

No plane necessary for this Mideastern jaunt

Food

★★★★ Outstanding
 ★★★ Very Good
 ★★ Fair to Good
 ★ Poor

Service

✓✓✓✓ Outstanding
 ✓✓✓ Very Good
 ✓✓ Fair to Good
 ✓ Poor

LEILA, 120 S. Dixie Highway (corner of Datura), W. Palm Beach, 659-7373.

Reservations taken. Moderate-expensive.

Food ★★★. Service ★★★1/2.

The Mideast may be off limits for travelers these days but surely its food is not.

Which is why Leila, a new restaurant in the Clematis area, specializing in the cuisine from that region, is such a happy edition to the downtown scene. To all our readers who travel to West Palm Beach, even with its parking problems, this is a must.

A delightfully pretty establishment, with its walls and banquettes decorated in a darkish royal blue, Leila is the only eatery in the entire area where you can get the kind of Lebanese, Greek and Turkish specialties that are commonplace in larger cities like New York, Chicago or Boston.

Pinpoint lights under multi colored petite half globes glow softly. So does an exotic Moroccan light fixture, giving the room a slightly mysterious aura. Waterpipes decorate the outside patio. The singular wail of mid eastern music purrs in the background. What setting could be more romantic?

Add to that belly dancing on various nights, a jazz singer on other evenings, and mostly just plain unvarnished dining, seated, hopefully, on one of the plush, velvet flocked banquettes that line the wall. A welcome change of pace for those with eclectic tastes.

Palm Beachers have been waiting a long time for a tapas (Spanish or Portuguese small appetizers) bar in the area. As they flourish almost everywhere else, it seems that nobody has thought to open one here. But now, with Leila, we have a restaurant that serves mezze, the Mideastern version of tapas. Leila has a wonderful array of choices—so many that you can create a meal out of just eating these small plates accompanied by a bottle of wine, a glass of sherry, or certainly a martini.

Linger long over hummus (ground chick peas and tahini), \$6; a vibrant falafel (croquettes made of ground chickpeas, onion, sesame seeds and spices), \$7; hummus bi lahme (hummus topped with minced meat and toasted pignoli nuts), \$9; a terrific jibnee mishwieh, (grilled soft, salty pieces of Syrian sheep cheese), \$6, baba ghanouj (eggplant mashed with garlic, lemon and tahini), \$6. On a second visit we sampled the yulanji (\$8), lemony flavored wonderfully plump grape leaves stuffed with a tangy mixture of rice, parsley, tomato and onion. Also, try the kibbeh (\$10), a crisp croquette of minced beef and bulgar wheat with a center of zesty ground beef, sauteed onion and pignoli nuts. The only mezze that left me cold was the maanak (\$9)—little sausages made of lamb, beef in a gravy of port and sherry. I must add that the three others in our party thought they were just

fine. If you want to sample six of 16 choices offered you can opt for the "mezze tour" priced at \$39.

All the mezze is served with plenty of warm, excellent pita bread.

Like with Chinese food, we shared various dishes so that we got to taste a variety of appetizers. We ordered two different salads that turned out easily to be big enough for four to share. Of the two, the fatoush (\$10), was the best. Composed of pita chips tossed with romaine, cool cucumber, tomatoes, onions and radishes, it contained a light, unbelievably tangy lemon infused dressing. The second, a traditional Greek country salad (\$11) with feta cheese and Greek olives, was good but rather ordinary except for the excellent stuffed grape leaves that accompanied it.

Entrees are special, too. At least the ones we sampled. Try any of the grilled meat or chicken dishes. We ordered a shish tawook—chunks of chicken marinated in fresh garlic, olive oil and the zest of a lemon on a skewer (\$17). Charred to perfection over a grill (but not overcooked) and saturated with a burst of flavors, the kebob made an outstanding selection. So, too, was the classic lamb kebob (\$25). Succulent, tender lamb, again, veiled in a myriad of herbs that brought out the slightly gamey lamb taste.



Patricia A. Weiner

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Special mention must be made about the splendid sides of flame grilled vegetables (zucchini, yellow squash, eggplant), the moist, shimmering couscous and unusual blend of long grain rice mixed with vermicelli. All are delicious.

A wine list that features a varied selection of varietals is nicely priced. We drank a Hahn Chardonnay at \$25 that was nice crisp. On a second visit we sampled a Lebanese white, Silver Massaya (\$8) similar to a chardonnay but much more potent and rougher than you would expect from a California or French wine.

I must confess up front that am personally not fond of Mideastern desserts. They are always too sweet because of all the honey used. Leila offers four selections including a fresh baked baklava. We didn't sample any of them. After this kind of meal an ice cream cone or gelato is my pick. But forget my bias and try one of them—they may awaken a secret longing for Greece or Turkey on your part.

Now we've got standout mezze—and superior grilled meats in our back yard, can a tapas bar be far behind?

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