



— THIS IS WHAT YOU GET WHEN YOU MESS WITH TAHINI —

## Shawarma Police

By Michael Nagrant

**THIS IS WHAT YOU GET (WHEN YOU EAT IN THE FRONT SEAT OF YOUR CAR):** a combined dry-cleaning and auto-interior-detailing bill that costs four times the price of the sandwich you just ate.

After the best-taco-al-pastor search of 2007, whereby I had to remove achiote paste stains from the front passenger-side carpet of my Ford Escape, the subsequent best-French-fry search, whereby my truck's cabin wafted greasy McDonaldsesque potato fumes for a week, and then finally the best-pho quest, which ended up with me using a wet/dry vacuum to suck out star-anise-perfumed beef broth from the crevices of my center console, you think I woulda learned my lesson.

Of course, though my 3-year-old son just explored what almost all of the colors in the Crayola Fun Pack look like when you scribble them on the back of our white entry door, my wife claims she wants to give birth again.

Pain is somehow often synonymous with forgetfulness.

And so, the great shawarma search of 2010 commenced with me dripping spicy, rusty orange harissa-infused tahini sauce all over my button-down, my jeans and the cracks in the leather on my gray bucket seats. For those wondering, tahini is not a good natural sesame-paste alternative to Armor All.

Technically, since my recent jaunt only included a sampling of shawarma from two recently opened spots, Ameer Kabob in West Town and Zaytune in Bridgeport, it was actually more like the Near West and South Side shawarma search of 2010.

But this is still significant. For all the good shawarma, coincident with Jewish and Middle-Eastern population migration, seems to be north on Kedzie and Lawrence or near Devon, Salam and Taboun Grill being some of my favorites. Pita Inn in Skokie does alright too, but by that point you're close enough for a burger and truffle fries over at Edzo's in Evanston. Outside of Baba Pita, which has been nudging its entire prices skyward in the last couple of years, and the banker's hours keeping Oasis Café in the Loop, the Near West and South Sides have generally been a shawarma desert.

Now, however, with the opening of these two new spots, we have what you might call a tiny oasis. Neither, however, is perfect. Ameer kabob, by virtue of the multiple misspellings and typos on its menu (entrée is spelled "entres," "entre" and "entrée" for example) seems most promising. For in my experience, bad grammar equals good baba ghanouj. And as far as the shawarma goes, the fact that Ameer's is fire-roasted on a traditional spinning spit and the sweet allspice-tinged charcoal flesh flares your nostrils with delight, it is the victor in this particular showdown.

Zaytune's version, which resides in a rosemary, garlic and allspice marinade and is grilled, rather than spun and fire-roasted, is pretty decent, just not the victor. However, their house-made, springy, smoky, grill-marked fresh-made lavash is superior to anything coming out of the plastic-wrapped bags at Ameer, and the flame-roasted tomato-based hot sauce (I saw the grill cook roasting off the tomatoes) is a much better Mexican-salsa-like alternative to the ho-hum harissa served at most places.

Though this was a shawarma recon project, I do not shirk my responsibilities for collateral eats. The baba ghanouj at Ameer is righteous, devoid of eggplant slime, the key failure at many spots and, more importantly, sports a superior old-school-jazz-club-like smokiness.

I did not try the analog eggplant spread at Zaytune, but their cumin-and-coriander-infused mahogany-crustured fried falafel, whose interior color is coincident with the nuclear waste glow of Dekuyper Apple Pucker, was way better than the soggy Ameer version.

Both spots have satisfying lentil soups, though Zaytune's receipt spells theirs "Lentill," which brings up the memory of Emmet Till, not something you generally want to reflect on when dining out. Zaytune's is beefy and army greenish with bitty chunks of meat. Those looking for a dalliance with dill will love the more Granny Smith-hued puree at Ameer. And after a slurp of it, for a minute there, I lost myself.

*Ameer Kabob, 1050 North Milwaukee, (773)489-8888; Zaytune Mediterranean Grill, 3129 South Morgan, (773)254-6300*

— THU/4 —

### Art of Fashion Kickoff Party

The store celebrates the launch of the Spring 2010 fashion season with an all-store extravaganza. Enjoy live music, refreshments, a spring fashion show and a beauty photo booth. With restaurant tastings from Sushi Samba Rio, Old Town Social, Gibson's Bar and Steakhouse and More Cupcakes. For more information, call (312)642-5900 ext. 4005. Neiman Marcus Michigan Avenue, 737 N. Michigan, 6-8pm.

— FRI/5 —

### MCL Trunk Show

Designer Matthew Campbell Laurenza's collection is known for enameled bracelets, bangles and earrings set with precious and semi-precious stones. See a full assortment of his designs and meet with a representative to view the collection. For more information, call (312)642-5900 ext. 2417. Neiman Marcus Michigan Avenue, 737 N. Michigan, Designer Jewelry, First Floor, 10am-5pm.

— SAT/6 —

### Pamela Anderson Personal Appearance

Pamela Anderson will make an in-store appearance in support of the launch of her new fragrance, Malibu by Pamela Anderson, featuring two scents—Malibu (Blue) and Malibu Night (Pink), currently available at Sears' department stores. Fans can meet Anderson in person and purchase the fragrance to receive autographs. Personal autographs will be limited to the timeframe of the appearance while supplies last. For more information about 'Malibu by Pamela Anderson' visit internationalbeauty-brands.biz. Sears, Woodfield Mall, Schaumburg, 3-4:30pm.

### Cheap Thrills Shopping Sale

Participants include Eskell, Le Dress and Tangerine as well as Hayden-Harnett and In God We Trust from Brooklyn. This sale is a mix of mark down items as well as new spring deliveries, clothing, accessories and more. Eskell, 1509 N. Milwaukee, 11am-6pm. Also, SUN/7, noon-4pm.

— SUN/7 —

### Oscar Night America

Celebrate the 82nd Annual Academy Awards at Chicago's only Academy-sanctioned Oscar Night America party, featuring red carpet, Champagne, buffet, live Oscars telecast and official Academy Awards programs. Tickets start at \$100. For more information, (312)846-2800 or siskelfilmcenter.org. Gene Siskel Film Center, 164 N. State, 6pm-midnight.

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