

## Love and Spices: Inside Tanoreen, Bay Ridge's Temple to Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean Cuisine

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Jumana and Rawia Bishara, of Bay Ridge's Tanoreen

By Jennifer Meehan

Despite its distance from those preening neighborhoods to the north where the more glittery hubs of Brooklyn's food scene tend to hog the spotlight, **Tanoreen**, with its jovial atmosphere, focus on family cooking, and elevated interpretation of Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean cuisine, has enticed many to embark on a journey to Bay Ridge.

Tanoreen may not be a new (it's been a neighborhood fixture since 1998), but its popularity has certainly skyrocketed in recent years. While awarding the restaurant a coveted star in his 2010 review for the *New York Times*, Sam Sifton lauded the, "...ethereal hummus, lightened with lemon juice to the point of being cloudlike." – a sentence alone that surely launched more than a few Tanoreen-bound ships.

Chef and owner Rawia Bishara never expected this kind of attention. To

her, feeding people isn't about trends, celebrity chefs, or scientific preparations — It's about food of the highest quality, prepared with love.

When I was finally able to make my own hour-long journey to Bay Ridge for a taste of Tanoreen, Rawia, her daughter Jumana, and I sat down to chat about the inspiration behind the restaurant and what they see for its future.

*So Rawia, where are you from? What brought you to Brooklyn and Bay Ridge?*

I grew up in Nazareth, Palestine. I fell in love and my husband and I moved here in 1974. We have always lived in this area and I feel very much a part of the neighborhood. I never thought of having the restaurant somewhere else.

*How did you get interested in food?*

I have always been interested in cooking. I don't believe it's something you acquire — it is just in you. My mom was a great cook. It was her dream to have a restaurant but at that time, for a woman, it wasn't acceptable. I decided I would do it in her honor. 15 years after she passed away, Tanoreen opened. By this time my children were older and we had spent plenty of quality time together. I didn't want to interrupt being a mom.

*What made you decide to open the restaurant?*

I never thought of opening a restaurant. When my children reached college bound age I saw myself attending college with them then getting a job. Then I realized I would be competing with them and all the younger people and I thought it would be harder for me to find a job at that age.

I was always a big entertainer at home so many friends and family members kept bringing up the idea of me opening up a restaurant. We started off as a catering business with some seating. I don't know how it grew. It was always very busy and it became hard to handle.

Jumana: The reputation outgrew the space.

Rawia: I was surprised at how this happened. I had been told the ratio of success of New York restaurants — that only one in nine succeed — and was scared, but I underestimated people's judgment and taste. If you believe they will like it, it will work out.

*Did you face any major challenges at the onset?*

Besides paying the bills? I had a lot of support. I was part of the Union of

Palestinian Women Committees and I hired a few Middle Eastern women from the group to help. I also had to sometimes serve customers and cook in the back.

*What about on the business aspect?*

I took some business courses at Hunter and got plenty of help and support from the family. The kids worked in the restaurant during their vacations.

*What inspires your food?*

I cook my mom's food. When I decided to open the restaurant I didn't want her recipes to go to waste. But it's not just traditional food, it's Middle Eastern food with a Mediterranean aroma.

Jumana: She has an amazing ability to put things together.

Rawia: New York City is the most fantastic place to be influenced by international cuisine. When I first moved here, I would go to the supermarket, buy different things and experiment with them at home. We use a lot of ingredients from other types of cuisines, like herbs from Italy, ginger, and cilantro. We used to have basil on the windowsill so the scent would come into the home but no one ever cooked with it. So I dared to try one day.

*How did you learn to cook? Did you receive any training?*

Cooking was a big thing about the house – with 5 kids, and always guests. My mom was always eating, cooking, prepping for next day. She wouldn't allow us in the kitchen but I learned to cook from eating – you remember what you ate and learn to identify the flavors.

Jumana: She has a gift for it. She can remember exactly how things tasted or are meant to taste.



