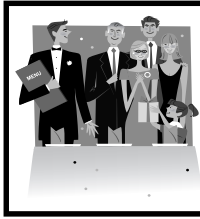


Luxor in South San Francisco — Spicy food, hot music

By JOHN MAYBURY
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE



Restaurant Review

Luxor, a Mediterranean restaurant housed in the old Brentwood Lodge in South San Francisco, retains the best of the old Brentwood Italian menu of pasta, seafood, and steaks, while adding the exotic cuisine and music of the Middle East.

On a recent Saturday night, we checked in around 9:30. Nabil Safi and his band were just warming up. Nabil played lute and sang, while three drummers and a keyboardist punched up the dance music with rhythmic highs and lows in the minor keys characteristic of Middle Eastern music. It was infectious stuff, and soon the floor was full of writhing, stomping dancers. It was so much fun to watch the dancers that I forgot to go out there myself and get all sweaty. As a dedicated chair dancer, I opted for the laidback position. (By the way, if you enjoy Nabil's music as much as I do, ask him how to get a copy of his CD.)

Meanwhile, servers brought more and more hot and cold appetizers to the tables. On the regular menu, you can get European-style stuffed avocados, eggplant, artichoke hearts, panache, smoked salmon, ahi tuna, and puff pastry shells. But Saturday night is Luxor's real specialty — a family-style barrage of little dishes called meze. Here is a sampling of what might be available, depending on the evening's menu:

Muhammara — crushed walnuts, breadcrumbs, sweet red-pepper paste, pomegranate syrup, olive oil. This is a rich, exotic spread that will have you begging for more. It is my No. 1 favorite dip of all time, and that is saying a lot for Juan Mayburrito, The Guacamole Kid.

Shanklish — Lebanese aged, spicy cheese mixed with chopped onion, tomatoes, fresh mint.

Basturma — Armenian spicy, cured beef with exotic seasonings, sliced very thin. Yum!

Dolmas — grape leaves rolled and stuffed with seasoned rice and vegetables, cooked in lemon juice and olive oil. Bet you can't eat just one!

Hummus — mashed garbanzo beans, tahini (sesame paste), lemon juice, garlic, olive oil.

Tabouleh — chopped parsley, cracked wheat, tomatoes, fresh mint, onions, lemon juice, olive oil. Very fresh, clean taste, and healthy as all get out.

Baba Ghanouj — chopped eggplant, tahini, lemon juice, olive oil. The monster mash of all time. Roasting the eggplant gives this velvety spread a smoky flavor I just can't resist.

Fattoush — fresh greens, toasted pita pieces, red vinegar, olive oil, pomegranate syrup, ground sumac (which adds a nice, balancing sourness). A true palate-clearing experience.

Kebbeh nayyeh — classic Lebanese steak tartare with beef and cracked wheat, mint, basil, marjoram, onion, olive oil. I am not man enough to try this, but it looks very good.

Lssanat — tender sliced lamb tongue, cooked in lemon juice and olive oil. Hmmm!

Kebbeh — ground beef, cracked wheat, pine nuts, onions, rolled and fried. Yummy!

Maanek — tiny spiced Lebanese sausages sautéed and served in tangy lemon sauce. Mouthwatering good. Don't Bogart the whole bowl.

Falafel — crushed garbanzo beans and spices, rolled and fried crisp, served with lemon juice and tahini. I love these little belly bombs, but don't turn off your calorie counter.

Beid ghanam — lamb fries, spiced and pan-fried, served in a lemony sauce. If you know bull fries, these are the same thing, different animal.

Foul mudammas — fava and garbanzo beans stewed with tomatoes, garlic, lemon juice, topped with olive oil and chopped parsley. Terrific dish that tastes much better than the name would indicate (to an English-speaking diner).

Fatayer — baked homemade turnover stuffed with spinach, on-

ions, pine nuts, seasoned and marinated with lemon juice and olive oil. Irresistible.

Rekakat — turnover stuffed with white cheese and pan-fried. Think blintz!

After you burn off the calories by dancing or at least jiggling your foot to the music, it is time for the main courses. On dance nights, you get a nice big mixed platter of chicken, beef, and lamb: kebabs (marinated, skewered, and broiled) and shawarma (roasted and sliced thin). Dinner and entertainment cost \$35-\$45, a real value for a whole evening of fun and feasting.

In the main restaurant any day of the week, you can order from a full range of fish, seafood, and steaks. Have it your way — baked, grilled, roasted, or sautéed. Plus, you can get soups, salads, pastas, chicken dishes, kids' plates, and desserts from all sides of the Mediterranean Sea. A good way to top it off is with a cup of thick, strong Turkish coffee and a honey-drenched baklava. Menu prices range from \$5 to \$9 for appetizers and \$13 to \$19 for entrees. Luxor also has a beautiful, curved mahogany bar.

A new offering is the express lunch with a different home-style dish every day for a fixed price of \$7.95. Also on the bill of fare are gourmet hamburgers made fresh from top-quality beef.

I have been back seven times and plan to return many more. Co-owners Rocky Kardosh and Nabil Safi plan to add a Friday night dinner, dance, and D.J. show with American music, all for no cover charge. Call ahead for details on weekend shows: 650-737-7900 for reservations and information. Occasionally, belly dancers perform on Saturday nights.

This great getaway is at 101 Brentwood Drive, just off El Camino Real next to the Enterprise rental cars and kitty-corner from the See's Candy factory on Spruce and ECR.