

RESTAURANT REVIEW

So What is Lebanese Food? A Review of Al Waha

By Robert Springborg

MOHAMMAD BADER Alden Antabli, proprietor of Al Waha Lebanese Restaurant, is in fact a Syrian from Damascus. Why then does he refer to al Waha as being Lebanese? "Because that is the label that Londoners are familiar with," he points out. The Lebanese introduced eastern Mediterranean cuisine to the UK and much of the rest of the world, so "they have claimed ownership." But, in Mohammad's view, this part of the world has seen the coming and going of conquerors and their civilisations since Alexander if not before, with many of them leaving their impact in the form of culinary preferences. So the food of this entire region, extending from the Egyptian frontier up to and including Turkey, is so similar that no one nationality can claim it as their own.

Indeed, the theme of shared origins and culture is not restricted in Mohammad's view to food alone. He laments not only the parochialism implied in giving a national label to Levantine food, but in the broader trend of drawing distinctions between Arabs, especially Syrians and Lebanese. When he first came to London in 1979, and for many years thereafter, he neither thought of himself as being in any way different from his Lebanese friends and contacts. In recent years, however, he notes that the fragmentation of the Arab world is reflected in increasing assertion of national identities and differences, something he much laments.

A thoughtful and observant man, his career in restaurants is altogether different from how he had anticipated it would be. In Damascus he studied natural science and then spent some years living elsewhere in the Arab world, including as far afield as Algeria. He came to London to take up his real love, film directing, but his chase to save enough money while working in various Lebanese restaurants in order to pay ever increasing tuition charges in private film schools was not successful. So photography became his hobby, the preparation and presentation of food his profession.

He learned the business from the bottom up, starting as a pot scrubber, moving to vegetable peeler, then to butchering and the various other general culinary tasks and those particular to Middle Eastern food. With other partners he ultimately opened a restaurant on Shaftesbury Avenue, then shifting to the present location to found Al Waha (The Oasis), a decade ago.

The inspiration for his cooking came principally from his mother, whose family inhabited one of the old Damascene courtyard houses knocked down when al Thawra Street was bulldozed through a large swath of this historic quarter of the city. Mohammad notes though that some of his mother's advice, such as removing the garlic clove's fibrous head so as to improve the texture and flavour of the paste made when it is crushed, are not always practical when cooking commercial quantities and using modern machines such as liquidizers. But until her death in London where she had moved from Damascus, she

remained his principal culinary consultant. Although his two partners—one Syrian, one Lebanese—are both chefs and now have primary responsibility in the kitchen, he continues to be involved in selecting recipes and overseeing preparation.

While he steadfastly refuses to want to put city or country names to particular dishes, he will concede that some of his recipes are based heavily if not entirely on a dish known in this or that location. His preference is light dishes that are entirely vegetarian or utilize small amounts of meat. He does not share the Egyptians' great love of meat and considers Levantine cuisine to be quite distinct from that of Egypt. Seven days a week his Lebanese suppliers provide fresh fruit and vegetables. He changes the menu according to seasons, removing for example tehina from the preparation of eggplant based *mutabel* in the summer so that the dish is lighter. All of the pastries, with the exception of baklava, which requires very large trays and would therefore consume too much space in the kitchen, are done in house.

As for the wine, he laughs as he claims that this is his job alone. He has methodically and, from his perspective enjoyably, put together a cellar that combines Lebanese, French and new world wines, offering his customers wines that he believes particularly complement al Waha's food.

All of his efforts have not gone unnoticed. As the restaurant's website (www.alwahrestaurant.com) reveals, it has been bestowed with a vast array of prizes and awards, including London's Middle East Restaurant of the Year award by Moët & Chandon, one of "Top Ten Restaurants in London" by Charles Champion and "the best Lebanese food in London," by the Evening Standard, which also included it in its list of 60 Best Restaurants in London for meals for two with wine for £60 or less. Muhammad was recently invited to California's Napa Valley by one of America's leading culinary organisations to participate in a festival of Mediterranean food, with his preparations selected to represent the Levant's contribution.

Those of us living in London and who have a penchant for Lebanese fare are indeed fortunate that Mohammad was unable to pursue his first love of film making, although who knows what contributions he might have made in that vocation. Judging by the perfection which he brings to the preparation and presentation of food, for which those from Aintab (now known as Gaziantap), the city from which his name is derived, are renowned, the movies would have been pretty damn good.

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