

Cedar's Cafe chef enjoys having fun with food

Written by Lyn Dowling For FLORIDA TODAY

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CEDAR'S CAFE
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Information

Cedar's Café is at 4100 N.Wickham Road, No. 137, Melbourne. Call 321-751-0000 for information, or go to cedarscafe.com.

MELBOURNE — Midway through a rainy winter afternoon, Toni Elkhouri sees friends coming through the doors of her restaurant and calls greetings from the kitchen, preoccupied though she is. Well past the lunch hour, Cedar's Café is crowded.

"I want to show you some of what we're going to do for Valentine's Day and the Super Bowl," she calls. "Sit down and have something to drink."

The drink is Turkish-style coffee: hot, thick, fragrant and poured properly, from a long-handled little metal cezve into an espresso cup. It warms. It also serves as a reminder that Cedar's is a restaurant to be taken seriously and Elkhouri is its chef.

That she is well and formally trained for the job is something that doesn't come up in conversation, though the names of certain culinary geniuses from around the country do, largely because they are her friends and she is happy to hear from them. Food and everything that goes into it does, and to say that the ebullient Elkhouri is passionate about food is an understatement.

"If you can't have fun with food, then you really shouldn't be in this business," she says with a grin as she sets down a beautifully plated dish of tiny meatballs and a croquette. The meatballs are of spiced lamb in a sour cherry sauce, nestled on a dollop of plain Greek-style yogurt. The puffy croquette is Khoury's idea of what to do with potatoes, not being overly fond of the mashed or french-fried versions as she is.

Much of the Mediterranean may be found in the dish, which is clever rather than especially exotic. It will be perfect for Valentine's Day, Elkhouri figures, just as her Lebanese nachos — toasted pita topped with homemade hummus, tabbouleh, olives, peppers, feta and a yogurt dressing — will be on the menu for the Super Bowl.

Valentine's Day is important at Cedar's, which already pulls in customers from throughout the region and beyond, and this year it will be a three-day celebration, Feb. 13 through 15. For those days alone will Elkhouri prepare her signature dish — mint and pistachio-encrusted rack of lamb.

"The racks of lamb must marinate for three days and then they have to sit for a day. ... And they're always made to order, but only on Valentine's Day," she says. "People come here from as far away as Miami to dine with us, and we're already pretty much fully booked. But I

never turn away our regular customers.”

Elkhouri does know those regulars, and as one comes through the door, she asks him if he wants the usual fare. And he nods. They are part of what makes Cedar's special to her, along with what she blithely describes as “playing with food.”

The child of a close-knit family from Lebanon, her parents, Tony and Marlene Elkhouri, started the restaurant, which now is owned by mother and daughter. Marlene still serves and cooks there, and nothing leaves the kitchen without Elkhouri approval, ever. Toni literally is always in the kitchen, which, she says, “never gets old.”

They do serve the foods one would expect in a Lebanese-Mediterranean restaurant — kibbeh, shawarma, gyros, kafta — as well as a selection of salads and entrees, but the trick at Cedar's is to order the daily special; “hodgepodge,” a sort of combination of recent specials; or simply to ask Elkhouri to make something.

She is fearless about it.

“For me, food is about looking to other cultures and adapting what we prepare. ... We pretty much know what is in trend; it's finding out what is new and not being afraid of it, but staying true to our own roots,” Elkhouri says. “That's the point: taking the ideas of others and paying homage to them, though not precisely imitating them. People don't come to restaurants to eat what they could have at home. Why go out? They come to restaurants to try the chefs' interpretations.”

Thus, a bit of the heat in those distinctly Mediterranean nachos comes from Aleppo peppers, which are native to Syria, rather than familiar Southwestern chiles. The wings served around the time of the football game will have a garlic-Sriracha sauce, with cayenne and more Aleppo pepper flavoring, finished with mint and whipped feta, “to add a little coolness.”

As preparations for the special days go on, so does planning for menus to come. Cedar's décor and menu will undergo a revamp after Valentine's Day and special events like wine dinners are planned for the months to come. During the first week of March, Cedar's will host a “Breakfast for Dinner” event for which Elkhouri will prepare her versions of typical morning fare deconstructed and done in her Lebanese-American-international way (savory, not bland), including lamb bacon.

She speaks with great animation about her plans for the latter and admits she was a bit flummoxed as to how to do it properly. Then she spoke to a couple of famous chefs who turned out to be equally excited. One of them suggested she use black salt to cure the bacon. Another suggested using a preparation that includes pomegranate. She will use them, and one of her friends, celebrity chef Rick Bayless, will take a few days here to help her with that menu revamp.

“She listens to them, and they listen to her,” her mother says. “The chefs talk to one another.”

That is helpful because Elkhouri will talk about food all day, even after she has locked the front door and starts to clean up. Subject matter includes the likes of cleanliness (“You have to take everything down from the ceiling and clean it. Period.”); cell phones (“I'm going to put up a sign that says, ‘Please turn off all electronic devices or place them on silent.’ ”) and where to buy good

provisions. The Elkhouris despise second-rate provisions.

As she speaks of such things, Elkhouri disappears into the kitchen and re-emerges carrying a plate on which two small lemon cakes have been arranged, one of which has walnuts, cranberries and homemade lemon curd, the other of which is flourless. Lots of flourless things are available at Cedar's, which does not make a show of serving gluten- or lactose-free foods.

It also is highly vegan-friendly, which may be surprising in the restaurant that represents such a meat-rich culture, but not when the chef herself has been a committed vegan since she was 7 years old. "It was a matter of choice," she says with a shrug. "I like vegan food."

The lemon cakes came about because "the lemons talked to me," adds Elkhouri, who converses frequently with fruits, vegetables and meats. In this case, the lemons didn't want to be squeezed into beverages but incorporated into those tart confections.

"It's fun," Elkhouri says. "Show me people who say they eat strictly for nutrition and I'll show you people who are unhappy and boring. I love to play with food and it never gets old. This is fun."