

FEATURED RESTAURANT

Baklava

A Turkish Delight in Palo Alto

By

Baklava is a rich, sweet pastry made of layers of phyllo dough filled with chopped nuts and sweetened with syrup or honey. It is a hallmark of the cuisines of the former Ottoman Empire. Baklava is also the name of a newly opened restaurant on Emerson Street in Palo Alto. Owner and chef, Ilker Yuksel, (nicknamed Iliano) opened the doors of his new restaurant on Thursday, June 3rd in the space that used to be Bistro De Asie.



CHEF AND OWNER: Ilker Yuksel

Chef Iliano has revamped the interior, knocked down the front wall, and created an airy, light filled space. Baklava serves traditional Turkish cuisine in a relaxed, comfortable setting. The walls are painted a light peach color reminiscent of adobe bricks used in construction of desert abodes. There are murals on the walls, one of Turkish women baking traditional bread

and one of a favorite vacation spot in Turkey. The kitchen is open and at the back of the restaurant. You can eat at the bar, at a table or outside on the sidewalk. It has the feel of a restaurant one could easily find in Italy or Spain.

Since some of the menu items reminded me of Greek dishes, I asked Chef Iliano about the differences between Greek and Turkish cuisines. "Greek food is sweet and they use a lot of olive oil," he said. "Turkish food is not too sweet and uses less olive oil." Iliano calls his cuisine, "Mediterranean." When I asked him what that meant he said, "Mediterranean food uses herbs and has flavor and (almost) no butter. Some of the herbs and spices we use are, oregano, paprika and cumin."

My friend and I started with Turkish tea or çay (pronounced like chai). Turkish tea is brewed from very strong loose-leaf tea black tea grown mostly in the Eastern Black Sea coast region of Turkey. Tea or coffee can be served before or after a meal and is usually served with sugar but never cream or milk.

At Baklava we were served the çay in traditional transparent tulip-shaped cups. One drinks the tea by holding the rim and sipping as the tea so as not to burn oneself, is usually piping hot. As the tea is also quite

strong the serving is small so one can have as much or as little as one pleases. Chef Iliano serves all his customers free warm pita and a dip made with sun-dried tomatoes, basil, garlic and olive oil called tomato ezme. It is delicious.

After tea we moved on to the meze. Priced between \$7 and \$11, the mezes offered a wide variety of small dishes to choose from. Baklava's lunch and dinner menus both feature these meze. Similar in size and concept to Spanish tapas, some of the meze served are, hummus, the familiar chickpea puree, falafel, chopped vegetables that are then deep fried and served with yogurt sauce and greens, kalamari, calamari that has been stuffed, fried then finished in a spicy tomato sauce with onions, oregano, and parsley, kofte, grilled balls of ground beef and lamb, çevezli peynir is similar to hummus but made instead with walnuts. Chef Iliano told us it could only be found at his establishment. I found it to be more flavorful than the hummus. We also tried the çacik (pronounced jajuk), a creamy tangy yogurt dip with dill, cucumber, and white pepper. He Baklava salad with its tomatoes, parsley, lemon juice, oregano, cucumbers and kalamata olives is similar to a Greek salad but without the feta cheese. I found the s

Dinner entrees and priced between \$13 and \$25. We both tried the pizola (lamb chops)

The lamb is marinated for 24 hours with paprika, garlic, onions, and white pepper. Chef Iliano does not use black pepper as he finds it too strong. Served with basmati rice pilaf and mixed grilled vegetables, the lamb was tender. We also had the patican kebab, eggplant stuffed with ground lamb served with a tomato based sauce, Parmesan cheese, and saffron scented basmati rice. With rice the sauce was delicious. This dish is not a menu item but was that day's



LIGHT AND REFRESHING: This chopped salad is similar to a Greek salad but without the feta cheese. CHRIS SCHMAUCH



PHYLLO DELIGHT: Warm phyllo pastry meets cold ice cream. The result is at once crispy and smooth.



STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: Made with loose-leaf Turkish tea, the tea's strength can be controlled by the amount of tea leaves used to brew it. It is quite strong.



EGGPLANT DELIGHT. In this dish eggplant is stuffed with ground lamb and served with a rice and tomato-based sauce. This dish is not on the regular

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