Tanoreen's Eggplant Neapolitan (with babaganoush and tomato pesto). In background: Frekeh (ground chicken with slivered almonds)

*Tell me about the spices. I've heard a lot about the "Tanoreen blend."  
How and when did you develop it?*

I started working on the spices from the first year. It's such a special way of cooking with so many spices. Having the blend makes it easier to tell the staff to use Tanoreen spices rather than listing each herb. Still, each dish is different – some have more cumin or need more coriander – so it is more like a base. And I use fresh spices that are ground daily.

*You still have the catering part of the business. Is it difficult to juggle them both?*

Juggling the restaurant and catering is difficult because I don't want to turn anything down. It's non-commercial food, not mass made. We make it everyday and I have a hand in everything. Some dishes may seem easy, but they are labor intensive. We don't have any machines for chopping vegetables or meat – it's all done by hand. And it must be done with pleasure, love and care.

I count my customers as friends and family and I want to make sure everyone leaves with a smile on their face. Everyone must leave happy. I care about their needs, so if the food is not to their taste I will fix it. I check on each table every night.

*What do you eat when you're not working? Do you have a favorite neighborhood restaurant?*

We are neighborhood friendly. We go out to different restaurants and also love going to Manhattan.

*Do you cook at home as well?*

No. I'm here every day, except for Monday, and they are long 12-hour days so I like to relax and spend time with my family. If my son is in town (he lives in California), he will cook at home.

*Do you have any goals for the restaurant's future?*

I don't think about the future but we will go on. I am in it to succeed, to see people smile, and have people try my food. No idea where I see myself but I don't see myself stopping. I enjoy success very much.

But we do have some big goals! We are considering branching out, and thinking about mail order. My son lives in California, so we are thinking of doing the first branch there. He cooks and entertains a lot. I am also working on a cookbook. It will have recipes of the popular/loved dishes and a lot of traditional family dishes. I want to create my own brand, starting with the spices.

*Jumana, how did you first get involved with your mom's restaurant and how do you see your role growing?*

Jumana: As my mom mentioned, we'd come help her during our vacations. Then I went to Cairo to get my MA in Middle Eastern Studies, but when I came back I realized I didn't want to do that work from here.

I think the restaurant has an advantage being a family business and I wanted to be a bigger part of it. I am mostly working on the administrative side of things but am constantly in training – I know the recipes, different ingredients, and how to taste for different flavors.

I am proud of the family legacy and hope to help Tanoreen continue to grow and succeed. I will help however necessary to push it forward. I also hope to make it recognizable – increase familiarity to the masses and spread culture through food. We want to create a little empire.

After our chat, I followed Rawia into the kitchen to get a peek behind the scenes. As she showed me what was being prepared for the evening she also mentioned another important ingredient in the restaurant: her employees. She is a firm believer that happy people make good food. Most employees have been working at Tanoreen for 10 or 11 years and she does her best to make them feel good. Family dinners are often inspired by the employees' background, as was the case with a mole sauce she recently made. She also offers them a beer after a long night of work.



Rawia Bishara, Tanoreen's owner and chef, in the kitchen

Gardens, Rawia said, are important too. Though many ingredients travel far, she does her best to incorporate local vegetables and herbs from her own garden. The pickled vegetables and peppers you see in jars in the restaurant were freshly picked. She infuses her oils with her own homegrown herbs. She works hard to maintain the family feel of her family business and believes that the little extra time it takes to add individual touches or make something by hand are what make an experience as close to perfect as it can be.

*Want your own taste of [Tanoreen](#)? You'll find Rawia and Jumana at 7523 Third Avenue (76th Street), in Bay Ridge. Telephone: (718) 748-5600.*

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**Christina** says:

Jan 20 2012 at 10:53 am

This place has amazing food! The flavors are so bright. Eaten here twice, each time traveling an hour to get there.

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**sam** says:

Oct 31 2011 at 4:18 pm

fantastic profile! planning a trip to Bay Ridge so I can see these women in action!

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