

Good enough to make grandma smile

By GREG COX
CORRESPONDENT

When Greg Hatem and the Saleh family announced that they were teaming up to open a Lebanese restaurant, you just knew it was going to be something special. Hatem's reputation as a restaurateur, after all, is surpassed only

REVIEW

by his record as a commercial real estate developer. He has given downtown Raleigh a diverse assortment of dining options — among them The Duck & Dumpling, The Pit and The Raleigh Times Bar — while restoring a number of beautiful old buildings in the process. And it's no exaggeration to say that the Salehs brought Middle Eastern cuisine to the Triangle. The family opened the first Neomonde in 1977, and the restaurant remains the local benchmark for Middle Eastern deli fare to this day.

Sitti, which the partners opened in November in the historic Heilig-Levine building, is indeed something special. It's a labor of love, in fact, a celebration of the shared Lebanese heritage of its owners. The owners installed a special domed oven for baking the pillowy pita ovals that are served hot with a small dish of za'atar-spiced olive oil as a complimentary welcome. They refurbished an Art Deco bar, evocative of Beirut's "Golden Period" of the 1920s, and stocked it with (among other things) a strong selection of Lebanese wines.

In the middle of the vibrant, casually elegant dining room, the partners placed a communal table hewn from Lebanese cedar, a tribute to the large mealtime gatherings of family and friends that are a foundation of Lebanese tradition. On one wall, overlooking the room through sepia-toned eyes, Hatem and the Saleh brothers hung large, vintage photographs of their grandmothers in the Old World. And they named the restaurant after these grandmothers, who are the hub of traditional Lebanese culture, and who are affectionally called "sitti."

The partners hired Ghassan Jarrouj, formerly chef to the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon, to translate their family recipes into an extensive menu of mezze, entrees and house-baked flatbreads. Jarrouj responded with an offering that rivals the best I've had in Toledo and Detroit.

Even in those Lebanese-American population hubs, I've never had a lighter, fresher tasting tabbouleh than Sitti's citrus-bright rendition. Or a better dish of hummus with hashwi, a jazzed-up version of the familiar chickpea dip topped with minced beef, caramelized onions, pine nuts and sumac.

Kibbeh nayyeh, Lebanon's answer to steak tartare, is impeccably fresh, beautifully garnished and served in a generous shareable portion. For those who prefer their beef cooked, kibbeh mli — deep-fried balls of minced beef and lamb, cracked wheat, onion and spices — are a rewarding alternative.

The kitchen doesn't have a vertical spit for roasting beef shawarma, but chef Jarrouj turns out



At Sitti, even the nontraditional food is stellar. This entrée is pan-seared sea bass with shiitake mushrooms, tomato broth, garlic confit and white truffle polenta.

STAFF PHOTOS BY JULI LEONARD

a respectable facsimile from the sauté pan. His mastery of the domed oven is evident, too, in the thin crusts of flatbreads (which the menu calls pizzette) with topping options ranging from chicken and artichoke to ground lamb, onions, tomatoes and pomegranate molasses. Unfortunately, the pizzette I ordered was lukewarm when it reached the table.

Such disappointments are few, though and rarely as severe as lukewarm pizzette. I could find nothing to fault with an okra stew with lamb, simmered in a tomato sauce and served over rice. Nor with a mixed grill of chicken, kofta and lamb kebabs, a toothsome trio attractively presented with a molded cylinder of rice, grilled tomato and onion. Only a slight under-salting prevented fattah with lamb, which the menu describes as "stewed lamb over rice, crispy phyllo chips, pine nuts, whipped yogurt and garlic," from being as thoroughly delightful as

menu. Besides, as the owners have noted, Sitti's aim is to present Lebanese cuisine as they've known it: not frozen in time, but evolving and adapting to their lives as contemporary Americans. No doubt their sittis would be proud.

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In several ways, the owners of Sitti pay homage to their grandmothers. Greg Hatem's is pictured here.



Sitti's version of tabbouleh is made of parsley, tomato, spring onion, cracked wheat, lemon juice and olive oil.

Sitti

137 S. Wilmington St., Raleigh
239-4070

www.sitti-raleigh.com

Cuisine: Lebanese

Rating: ★★★★★

Prices: \$\$-\$\$\$

Atmosphere: vibrant, casually elegant

Service: generally knowledgeable and efficient, could use a little polish

Recommended: tabbouleh, hummus with hashwi, kibbeh nayyeh, sea bass, mixed grill, desserts

Open: lunch and dinner Monday-Saturday

Reservations: accepted for parties of 6 or more

Other: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, Discover; full bar (strong selection of Lebanese wines; smoke free (smoking permitted in the courtyard); accommodates children; excellent selection of vegetarian mezze

The N&O's critic dines anonymously; the newspaper pays for all meals. We rank restaurants in five categories: ★★★★★

Extraordinary ★★★★★ Excellent. ★★★ Above average. ★★

Average. ★ Fair.

The dollar signs defined: \$ Entrees average less than \$10. \$\$ Entrees \$11 to \$16. \$\$\$ Entrees \$17 to \$25. \$\$\$\$ Entrees more than \$25.