

Lebanese Taverna brings its expertise to city

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The new Lebanese Taverna makes a great first impression. The "taverna" in the name, the ethnic cuisine, and the fact that it's part of a local chain could lead you to believe it might have good food but not much style.

You'd be wrong. The high-ceilinged, contemporary space in the Spinnaker Bay building is a showstopper. The ceilings are curved like sails, huge windows let in plenty of light and many of the seats have views of the water. As modern as the dining room looks, decorative accessories from the Middle East give it a sense of history. Silver beaded curtains divide one area from the next.

But in a bit of marketing cleverness, much of the food is still home-style Lebanese cooking, those dishes familiar to Americans like hummus, stuffed grape leaves and kebabs. You're in surroundings worthy of a special occasion, but you can enjoy dinner without taking out a second mortgage.

The presentation reinforces the dual-vision concept. A ball of falafel is not one of the world's most beautiful foods, but when it and its companions are arranged on a square white plate with artistically placed shavings of red and green cabbage, thin slices of radish and fresh mint leaves, they look remarkably appetizing.

The menu is endless, with dozens of mezza (small plates), full-scale dinners and plenty of vegetarian options. If you feel overwhelmed, do what we did. The four of us went with the "Table Mezza." Everyone at the table has to agree to this, but there are five versions so no one should be unhappy. Each has its own fixed price for a selection of appetizers that everyone shares and individual main courses.

We ordered four of the five variations: grilled, rotisserie, vegetarian and seafood. The fifth is just appetizers; you share seven of them, and then you get a couple more for yourself while your companions are eating their main courses. Just try to keep track of what you're being served. With so much food on the table, we never noticed we didn't get our second vegetarian main course: a stuffed vegetable of the day.

If you order nothing else, try the Lebanese Taverna's world-class hummus, with just the right balance of garlic, sesame paste and chickpeas so you actually taste the other

ingredients besides the garlic. This and the other mezza come with warm pita, a little more the size and shape of a hollow sub roll than you may be used to.

Little dishes of good things arrive as they are ready: grape leaves stuffed with rice and chickpeas; a bright, parsley-filled tabbouleh salad arranged with heart-of-romaine leaves sticking up jauntily; pastries filled with ground lamb and beef -- a combination that shows up again as skewered meatballs. Pinenuts, almonds, fresh mint, yogurt, cilantro and garlic are recurring themes.

But lamb chunks as tender, flavorful and perfectly cooked as those on the grilled table mezza don't need any of those extras. The kebabs are just fine as is, grilled with peppers, onions and tomatoes. You get a sample of two other kebabs as well, chicken and balls of ground beef and lamb; but the lamb overshadows them.

The other table mezza featuring meat focuses on rotisserie selections, sliced chicken and beef with lamb, highly seasoned and served with a garlicky tahini (sesame paste) sauce.

The seafood table mezza gives you an idea of how well the kitchen handles seafood. The chunks of swordfish on the fish kebab could easily have been overcooked but weren't. The large shrimp had a pleasing smoky flavor, and the grilled salmon was moist and fresh.

If you're a vegetarian you have to love this place. For the vegetarian table mezza you get 10 (or, in our case, nine) meatless dishes. The main course was built around eggplant and chickpeas with yogurt and pinenuts, with toasted pita chips under the yogurt. They added texture but were disconcerting.

Desserts are traditional Middle East sweets: dense, sticky-sweet, often flavored with rosewater and pistachios. A warm bread pudding was noteworthy, and the baklava is a safe bet.

And speaking of desserts, we got ours because the chef noticed we were looking around anxiously for our waitress (and had been for some time), so he brought us the dessert menu. In other ways Lebanese Taverna has hit the ground running, but the service was wildly uneven. My guess is that won't last long. Lebanese Taverna hasn't expanded to five full-service restaurants in the Baltimore-Washington area without being able to straighten out such glitches quickly.

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Ratings:

Food: ***

Service: **

Atmosphere: *** 1/2

Rating system: Outstanding: ****; Good ***; Fair or uneven **; Poor *