

# eat & drink



The combination kebab plate (clockwise from left), Romania, koshari and fatet batinjan at Masada

KAITLYN MCQUAID  
PHOTOS FOR REDEYE

## Worth the wait

### Meet Logan Square's new Middle-Eastern paradise, Masada

By Michael Nigrant

FOR REDEYE

They say good things come to those wait. If that's true, then Shadi Ramli, owner of new Middle Eastern restaurant Masada in Logan Square—which took 10 years to open after he bought the building—is about to receive truckloads of great karma.

If you've passed the Masada marquee and boarded-up windows on California Avenue

just south of Milwaukee Avenue, it was easy to assume that the restaurant had opened and closed quickly. But just behind the riot of handbills and graffiti, the space was undergoing a slow and deliberate transformation. "Ten years ago, me and a buddy rented a backhoe and went to work," Ramli said. "[Opening] was never a question of when, but how. We wanted to do it right."

Ramli's pace was dictated by a desire to own the restaurant outright and to control costs. "If I'd taken out a construction loan, my menu prices would be three times what they are," he said. "Also, because we own the building, we can be here for a hundred years, like the Greeks and the Italians. Look at New York. No one can afford the rents. It's gentrified and losing its edge."

#### Hurry up and wait

You'd think with all that time to get things right, the staff would have been put through their paces, but the hostesses seemed a little scattered. They promised me a table in

5 minutes, but then said it wouldn't be ready for 25 to 30 minutes. My friend and I went to the bar downstairs to get a drink, and just as we ordered, one of the hostesses came down and said the table was ready.

#### A one-stop garden, lounge and restaurant

All the extra construction time meant Ramli didn't have to rely on off-the-shelf decor. He traveled around the country finding ornate chandeliers and restaurant fixtures, which he installed along with a cool multicolored ceiling tile that looks like it was made from the side-panels of hundreds of Rubik's Cubes. The dining room also is outfitted with family photos, a fireplace with gold-tone trim and a serious DJ booth (after all, Masada is open until 2 a.m. Sunday through Friday and 3 a.m. Saturday). There's also a fantastic bi-level outdoor patio overflowing with lush plants, room for 50 diners and more wicker furniture than Pier 1. Masada looks like it might succeed as a standby for neighborhood



**REVIEW**  
**Masada**

2206 N. California Ave. 773-697-8397  
Heating up

folks to drop in for a casual meal while also appealing to destination diners who want to dress up a bit and drop in for late-night beats and cocktails.



### Behold the 'selfie' bathroom

Normally I don't comment on bathrooms, but the ones at Masada have more mirrored surfaces than a strip club. After a few cocktails, I couldn't tell if I was in front of a urinal or a mirrored reflection of one, a mistake one can't really afford to make. "We call it the selfie bathroom," Ramli said. "Everyone's been taking pics in there saying, 'I'm at Masada looking hot,' or whatever."

### Is that Snoo Dogg in a turban?

The downstairs space, which has a tiny stage, a bar and a smattering of cozy, modern club chairs, is intimate and lounge-like. Photos of famous celebrities such as Snoo Dogg and Denzel Washington wearing traditional Arab garb, the work of artist Mohamed Kano, line the room. "I wanted to bring attention to the stereotypes people have," Ramli said of the artwork. "The world has been trained to think of Middle Eastern people as evil guys cutting people's heads off. But we're a peace-loving people."

### A vegan paradise

The Ramli family also owns Sultan's Market in Wicker Park and Lakeview. Since 1995, the Wicker Park location has been a stalwart clubhouse for artists, vegans, vegetarians and anyone who loves good, cheap Middle Eastern cuisine. Sultan's famous falafel makes an appearance at Masada, served either a la carte (\$4) or with an "entourage" of crispy caramelized cauliflower, golden fried potato and zucchini (\$8). The falafel had a nice coriander and cumin perfume, but of all the vegetarian/vegan-friendly plates, my favorite was my server's recommendation, the fatet batinjan (\$7), a mix of toasted pillowy pita chips and sautéed eggplant drizzled with sweet and sour pomegranate, tahini and lemon dressing. It reminded me of the Middle East's answer to panzanella, or Italian bread salad. Another vegan dish I dug was Romania, a comforting stew of tender brown lentils, eggplant and pomegranate molasses (\$13). Masada has one of the most vegan-friendly menus I've seen in a while. "Vegetarians, vegan and conscious eaters, they built us at Sultan's," Ramli said. "I tip my hat to anyone who sacrifices or gives up food out of respect to their beliefs, and that's why we have so many vegan dishes."

### Lamb spleen, anyone?

Being vegan-friendly doesn't mean Masada is meat-free. It's plentiful and served in a nose-to-tail fashion with dishes featuring lamb spleen, liver and heart. "We grew up poor. ... My mom was a genius at making food out of nothing, like most moms are," said Ramli, who was born in Amman, Jordan and named Masada after his mother. "Chickens only had one gizzard and we'd all fight for that. It



The patio at Masada



Colorful ceiling tiles at Masada



Masada's dining room

was a gift." For those not so organ-inclined, there is an incredible array of kebabs made of seafood and halal-butchered meat. (Halal is Arabic for "permissible," and in the case of halal butchery, the meat is raised humanely, fed a natural diet and slaughtered according to a set of strict rules.) The best meat value at Masada is the combination kebab (\$39) plate featuring two pounds of grilled meat, including rare charred bits of lamb, juicy hunks of kefta (an Arabic sausage) and chicken, purple tangles of squid and scallops. It's enough to feed two, and the meats were brined and beautifully seasoned; the only shortcoming was that the scallops were a touch bland.

### Cocktails with a backstory

Ramli, who is as serious about his cocktails as he is about the food, hired Matt Frederick (formerly of The Aviary) to oversee the cocktail program. Many of the drinks here have funny names and backstories. One of my faves, a boozy Arnold Palmer featuring black tea, lemon juice and whiskey, is called the Bourbon Turban. "I liked the rhyme. Frederick told me I was either a [bleeping] idiot or a [bleeping] genius," Ramli said. "One guy complained so far and said we were prejudiced. But we're just having fun." And then there's the Habibi Hendricks cocktail, a mix of Hendrick's gin, cucumber and lemon juice. "I was down in Tampa picking up some

of the light fixtures for the restaurant and I discovered Hendrick's. I got really hammered and fell in love and started calling it Habibi Hendricks. Habibi is a term of endearment. It means like 'my boy.' At \$8, the well-crafted and balanced cocktails are an incredible value.

### The bottom line

Though it took 10 years to launch, the incredible food, low prices and eye-catching decor make Masada a great new restaurant that was definitely worth the wait.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR. REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE. REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEATDRINK