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EATS, DRINKS & SCOOPS



DINING meat and greet

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OPPOSITE: (left) Creamy borani bademjan eggplant dip, the perfect accompaniment for flatbread.



Arya, a Persian steakhouse, takes pride in its roots—evident from the tapestries depicting the poet Rumi’s ancient tales and the winged lion logo inspired by an artifact from the First Persian Empire. But make no mistake, the restaurant’s halal menu welcomes every diner with open arms. Catering to an array of dietary needs and preferences, it ranges from Iranian dishes like tender kebabs to succulent steak to vegetarian and fish options. There are even a few Italian dishes, thanks to executive chef Mike Hashemi’s time living in Florence, Italy. “Everyone finds something that they like,” promises Mike, who owns the restaurant with his wife Fera Hashemi.

While Mike’s domain is the

kitchen, Fera presides over the front of the house and oversees behind-the-scenes tasks like marketing and staffing. But this dynamic dining duo unites over a shared vision. “We want to be fine dining, but we want to be fine dining with a personality,” Fera says, smiling at a pair of diners enthusiastically scooping up borani bademjan eggplant dip with hunks of flatbread. Mike nods, “Friendly fine dining!”

After opening Arya Steakhouses in Cupertino and Redwood City, the couple relocated the restaurant to Palo Alto two years ago. “I love the mix of cultures!” Fera says of Palo Alto, pointing out that University Avenue sees

a steady flow of Stanford University families and international executives. “Sometimes, standing in the front of the restaurant, I cannot believe we have this many cultures in one place, under one roof.” Mike wholeheartedly agrees. “You get to talk to them and learn.”

Arya’s interior channels this spirit of camaraderie. “I wanted it to be a cheerful steakhouse and I wanted it to be warm,” describes Fera. “You go to a typical steakhouse and it’s white and black. It’s very dark.” Grounded with earthy tones and accented by golden yellows and emerald greens, Arya is anything but stark. Its old-world charm is enhanced



by wood ceiling beams, framed tapestries and rough-hewn stone-work reminiscent of a castle.

Obviously, this isn't the Hashemis' first rodeo. Mike has opened 10 restaurant locations over the years, six with Fera by his side. With a voracious appetite for learning the industry, Mike spent his younger years training under "very mean, good chefs," until he felt confident he could make it on his own. He also grew up helping at the family butcher shop and market in Iran. "I was butchering lamb and cow when I was 16 years old," he notes.

This background has served him well. Expect exceptionally tender cuts of meat at Arya, from the lamb tenderloin kebabs over saffron yellow basmati rice to the

filet mignon served with a head of roasted garlic and herb butter melted with a chef's torch at your table. All steaks are dry-aged and cut in-house, then seasoned with Arya's custom rub.

They serve Australian as opposed to Japanese Wagyu—a choice some customers question at first, Fera says. That's because Australian Wagyu is halal, complying with Muslim guidelines for humane treatment of the animal. "It tastes great and is much juicier. And people are like, 'Oh god, I converted!'"

Discerning diners won't stop there. Begin your meal with an order of meatballs, tangy from the



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pomegranate pinot noir sauce—and end with the cheesecake. Arya's fusion twist on this classic dessert includes a drizzle of honey to complement the tangy filling, a flaky baklava-like crust and a sprinkling of pistachio for texture. It's "Paris meets Tehran," Fera describes.

When asked for insights into the food industry, Mike dishes out this sage advice: "Always use the best quality—or you end up spending more to replace it," he shares. "Use the best quality for anything in your life. Food or anything else! That is why I have the best quality wife." Beside him, Fera cracks up.

Quality over quantity applies to their decision to dial back from several restaurants to one. The couple wanted more time to support their three children—which meant attending their soccer games, concert performances and figure skating competitions. "We want to make sure we're there for them when they need it," Fera says. "If we're so busy in the business world and we don't have time for that, then what's the whole purpose of it?" Mike adds that their guests also appreciate the extra face time. "They don't say, 'We're going to Arya.' They

say, 'We're going to see Fera.' 'Let's go see Mike.'"

There's one more ingredient in Arya's recipe for success: their tableside finesse. Fera interacts with guests before engaging in some mealtime match-making in order to pair them with the right server. "Just from a 'Hello, how are you?' I can kind of assess their personality or their day. Are they bubbly? Are they all business? Is it, 'I don't want to talk to you.' Is it a date night?" She's trained her managers to take a similar approach. "After a while, it's a gut feeling. I don't know how to explain it," she muses. "Intuition."

And how does she know if they got it right? At the end of the meal, Fera says, "When I see a guest hugging that server at the door, I'm just like, 'Spot on! Yes!'" **P**

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