



## Chewin' on Chickpea

By Michael Nagrant

**JUDGING BY THE COVER OF BRITNEY SPEARS' "TOXIC"** by Israeli-French singer Yael Naim playing over Palestinian café Chickpea's sound system, the Arab-Israeli conflict doesn't have much purchase here. That's no surprise though, as pretty much everything here is a touch askew.

The Genie coin-op pinball machine in the corner rigged for free play is possessed with a sticky right flipper and almost all of the songs that play while I eat are covers, including what seems like an impossibility: a more plaintive, cheesy version of John Waite's "Missing You" than the original. Though, apparently Steve Perry is cheesy enough, because "Don't Stop Believin'" is featured in all of its original arena-rock glory.

The walls are plastered with familiar iconic pop-cultural imagery: the American-flag-shrouded Rocky Balboa, the vengeful, badass, gun-toting Charles Bronson from "Death Wish," the wily Clintonsque grin of Eddie Murphy from "A Distinguished Gentleman" and the Red-Sea-parting white Coca-Cola wave. These aren't Hollywood lightbox reproductions, but Arabic language posters.

But just as American pop culture is interpreted through the Middle Eastern graphical prism, the food at Chickpea is sometimes inversely reinterpreted against the backdrop of the Elvis-and-"Speed Racer"-tinged, Western-influenced childhood of owner Jerry Suqi (Sugar, La Pomme Rouge).

Chicken kabobs are made with Amish poultry and Laham ma hummus is topped with juicy bits of charcoal-smoked tenderloin rather than spit-roasted lamb shawirma and girded with pulpy dollops of spicy jalapeño. The familiar chickpea puree is four-star-restaurant-kitchen creamy.

Then again, this ain't your corner kebab shack because they make a few modern nods to American culinary tastes, but precisely because half of the dishes are so authentic, rustic staples of the Palestinian family table, that most Middle-Eastern restaurateurs who never go beyond falafel (undersalted and in need of more cumin and coriander here) and baba ghannooj would be afraid to serve them.

Maybe the best dish, reminiscent of the Golubki or stuffed cabbage of my own first-generation-Polish childhood, is the Malfoof, cabbage leaves rolled with herbed rice, minced lamb and garlic, drizzled with a touch of lemon. There's none of the sulfurous funk emanating from these rolls as they did in my youth and the cabbage-leaf wrappers here are so creamy that they ape the tenderest of pasta-based dumplings.

And while my own babcia (Polish grandmother) isn't in the kitchen, Jerry Suqi's mother, Amni, is. The hijab-clad Suqi matriarch is everywhere, often hovering in the dining room, ministering to the hungry masses like a culinary Mother Teresa, offering an encouraging pat on the shoulder, navigational guidance through her menu, or a tart granny smith apple wedge to soothe a truculent toddler.

It's no dog-and-pony show either. The night we were there, Amni Suqui, fresh off making a batch of Malfoof, sported a freshly burned hand coated in ointment from a minor kitchen mishap. And while I doubted she painted the sumac on the plates in mod horizontal lines as they do here, she claims these are the same recipes she made for Jerry and his siblings, all who seem to work here in some capacity from manning the cash register to running food tableside.

As warming as the food and Amni Suqi's omnipresence is the interior design of Frank Adorno. The kaleidoscope glint of metal-trimmed chandeliers, the golden-flocked stencil, a lush purple wall and the deep dusky wooden banquettes form a comforting bulwark against the harsh squalls of swirling snow on a hard Chicago's night.

Ultimately the best restaurants don't try to be all things to all people, but instead honor the vision and personality of their owners. And, Chickpea is a monument to the generosity, creativity and warmth of the Suqi family. Then again, personality isn't always enough. Last time I wrote about this space when it was The Painted Lady Organic eatery, I'd also lauded the honest refreshing vibe emanating from the Garcia family (Bleeding Heart Bakery and Chaos Theory), and then it shut down a week after my review. I hope the story is different this time around and Chickpea doesn't get smashed into hummus and become another economic casualty.

