

# Meze Haul

**It's tempting to overdose on the brilliant Middle Eastern appetizers at Tanoreen. But don't miss the main event—lamb, in more ways than you ever imagined.**

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**Mideast Feast:** The vegetarian meze platter from Tanoreen.

(Photo: Kenneth Chen)

Is it our imagination, or has the greater metropolitan area been beset by an incredible shrinking appetite? That's one explanation for the sudden preponderance of "small plates"—a.k.a. tapas, antipasto, antojitos, and dim sum. But grazing is nothing new. Meze, the original small-plate processional, evolved in the Middle East, which is where we looked to get some perspective on the current fad.

From the local falafel joint to the Arabic enclaves of Atlantic Avenue and Steinway Street, it's a cinch to find decent hummus and baba ghanouj. But for an elaborate and unusual spread that's fresh and flavorful enough to evoke a sun-kissed summer afternoon on the bleakest midwinter night, we happily trudge to Bay Ridge to gape at the display case at **Tanoreen**. That's where chef-owner Rawia Bishara benevolently reigns over a modestly appointed dining room and open kitchen, supplementing exceptional renditions of traditional Middle Eastern cuisine with her own creative riffs on a Mediterranean-flavored theme.

Tanoreen's menu lists more than 50 items and instructs customers to order by number, but we prefer to march up to the case, point at platter after parsley-rimmed platter, and try Bishara's eternal patience by asking "What's that?" about twenty times. Then, invariably, we ask her to compose a combination plate—always elegantly presented—followed by a couple of blackboard specials.

You can't go wrong. Unless, that is, you're one of the sad few who can't abide garlic, a defining feature of Bishara's cooking (the others being lemon, parsley, and olive oil, plus her closely guarded blend of "Tanoreen spices"). These flavors resound in everything from a crunchy fattoush salad, strewn with toasted pita and sprinkled with sumac, to one night's special baby eggplant, stuffed with ground lamb, in a bracing lemon-garlic sauce. Over the course of several meals, we made our way through most of the meze repertoire, marveling over creamy hummus; outlandishly thick, mint-dappled labneh; cauliflower drizzled with pomegranate syrup and tahini; and eggplant half a dozen ways. (Tied for favorite: a smoky,

tahini-free purée, and voluptuous fried slices topped with tomato and jalapeño.)

Commercial pita is a minor disappointment—a rather ordinary incursion in the midst of such extraordinariness. But Bishara bakes her own mini-flatbreads, topped with feta or brushed with red-pepper paste, and sambosak, flaky half-moon-shaped savory pastries. She takes an ecumenical approach to vegetables, sautéing with equal aplomb those you'd find in her native Nazareth (dandelion greens and spinach) and those you wouldn't (Brussels sprouts).

If you love lamb, you're in the right place. Fragrant grape or cabbage leaves stuffed with an expertly seasoned mixture of rice and ground lamb are an irresistible prelude to the menu's lamby leitmotif. Ditto the double lamb whammy of deep-fried kibbeh balls—three crisp, golden shells made from finely minced lamb and bulghur, encasing a juicy mixture of ground lamb, pine nuts, and onions.

You can stop there, fully satisfied. Or, if appetite allows, you can advance past the meze portion of the meal to daily specials like earthy, succulent braised lamb and carrots, bolstered by a molded rice-and-lamb pilaf flecked with pine nuts and slivered almonds. Other specials deviate from the theme: There's organic beef with string beans, a terrific turmeric-infused chicken-and-rice dish reminiscent of Indian biryani, and a pesto-crusting salmon fillet baked with artichoke hearts and tomatoes. But no matter how satisfying the kitchen's cross-cultural digressions, visiting Tanoreen without ordering lamb in some form seems as perverse as skipping the porterhouse at Peter Luger. Doing full justice to the marvelous meze and still having room for lamb, though . . . that's another story.



