



February 23, 2010

# Tanoreen

By **SAM SIFTON**

SATURDAY night in the neighborhood that once gave America fever, a Brooklyn that looks to itself for employment and has little time for the glittering island to the north. A bridge rises out of it, a silver ramp, and you can see ocean beneath it, darkness running all the way to Portugal, and from there down the Mediterranean to the Middle East. Dinner time.

Couples slide into tables at Tanoreen, Rawia Bishara's marbled Levantine restaurant on the corner of Third Avenue and 76th Street in Bay Ridge, lately expanded from its tiny birth site in a storefront one block south. They join families with children, friends meeting friends. It is a lively, happy scene set beneath clouds of lamb, mint and garlic scents combined.

Arabic music plays over speakers connected to a stereo set in back, and if this time it's not the Lebanese siren Fairuz, singing "Al Bosta," which evokes a village called Tanoreen, it might as well be.

Fairuz is known in the Middle East as "the neighbor to the moon." Much the same could be said of Ms. Bishara, a [Palestinian](#) who grew up in Nazareth, in northern Israel, and who has been in the United States for close to four decades. She owns Tanoreen with her daughter, Jumana, whose eyes sparkle in the same almond shape as her mother's.

These women rule over the kitchen and dining room with a kind of fierce benevolence. But it is the boundless cooking and endless, prodding hospitality of Ms. Bishara the elder that have defined the restaurant. At Tanoreen, she is celestial.

Pickles come to the table first: delicate, sweet beets tangy with vinegar, lovely against a glass of mint tea. Palates jump to attention. They are greeted then by plates and plates of appetizers, or mezze. Sujok, an air-dried Armenian beef sausage scented with cumin and sumac, arrives in a small pool of spicy olive oil, bright with garlic. Eat a slice with a piece of the restaurant's thin pita or crunchy zatar-spiced bread, then take another bite of beet.

Follow this with a bit of ethereal hummus, lightened with lemon juice to the point of being cloudlike, and some crazily flavorful tabbouleh, whose mint and bulgur combine into something that tastes very much like joy.

There is baba ghanouj as well, smoky and rich in its eggplant base, and fattoush, a marvelous [salad](#) made of lettuce and cucumber, [tomatoes](#) and mint, sumac and parsley. It is dressed in olive oil, lemon and garlic, and layered in toasted wedges of pita, which Ms. Bishara uses throughout her cooking for texture, to great effect.

Here now are some florets of cauliflower, browned to softness then allowed to cool, dressed in tahini and lines of pomegranate molasses, astringent sweetness against the flavors of sesame and vegetable. And a napoleon of eggplant, fried soft and sweet, then layered with baba ghanouj and festooned with tomatoes and — what's this? — basil.

Ms. Bishara's translation of Middle Eastern cooking has Mediterranean accents, and occasional North American ones from her decades in the United States. And so the tang of cilantro enlivens some of her dishes, and the musk of basil, the welcome zing of jalapeño.

In the opposite direction, she makes a simple spiced roast chicken with potatoes (and, for children, a mean plate of fried chicken fingers with French fries and ketchup), and a stuffed cabbage that your Uncle Murray who only eats tuna salad would devour.

Tanoreen's entrees are, in the main, less successful than the appetizers. Partly this is because the food doesn't support the division of a meal into the Western tradition of starter and main course. After four or five delicious small plates, it's difficult to do battle with a gristly lamb shank or one-acre lot of shepherd's pie.

It is smarter, perhaps, to order more from the appetizer lists — some small spinach or meat pies, for instance, and a plate of kibbe, the fried nuggets of ground lamb and spices that are meat's answer to M&M's, followed by some ridiculously flavorful stuffed grape leaves. Then share sparingly of the main courses, along with some simply sautéed spinach or kale.

The best of the entrees include lamb fette, traditionally a breakfast dish, here layered with toasted pita and yogurt, chickpeas and mountains of meat flavored with Ms. Bishara's secret blend of Tanoreen spices (cinnamon, coriander, cumin, some nutmeg, dried ginger, rosebuds and pixie dust), with pilaf cut through with vermicelli. It would serve a platoon of [Marines](#).

There is also a terrific combination platter of grilled lamb and chicken, and another of delicate fried red snapper, and sautéed shrimp that is as redolent of garlic as that at any Italian ristorante on Sheepshead Bay. The kibbe entree is also worth a look — fried crisp on its exterior, with pillowy lamb within. The falafel sandwich is superb.

Service is professional if slightly scattershot — Ms. Bishara's staff is still coming to terms, perhaps, with the larger room, which has 50 more seats than the old one, and a full bar besides. There are

occasionally long delays between courses (another argument for investing heavily in small plates). You might need to ask for water a few times.

But whenever spirits flag, it seems, Ms. Bishara appears at an elbow, eyes flashing and smile wide, to check in or apologize, to inquire after health and happiness, to see what might be done to improve the meal. This does a lot, as it happens, to mitigate a restaurant's shortcomings. It is part of Tanoreen's ethos.

So, too, is dessert. Knafeh, or shredded phyllo dough stuffed with sweet cheese and topped with pistachios and rosewater syrup, is the signature dessert. But sahlab, a sweet custard that nods to France's occupation of Lebanon between the world wars, is worth a spoon as well, as is a plate of baklava, sticky with honey and rich with nuts.

Tanoreen is, at the end, a deeply individualistic restaurant. Ms. Bishara is a Brooklynite, though also a Palestinian raised in Israel, where her brother served in the Knesset. Her restaurant has a Lebanese name. She sprinkles basil over her lamb.

Is such cooking authentic? Yes, though no. It doesn't matter and who cares. It's mostly delicious. Authenticity, anyway, is almost always a lie.

## **Tanoreen**



7523 Third Avenue (76th Street), Bay Ridge, Brooklyn; (718) 748-5600, [tanoreen.com](http://tanoreen.com).

**ATMOSPHERE** A warm and inviting family restaurant, bustling and bright.

**SOUND LEVEL** Conversation is as much the point as the eating: not too loud.

**RECOMMENDED DISHES** Sujok, hummus, baba ghanouj, tabbouleh, fattoush, cauliflower, fette, grilled lamb, kibbe, falafel, desserts.

**WINE LIST** There is a small list with some drinkable bottles in the \$30 range, but this is a restaurant for tea and beer.

**PRICE RANGE** Small plates, \$4.50 to \$12; entrees, \$15 to \$28.

**HOURS** Tuesday to Friday, noon to 10:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Sunday, 10:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Closed Monday.

**RESERVATIONS** Call a few days ahead, particularly for weekends.

**CREDIT CARDS** All major cards.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS** The restaurant is on one level; the bathroom is large.

**WHAT THE STARS MEAN** Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction to food, ambience and service, with price taken into consideration. Menu listings and prices are subject to change.



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