after a bite.

“Ashta and aasan” means “honey and ricotta.” Imagine a scoop of vanilla ice cream topped with ricotta cheese, a sprinkling of pistachios, and a drizzle of honey. The ricotta was delicate, and the presentation was attractive, too, an ice cream/ricotta mound embraced by cut strawberries and slices of cantaloupe.

We didn't order any alcohol, but saw customers dining at the bar and drinking from Shadi's selection of Lebanese wine, beer and liqueurs, including the amazing arak, a liqueur that turns white as milk when added to water.

Restaurateurs for 30 years, Michel (known as Mike) and Hind Asmar hail from Lebanon and named Shadi's after their son. They suffered a setback in 2010 when a Christmas Eve fire destroyed their restaurant in Methuen, but they rebuilt their business in this location three years ago. Their loyal clientele followed them here, and they say they've gained customers from such faraway places as Florida and New York.

They buy vegetables in season from local farms and honey from a local beekeeper, and do their own carving of beef and lamb to get the special cuts for their cooking. Meat eaters benefit from this special attention, but the Asmars stress that there are plenty of choices on their menu for vegetarians.

They also make their own yogurt and hummus. The hummus takes three days to produce, a process that consists of soaking the dry chickpeas, boiling them for four hours, cooling, mashing, and blending them with other ingredients.

The Asmars are at Shadi's every day, crafting their cuisine to satisfy diners. If you're up for a little trip to Lebanon without leaving these shores, try Shadi's. You won't be disappointed.



Michel Asmar is owner and chef at Shadi's Restaurant & Lounge.

Diane Severin can be reached at dianeandthebees@comcast.net.