

# Wide-ranging chef finds home here

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STAFF WRITER

**I**t seems that Ghassan Jarrouj has cooked all types of cuisine — French, Italian, American — everywhere from Los Angeles and Detroit to Washington.

But it was the food of his homeland, Lebanon, that brought him to Raleigh.

Jarrouj, 59, is the executive chef at Sitti, the latest restaurant venture from downtown developer Greg Hatem. This time, Hatem teamed up with the Salehs, the first family to bring Middle Eastern cuisine to the Triangle when they opened the first Neomonde in 1977. Sitti, which means “grandmother” in Lebanese, opened in November in the historic Heilig-Levine building in downtown Raleigh.

Like many chefs, Jarrouj discovered the kitchen while in college in southern California. He worked as a bus boy, waiter and dining room manager before venturing into the kitchen. The owner agreed to teach him how to cook. “I got hooked,” he says.

For Sitti, Jarrouj translated the Hatem and Saleh family recipes into the restaurant’s fare from flatbreads and cucumber mint salad to stuffed grape leaves and pizzettes. Last month restaurant critic Greg Cox gave Sitti four out of five stars.

Ghassan Jarrouj of Sitti in Raleigh.

STAFF PHOTO BY TRAVIS LONG



## How do you pronounce your name?

GAH-sahn Jah-ROUGE.

## When did you come to the United States?

I came from Lebanon in 1968 to the Los Angeles area, southern California. I worked at quite a few restaurants in California, mostly continental, American, Italian, French.

## So was cooking Lebanese cuisine a change for you?

No. I did an apprenticeship back in Lebanon. Then I worked at a Lebanese restaurant, as a chef, called the Olive Tree. ... Then I moved up to Northern California and opened my first Lebanese restaurant. It was featured on TV. It was quite an exciting time. ... From California, I went back to Lebanon. I worked for the American ambassador’s residence. I worked there for 8½ years. Then I moved back to the United States.

## Who were the good cooks in your family?

Of course, my mother and my grandmother. The actual Lebanese food is a little bit different than what you would find in a restaurant. Lot of stews. Lot of varieties of food. They even incorporate spaghetti and pasta. It’s more versatile. Traditional restaurant food — that’s probably what you go out to eat once a week or make once a week. Kebabs are not what you eat every day. Here we try to do as much as close to the traditional grandma cooking.

## How do you like Raleigh?

I like it. They have an appetite for something different, something new.

Sitti, 137 S. Wilmington St.,  
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