



Magazine: Souther Living Issue: Mid Atlantic Living

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After coming to Washington, D.C., with a little money and a lot of hope, the Abi-Najm family went to work building a chain of popular Lebanese restaurants.



Taniao and Marie Abi-Najm, along with the next two generations of their family, enjoy the traditional Lebanese cuisine they introduced to the D.C. area in 1979.

Growing The American Dream

When Taniao and Marie Abi-Najm escaped war-torn Lebanon with their five children in 1976, the family sold all they owned, boarded a cargo ship, and set their eyes on America.

In the years since, the Abi-Najms have made a culinary mark on this country, establishing the Lebanese Taverna. The original storefront restaurant in their Arlington, Virginia, neighborhood has grown to include six other locations, a market, and a catering business in the Washington, D.C., area. Like the majestic cedar of Lebanon that graces the company logo, the family—as well as their business—grow bigger and stronger every year.

Cultivating a Dream

Taniao admits those first years were hard. “We pooled our resources to help support our life in America,” he says. “Although it was tough early on, I wanted to show my kids that opportunity is created by working hard.”

While Taniao painted houses and worked as a cook, sons Dory and Dany bused tables. Younger son David delivered newspapers and cut lawns. “The older boys didn’t speak

any English. But they worked till 2 a.m. and then got up at 5:30 to go to school,” sister Gladys remembers.

In 1979, Taniao decided it was time for the family to strike out on its own. They opened a restaurant in a building that had previously housed a Greek cafe called the Athenian Taverna. “We didn’t have enough money

to change the whole sign,” says Dany. “So we only changed half, making it the ‘Lebanese Taverna.’”

Opening a Lebanese restaurant in suburban D.C. 25 years ago posed some major challenges. “The only things people had heard about Lebanon were bombings, terrorists, and chaos,” says David. “Even the



The backgammon boards built into the tables of the restaurant’s South Joyce Road location were crafted in Lebanon.

Shop at the Market

The family’s Lebanese food market, at 4400 Old Dominion Drive in Arlington, holds cooking classes and sells Middle Eastern items and take-out versions of popular dishes. Call (703) 841-1502.

For more information on the restaurants, cafes, market, and catering services, visit www.lebanesetaverna.com.



Dany’s son Alex already knows his way around the restaurant kitchen.

food was unknown. You’d mention hummus to someone, and they’d say, ‘Ugh, what’s that?’”

Starting the business took an all-out effort from every member of the Abi-Najm clan. “We didn’t have any employees for the first year; it was strictly the family,” Dany explains. All of the kids worked in the restaurant whenever they weren’t in school, doing homework during breaks.

Branching Out

The hard work paid off, and the business grew. Gradually, they hired more employees, expanded the menu, and doubled the restaurant’s size. Regular customers became part of the family’s life and watched the kids grow up. They opened a second location in 1990.

Since then, they’ve added two more restaurants, three cafes, a catering business, and a Lebanese food market. The more casual cafes offer faster service and a selection of top-selling items from the original Taverna’s menu.

Each location has its own unique flavor—both in the decor and the food. “None of our recipes is standardized. The chefs don’t use measuring spoons; they just make everything from memory,” youngest sister Grace says.

The core of the cuisine still relies on traditional Lebanese recipes and ingredients used for centuries. Popular items include spinach-and-cheese pastries, rotis-

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series meats, stuffed grape leaves, and freshly baked pitas.

Food and Friendship

The Abi-Najms make customers feel as if they’re dining in the family’s home, and, as a result, the original Taverna was recently named “Neighborhood Gathering Place of the Year” by the Restaurant Association Metropolitan Washington.

The family’s friendly concept also extends to the employees, most of them natives of Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America. “It’s like the United Nations,” Gladys says.

Remembering their own hard first years, the Abi-Najms look out for the needs of their employees. They cosign loans and assist in bringing workers’ families to America. So far, they’ve helped make it possible for more than 100 staff members to gain citizenship. “We were given the opportunity to come to the U.S.,” Dany says. “Now we want to extend that to others.”

LIBBY MONTEITH MINOR

Locations

The original Lebanese Taverna is located at 5900 Washington Blvd. in Arlington; (703) 241-8681.

■ **Other Virginia restaurants:** 1101 South Joyce Street, (703) 415-8681; Tysons Galleria, 1840-G International Drive, (703) 847-5244.

■ **Washington, D.C., restaurant:** 2641 Connecticut Avenue NW, (202) 265-8681.

■ **Lebanese Taverna cafes in Maryland:** 2478 Solomons Island Road (at the Harbour Center), Annapolis, (410) 897-1111; 1605 Rockville Pike (at Congressional Plaza), Rockville, (301) 468-9086; 933 Ellsworth Drive, Silver Spring, (301) 588-1192.