

FOOD SCENE

NEWS | REVIEWS | TIPS | TRENDS

Thirst-Quenching Throwbacks

Gio's Pizza and Bocce in Berkeley offers refreshing sips made with old-school aperitifs and digestifs.

BY LAUREN BONNEY

A classic aperitif that serves as a key ingredient in martinis and Manhattans, vermouth is rarely appreciated in its own right. But Nick Stolte, the bar manager at Gio's Pizza and Bocce in Berkeley, is trying to change that by highlighting aromatized wines—such as vermouth—and traditional Italian liqueurs in a whole new way.

Stolte has developed a cocktail program that “pays homage to these heritage spirits,” he says. “With aromatized wines, it’s an easy way to show some roots.”

Take, for instance, the lavender pomegranate spritz—one of Gio's four rotating spritzes on tap. Comprised of Lo-Fi dry vermouth, dry gin, and lavender-infused grenadine, it's house kegged and run on a CO₂ line to deliver a refreshing, seasonal cocktail with low alcohol by volume.

But enjoying a great vermouth in a spritz is easy. For something different,

consider the amaro flight—a selection of three herbal liqueurs from producers in Northern Italy, Southern France, and California. This taste-and-contrast approach to amaro—a bittersweet botanical spirit that's typically sipped as a digestif—is one of Stolte's favorite ways to introduce customers to the varietal.

“The terroir [of amaro] is totally dependent on where and who produces it,” Stolte explains. “For example, there are bright mountain herbs from Northern Italy versus the woody botanicals of California. That's what really gets people's attention and hooks them into it.”

Stolte has been amazed by the public's receptiveness to his bar program and is excited about its rise in popularity. “It's a niche category, but it's growing,” he says. “It makes me feel like I'm helping build community through a drink.” giosberkeley.com.

Gio's vermouth flight pairs a trio of aromatized wines with citrus oils.

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Common Ground

Dyafa brings Arabic hospitality to Jack London Square.

BY NICHOLAS BOER

Chickpea pancakes may not solve the world's woes, but they make a good start for both dinner and conversation. On our first visit to Dyafa—a Middle Eastern restaurant championing equity along with its meze (Middle Eastern appetizers)—acclaimed chef-owner Reem Assil worked the flattop while managing the multistation kitchen. From a counter perch, we witnessed our za'atar-spiced chickpea crepes crisping. When they seemed destined to char, a tranquil Assil performed a 180 and flipped the perfectly caramelized pancakes, plating them just as our pristine, chilled lamb tartare—dressed with red onions and bulgur—arrived. The warm crepe paired with cool lamb—laced with intentionally burnt cinnamon—was revelatory.



Shakriyah—comprised of braised lamb shank, garlic yogurt, Arabic rice, almonds, and gremolata—is a Dyafa specialty.



The meze sampler (offered at lunch) features an assortment of house-made dips, pickles, and pita.

Assil's rise—from opening Reem's California, a casual café in the shadow of the Fruitvale BART station, to partnering with Daniel Patterson, one of the Bay Area's premier chefs and restaurateurs—was as rapid as it was welcome.

Formerly Patterson's Haven, a great eatery that never quite found its niche, Dyafa welcomes guests into wooden chairs with turquoise, turmeric, and aubergine seat cushions as vivid as the house's pickle plate. Haven's Mediterranean flair—marked by a wood-frame ceiling interlaced with living grapevines—remains, while vibrant mosaic floor tiles add Middle Eastern dazzle. The ambience serves as a lovely complement to Jack London Square's water views, especially on summer nights, when a short stroll on the promenade before or after dinner should be mandatory.

From refined tapas (such as shimmering stuffed squid) to family-style entrées (including spicy, whole roasted fish), the menu is compatible with all of Dyafa's libations and dining areas: red wine at the exhibition-kitchen counter, sumac-infused Lebanese Pale Ale at the communal tables straddling the floor-to-ceiling windows, or a cinnamon-spiked Le Beirut cocktail on the sleek patio.

Some of the dishes have a California attitude: Our blistered asparagus with sunny fried egg and crispy olive oil pita crumbs came on a pool of spring fava-tinted aioli. Others, such as the *mujadarra*—a brilliant warm salad of piquant rice and lentils topped with fried onions, cool cucumbers, and house-made yogurt—boast a distinctly authentic character.

