



BALADE

A TREASURE IN THE EAST VILLAGE

By Bob Kappstatter

With the health food mantra sweeping the nation, New York City has been increasingly adding Middle Eastern cuisine to its taste buds. This is a cuisine dating back eons to the Fertile Crescent on the Arabian Peninsula when hunters began shifting to plant-based agriculture.

The modern version of Middle Eastern food is all over the city, from streetside take-out wagons and local falafel joints to some very posh restaurants around town. The now well-established cuisine can be found in a takeout container or presented on a white tablecloth with subdued room lighting. Either way, it's a welcome delicious alternative.

We think one such establishment that meets the top end of the scale is *Balade*, where Chef/Restaurateur Roland Semaan has found his sweet spot in this East Village restaurant focusing on Lebanese cuisine. With its reputation for healthy, genuine, and inventive Middle Eastern food, the popular Zagat-rated restaurant continues to satisfy hungry diners visiting its striking Lebanese cedar wood-lined dining room, an outdoor dining booth, and front take-out counter.



FRESH IS BEST

Semaan told us that many ingredients include fresh spices and the most refined olive oil imported from his native Beirut. He added that many of the vegetarian dishes and family-style meat and other platters so typical of the Middle Eastern tradition are from family recipes passed down through generations.

"A lot of our recipes are family recipes that are at least 50 years old," said Semaan. "To name a few, our falafel, hummus, and baba ghanouj. Additionally, we will include some new dishes this autumn," added the chef, who credits his training "at a young age in Switzerland at the Cesar Ritz Hotel school and with Youssef B, the executive chef of *Arabesque* restaurant at Hotel President Wilson in Geneva."



SIMPLE PLEASURES

A piece of friendly advice: while the food sounds and looks great on the menu, your eyes may be bigger than your stomach, especially with so many tempting savory appetizers—or *mezze*, as they are called. We fell into the same trap, ordering up a selection of *mezze*—spice and veggie-topped hummus (chickpea) and baba ganouj (eggplant) dishes, made for dipping with *Balade's* fresh-baked flatbread, along with a score of other tasty—and filling—appetizers. That includes stuffed grape leaves, falafel, pastries stuffed with a variety of meats, and vegetarian phyllo rolls filled with mozzarella, feta cheeses, and oregano.

For a major appetite or a small dining group, there's the *Mezze Supreme*, with hummus, baba ghanouj, labne, muhamara, kebbe, drass, sfina, makanek, and halloumi cheese.

Add to the *mezze* selection *Jwaneh*, chargrilled chicken wings marinated for 48 hours with *Balade's* proprietary spices and imported olive oil from Lebanon; *Mouhamara*, freshly-ground red peppers, and walnuts topped with pomegranate; *Makanek* beef sausages flamed tableside with fresh lemon juice.

And of course, we had to try a few slices of the *Manakeesh* or Lebanese Pizza. The traditional signature pie, *Lahme Baajin*, is crafted from house-made seasoned ground beef mixed with finely diced tomatoes and onion. The *Jebne* version is made from a combination of white cheeses and served with a side of tomato slices. Semaan's creation, *Pita Pizza*, or The Sultan El Shawarma, yields a crispier crust and is made with thinly-sliced marinated beef and roasted with onions, cucumbers, tomatoes, and topped off with a drizzle of tahini and a pinch of a spicy mixture called za'atar.



THE MAIN EVENT

We barely made it to the main menu, which features *Balade's* signature family-style platters, including our shared order of the *Supreme Mixed Grill*, a medley of grass-fed beef kafta, lamb kabab, chicken tawook, and lamb chops, served with chargrilled vegetables.

Not to be forgotten: *Djej Al Fahem*, a half chicken marinated with *Balade's* signature recipe of fresh herbs and spices served with hand-cut fries. For fish lovers, *Balade* offers the *Samke Mechwiye*, a whole grilled branzino bone-in, marinated in lemon, olive oil, and salt served with tahini dipping sauce.

There were two more delights from our meal that night. First, from its respectable wine list, we thoroughly enjoyed a not-too-dry, not-to-full-bodied 2017 Wardy, a Clos Blanc from Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. We had a pleasant fantasy of enjoying a bottle while working through some *mezze* at a table outside some small local cafe in the verdant valley. And for a grand finale, *Mouhallable*, an amazing-if-not-hard-to-pronounce native desert of milk pudding, banana, strawberries, pistachios, and honey. A dish worth a trip to the gym the next day.

As for the current popularity of Semaan's and other Middle Eastern restaurants focusing on health-conscious food, Semaan said he has seen "an uptrend in plant-based meat and fermented proteins." For his restaurant, that has meant "redefining what it means to have healthy fresh, delicious food that is quick and customized up to the last spice."

"Applying our special variety of cooking techniques to our unique blend of flavors has allowed us to bring highlights from the world of fine dining into our quick-service restaurant."

With a reasonably-priced menu, *Balade's* prices are a bargain for what you get. Good service, delicious food, and a genuine feeling of what more ethnic restaurants should strive to be.

For more information on *Balade*, visit baladerestaurants.com.



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