

The best of both worlds

A melding of gastronomic treats tempts tastebuds at Torrensville.

THE ACT of taking over a Greek cafe in the midst of a strong Greek community like that surrounding inner-western Torrensville and replacing it with a new Lebanese restaurant might sound to the uninitiated like an act of madness, belligerence or perhaps naivety.

It speaks loudly of our successful cultural melt that Byblos, now at the site of the former Nikitas, has been met with a sense of unity in the suburb rather than separation.

In gastronomic matters, there are many similarities between the diets of the two groups and it speaks well of the new owners, the Rachid and Raslan families, that they are completely at ease in melding Greek influences with a more dominant Lebanese menu at Byblos, which is named after a 7000-year-old city settled variously by the Phoenicians, Greeks and Arabs.

It's lucky that both Lebanese and Greek cuisines have many similarities in produce and techniques and its welcome into the area has no doubt been due to a local community that recognises and understands this.

Mezza, salads, grills of meat and seafood, loads of lemon and garlic over chicken and squid appear here as if there are no borders and all the world is sitting around the shores of the Mediterranean and Aegean. If only there was such peace and joy everywhere.

At Byblos, we can thank our lucky stars that glorious Lebanese/Australian home cook Hiam Rachid has taken to a bigger stage. It's her first foray into professional hospitality. Likewise it is her son Nidal's inaugural restaurant business along with uncle Sam Raslan. They wanted to offer authentic Lebanese food presented in the way their countryfolk eat it. Nidal says proudly his mum's restaurant food is exactly the same way she cooks at home - writ large.

The new setting is essentially a half-in, half-out venue, with a spacious terrace facing on to busy Henley Beach Rd a tad noisy for those keen on the art of conversation. It probably is a smokers' haven as well.

Inside, the setting is quite simple, tables and chairs in black, basic cafe-style layout and preparation. Hiam's children are on the floor - a cousin Adam also runs the bar -

REVIEW

TONY LOVE

making this a true family affair. Daughter Nadine's smile and pride of her mum's dishes are infectious.

We are convinced all is good when she reports that Hiam makes the stuffed vine leaves and doesn't drag them out of a can.

These appear in the starters section of the menu and carry, like many of the dishes, a series of tags relating to their status as vegetarian, vegan, gluten free and ultimately a "Healthy Choice" meal which on the menu is further explained as low in fat, sugar and salt but high in fibre.

For the record, there are more than a dozen vegetarian choices and more than 10 for those intolerant to gluten.

The vine leaves are fantastic, filled with creamy herbed rice, flavoured delicately and not over-brined or pickled.

Without even having to state a case for the modern preoccupation of "shared plates", Byblos does exactly that. A trio of dips, the rolled leaves and a plate of "Modern Saganaki" is a great communal entree for three, the dips all quite distinctive and genuinely homemade, babaghanouj teetering on too smoky, hummus creamy and full-bodied, and a "Msaq'aa", a blend of chickpea, eggplant, garlic and onion and a thick tomato puree, fresh, chunky and addictive.

The modern saganaki is very salty and is all the better for slices of just sweet pickled cucumber. Excellent.

To make your basic dips so special is an indication of the authenticity of the rest of the menu. The salads are full of life and goodness, Phoenician fattoush, Lebanese tabouli among them, while a classic Greek salad can be turned into a main meal by adding charred lamb.

Once again, these all make for an amazing Mediterranean banquet that comes into its own with platters of mixed meats or seafoods grilled just right, with additions of pan-fried pieces such as barramundi, and a small bowl of mussels that doesn't match the heights of



Chef Hiam Rachid, left, has created a great communal entree, the trio of dips, above.

THE RESTAURANT

BYBLOS MEDITERRANEAN CUISINE

176 Henley Beach Rd, Torrensville.
Phone 8152 0404.

www.byblos.net.au

Breakfast (Lebanese): 9.30am-noon, Tue-Fri;

from 8.30am, Sat, Sun.

Lunch/dinner: Noon-late, Tue-Sun.

Seating: 110; 60 outside.

Banquet menu and function seating available.

Wheelchair access and facilities: Yes.

Proprietors: Nidal Rachid and Sam Raslan.

Chefs: Hiam Rachid and Richard Moretti.

THE VERDICT

THE BILL

Entrees: \$5.90-\$12.90.

Mains: \$16.90-\$32.90.

Desserts: \$4.50-\$9.

Vegetarian options: Many and varied.

Corkage: \$9.50.

SUMMARY

Cafe-style setting, with a genuine Lebanese/Greek crossover menu delivering beautifully fresh home-style dishes best shared or in banquet mode. The wine list is too spare and needs a lot more attention, but corkage is good value.

SCORE 14/20

Score guide: Below 10: Awful. 10-11: Passable. 11-12: Fair. 12-13: Something going for it. 13-14: Good. 14-15: Recommended. 15-16: Special. 16-17: Excellent. 17-18: Outstanding. 18-19: Brilliant. 20: Perfect.

other seafood components. If anything, there's a little repetition of a pepper and salted coat over some items, but the value is excellent for this top-shelf offering.

More homely is a plate of cabbage rolls, again with white pepper to the fore and a huge pat of labneh (drained yoghurt cheese) on top that adds an edge to the palate.

The desserts are shown off in a cabinet, with a huge tray of Hiam's cream kataifi holding pride of place alongside a bright yellow lemon tart baked by co-chef, ex Poplars at Coonawarra's Richard Moretti.

The kataifi is boldly aromatic, with orange blossom water flavour, and its shredded filo pastry base holding a superb balance between syrupy sog and kataifi crunch. The lemon tart has bright citrus curd flavour and acidity.

For coffees, you get Arabic or Greek or the usual; the family drink Arabic, we're told, so that's the choice. It's strong and powdery in the dregs, and worth the buzz.

That's the whole point of a place like Byblos. There is an honesty and authenticity here worth bottling. The families connected to the restaurant have a culinary tradition and multi-generational passion that translate to a table that groans with fresh and vibrant food. It's not just about sustenance. It's also about inspiration.

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