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*According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, Occupational Outlook Handbook, 2016-17 Edition.

eat&drink



Kurdish baklawa crepes filled with goat cheese. MICHELLE KANAAR/TRIBUNE

eat this

KURDISH BAKLAWA CREPES AT THE GUNDIS
 2909 N. CLARK ST. 773-904-8120

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

You can take the men out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the men. So it goes with chef Mehmet Yavuz and Mehmet Duzgun, two friends who run Chicago's new—and only—Kurdish kitchen, The Gundis in Lakeview.

"Gundi means villager or country boy," Duzgun said. "People from the city would call us Gundi, so my partner and I took that and made it our name as a point of pride. We're the villagers, or the country boys."

Duzgun described a childhood where he was one of nine children—six boys and three girls—growing up in Southeast Turkey near the Syrian border. He said the recipes served at The Gundis are inspired by their mothers.

"Growing up, there were no tables," Duzgun said. "We'd eat in a circle on the floor. Here, we refine the plates, but the flavors are very similar."

Refinement is one of the hallmarks of The Gundis. Many Middle Eastern restaurants in Chicago are tiny mom-and-pop storefronts, often takeout operations with a schwarma spit and a few haphazard tables and chairs. The Gundis—with its white modern banquettes, Edison bulb-adorned light fixtures and glass vases stuffed with dried wheat frond arrangements—is clean and has the design quality of a restaurant from established groups like, say, One Off Hospitality (Blackbird, AVEC, The Publican).

The service is warm and attentive. Yavuz's wife, Denisse Gonzalez, walks patrons through the menu, explaining unfamiliar ingredients like isot pepper, a slow-burning chili with smoky chipotle-like characteristics. Duzgun plied our table with complimentary black tea as an appreciative parting gesture on one of my visits.

Though inspired by childhood dishes, Yavuz's plates are anything but rustic mom-fare. The Mardin special (\$20.25) features an artful yin-yang arrangement of sour yogurt and punchy lemon-spiked tomato sauce. The yogurt is studded with a bright confetti mosaic of diced bell pepper. In the center, cubes of luscious lamb are wrapped in silky fried eggplant.

A word to the wise: Don't sleep on the fortifying daily soup specials. My favorite was a cream of mushroom and white rice (\$6.95) with addictive sweet notes and earthy bits of mushroom. It's served with pillowy golden Kurdish bread adorned with toasted sesame seeds. Duzgun said they had a customer who liked the mushroom soup so much, she asked them to pour it over pasta so she could have a second entree portion of the soup to round out her meal.

But for those who like sweets at brunch or are looking for a gateway to Kurdish cuisine, perhaps the most exciting menu item is the Kurdish baklawa crepes (\$10.95). Silky thin pancakes are stuffed with tangy goat cheese, drizzled with honey and garnished with a hail of winey-flavored pistachio and salty walnuts. The luscious crepe texture is superior to the dry flaky phyllo dough used in Greek baklava.

The Gundis is an all-day affair, serving lunch and dinner and brunch on weekends. Best of all, at least for now, brunch is an easy weekend table to score, unlike neighborhood stalwarts Kanela Breakfast Club and Nookies.

Michael Nagrant is a RedEye special contributor. Reporters visit restaurants unannounced, and meals are paid for by RedEye.