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## Foul For Love

Posted on [April 1, 2006](#) by [Tony](#)



The thing about chowhounding, is that sooner or later the New York Times always catches up and turns your favorite little outer-borough mama’s-kitchen haunts — that you either happened upon or were clued into by more energetic and committed chowhounds than yourself — into Zagat contenders. And so it comes to pass that Tanoreen, [my hands-down favorite Palestinian restaurant in the world](#), has gotten its “Dining Out” moment. But its star, Rawia Bishara, shines so bright there was no way her establishment, even given it’s location in far-off Bay Ridge, was going to remain a secret for long.

I’m a fool for *foul*, that delectable paste made from mashed fava beans that would be a mainstay on any Cairene table (or so my Cairene culinary correspondent tells me — I’ve only had the pleasure in NYC). And nowhere have I tasted foul as light, creamy and exquisitely spiced as at Tanoreen. That’s reason enough to go. But then there’s the lamb, umpteen different ways; and the fish... Her spice combinations are intriguing and intoxicating.

And there are other reasons to go, too. The conversations you’ll have with the lead waiter, a witty and charming fellow with film-star looks who, in his younger days, played as a fullback for Etoile d’Sahel, the Real Madrid of Tunisia.

And then there’s Ms. Bishara herself: Her stories of the life and culinary culture of her long-suffering people. Everything she does in the kitchen has its roots in the habits of her mother and aunts, and the wider Palestinian community of Nazareth.

Extracts from the Times piece:

” ‘They all knew exactly where their flour came from,’ she said of her neighbors, ‘and who made the finest cracked wheat burghul. They always got the best olive oil’ — originally from her grandparents’ groves, later, after government land confiscations, from whoever had the region’s famously lush green oil to sell.

‘Back then we even made our soap from olive oil,’ she added, ‘and in late summer all the rooftops were covered with tomatoes and figs cut in pieces, and tobacco and herbs like mint and zaatar put out to dry.’

To this day, the olive oil she uses at Tanoreen, her delightful small restaurant in Bay Ridge, comes from the West Bank, imported by a Chicago company, and her secret spice mixture, which she calls the foundation of her cooking, is roasted and ground for her back home in Nazareth.

The last time she was there she sent back about 55 pounds of it, she said. ‘When I use it with chicken, I might add a little more cumin,’ she continued. ‘When I use it with lamb, a little more coriander. But I always begin with my spices.’

“...But she looks to her late mother as a role model. ‘She was a school teacher with five kids to care for, but she was always cooking,’ Mrs. Bishara recalled. ‘When people had weddings, when they had funerals, they called my mother to make something, like stuffed artichokes or mousakhan.’

Mousakhan is the quintessential Palestinian dish, a savory, sumptuous banquet feast of whole chickens oven-roasted atop freshly baked Arab flatbread with lots of sweet onions and tart, deep-red sumac. Mrs. Bishara does a simplified version at Tanoreen, and she will do the real thing if it is ordered in advance.

Mousakhan apart, Palestinian cooking shares a lot with Jordanian and Lebanese cuisines, as well as with modern Israeli food. The use of exotic spices like cumin, sumac and dried rosebuds is balanced by an emphasis on sweetly pungent green herbs like parsley and cilantro, while the richness of olive oil, roasted almonds and pine nuts is offset by the prominence of flawlessly fresh vegetables and the bright tang of lemon.”

Thus the NY Times. I noticed that [New York magazine had done its own review](#), and their advice to avoid overdosing on the starters is well taken. But what neither of the reviews prepares you for is the dessert: Just when you don’t believe you could eat another thing, out comes the waiter bearing what looks like a standard upside-down cake — but the force he applies when cutting through it’s crust of rosewater syrup, pistachio and crunchy vermicelli makes clear that it’s no cake: It’s a cheese, light, fluffy, baked. You know you shouldn’t, and you know you have to...

As the piece above notes, she’ll happily cater to your needs if you call your order in with sufficient lead time. She even catered [my friend Azadeh’s book launch](#). And having tried my own hand at a traditional Iraqi *iftar* to break our fast on last Yom Kippur — cumin-lemony lentil soup with vermicelli noodles and minced-lamb-and-mint meatballs, with a *fatoosh* salad on the side (there is no better way to dispose of old pita breads than toasting them and then adding a dusting of sumac and a splash lemon vinaigrette in this otherwise simple salad) — come Pesach, I’m tempted to outsource the whole seder to her!

All I can say is that if Rawia Bishara does not write a book chronicling her recipes and the rich, often sad, but ultimately affirming history each dish and spice combinations carries, the world will be a sadder place.

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