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TANOREEN'S ELEGANT OWNER ENVISIONED HER INNOVATIVE FARE AS AN ODE TO BOTH HER MOTHER AND MIDDLE EASTERN HERITAGE

Photos By Jon Gordon

Even at 1 p.m. on a Wednesday, eyes ringed with liner and neck and wrists adorned with dramatic, hammered-gold cuffs, Rawia Bishara looks like the hostess at some highly glamorous dinner party. And for all intents and purposes, she is, because a visit to the Bay Ridge restaurant Tanoreen is akin to stepping into Bishara's very own home. It's a chance to experience her warm hospitality and unique brand of cooking—which serves as a tribute both to her mother and to her rich Middle Eastern heritage.

"My mom was a schoolteacher and she had five kids, but she cooked all the time. It was a beautiful tradition that brought the family together," Bishara says. "I opened Tanoreen to honor her, and I will never do enough."

What began as a love letter to Bishara's mother has actually worked to put Bay Ridge on the culinary map. After opening in 1998 in a tiny slice of a space on Third Avenue (known for years as "Red Sauce Row"), Tanoreen was one of the first non-Italian restaurants to garner serious attention outside of the immediate

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neighborhood. In fact, it was a common sight to see Manhattan folk fresh off of their endless commute on the R-train, battling Bay Ridge locals for a spot at one of ten tiny tables. It was evidently worth it for the chance to try Bishara's inventive spins on homestyle dishes that draw inspiration from all over the Middle East and beyond. Yes, there's an impossibly creamy hummus, citrusy grape leaves, crispy discs of falafel, and succulent shawarma and kabobs, but the real draw of Tanoreen has always been unique items like the famous Fried Brussels Sprouts, bathed in a tangy tahini and pomegranate sauce and topped with a panko crunch. Or the towering Eggplant Napoleon, alternating breaded eggplant slices with smoky baba ghanouje, served with a chopped tomato and basil salad. There's also the Musakhan, a delectable flat bread strewn with sumac-spiced shredded chicken, slow-cooked onions, and crunchy almonds. Not to mention daily specials like Squash Yogurt—baby squash stuffed with spiced lamb and stewed in homemade garlic yogurt sauce, or even Mansaf, a traditional rice pilaf crowned with braised chunks of musky goat meat.

Of course with a space so tiny, a menu so far-reaching, and a restaurant so beloved, Bishara was duty-bound to expand, which she did in 2010 to a much larger location across the street. It includes a separate takeout area (no more customers waiting around the tables for to-go containers) and a palatial dining room boasting a full bar, vaulted ceilings with sparkly chandeliers, plush banquettes, and a row of tables in a glass-enclosed atrium. But even with the added real estate (50 extra seats in all), the ever-popular spot still barely accommodates the crowds on weekends.

"I've had to turn my husband away a few times," Bishara admitted, laughing.

That's why it's an even greater honor to be able to join the owner on her real home turf—her kitchen—watching her gather ingredients to make Lamb with Freekah (pronounced free-kee), an ancient, roasted grain derived from wholesome green wheat.

"Everyone is afraid about wheat, but this is so nutritious... so good for you," Bishara said as she runs the freekah through her manicured, purple-painted fingers and lets it drop gently back into the bowl. "Although it's been around for hundreds of years, I believe that it's about to become incredibly popular. So we're using it first."

"And now," Bishara added, as she ushered us out of her kitchen and back into the dining room to await her delicious dish, "I'm going to get freekah!"

TANOREEN'S Freekah with Lamb Serves 8

Chef's Note: I love to use freekah because I believe it's going to be the new, upcoming grain. It's incredibly healthy, high in protein, and picked while it's still green.

For the lamb

- 1 tablespoon allspice
- 1 tablespoon salt
- 1 1/2 teaspoons fresh ground black pepper
- 1/3 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/3 teaspoon nutmeg
- 3 pounds leg of lamb, cut into 1 1/2-inch cubes
- 1/2 cup vegetable oil
- 5 whole cardamom seeds
- 3 bay leaves
- 3 whole cloves
- 1 onion cut in half

For the fried nuts

- 1/4 cup vegetable oil
- 1/2 cup slivered almonds, toasted
- 1/4 cup pine nuts, toasted

For the freekah

- 2/3 cup olive oil
- 1 medium onion, diced
- 3–4 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1 tablespoon allspice
- 1 teaspoon fresh ground black pepper
- 1/3 teaspoon ground cardamom, optional
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
- 3 cups freekah (can be found in Middle

Eastern groceries, health food stores, or many well-stocked supermarkets)

To make the fried nuts: Heat 1/4 cup vegetable oil over medium-high heat in a skillet large enough to hold 1/2 cup of the nuts in a single layer. Add the almonds first, reduce the heat to low, and cook, stirring frequently for two minutes until the nuts take on a golden brown color. Add the pine nuts and stir frequently for 1 1/2 minutes more. Remove from the heat and, using a slotted spoon, transfer nuts to a paper towel to drain and cool (keep the oil to cook the freekah in later on).

To make the lamb: Combine allspice, salt, pepper, cinnamon, and nutmeg in a small bowl. Place the lamb in a medium bowl and dump half of the spice mixture into it. Using your hands, rub the spice mixture into the meat, coating all sides thoroughly. Set the remaining spice mixture aside. In a large pot, heat the oil over high heat until

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13 DEC 13 | THE CHRISTMAS SHOW
ST. GEORGE THEATRE

16 DEC 13 | PET PHOTOS WITH SANTA
STATEN ISLAND MALL

17 DEC 13 | THE BEACH BOYS
STATE THEATRE

17 DEC 13 | JOHN MAYER
BARCLAYS CENTER

19 DEC 13 | NAHMIA ET FILS DISTILLERY WINE PAIRING EVENT
TAGINE

20 DEC 13 | KENNY G'S HOLIDAY SHOW
HARRAH'S

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hot. Add the meat and sear on all sides (about 3 minutes). Add the cardamom seeds, bay leaves, cloves, onion, the remaining spices, and 15 cups of water (enough to cover the ingredients and an additional 5 inches over). Bring to a boil and let boil for 5 minutes. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer—skimming the fat from the surface with a slotted spoon—for 40–60 minutes for lamb and 60–90 minutes for beef, or until the meat is fork tender. Any remaining broth can be frozen and reused.



Tanoreen
7523 Third Ave. / 718.748.5600 / tanoreen.com

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