

SCHERA'S ALGERIAN-AMERICAN RESTAURANT FAIRY TALE ON THE TURKEY RIVER

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

This must be some fairy tale.*

In the middle of the 19th century, Timothy Davis helped found an Iowan city on the banks of the Turkey River and was tasked with naming it. He admired an Algerian rebel named Abdelkader who was fighting the French colonizers and decided to name the new city Elkader.

In the early 21st century, a French-Algerian boy named Frederique came to Boston for higher education and was intrigued to learn about this state called Iowa and a town named after his homeland hero. He happened



to fall in love with an Iowan boy named Brian and who hailed from a town not far from Elkader. So, they visited the town and were charmed by the ambience as well as the people. They eventually decided to move there and start a restaurant that would feature Algerian as well as American food, hoping to put down roots and grow old together. The restaurant, as it should be in fairy tales or Victorian romances, has a balcony that overlooks a dam and a waterfall on the river.

Every fairy tale needs a good villain and the 2008 floods that ravaged many an Iowan town proved to be one. The entire downtown Elkader was flooded and the basement of the restaurant did not escape the river's wrath. The men survived, fought back and thrived. The fame of their food, as well as the tale itself, would spread far and wide and the restaurant would welcome guests such as the Algerian ambassador and then candidate Barack Obama who was on a fairy tale ascent of his own.

I did not know of the tale when I first visited Schera's. I was lured by onion rings—the best onion rings my friend Michael ever tasted, as he kept harping. Imagine

my disappointment at not finding those fabled onion rings on the menu that changes seasonally. The food I did discover was full of personality and the picturesque terrace only enhanced the experience.

(There is a happy ending to the onion rings story. Chef Brian made a small batch for us on a subsequent visit and they were every bit as wonderful as described by my friend. It helped that I took my mom along for emotional manipulation!)

The food at Schera's reflects the journey Brian and Frederique took to Elkader. There are the Iowa favorites such as pork tenderloin, fried fish and burgers. But it is the Algerian influence as interpreted by an Iowan chef that captured most of my attention. I am quite familiar with Moroccan cuisine with its array of complex spice mixtures and once had a Tunisian meal I mostly remember for being hot. Algeria, situated between those two countries has a more humble cuisine: less variety of spices than Moroccan and not as much heat as Tunisian. The flavor is developed by slow cooking to get the most out of simple ingredients—not that much different from the use of crock-pots in the Midwest to get the most out of cheaper cuts of meat. The predominant Algerian flavors come from onions, black pepper and cinnamon and the cuisine is vegetable heavy (and thus vegan friendly). There is also a French influence, both due to history (Algeria was a French colony for a long time) and geography (situated right across the Mediterranean).

If you want a good introduction to the cuisine at Schera's, start with Cade (pronounced ca.ad), a baked



SPICY SHRIMP TAGINE

chickpea dish served with baguette slices and a spicy harissa sauce. Inspired by street food in Marseille, this is a brilliantly balanced dish that evokes France and Algeria but has the sure touch of a chef. The chickpea flour is mixed with gentle spices, egg and water and baked in a shallow dish. The harissa is made by grinding red chilies with spices and vinegar—Brian adds crushed fennel to add an extra pop of anise flavor to the sauce and it is that surprise element that elevated the whole dish.

Among the appetizers, I also tried the Bourek and Chicken B'stilla. The Bourek has ground beef seasoned with parsley and other spices, wrapped in phyllo dough and deep fried. It has the flavor profile of kofta kebab and is robust and delicious. The B'stilla is traditionally a large complex dish where whole partridges are baked with spices in puff pastry. Brian reinterpreted this dish as an appetizer with small chicken pieces flavored with onion, garlic, black pepper and cinnamon are baked in puff pastry. The flavor is quite delicate.

Among the sandwiches, I highly recommend the falafel and shawarma. The falafel sandwich accompanied by a light couscous salad was perfect for a light summer evening. The falafel is wonderfully light



CADE



FALAFEL SANDWICH



ZUCCHINI TAGINE

and crumbly, achieved by combining three kinds of chickpeas: soaked dried peas, cooked peas and flour. The tahini dressing is lightened by thinning it with lemon juice. The pickled turnips, re-pickled on site and finished with vinegar (a classic French technique) add the right touch of bright acidity to the sandwich. The shawarma has flavorful slow-roasted lamb and beef slices. The dry meat and bread are perfectly paired with a tzaziki sauce, lettuce and tomato.

