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MARIA SONNENBERG
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 Freelance_OK

FOR FLORIDA TODAY

Your server at Melbourne's **Cedar's** Caf may hold an advanced degree from one of America's top universities. Owner Marlene Khouri stresses the value of higher education to her large family and encouraged her children to excel. The kids listened to mom, graduating from top schools.

The degrees don't stop the kids from helping at Khouri's **cafe** for weeks at a time. Daughter Toni Marie, a graduate of Princeton, was preparing to return North after spending several weeks helping mom run her restaurant. Her sister, a Stanford graduate, was slated to come in for her annual "tour of duty."

While serving a late lunch crowd, Khouri discussed her experiences in the business she opened just a little over a year ago.

Why did you get into the restaurant business?

I always liked to cook and always dreamed of opening up my own caf. After I got married, I had a big family. By the time the kids grew up, I thought it was time to follow my dream.

I worked in an American restaurant for two years before opening up my own place.

What advice would you give to others who are thinking about opening a restaurant business?

Start small. What made you settle in Brevard?

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We're originally from north Lebanon, but have been in the United States for 30 years. When we first moved here from Boston, the area was very quiet. We moved here for the kids, really, because it was a nice place for them to grow up in.

What's the worst part of your job?

When I tell a customer the order is going to be ready in 15 minutes but it turns out it takes longer. I don't like to keep people waiting.

What do you enjoy most about your job?

It makes me happy to come to work. This is not a restaurant. My customers are like family.

What's your favorite type of food?

Lebanese, because it's so healthy. I'm 48 and never been sick.

Family?

My husband, Tony, and my children, four girls and a boy. My children always come in, from California, from Pennsylvania, from Gainesville to help.

What is your signature dish?

We cater a lot of seders. The Jewish community likes our falafel. Our vegetarian dishes are also very popular. We host a buffet for the Vegetarian Society of Brevard every month.

Do you like eating out?

We don't go to big chains. If people ask me for suggestions, I tell them to go to small restaurants like Pinero's, Taste of India and Salt and Sweet.

Do you enjoy cooking at home?

Oh, yeah, I enjoy every minute. I cook every morning for my son and my husband before I leave for work.

How do you come up with menus?

Our menu has actually grown quite a lot since we opened, because customers kept suggesting we add other things.

Do you ever "retire" entrees?

No, we actually just added stuff.

What's your restaurant's slogan?

You don't have to sacrifice quality to satisfy flavor.

Favorite beverage? Water

Favorite dessert? Honeycake or miniroses baklava

What three famous guests, dead or alive, would you invite for dinner? Ronald Reagan and Bill and Hillary Clinton

The best place to eat a meal? At home at Christmas, with all my family.

Contact Sonnenberg at msonnenberg@cfl.rr.com

Bistro du jour

What: **Cedar's Cafe** Where: 4100 N. Wickham Road, Unit 137, Melbourne Hours: 11 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays, noon to 5 p.m. Sundays. Prices: Entrees range from \$4.99 to \$10.95. You must try: Shish Taouk (grilled chicken marinated in garlic sauce and spices, \$10.95) and Rose Water Lemonade (\$1.25) Phone: 751-0000 Web: www.cedarscafe.com

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