

## Comfort Me with Falafel

An Egyptian chef in Queens dishes up international home cooking

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I LIVED in Egypt for a year, and I miss a few things about the country -- but not the food. When I moved to Astoria, Queens, a few years ago, and heard rave reviews of an Egyptian restaurant around the corner, I rolled my eyes. Were trend-obsessed New Yorkers swooning over *bisara*, that squelchy fava bean Jell-O? Or maybe they were lapping up underspiced *masa'afa*, a pale, greasy shadow of Greek moussaka.

One winter's eve, I got to talking with a friend I'd met in Cairo about our time in the Big Mango and the things we missed: convivial cafes, strong tea, music blaring from tinny radios, a relaxed attitude toward time, the hospitality. Soon we were tromping through the sleet toward the Kabab Cafe, the Egyptian restaurant I'd heard so much about, hoping for a nostalgia fix, if not a good meal.

We were greeted by a hot blast of air -- not the Egyptian *khamsin*, the spring desert wind, but warmth generated by a stove that had been cranked all day in a 150-square-foot space. For that was how large the restaurant was, and nearly half of that space was occupied by the open kitchen, which looked no more professional than the one in my apartment.

We were also greeted by a large man in rumpled chef's whites and a rakish black beret, a handkerchief knotted jauntily around his neck. "Welcome, welcome," he said with grandeur. He swept his arm past the four miniscule tables. "Please, have a seat anywhere."

The chef, who introduced himself as Ali, immediately presented us with hot mint tea and menus. But the decor distracted us. The tabletops were encrusted with seashells, tiles, and postmarked stamps. The walls were painted with desert palms and covered with black-and-white photos of family, Egyptian movie stars, and Louis Armstrong. Umm Kulthum, the legendary Egyptian classical singer, wailed from a tiny cassette player.

Fortunately the menu was irrelevant. Ali squeezed between the tables to capture our full attention, and began to orate: "Today, my dears, we have some specials. We have lamb baked with okra. We have Bugs Bunny -- rabbit in a stew with white wine. We have a whole fish, the holy mackerel, with grilled vegetables." His list went on until we were dizzy. It all sounded amazing, but we'd had some dinner already. We'd thought this was a cafe, like the sign said. (Oh, and there'd been no mention of kabab either.) We meekly ordered a mixed-appetizer plate.

Hummus, baba ghanouj, and the Egyptian staple *foul mudammas* (fava beans stewed with tomatoes and onion) arrived decked with apple slices, crisp-fried spinach, rich-purple sumac, and sesame seeds. Our appetites quickly revived, and we found each of the standard spreads thoughtfully rendered, cooked from scratch, not from habit: pasty, smoky eggplant, chunky fava beans, extra-garlicky hummus, along with the lightest little balls of falafel.

"Talk to me, baby," Ali called from in front of his range. "How is the food? You love it, baby? It's good?" He sidled over to our table with a wide grin, devouring our praise.

Eventually we couldn't help remarking that the food in Cairo had never been this good. Ali told us that he was from the Egyptian city of Alexandria, on the Mediterranean coast, which has a long tradition of fresh seafood and multicultural innovation -- which explained both his rethinking of culinary standards, as well as his choice to settle in Astoria, an ethnic mishmash with a strong Greek influence.



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I returned frequently, bringing every visitor I had to Ali's magical hideaway. We sampled the hearty lamb shank with okra, we sampled Bugs Bunny, and once I had the most delicious calves liver I've ever tasted. Dinners got longer, and we would take a break if necessary to make room for delectable baklava, thick with pistachios (or sometimes unorthodox peanuts) and honey. Sometimes I'd stay and smoke a little from Ali's *shisha*, a water pipe with strong, sweet tobacco he brought back from his hometown.

The food was never that exotically spiced, nor was it particularly delicate, but it was clearly cooked with love, and sometimes delivered in Mom's-kitchen style -- straight from the cast-iron skillet to the plate in front of you. Even guests more accustomed to linen tablecloths were soon reaching across the table to mop up the last bits of a tangy beet-and-dill appetizer with a scrap of pita bread.

In the fall of 2002, Ali told me the Kabab Cafe was going to close for a month -- no big deal, he said, as he needed to have some minor surgery and take some time off. But one day I biked by and saw the sign had been removed and the space gutted. The bare, white space looked even smaller than when it had been filled with Ali's bric-a-brac and hearty presence. I panicked; I nearly cried. Horrible scenarios of Ali's surgery played out in my head. I was too afraid to ask anyone in the neighborhood what had happened.

A month later, a new sign was on the door, but fortunately the name was the same, and Ali was back, looking heartier than ever. The "redesign" has added an extra seat and put a fresh arabesque mural on the wall, but otherwise the Kabab Cafe is completely intact. Perhaps because of that absence, I go there more regularly now, even more appreciative of Ali's ever-welcoming kitchen.

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*Photos by the author*