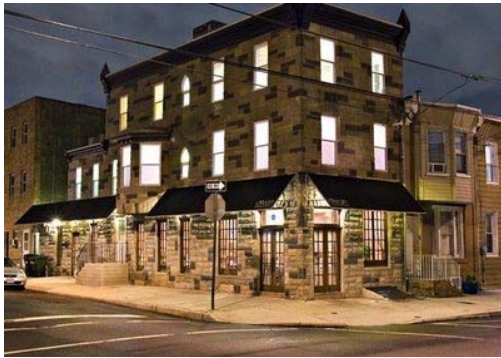


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This Turkish dish is the shish

by Larry Nichols

11.25.09 - 11:00 am



As Ilker Ugur, proprietor of Divan Turkish Kitchen, 918 S. 22nd St., tells it, he was eager to take friends and relatives from his native Turkey for a night out in Philadelphia years ago, only to be embarrassed by the quality of what the city's (supposedly) best Turkish restaurant had to offer.

Well, hats off to whatever restaurant wounded his sense of national pride,

because it inspired him to open Divan, a world-class establishment from the ground up. The décor is impeccably thought-out and gives the restaurant an upscale yet relaxing ambience.

To be fair — and in the spirit of full disclosure — the fine selection of Turkish wines and beers helped a little with the relaxing.

The appetizers kicked off the meal in fine style. We were tempted to jump on the hot appetizers but were steered toward the cold ones. We're glad we took the advice.

The Rus Salatasi (Russian salad, \$4.95) may not be an attractive dish, but the pinkish mixture of carrots, chick peas, mayonnaise and pickled cucumbers is a threat to even the best homemade potato salad. The Enginar (artichoke with lima beans and dill, \$4.95) delivered the goods as well, with great flavor and texture. For something a little more mainstream, the hummus (\$4.95) and the Patlican Ezmesi (mashed eggplant, akin to baba ghanoush, \$4.95) are also savory options.

If dining with a number of friends, the Karisik Meze Tabagi (mixed appetizer plate, \$16.95) will give everyone a bit of everything, including spicy minced peppers, a wonderfully tasty eggplant with tomato sauce, mashed eggplant, artichoke, Russian salad, stuffed grape leaves and hummus.

As good as the appetizers are, the entrées up the ante. We dare anyone to find a better cooked kabob anywhere within 100 miles of Philadelphia (yeah, that means New York City too). One of the house favorites, the Döner Kebab (\$11.50), is the perfect combination of ground lamb and Turkish spices. The Tavuk Sis Kebab (chicken shish kebab, \$11.25) is excellent as well. If you like your meat a little more solid, the Kuzu Pirzola (lamb chops, \$16.95) are tender, juicy and irresistible. Of course, if you prefer to try each of them, the Karisik Izgara (mixed-grill platter, \$19.90) has all of the above plus a wonderful Köfte (lamb and beef patty).

The attention to detail on these platters was flawless. At lesser establishments, the sides and garnishes usually get treated as an afterthought, but the rice at Divan is

cooked and seasoned to perfection. You'll want to devour every grain on your plate. The grilled peppers accompanying the kabobs are also fresh and vibrant and add an indispensable flavor to an already-savory bit of fare.

There's a considerable amount of vegetarian offerings among the entrées. The Vegetable Sis Kebab (\$10.90) features grilled marinated mushrooms, tomatoes, peppers, zucchini and eggplant. Ispanakli Kayseri Manti (spinach dumplings, \$11.75) are delightfully tender, steamed and topped with garlic yogurt and mint.

It also must be noted that Divan does a brisk lunch business, with pita sandwiches featuring your choice of kebab meats (\$6.50).

Also, be forewarned: Divan is a great place to feast, but you might want to leave your credit card at home; it'll cost you anywhere from \$1-\$5 more per dish if you use plastic.

The end of the meal doesn't let up on the Turkish goodness. You can't go wrong with any of the desserts on the menu (all \$4.25), which features an excellent baklava made by Ugur's mother. No disrespect to her, but we were all about the Kazandibi (translation: bottom of pot), whose rich and creamy sweetness managed to edge out the baklava and Divan's wonderful rice pudding as our favorite dessert.

Thankfully, the desserts come with Turkish coffee to help ward off the food coma Divan inspires.

Take a bow, Ilker. You've done your country proud.

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