

MOUTH OF THE COLUMBIA

Coast Weekend's local
restaurant review

Find Mediterranean, Lebanese flavors at new Seaside restaurant

Review and photos by
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I can't tell you how many times I passed the old Mediterranean cafe in downtown Seaside only to see a "closed" sign hanging in the window. I would mope, because these are elusive flavors on the North Coast, particularly in South County. (Long Beach, Washington, has the terrific Iranian-inspired Kabob Cottage.)

Eventually another sign popped up. It read: "For sale." Early this summer a couple from Portland bought the bright, scrubbed cubby-hole of a cafe. While rechristening it McBani, the husband-and-wife team — he's originally from Jordan; she's from Lebanon — is keeping with the Mediterranean/Lebanese inspiration.

But they have come up with their own menu. It's based on regional specialties, constructed with nods toward simplicity, purity and health. As the co-owner told me, "We make everything from scratch except the pita bread." The menu goes into detail, explaining that the dishes are "prepared with 100 percent natural, kosher, fresh ingredients, no preservatives, no artificial flavors, no GMO." And while Lebanese and Middle Eastern cuisine lends itself well to vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free purviews, I was none-the-less impressed with McBani's highlight and care for alternatives. I figured: Next time my vegan sister visits I'm bringing her here.

My first trip came on a warm Friday evening, and Broadway — ever the tourist mecca — was packed, the sidewalks nearly shoulder-to-shoulder. McBani, with white walls, halogen lighting and sparse decor, is not particularly reflective of any aesthetic beyond "the coast." It was busy too, but not to the point where my companion and I couldn't choose between tables — there are only about five or six. Which is just as

well; the husband-and-wife owners are McBani's lone employees, handling front and back of the house in totality. Perusing the menu, I couldn't help but stare at the plates of nearby diners, lovingly presented on large, segmented dishes and platters.

We began with the Falafel appetizer (\$5.95), the first of many colorful, aesthetically pleasing dishes. The three garbanzo and fava bean balls, mixed with onions, cilantro and garlic were both well spiced and fried — a crisp, thin crust cupping the steamy, crumbly, soft green innards. The falafel were accompanied by light green lettuce, chopped red tomatoes, sweet pickles and a vibrant, pink pickled radish, as well as cup of beige tahini sauce.

Soon after came plates of hummus and baba ghanoush (which came as part of our platter orders). The hummus was dusted with smoked paprika, a few chopped tomatoes and whole garbanzo beans. The baba ghanoush spared the parsley and chickpeas, adding green bell peppers. The hummus was robust, the baba ghanoush silky smooth, and both were complemented with quality olive oil. With another pair of plates containing pitas filling the table, there was hardly room for the main course platters. And even before they arrived, the veritable smorgasbord was absolutely delightful.

But, my, when the meats came, my companion and I melted. She had the Lamb Shawarma Platter (\$21.95). Upon her first bite of the sinuous sirloin she emitted, in ecstasy: "Oh wow. Oh wow." Gathering her senses, she added, "Perfect marinade on the lamb, and the cinnamon, clove and cumin." The rich, lean cubes were served upon un-sticky basmati rice and with a refreshing, cleansing Mediterranean salad.

My lustful reaction to the beef



Above: McBani's Stuffed Cabbage Leaves Platter featured hummus, salad and cabbage leaves suffed with rice and spiced beef.

Left: The beef and chicken kabob combo platter featured well-spiced meat offerings.

kabob was similar to my companion's. The meat was supple and ground with onions and herbs; the spices — particularly saffron — gave whispers of ancient, exquisite elegance. Tantalizing seasoning elevated the chicken too (I had a combo platter featuring both, \$19.95). It included saffron, hints of turmeric, and became something deep, almost mysterious.

As business mellowed I chatted for a moment with the co-owner. He talked about enhancing whole foods while staying healthy and ethical. He talked about maturing palates, of the adult need for "real food." As we left, leftovers in hand, I was equally happy about the check — quite reasonable.

I returned with my parents. They're not adventurous eaters, but I was confident that McBani's elemental, mostly familiar, though punched-up ingredients would make them fans. And hey, if things went sideways, they could just have chicken.

But things didn't go sideways — they went swimmingly.

My mom was sensible and had a light lunch — the Baba Ghanoush platter (\$9.95, vegan). My dad and I went for it. He had the Stuffed Cabbage Leaves Platter (\$18.95), which featured rice and cinnamon-and-cloves-spiced ground beef wrapped in cabbage leaves that were topped with a light tomato sauce. I was glad he was eating more nutrients than flour or corn.

After a Spinach Pie appetizer that was soft, easy and forgettable, I had the "Kafta" Beef Kabob Sandwich (\$11.95). I chose it in order to check out the sandwiches and because I was longing for more saffron beef. I'm pleased to report it was enormous — akin to nearly two burritos, stuck end-to-end. Inside, the kabob monopolized some 80 percent of prime real estate. The remaining alleys were stuffed with hummus, bursts of pickle, tomato, crisp lettuce and other goodies.

Finishing up, my folks, coffee addicts that they are, wondered if McBani's had any. There was none brewed, but if we could wait the co-owner would brew up "one

MCBANI

Rating: ★ ★ ★ ★

ADDRESS: 490 Broadway, Seaside

PHONE: 503-757-9919

HOURS: 1 to 9 p.m. Thursday through Monday.

PRICE: \$ – Entrees range from \$10-\$20

SERVICE: Gracious, thoughtful, but can be stretched

VEGETARIAN / VEGAN

OPTIONS: A top choice for vegetarians and vegans

DRINKS: Bottled drinks, coffee

KEY TO STAR RATING SYSTEM

★ Below average

★★ Average

★★★ Good

★★★★ Excellent

★★★★★ Best in region

hell of a cup of coffee." He said he was once a coffee roaster and "very particular" about it. My folks obliged and ordered a baklava, which was layered, flaky, nutty and not too sweet or mushy. The coffee took its time, as can service at McBani — two people can only do so much. While they're gracious, competent and well-meaning, the co-owners are also stretched. In the meantime, we were offered the cafe's second pastry choice: a crusty traditional flour pastry with a center of minced, seasoned dates. Its spicing was another singular sensation, darkly twinkling. The pastry paired exceedingly well with the coffee — which lived up to its high billing.

Much as I was, my dad was buoyed by the co-owner's sense of pride in his work and product. "You've got to have that," my dad said. Indeed — every bit as much as you've got to have these flavors, this ethic, and this diversity on the North Coast.