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Food and Drink in Hawai'i

BY MARTHA CHENG

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEAH FRIEL

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The Spice is Right

Exploring restaurants by the Islamic community on O'ahu means tasting flavors from Uzbekistan, Iran, Morocco and ... Italy.

M'hammed Benali,
co-owner of
Casablanca



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Silk Road Café owners Mamuna Yuldasheva and husband Akrombek Yuldashev.

SILK ROAD CAFÉ, AN UZBEK RESTAURANT, is one of the closest places to eat by Iolani Palace. Tourists sometimes find their way there, after visiting the former home of the Hawaiian monarchy and the site of its overthrow. It's a strange juxtaposition, that some might get their first taste of Uzbek food here in Honolulu, and yet, it's almost appropriate. The two regions have long been where East and West connect—Uzbekistan by land, the Silk Road running through on its way from China to Rome, and Hawaii by sea, lying in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, between Asia and America.

It's also why the contemporary cuisines of both are so hard to classify. Originally, I came to Silk Road Café to explore Islamic cuisine, inspired partially by current news and recent visits to Doris Duke's Shangri La Museum of Islamic Art, Culture and Design. But I discovered trying to define "Islamic cuisine" is like trying to explain "Christian food." Concentrations of Muslims live everywhere from Egypt to Pakistan to Indonesia (which has the most Muslims in the world). So instead, I set out to taste restaurants owned by Muslims on Oahu, and in doing so, discovered flavors as different as the countries the cooks came from and menus influenced as much by business and adaptation as spices and tradition.



Silk Road Café

→ OPEN HONOLULU THROUGH SATURDAY, 10 AM TO 10 PM
1010 N. KALANIAN'OLE AVENUE, SUITE 202, SILKROADCAFEHAWAII.COM

U ZBEK FOOD FEELS PRIMAL.

On the TV at Silk Road Café, a YouTube videos shows food being prepared in Tashkent—slabs of bread stacked upon each other, hunks of tail fat and lamb, beef or mutton shanks cooked in wood-fired cauldrons the size of bathtubs, plates garnished with horse sausage. And yet, when it's served—family-style, heaped onto a large plate in the middle of the table—there's always a light, fresh counterpart nearby, like tomatoes and raw onions tossed with dill or small dishes of a thick yogurt. Each dish occupies an extreme, but balance exists on the whole table.

At Silk Road Café, you're served a compact version of that Uzbek table, like the Hawaiian plate lunch, all in a corralled into a Styrofoam chafinshell. The base flavors are meaty, rich and warm with cumin, but they're balanced by a flurry of dill and green onions on top, salads and a wedge of Uzbek bread, neither dense nor soft.

An entry into Uzbek food begins with plov. Here, the rice dish is equal amounts rice and meat, with carrots, chickpeas, carrots, and a sprinkle of dill and green onions brightening it. "Plov is the king of Uzbek foods," says Mamuna Yuldasheva, who owns the restaurant with her husband. "We make it during weddings, make it during birthdays. You have a guest, you make plov. Mom comes, you make plov. Mom leaves, you make plov. Somebody dies, you make plov. Somebody's born, you make plov."

But if plov is considered traditional Uzbek, delving into the rest of Silk Road's dishes reveals a menu—just like those of Hawaiian restaurants—that's not as tidy as it seems, one that raises the questions: Where does tradition begin and end? Where does one country begin and end?

The questions are mixed into dishes like the lagman, a fried noodle dish (from

Uighurs, Muslims who live primarily in the northwest region of China and in Central Asia) and pelmeni (from Russia). When Silk Road Café first opened in 2017, Yuldasheva's mother used to hand-pull the noodles for lagman but has since substituted the time-consuming process with chewy udon noodles that approximate the bounce of stretched noodles. They're stir-fried with cumin, ground beef and fresh tomatoes. The shredded carrot salad served alongside every dish provides a bright counterpoint, doused with salt and vinegar. The carrot salad, common in Uzbek, is thought to have been created by Koreans in Uzbekistan, who were relocated there by Stalin from the Soviet Far East.

One of my favorite dishes is that pelmeni, doughy dumplings filled with beef and served in a vegetable broth mixed with cream. While Uzbekistan declared

"Plov is the king of Uzbek foods... You have a guest, you make plov. Mom comes, you make plov. Mom leaves, you make plov."

—Mamuna Yuldasheva, Silk Road Café



Clockwise from bottom left: Fried lagman (\$9.75), pelmeni (\$8.75), chicken shish kebabs (\$9.75), plov (\$9.50), beef borscht (\$8.95)



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its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, it's impossible to draw borders around food, which is why Russian pelmeni and Ukrainian borscht are on the menu.

The kebabs, though, Yuldasheva insists, is Uzbek. "The Turkish, Middle Eastern, Central Asian, they are kebab people," she says. "Café Mahrami is different from ours, ours is different from Olive Tree. We all have kebab, but taste, what the ingredients [are], what they skewer it on, is different." At Silk Road Café, the kebabs are pierced with flat metal skewers—the lamb ones are tender, juicy and flavored with whole cumin seeds.

