



Hala's Mideast Eatery



Othello

Arabian Nights

MIDDLE EASTERN CUISINE IS A LONGTIME FAVE OF JAX DINERS.

BY JEFFREY SPEAR

With its growing, ethnically diverse population, Jacksonville's dining scene caters to a wide range of culinary preferences. Coupled with an obvious and healthy demand for plant-forward and globally inspired foods, restaurants specializing in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisines are thriving and increasing in number.

For clarity, Middle Eastern foods have emerged from numerous countries in western Asia and Northern Africa, many bordering the Mediterranean Sea. Frequently confused with Mediterranean cuisine, due in part to recipes that have been shared between neighboring countries for centuries, a few of the best-known dishes are hummus, shawarma, falafel, baba ghanoush, dolmas, kebabs and baklava.

Around town, Middle Eastern restaurants are

well suited to either casual dining—full-service operations featuring both traditional and chef-inspired dishes in a unique, relaxed atmosphere; or fast casual—counter service best suited to quick, relatively inexpensive meals, as well as carry out. Before heading out, make sure you confirm which dining experience you prefer. Also, no matter where you go, every chef infuses their own cultural heritage and personal preferences into their cooking, imparting new flavors into seemingly similar dishes.

When it comes to fast casual, Jacksonville has numerous restaurants serving Middle Eastern classics. Among them is **Noura Cafe**, consistently recognized for some of the best, undeniably authentic, Lebanese food in town. If you get there early, enjoy a Breakfast Pita or Manakish Za'atar with Cheese (\$4). Later in the day, their Lamb or Chicken Gyros

(\$9) and more substantial Kabob Platter (\$23) are equally satisfying.

For a more unique Middle Eastern experience, **Hala's Mideast Eatery** is a full-service restaurant as well as bakery and international market. While their menu is similar to many of the fast casual operations, the decor and service are considerably more inviting. Don't miss the Grape Leaves (\$15), Shawarma Arabi, or fire-grilled Australian Lamb Kabobs (\$24). After your meal, wander into the adjacent market and stock up on Middle Eastern ingredients, prepared foods, house-baked pitas and a selection of baklava, a much loved Hala's specialty.

There are several full-service restaurants around town where dining experiences become considerably more seductive. In particular, **The Casbah Café** in Avondale, adorned

with colorful Moroccan lamps, Lebanese baskets and tapestries, is a cozy Middle Eastern bistro. Whether you prefer their outdoor patio, full-service bar, or dining room, you'll have access to a wide range of alluring Middle Eastern dishes including the Old City Sampler (\$20), Lamb Chops (\$32) and Chicken Shawarma Platter (\$17). To round out your experience, enjoy the extensive hookah menu and the belly dancers that entertain on weekends. Desserts accompanied by a Turkish coffee are the perfect finishing touch.



When you're ready to explore even further, head over to **Othello** in the Springfield neighborhood. Housed in a 1920s Spanish Revival building, this contemporary-styled restaurant offers creatively inspired dishes that reflect their Jordanian heritage along with influences from North Africa and the Mediterranean coast. Don't miss the baked-to-order breads along with plates of Hummus (\$7) or Whipped Feta. Then enjoy the Seared Octopus (\$26) or shareable 32-oz. Braised Lamb Shank (\$59). Plus, there's a wonderful selection of Middle Eastern wines and spirits to keep your thirst at bay. If you're an open-minded drinker, ask about their Stay Golden Ponyboy.

Lastly, the just opened **Alder & Oak**, located along Riverside Avenue near the Fuller Warren Bridge, is a two-story dining destination reminiscent of a coastal cafe on the Mediterranean. Start on the rooftop patio at Zorba's Bar, enjoying the view with a cocktail, perhaps the Aphrodite martini (feta infused gin, calamata olive brine), along with the A&O Mezze, an assortment of tzatziki, baba ganoush, hummus, olives, pickles and pita (\$26). Alternatively, take a seat in the dining room for an extensive selection of culinary creations influenced by Turkish, Greek, Italian and Spanish cuisines. Favorites include the Tartufo Bianca Pizza and Grilled Octopus (\$28).

It doesn't matter if you prefer fast-casual or full-service dining. Whether you're familiar with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean foods, or experiencing these flavors for the very first time, you'll find each of these destinations noteworthy and enjoyable. *

Spice of Life

Growing up, Susie Busch-Transou loved weekends when her father August A. Busch III was home and grilling steaks outside. With the help of a chef friend, August, great-grandson of beer brewing magnate Adolphus Busch, created a special seasoning, a savory blend of organic salt, garlic and pepper. Suitable for use on steak, chicken, pork, veggies and even seafood, **AABIII Seasoning** is available online and at Hearth & Soul (\$15) in Atlantic Beach. Here, Susie (on left, pictured with her father and mother) shares a family favorite shrimp recipe that uses dashes of AABIII and a bottle of Bud. Shrimp and beer... yes, please.



INGREDIENTS

1 lb. fresh jumbo shrimp, peeled
1 Tbsp. fresh garlic, minced
2 Tbsp. olive oil
1 tsp. AABIII Steak Seasoning
1/2 bottle of Budweiser
3-4 limes
splash of dry vermouth
pinch of cayenne pepper

DIRECTIONS

1. In a large skillet, heat olive oil and sauté garlic
2. Add shrimp, dash of cayenne pep-

per, and a dash of steak seasoning, quickly saute

3. Pour half a bottle of Budweiser over the shrimp and bring to a simmer

4. Add the juice of 2 to 3 fresh limes over the shrimp and add a splash of vermouth to finish

5. Transfer shrimp to a serving dish, sprinkle with steak seasoning

6. Serve with fresh limes *

Alder & Oak

