

JOIN THE NETWORK

CONNECTING MIDDLE EASTERN CULTURE THROUGH FOOD

BY DAEMION LEE



RESTAURANT OWNER ALAA ALBAADANI AND HER MOTHER

PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

What you know about Middle Eastern food is probably wrong — at least according to Alaa Albaadani. That’s why she started the Mediterranean Network Restaurant, to share the traditional tastes from her home in Yemen, along with other staples from across the region.

“I love American food, but every restaurant that is not American is Americanized,” Albaadani says. “I go to a Middle Eastern restaurant and it tastes totally different than what I’m used to. I get frustrated because people say, ‘This tastes good,’ and I say: ‘That’s not my food; that’s not the real thing.’”

The difference, she says, is in the spices. The opening of her restaurant was delayed, in fact, by an extended search for the right spices. Some are more familiar, like cumin and cardamom. Others are more exotic, like saffron, the stigma of the saffron crocus, which gives food a cheerful yellow-red color. *Za’atar* features heavily in the menu as well, a traditional blend of spices used throughout the Middle East. Even the rice comes well seasoned, carrying a distinctive kick because of the addition of dried lemon.

One of her most popular dishes, Albaadani says, is the *fattah* lamb, a stew served in a bowl lined with chunks of *saj*, a flat bread flavored with *habbah sauda* seeds — sometimes called black caraway or nigella in English. The *mendi* chicken and *mendi* lamb are



also popular. For vegetarians, one option is *molokia*, a green stew made from the leaf of the jute plant and a national dish in Egypt. Served over rice, *molokia* has a rich, garlicky taste and a distinctive slippery texture.

Her interest in cooking started out as a hobby, Albaadani says, something to do when she was bored. “I used to open up the fridge and get whatever ingredients I had and just start making food,” she says. “Then I started learning more and more and I started getting recipes from my family and trying to

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