If you are being adventurous, try the camel burger. Camel meat is relatively lean, much like bison, and has a slight gaminess to it. The camel meat is flavored with olive oil, spices and served with a ras-el-hanout (a spice mixture) mayo that eliminates any hint of dryness such a lean meat burger might have. I quite liked the camel burger, but it probably won't replace beef for me!

If you want a vegan burger that also happens to be gluten-free, the quinoa burger is very good. The burger felt very light and would make for a great lunch dish—the crunch of quinoa mixed with rice crispies as a binder gave an inviting texture to the burger. The vegetable panini on a firm baguette had one unusual component: roasted fennel, adding a subtle and welcome licorice flavor to the sandwich.

The various tagines as well as couscous are the entrée stars. I expected all tagines to taste the same, allowing for changes in ingredients (I am used to lot of Indian and Thai restaurants using common curry bases and adding different ingredients). The various tagines at Schera's are well differentiated with subtle changes in spices lending support to the different ingredients. The shrimp tagine had a tomato base that was cooked for a long time, but the shrimp were cooked only briefly in the sauce. This prevents the shrimp from getting rubbery and they stayed nice and juicy with the acidity of the tomatoes adding a bright counterpoint. On the other hand, the zucchini tagine was made by cooking the zucchini with tomatoes and chickpeas on low heat for a long time so that the zucchini were falling apart. The flavors of the zucchini and tomato melded together harmoniously. Both tagines were served over couscous that provided an ideal backdrop. The couscous, no longer a supporting player, was the costar on the vegetable couscous dish, sharing space with firm vegetables that were cooked al dente.

Whatever you do, save some room for dessert. The baklava is one of my favorite desserts (almost as much as ice cream!) and I have had at least a hundred different versions. So, you can trust me when I tell you that this is one of the best baklavas you will ever taste! Full of chopped pistachios amidst layers of phyllo and drenched in good honey, this is a perfect meal-ender.



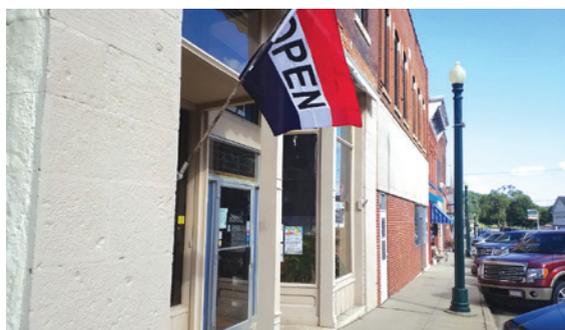
BAKLAVA

A few words about drinks at Schera's. A few years ago, Frederique decided to leave the restaurant part to Brian and started a beer distribution company. The aim was to secure and distribute beers you would not easily find in the Midwest, or sometimes even in US. Schera's claims to have the most extensive beer list in Northea Iowa, and while certain brewpubs may want to take umbrage to that, I certainly found some unique beers on the list. The tap list changes seasonally and you may not find the same beers I did, but they do carry beers from far off places. I had beers from Jester King in Austin, TX; Stillwater Artisanal in Brooklyn, NY; Pohjala in Tallinn, Estonia and Adnams in Southwold, Suffolk. The Adnams Broadside was a revelation: dark ruby red in color and entrancing like a deep mulled wine. The Pohjala Must Kuld was a porter from Estonia that acted more like a milk stout with enough complexity to act as a dessert on its own. The most unusual beer I had was the Jester King Figlet, a Farmhouse Ale fermented with smoked Texas figs. A golden-brown beer with delicate figgy and smoky flavors that never overwhelmed the maltiness of the beer.

Schera's also has an extensive wine and cocktail menu that I did not sample (being the driver does have its disadvantages). Some of the cocktails like the Saffron Rose or the Harissa Bloody Mary are inspired by Algerian flavors while there are quite a few traditional supper club cocktails.

As I sit on the terrace on the river biting into some delectable tomato and zucchini tagine, it feels both surreal and hyperreal. After an invigorating drive through lush green fields, here is an improbable fairy tale setting and food redolent of distant Africa, yet every bite lowan in a homespun way...

[* The writer in his penchant for Victorian romances may have simplified the story a little!] ■



SCHERA'S ALGERIAN-AMERICAN RESTAURANT

107 S MAIN ST, ELKADER, IA

563-245-1992

SCHERAS.COM

Hours: Mon-Tue: 11 AM-2 PM;

Wed-Thur: 11 AM- 2 PM; 5-8 PM;

Fri-Sat: 11 AM-2 PM; 5-8:30 PM; Sun: 11:30 AM-2 PM

Prices: \$8-\$ 24.95

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