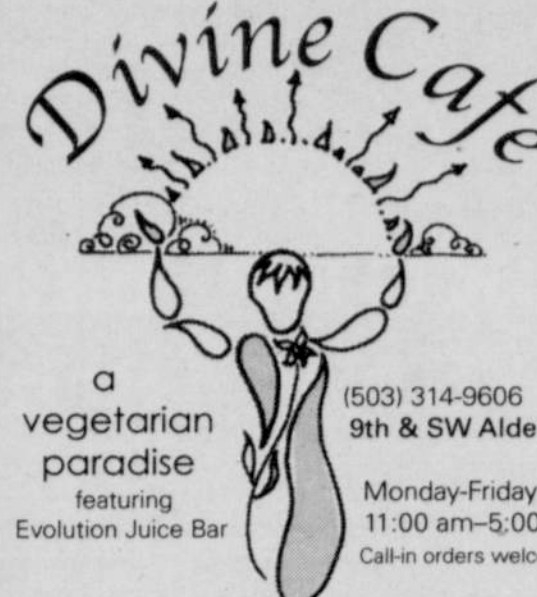




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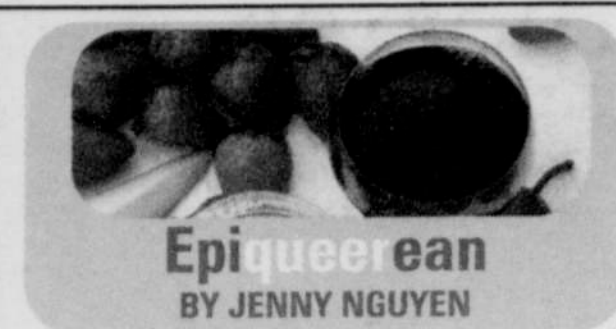


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Lesbo Needs Lebanese

Foods from this small region wedged between the Mediterranean and Southeast Asia have long been associated with the all-too-general classification of "Middle Eastern" food. So for your culinary knowledge and pleasure, I've taste-tested some tried-and-true Lebanese sources, and here's what I found.

Ya Hala • 8005 S.E. Stark St.

The largest and more fanciful of the three restaurants is surprisingly homey and welcoming. Chef Mirna Attar can be spotted chumming with guests and regulars alike; with food and drink aplenty, there's never a lack of hubbub. The *hummus*, a chickpea and garlic puree, was the most velvety and light I've ever had, while the *labneh*, a creamy yogurt cheese, was tart and addictive with kalamata olives and mint. The fresh, steaming-hot pita bread arrived crispy and thin, a perfect vehicle for any of the many *mezza*, or appetizers. The falafel was disappointingly hard and overcooked, while the *kousa*, a stew of vegetables, was in desperate need of seasoning. But with homemade sausages, yogurt, spiced beef and imported cheeses, I wouldn't sweat the small stuff and definitely give Ya Hala a holla.

Nicholas Restaurant • 318 S.E. Grand Ave.

This tiny Lebanese landmark boasts the city's finest homemade pita, sized to order—I witnessed a mammoth pocket bread for five the size of a poker table! Unlike Ya Hala, the falafels here were perfectly spiced chickpea pillows speckled with parsley and paprika. The lamb kafta was generously seasoned and charbroiled to a moist, meaty mouthful. Though the hummus was lackluster, the *tabbouleh*, a parsley and couscous salad, was refreshingly lemony and proportionately authentic. The beef *shawarma* sandwich wrapped thinly sliced sirloin steak, marinated in the grandparents' 10-spice recipe, in fresh pita. If yer mouth ain't watering, you got no glands, hun. This place is drool-worthy.

Riyadh's • 1318 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

This semi-small space has occupied the corner of 13th and Hawthorne nearly as long as the antique-retro stores that surround it. Stepping over banana seat cruisers and carved coffee tables is cumbersome, but the environ inside is a sight for sore eyes. The menu features the usual suspects and comparable prices, but portion sizes are noticeably smaller. Salads here take the cake: The *fatoush*—romaine, radish, peppers and sumac tossed with mint and lemon—was zesty and cool. Packaged pitas were a turnoff, but well-executed entrees made up for some of the luxury afforded by other joints. The location is convenient for shoppers and the like for a hearty lunch bite. 10

JENNY NGUYEN is in search of local brewpubs. Have a favorite? Write her at jenny0080@hotmail.com with any booze news.



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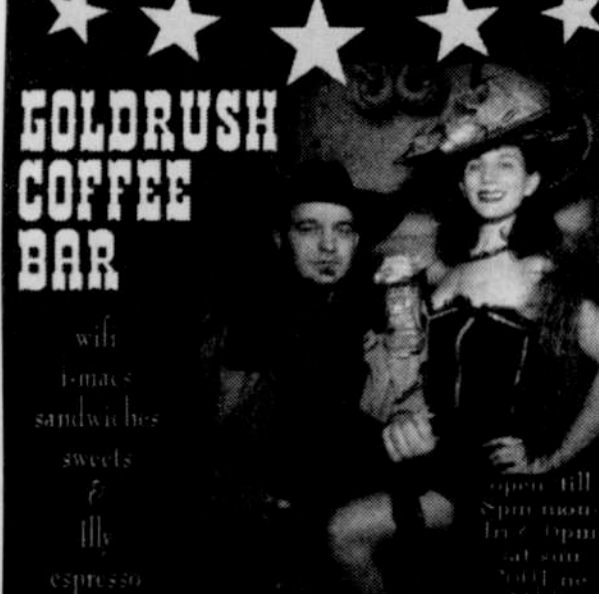


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