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Hop the Train Out to Tanoreen and Athena Express

Mideast fare—and some new Greek—in Bay Ridge

By Robert Sietsema

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Parsley queen Rawia Bishara awaits you.

Details:

Tanoreen

7523 Third Avenue
Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, 718-748-
5600

Athena Express

484 77th Street
Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, 718-748-
2077

Cheap rents, a population of wildly diverse ethnicity, and some charming storefront architecture has helped Bay Ridge grow into one of the city's foremost dining destinations, so that today you can find well-prepared cuisines as far-flung as Sichuan, Sicilian, Siamese, Syrian, and Spartan. The enhanced speed of the N train—which comes out of Manhattan like a stone from a slingshot—has also fueled this growth, though one has to change for the R at Sunset Park's 59th Street station to complete the trip. The number of Greek restaurants, in particular, has zoomed, so that now Bay Ridge has become better than Astoria if you have a yen for charred octopus and spanakopita (spinach pie). Here's the latest restaurant news from the B.R.

Ten years ago, Tanoreen opened in a small storefront that was mostly cluttered kitchen and glass display cases, with a paltry number of tables in a tight space out up front. The fresh-tasting salads and creamy bread dips made the place an immediate carryout hit, and it soon became one of the city's most respected purveyors of Middle Eastern fare. Very recently, Tanoreen transformed itself into a full-blown restaurant—and a semi-luxurious one, at that. Elegant light fixtures descend from coffered ceilings, while pierced-metal

baffles shoot stray beams of light from walls painted desert colors of sand, russet, and ecru. On a recent Sunday evening, jovial Middle Eastern families occupied the larger tables, from elderly mustachioed gentlemen in sports coats with silk scarves flung over their shoulders to babies crawling in pastel onesies.

The proprietor and chef, Rawia Bishara, was born in Nazareth. Sumptuously attired, she now presides over a full staff and prances proudly around the dining rooms rather than waving wanly from behind the counter wearing her apron. She arrived at our table just as the vegetarian mousaqa (\$15, a frequent special) appeared. The warm casserole was layered with eggplant, tomatoes, summer squash, and onions, cooked down to a dense, delicious mass and strewn with parsley and slivered almonds. You'll find parsley ubiquitous at Tanoreen; they must race through bales of it daily.

The menu is twice as long as before, including many items that were once offered only as specials. Another innovation is a magnificent bread basket. Apart from pita cut into wedges, there are several

types of homemade lavash crackers, including one smeared with the perky spice mixture zaatar. The heart of the menu is a magnificent take on kibbie (\$15)—a cracked-wheat pie stuffed with ground lamb and caramelized onions. Speaking of cracked wheat, there's an unforgettable salad that features it called shulbato, tossed with chickpeas and dressed with a thick, spicy tomato sauce.

Another vegetarian delight is makdous, a split baby eggplant swimming in pickling juices and sewn topside with chopped walnuts. Of the dozens of uses of eggplant found on the menu, this dish is the most compelling. On a negative note, some of the meat entrées seem meager in size for their price tags, including the \$17 grilled combo of diverse tiny kebabs, served with mixed rice and vermicelli. It's wise to stick with the vegetarian stuff. An exception is sujok, a dried Armenian sausage served in a tart braising broth.

Debuting a few blocks away in the old La Maison du Couscous space, Athena Express is named after the goddess of wisdom. Don't expect showy whole fish from her—instead you'll find meaty earthbound delights at bargain prices. Loukaniko (\$6.95) is a pork sausage of ancient Cypriot origin; the sausage has been slashed diagonally and then grilled to a sizzling char, and served with something called Greek fries, which in this case might be better described as Greek cheese fries. They come strewn with feta, but unfortunately most of the cheese falls off as you hoist the potatoes mouthward.

A second high point is the saganaki cheese, brought to the table with blue flames licking its flanks. Even the most jaded diner sits up eagerly when it appears. The pitas that come alongside are cut in triangles for easy scooping and tendered warm, which shows admirable attention to detail. Sadly, there was no octopus when we visited, but the calamari (\$6.95) was fried squid perfection. The best thing we tasted was the moussaka (\$9.95)—the Hellenic equivalent of the Middle Eastern mousaqa described above. This version is freighted with ground meat and top-heavy with a thick layer of creamy, browned béchamel. If you think you hate anything called "casserole," Athena Express's moussaka might just beat the pants off your mom's tuna noodle hot dish.

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