Chickpea, 2018 West Chicago, (773)384-9930

### MUSEUMS

#### Chicago History Museum

1601 N. Clark, (312)642-4600. →CHIC CHICAGO: COUTURE TREASURES FROM THE CHICAGO HISTORY MUSEUM. "Chic Chicago," the newest exhibit at the Chicago History Museum, highlights more than fifty high-end couture gowns chosen from the museum's collection of more than 50,000 historical pieces. The exhibit is a unique juxtaposition of high-brow and low-brow, of silk, pearls and satin set against a backdrop of soot, metal and blood. In a city famous for its slaughterhouses and gangsters, Chicago's elite sought to rise above their hometown's stigma by flaunting fashion from the most expensive and cutting-edge couture boutiques in Europe. On display are dresses donned by notable Chicago women between 1861 and 2008: Mrs. Potter Palmer II was presented to the Queen of England in a chiffon Madeleine Vionnet gown in 1938; nearly sixty years later, Oprah Winfrey wore a Chanel evening gown she purchased on Michigan Avenue. While admiring the exquisite beauty of these fashion masterpieces, visitors are constantly reminded of the gritty, industrial city in which these gowns were worn. At a mirrored vanity against one wall, guests are welcome to apply the perfume of their choice: Chanel's infamous No. 5...or the timeless stink of the stockyard. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jul 26.

→BURNHAM 2.0. See Tip of the Week. Through Apr 12. Hours: Mon-Wed 9:30am-4:30pm, Thu 9:30-8pm, Fri-Sat 9:30-4:30pm, Sun noon-5pm. Fees: \$12; \$10 seniors 65+ and students 13-22 w/ID. Members and children under 12 free. Mon free.

#### Museum of Science and Industry

57th and Lake Shore, (773)684-1414. →SMART HOME: GREEN + WIRED. The Museum of Science and Industry's latest exhibit is a fully functioning three-story house, the "Smart Home," an ecologically sound building built on the foundation of material, energy and water efficiency. This is green living gone haywire. Museum guests are ushered through a twenty-minute eye-opening (if somewhat rushed) tour of the house. Every aspect of the building is environmentally friendly, from the recycled construction material, to the organic food, to the LED lights. An ethanol-burning fireplace. A "raw" wood kitchen table. And of course, in the garage, a hybrid car. The house is called "smart" for a reason. Even the houseplants are clever. When a plant needs watering, a call is placed to your phone. That's right—your plant is calling to say it's thirsty. A black obelisk with blinking blue lights (that calls to mind HAL from "2001: A Space Odyssey") is the "brains and guts" of the "Smart Home"; it's an automated system that controls the heating, cooling and lighting of the entire house. A module of the house's network charts not only the amount of energy being used, but also the amount being produced. Guests are given a "Resource Guide" which, like a shopping catalogue, details each gadget and piece of furniture, and where everything can be purchased. We all might not be able to live in technologically advanced, self-sustainable houses, but we can live green by bringing aspects of the "Smart Home" into our own. (Laura Hawbaker) Through Jan 4. Hours: Mon-Sat 9:30am-5:30pm, Sun 11am-5:30pm. Fees: \$11, \$10 Chicago residents with ID; \$9.50 seniors 65+, \$8.75 city residents; \$7 children 3-11, \$6.25 city residents; children 3 and under & members free. Thu free. Omnimax, U-505 sub tour & CSI exhibit prices not included. Parking \$12 non-members.

### TIP OF THE WEEK BURNHAM 2.0: A PATCHWORK PLAN



In 1909, Daniel Burnham and Edward Bennett imagined the restructuring and beautification of a contemporary American city, "The Plan of Chicago."

A hundred years later, the Chicago Humanities Festival, the Architectural Club and the Chicago History Museum have composed "Burnham 2.0." This competition and exhibit takes "The Plan of Chicago" to the next level: in the new century, what would a utopian, sustainable and pluralistic Chicago look like as the hub of a high-speed rail network? The gallery space is small and simplistic, but the ideas within are big, dense and complex. Though some of the entries approach the challenge analytically, the majority are far-fetched, science-fiction speculations about utopias, heavy on the metaphors and light on plausibility. Joliet, Cicero and the fragmented districts of the Loop and South Side are given super-duper green makeovers. Vacant lots and auto dealerships are replaced with multifaceted parks and civic centers. Notable entries include a comic-book-style walk-through of a high-speed railway station and the replacement of the Presidential Towers with a series of gothic, counter-culture artist bungalows. The most impressive entry belongs to the winners of an international design competition, an imaginative yet realistic re-envisioning of Union Station as an intermodal transportation hub. (Laura Hawbaker)

"Burnham 2.0: A Patchwork Plan" runs at Chicago History Museum, 1601 North Clark, (312)642-4600, through April 12.