The menu derives much of its authority from the Arabic names on display: the *mujadarra*, for example, is listed under the *khodrawat wa nashawiyat* (veggies and grains) category. At lunch, where wraps rule the day, the menu gets a little more playful: to wit, a saaj named Steph Curry, which is loaded with turmeric-laced veggies and Feta cheese.



Diners can enjoy waterfront views along with their craft cocktails.



Dyafa's ambience reflects the aromas and tastes of chef-owner Reem Assil's heritage.

Assil, who was raised in a Palestinian-Syrian home, has deep roots in Oakland and has worked at many of its more progressive eateries, including the cooperative Arizmendi Bakery and Pizzeria. The servers on our visits exhibited a shy air of inexperience, but once you appreciate that Assil—a former community organizer—strives to promote opportunity (something Patterson also champions at his healthy fast-food venture, Locol), the timidity becomes attractive. One of our visits occurred just days after Dyafa's opening; that, too, might help explain an apparent lack of confidence.

This care for community comes through in a theme that binds together all of Dyafa's disparate elements: hospitality (the English translation of *dyafa*). That idea manifests itself most clearly in Assil's breads. The cooked-to-order flatbread for the wraps and the fresh pita—particularly spectacular when used as a scoop for Assil's platter of Middle Eastern dips—are as comforting as comfort food gets.

Which brings us back to those chickpea pancakes—made with both love and expertise, and inspired by a desire for a more equitable world. 44 Webster St., Oakland, (510) 250-9491, dyafaaoakland.com. Lunch Tues.–Fri., dinner Tues.–Sat.

CONNOR BRUCE PHOTOGRAPHY

CONNOR BRUCE PHOTOGRAPHY (3)

BALLPARK EATS

Culinary Curveball

The Oakland Athletics step up their game on another kind of plate.

BY CLAY KALLAM



Tired of typical ballpark food? Shibe Park Tavern at the Oakland Coliseum serves a delectable banh mi sandwich.

For many baseball fans, a trip to the ballpark means munching on peanuts or Cracker Jack while watching the game from your seat. At an Oakland Athletics game, there's also the ever-popular option of buying a Coliseum Dog and a beer for just \$14. But the A's food scene offers much more than those tried-and-true ballpark classics. With new dining options—such as banh mi sandwiches served in a sit-down restaurant with a full bar and an expansive view of the field—the Oakland Coliseum can now satisfy your nine-inning-sized appetite with a wide range of unique eats.

Start at Shibe Park Tavern on the Coliseum's Plaza Level. The historically themed venue features a cricket concession stand (seriously, real crickets—crunchy, spicy, nutritious, and roasted in Oakland). If crickets aren't on your bucket list of culinary delights to try, the eatery also serves an Impossible Burger—the highly touted and pretty-darn-tasty vegan patty—as well as Vietnamese banh mi and other nicely prepared sandwiches, burgers, and salads.

But you don't have to seek out Shibe Park Tavern to stumble across offerings that are fit for savoring. Empanadas? Yum. Lamb shawarma? The sauce has a nice bite. Dungeness crab roll? Give me more.

Let's not forget about the food trucks, either, which are set up in Championship Plaza between the Coliseum and Oracle Arena. Depending on which game you attend, the rotating lineup dishes out tacos, dumplings, Korean barbecue, fried chicken, and more.

Of course, a trip to the ballpark usually includes at least one adult beverage, and the Coliseum happily honors that tradition with a selection of 50 craft beers, ranging from the familiar Lagunitas Brewing Company IPA to the hyperlocal Calicraft Brewing Co. Oaktown Brown Ale.

For the stronger stuff, The Treehouse—a new hangout space in left field that's accessible with a prepurchased pass—has a full bar that hosts a variety of promotions. During the fan-favorite Thirsty Thursday deal, for example, all drinks are half off while the A's are ahead.

With all of these food and drink options, make sure you come to the Coliseum hungry and thirsty. Just try not to spill any of the Korean barbecue sauce on that vintage Rickey Henderson jersey. mlb.com/athletics.