

\$25 AND UNDER; An Uncompromising Position on the Middle East

By Eric Asimov
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WALK into Tanoreen, a bright little Middle Eastern storefront in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and it is easy to see who is in charge. Authority and passion emanate from Rawia Bishara like the enticing aromas that waft from the open kitchen. Whether overseeing her cooks or striding through the dining room to greet a familiar face, Ms. Bishara, a tall woman with striking dark hair, possesses Tanoreen. It is a restaurant as undiluted self-expression.

I love places like Tanoreen, where passion and vision outweigh all else. In a business where decisions are too often based on focus groups and consensus, Tanoreen comes down firmly on the side of art over product, of craftsmanship over assembly line. And the scale is still small enough to be personal. You either enjoy her vision of Middle Eastern cooking or go somewhere else.

This is not to say that Ms. Bishara is a demanding host. Far from it. She could not be more gracious and accommodating, with none of the eccentricities that sometimes accompany such single-minded owners.

"If you don't like it, we'll give you something else," she said as we prepared to tuck into a plate of squash stuffed with savory ground lamb, rice and pine nuts in a cooling yogurt-and-mint sauce. How could we not like it? As with almost everything at Tanoreen, it was both fresh and delicate, lively yet graceful.

If you ask Ms. Bishara, she will tell you that she opened Tanoreen in 1999 as a tribute to her mother, "the best cook I've ever seen." Her family is Palestinian, she grew up in Nazareth, Israel, and her restaurant is named after a town in Lebanon that she says is famous for its olive oil, but Ms. Bishara's cooking is not typically Palestinian or Middle Eastern. She uses basil or cilantro, unusual herbs for the Middle East.

She tops small rounds of eggplant with cubed tomatoes and jalapeño slivers to make deliciously spicy "eggplant pâté" (\$5).

But I love her traditional dishes as well. There may be no better hummus (\$4.50) in town than Tanoreen's smooth and airy version, just touched with lemon juice and garlic, perfect with the crisp house-made zatar bread.

And I will say with certainty that Tanoreen's cauliflower salad (\$4.50) is unsurpassed. The florets are sautéed until they barely turn crisp and start to caramelize, and then topped with tahini and pomegranate juice, a wonderfully sweet yet musky combination. A dish as simple as sautéed kale (\$4) is irresistible, and so is mujadara (\$4.50), toasted lentils with rice and frizzled onions.

The menu is voluminous, but does not tell the whole story. It is much easier to walk up to the gleaming display counter and look at the bountiful platters of mezze, some of which may not be listed. One day, Ms. Bishara recommended a dish called frekeh (\$5), made with a special kind of wheat that is harvested when still green. The wheat is then dried and smoked, just to the point of charring. Ms. Bishara boils it in water and olive oil, and blends it with spices. The result is soft and pleasing, with the faint taste of fire.

It is unusual and satisfying, but no more so than the more familiar fabulously smoky baba ghanouj (\$5) or a tangy lemon-imbued tabbouleh (\$5), or a bright fattoush (\$5.50), a salad accented with crisp pieces of pita.

It is impossible to settle for a single appetizer. It is much better to ask for a platter of assorted mezzes and to negotiate the composition with one of the friendly waiters or with Ms. Bishara herself. The price of a platter is never steep, and the portions are always generous. So generous, in fact, that I have rarely had room for more. And yet I always order a main course, too, even if I end up taking most of it home, as I did with the stuffed squash.

The standard kebabs (\$11 to \$12), served with nutty rice interwoven with thin noodles, are all fine, and so is baked eggplant (\$12), which is layered with onions, potatoes and tomatoes -- with or without meat -- in a kind of Middle Eastern lasagna. Specials abound, like a predictably tender but beautifully spiced lamb shank (\$13 to \$19 depending on size), which seemed to radiate flavors. About the only things that disappointed were hefty, tough falafel (\$5) and baked kibbe (\$12), which was too dry.

Ms. Bishara's attention does not waver when it comes to dessert. She makes a lovely traditional pastry called knafeh (\$8 for two people) with shredded phyllo dough and sweetened cheese, stained almost scarlet by a honey and rosewater syrup. But she extends herself for her customers, producing a Lenten carrot cake made with olive oil (\$3.50) that was admirably light.

She also makes wonderful anise-scented sesame cookies, which are dead ringers for an Italian bakery's. I assume they were inspired by Bay Ridge's Italian community, but she asserts they are a typical Middle Eastern specialty. All I can think is that her mother must have been one sensational cook.

Tanoreen

7704 Third Avenue (77th Street), Bay Ridge, Brooklyn; (718) 748-5600.

BEST DISHES -- Stuffed squash in yogurt-and-mint sauce; eggplant pâté; hummus; cauliflower salad; sautéed kale; frekeh; baba ghanouj; tabbouleh; fattoush; grilled kebabs; baked eggplant; lamb shank; knafeh; carrot cake; sesame cookies.

PRICE RANGE -- Appetizers, \$4.50 to \$8; main courses, \$11 to \$19.

CREDIT CARDS -- All major cards.

HOURS -- Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Closed Monday.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS -- Two steps at entrance. Restroom is narrow.

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