

Moroccan dishes learned at home, cooked for family

Owners Abdel Elatouabi and Leo Fouad have conjured up a bit of Marrakech or Casablanca in dining haven in Gastown

Mia Stainsby

Vancouver Sun

Thursday, September 27, 2007

LA MARRAKECH MOROCCAN BISTRO

52 Alexander St., 604-688-3714.
Open for lunch and dinner, Monday to Friday; dinner from 5:30 on Saturday.

Overall: 3 1/2

Food: 3 1/2

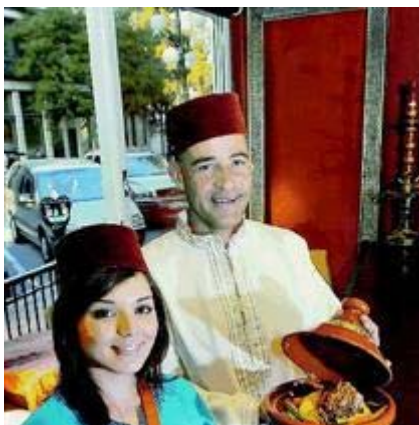
Ambience: 3

Service: 4

Price: \$\$

Restaurant visits are conducted anonymously and interviews are done by phone. Restaurants are rated out of five stars.

- - -



CREDIT: Stuart Davis, Vancouver Sun

Melissa Ribeiro displays golden beet salad in a rose water and pomegranate vinaigrette, pine nuts and goat cheese and Brad Blake holds braised short ribs, seasonal vegetables and caramelized onions with raisins over saffron couscous at La Marrakech Moroccan Bistro.

When the belly dancer approached, all a-jiggle, my husband pleaded urgently: "Trade places with me."

I didn't and she pursued and there he sat, a jaunty veil thrown over his shoulders, vociferously resisting entreaties to dance.

"C'mon! You've played to bigger audiences," I hissed, referring to his abduction onto the Cirque de Soleil stage. I know belly dancers are part of Moroccan culture but this crowd wasn't buying in. They ignored the dancer and the otherwise great ambience at La Marrakech Moroccan Bistro in Gastown.

Yup. Another great little food spot in Gastown (add to Jules, Boneta, So:cial of late) and we loved it despite the belly dancer (albeit a good one) and the Mad Max social scene on East Hastings that we wove through to get there. The restaurant, by contrast, is a cocoon of warmth and hospitality.

Owners Abdel Elatouabi (former owner of Bravo Bistro on Denman Street) and Leo Fouad have conjured up a bit of Marrakech or Casablanca in the former Jewel of India space.

Servers, dressed in traditional jabadors and fez, approach with elaborate handwashing gear (and sprinkle rosewater on your hands as you leave).

The lights are low; Moroccan music fills the womb-like dining room. And a detail I appreciated -- the cutlery didn't go skateboarding down the slope of my plate smack-dab into the food as it often does these days.

The menu features the kind of dishes Elatouabi (the chef) cooks for his family, the dishes he learned from his mother and father, both food lovers. Appetizers run from \$7 to \$16 and mains are \$15 to \$25.

Couscous and tajine (stew) are what people know best of Moroccan cuisine, and you'll find those here. But first, don't miss Les Salades de Fez, a triplet of salads, including zaaluk (roasted eggplant), taktouka (grilled peppers) and matisha khiare (tomato cucumber). For a smaller refreshing starter, the golden beet salad in rosewater and pomegranate vinaigrette with pine nuts and goat cheese is tasty. Or for something more substantial, the bastilla d'djaj (braised chicken in saffron broth with almonds and orange blossom honey in phyllo-like pastry) and bastilla b'diala (marinated, dry-aged oxtail, braised with Moroccan spices and dried fruit on pastry) offer delicious tastes of Morocco.

I much preferred the stewy dishes to the more lightly sauced meat and fish. K'sksou royale (braised short ribs, vegetables, raisins over saffron) was tender and delicious and la casserole d'essaouira, with ling cod, mussels, prawns, scallops and merguez sausage in saffron tomato broth featured fresh, nicely handled seafood.

However, I wasn't as keen about the pan-seared halibut with chermoula (overcooked, and the sauce was too light and thin for the dense fish) and while pan-seared duck breast with apricots and pistachios and carrot harissa sauce sounds like it's full of flavour, it wasn't.

For dessert, the m'hancha (pastry with almonds, orange blossom honey) was fine but I loved the accompanying fresh nougat and would have been happy were that the centrepiece. A matcha-flavoured financier with chantilly cream, raspberry sauce and pistachio praline was not remarkable.

What surprised us, though, was the Moroccan wine on offer (Bernard Megrez Kahina syrah grenache) with a concentrated flavour of black cherries. It was delicious. And to finish, you've got to try the lovely tea of crushed mint leaves (several varieties) and green tea.

mstainsby@png.canwest.com

© The Vancouver Sun 2007

CLOSE WINDOW

Copyright © 2007 CanWest Interactive, a division of [CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.](#) All rights reserved.