



GYRO



SHAWARMA



TACOS AL PASTOR

# MARIMBA

BY BRYCE PARKS

Late night bar-hunger sufferers REJOICE! Your prayers have been answered. Marimba, a new fast and affordable solution to your hunger pangs, has just quietly opened for business at the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> and Locust. You know, that yellow building with the giant mural of the buffalo caddy-corner from Oky Doky. The one with the Edward Jones Investments awning. Yeah, that place. That is now Marimba restaurant. And it's serving up three belly-filling favorites to cure both your late night food needs as well as your quick lunch desires.

Owner Steve Thompson wanted to fill a niche he's seen in downtown Dubuque for years. And as time went on, he wasn't seeing it filled. Where do we eat when the restaurants close and we want sustenance after a night out at the many downtown bars? And as an Uber/Lyft driver for a few years, he definitely knows what the food complaints are of those looking for a ride after a night at the bars. So with a shoestring budget and 18 years of real experience in the food industry in the Southwest Wisconsin pizza business, Steve decided to make the leap back into the world. He got so well know for his pizza places back in the day that people just called him "Pizza Steve." Well world, meet Shawarma Steve! You can meet him in person, even until 2 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, when you stop in to try the food out for yourself.

"The idea is about as simple as it gets," Steve says. "I'm serving three great items: gyros, shawarma, and tacos al pastor. And you can get chips and Pepsi products with that to round out your meal." That's it. No big menu, no bells and whistles. Heck, there isn't even a real sign on the building yet. It still says Edward Jones Investments. Look for the big flatscreen TV in the window with the logo and featured menu items rotating on it. It's easier to see at night, which works out pretty well for the bar crowd. But I promise, when you want in the door, it's going to please your senses.

Okay, so we will assume that if you don't know what a gyro is by now, you live under a rock and explaining it to you won't help. Oh, okay fine. In this version, it's ground beef, lamb, and spices formed into a loaf or a cone that turns on a spit. The meat is shaved off and put on pita with tomatoes, onions and a dollop of tzatziki sauce. You may not know exactly what tzatziki is, however. That would consist of yogurt mixed with cucumbers, garlic, salt, olive oil, sometimes with vinegar or lemon juice, and herbs such as dill, mint, parsley and thyme.

Shawarma on the other hand is a new one for most people and fear not—it's not far at all from a gyro. Shawarma is a dish in Middle Eastern cuisine consisting of meat cut into thin slices, stacked in a cone-like shape, and roasted on a slowly-turning vertical rotisserie or spit. Originally made of lamb or mutton, today's shawarma may also be chicken, turkey, beef, or veal. Marimba's is made of chicken. Thin slices are shaved off the cooked surface as it continuously rotates. Shawarma

is one of the world's most popular street foods, especially in Egypt and the countries of the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, and beyond. It got overnight-famous in America when Tony Stark (AKA Robert Downey Jr.) extolled its virtues to his fellow Marvel Superheroes in the first *Avengers* movie. Since then, its stock has risen greatly, but this is the first time you can walk into a place in Dubuque (that we know of) and order shawarma.

Spices may include cumin, cardamom, cinnamon, turmeric and paprika. At Marimba, shawarma is served on a pita and garnished with diced tomatoes, onions, pickled vegetables, and a cucumber slaw. The heat coming off of the spit's electrical elements was surprisingly intense. It can take up to three hours to fully cook a cone on the spit to the center, but the idea is to shave it off as you go, so in reality, fresh, juicy, crispy meat can start being cut from the edges of the 20 pound cone after just about 30 minutes.

Shawarma, in turn, led to the development during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century of the contemporary Mexican dish "tacos al pastor" when it was brought there by Lebanese immigrants. Like shawarma, a motorized spit slowly turns the stack of meat (pork in this case) in front of a heating element, continuously roasting the outer layer. Shavings are cut off the rotating stack for serving, customarily with a long, sharp knife.

Tacos al pastor (from Spanish, "shepherd style"), is a taco made with spit-grilled pork. Based on the lamb shawarma brought by Lebanese immigrants to Mexico, al pastor features a flavor palate that combines



traditional Middle Eastern spices with those indigenous to central Mexico. They are served three to an order and are served on double corn tortillas and garnished with pineapple, mango, onions and cilantro.

Like the food he serves, the Marimba as an instrument itself, the name-sake of the restaurant, originated in the Middle East and Africa and made its way to Central and

South America. Steve sees the notes of the marimba as a corollary to the unique flavor notes of the food he serves coming to gather for a pleasant party for your palate.

As for our experience, we ate it all... a couple times already and it's just what you want it to be. It's especially great when you can get it fresh off the spit so it's super juicy and crispy all at the same time. Our favorite was the shawarma, but that's likely just because we've never had it before so it was the new thing to us. But we think you'll like it no matter what you try. Have Steve modify if how you like it, lots of sauce or light sauce and there are a few optional toppings like black olives if you'd like them added to you meal.

Early feedback has been strong with many returning customers already. A few service members who grew to love shawarma during the tour of duty in the Middle East have expressed joy at finally having a place



to get the food they discovered overseas locally. A couple of guys told Steve he had the best tacos they've ever had, so that's got to make you feel pretty good.

Thompson isn't going to expand much on his menu. Simple is key to his plan, but if anything, he thinks a fryer would be a natural direction of growth and he can serve fries.

There is no seating at Marimba right now. Look for some outdoor eats in the warmer months, but for now, this is a to-go only establishment. And the speed along the parking spot right in front of the door make it a quick and easy pop-in to grab lunch on the go or to pick-up an office order. And yes, you can go full lazy mode and have the EatStreet food delivery service bring it right to your home or office.

Prices are \$9 for gyros or tacos al pastor and \$10 for shawarma. That's way to remember. ■



**MARIMBA**

105 LOCUST ST, DUBUQUE, IA  
FACEBOOK.COM/MARIMBADBQ

Hours: Wed–Thu: 11 AM–2 PM & 5–8 PM;  
Fri: 11 AM–2PM & 5 PM–2 AM; Sat: 11 AM–2 AM;  
Sun: Noon–5 PM; Mon & Tue: Closed

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