



diningout

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EXOTIC FARE

Shokran delivers exquisite Moroccan delights

Like many, all I really know about Morocco I've gleaned from Epcot Center, James Bond and Indiana Jones films. I thought maybe I'd gotten some information from *The Clash*, too, but it turns out a casbah is Algerian, not Moroccan.

I'm sure there's some truth to be found in cinema's snake-charmers, buzzing bazaars and scimitar-wielding bandits, but after a couple of dinners I now think the greatest reality is found in the food at Shokran, one of Chicago's best Moroccan restaurants.

Shokran is a small Mom and Pop outfitted with shimmering draperies, a tiny stone fountain and plenty of conical tagines wafting heady aromatics and melting meats. Flickering candles cast a gauzy light against vermilion- and pumpkin-colored walls as owner Khalid Kamal holds court with regulars sipping mint-infused tea. Though Shokran is undoubtedly a slice of Morocco, it is also a veritable Chicago storefront oasis, a warm corner to hunker down over a nice bottle of BYOB wine to wait out a Windy City blizzard or escape a summer's wilting humid heat.

Its waiters are detail-oriented,



The phyllo-wrapped chicken bastila at Shokran is a unique treat.

shimmering our table immediately when they noticed a tiny wobble, and folding napkins when my wife used the restroom. The waiters are also proud, pedagogical about their homeland, schooling you on the differences between *taktouka* (a smoky salad of green pepper and tomato) and *zaalouk* (a relish of eggplant and tomato burning with garlic and a healthy glug of olive oil). Both dishes are found on Shokran's veggie sampler, which also includes planks of

cumin-and coriander-perfumed carrot, tossed with zingy strips of preserved lemon and a nest of juicy *bakola*, or tender spinach punctuated with briny bits of olive and more of that bright preserved sweet lemon. Mix in a little of the fiery harissa chili paste at the center of the plate and the *bakola* is reminiscent of an Indian-style spinach. All of these goodies can be scooped up with complimentary warm puffy wedges of pita.

As a food writer, not lik-



Executive Chef Fatna Avinger displays some delicacies inside the Moroccan-themed dining room at Shokran, 4027 W. Irving Park. | RICH HEIN PHOTOS-SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

ing particular ingredients is a severe liability. And generally there isn't much I'm picky about, except orange blossom water, a staple of Moroccan cuisine. There's a soapy quality to it that makes everything that ever gets a drop taste like Dawn dish detergent to me.

With such a predisposition, I wasn't so sure I'd dig the chicken bastila, a flaky phyllo wrap stuffed with tender

chicken and custardy eggs and a touch of orange flower water. But somehow here at Shokran, the floral characteristics of the water meld beautifully with the pastry's sweet dusting of crushed almond, sugar and cinnamon. If Morocco has a sweet/savory answer to the classic American soul food specialty of chicken and waffles, the bastila is probably it.

A similar flavor combination is

found in a plate of chicken couscous, featuring thick, hand-pulled shards of roast chicken tossed with golden tangles of caramelized onion and plump glistening raisins. I thought I knew couscous, but most of what I've tried has been overcooked and heavy, nothing like the cloud-light grains on this plate.

But as delightful as all these dishes are, none is quite as satisfying as Shokran's grilled meats

— thick fingers of *merguez* or lamb sausage, hunks of paprika-slathered and nicely charred bits of lamb kebab, and pinkish rounds of ground marinated spicy beef *kafta* tamed by cooling parsley.

Though even these smoky meat treats are just a precursor to the primal soul-soothing tagines including the “Casablanca,” which features stewed lamb shank marinating in rich juices

and tossed with fork-tender bits of potato and salty olives. (Yankee pot roast is clearly descended from something like this.) If you have a sweet tooth, the Lamb Fez tagine, featuring cinnamon-spiced meat and plump, luscious prunes lacquered in honey, is also a nice choice.

In general, Shokran's greatest asset is its commitment to authenticity. It is not pander-



A mixed grill plate features *merguez* (lamb sausage), lamb and chicken kabobs and kefta meatballs.

SHOKRAN ★★★

4027 W. Irving Park,
(773) 427-9130;
shokranchicago.com

Hours: Mon-Thu 5-10 p.m.;
Fri 5-11 p.m.; Sat 4-11 p.m.;
Sun 4-10 p.m.

Prices: Appetizers \$4-\$8,
couscous \$14-\$18, grilled
meats \$12-\$15, tagine \$15-
\$18

Try: Veggie sampler, sweet
chicken, merguez, lamb
Casablanca tagine

In a bite: The best and one
of the only truly Moroccan
restaurants in Chicago.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;
★★★★ Excellent;
★★ Very Good; ★ Good;



The “Lamb Casablanca” includes fork-tender bits of potato and salty olives.

ing to some vaguely popular appetite for “Mediterranean” cuisine. There is hummus and a Berber Algerian skewing dish called Lamb Atlas made with roast green peppers on the Shokran menu, but in general, from crispy *briwat* — egg roll-like phyllo rolls stuffed with vermicelli and tender curls of succulent shrimp — to the complimentary spicy red pepper spread, this is truly Moroccan.

I am reminded of this as I order coffee with my dessert. I'm so used to Pan-Middle Eastern joints serving everything



The sweet chicken couscous may pleasantly redefine diners' notions of the grain dish.

from hummus to tagine that I absentmindedly ask if they have “something like Turkish coffee.”

I'm reminded by the waiter that Morocco is not Turkey and am gently (and thankfully) pushed toward their honeyed-mint tea.

The tea is probably what you should end with, for if there's any weakness at Shokran, it's dessert. A pear baked into a crumbly spiced cake round isn't bad, nor is the citrus tart, but neither of them is as rewarding as a steamy slurp of that fantastic addictive tea.

Michael Nagrant is a local freelance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and