Not long after opening the restaurant, Yuldasheva turned part of it into a Russian grocery store. There's an entire freezer stocked with herring, a fridge with Russian cheeses and salami, and shelves of birch juice and rums, a nonalcoholic drink brewed with black rye bread. Most of it isn't



Chicken shish kebabs



Beef borscht



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used in Silk Road's kitchen—Yuldasheva seems mystified by some of the ingredients and by how much herding they sell—but the Russian expats trickling in throughout the day are grateful.

Yuldasheva is currently studying for an MBA at Hawai'i Pacific University. She was born in Tashkent and moved with her family to Austin, Texas, when she was 11 so her father could pursue aerospace research, and then to Honolulu when he was offered a professorship at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. When she was 26, "my parents decided it was time [for me] to get married in Uzbekistan—they wanted me to marry [an] Uzbek person because of culture and religion," she says. After a few years there, she returned to Honolulu with her husband, Akrombek Yuldashev, and sensing an opportunity, they opened an Uzbek restaurant. Yuldashev had never cooked much before—his specialty was shoemaking, and he had worked at Joe Pacific Shoe Repair when they first moved to Honolulu—but he learned recipes, including, of course, plov, from people at home. He also watched a video on making plov from a Russian man in Uzbekistan, so detailed in its knowledge of culture and food that Yuldasheva says, "You watch it and you become Uzbek."

Bar Koko and Persian Restaurant

→ OPEN SUNDAY, TUESDAY THROUGH THURSDAY, 5 TO 10 P.M., AND FRIDAY AND SATURDAY, 5 TO 10 P.M. AND SUNDAY, 11 A.M. TO 10 P.M.
BAR KOKO/PERSIAN RESTAURANT/COM

"PERSIAN CUISINE IS THE MOTHER CUISINE OF THE MUSLIM WORLD," writes Anissa Helou in her cookbook, *Feast: Food of the Islamic World*. As one of the oldest cuisines in existence, which spread as the Islamic Empire grew, Persian food can taste familiar even if you've never had it before. At Bar Koko, it helps that Mahmud "Mike" Nezamloo tested about 20 dishes among "trends of differ-

"Persians, they love meat. We're all about meat."

—Mike Nezamloo, Bar Koko and Persian Restaurant



Bar Koko owner Mahmud "Mike" Nezamloo



ent ethnicities," he says, to determine his menu. Kebabs, of course, was a given. What differentiates the beef kebab at Bar Koko is the texture of the meat—ground fine and kneaded so that it's almost smooth. It's soft, akin to meatloaf. It, as with everything else on the menu, is served with a hearty mound of fluffy rice crowned with a scoop of saffron-stained grains.

I prefer the stews, in particular the ghormeh sabzi, thick with herbs including parsley cooked down to a consistency similar to its au, along with chunks of long-simmered beef and dried limes, a staple of Persian cooking that are simultaneously tart and earthy. There's also a vegan version, a concession to modern tastes. "Persians, they love meat," Nezamloo says. "We're all about meat." But Nezamloo knows how to adapt and cater to customers.

As an 18-year-old living outside of Tehran, he opened his first clothing store. He opened two more shops before leaving to study civil engineering in the Philippines to satisfy his parents. "I never practiced as a civil engineer," he says. "Liked it but liked business more than anything else." He moved to Hawai'i with his wife in 2008 and worked at Nordstrom. "I was their million-dollar salesperson for five years."

At one point, he says his wife came home, saying the mall salon she went to was selling their business.

"So we have to buy it," she said.

"Why are they selling?"

"They said they're not doing good."

"Ok, we don't want it."

"No, we can do it."

"Do you do nails?"

"No."

"Do I?"

"No."

But, Nezamloo says, "happy wife, happy life."

Lily's Nail Spa and Hair Salon struggled for a year before gaining a following. Since the salon, Nezamloo has opened two hookah lounges—and when customers there requested food, he opened Bar Koko.

At first, when I see the sausage spaghetti on the menu, I think it's a strange menu item, maybe for kids or the occasional person who ends up at Bar Koko when they really meant to go to Zippy's.

"It's not a traditional dish," Nezamloo



Combination kebab (saffron kebab, \$23)



Chicken stew (ghormeh sabzi, \$14)

Veggie stew (ghormeh sabzi) served with basmati rice and garden salad (\$14)



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says, "but it's been on the Persian table for a long time." The Persian version differs from the Italian version in that the noodles are cooked with the tomato sauce (and with a touch of turmeric), and while it's usually done with ground beef, Nezamloo's mother would use sausage, and so that's what's on the menu, a little personal history mixed into the restaurant.



Casablanca

→ OPEN 6 TO 8:30 P.M., TUESDAY
THROUGH SATURDAY,
19 HOO LAI ST., KAILUA, 282-8196

ONE OF THE LONGEST-RUNNING RESTAURANTS in Kailua is Moroccan restaurant Casablanca.

It has hardly changed in the 25 years it's been open—not the menu and not the décor, with lounge seating surrounding low tables, and textiles draped across the ceiling and walls, reminiscent of the interior of a desert caravan tent. Casablanca evokes a different time and place more than any other restaurant in Hawai'i. It is, in this sense, a lot like Morocco, a place where the *medinas*, or the old walled city centers, and their mud-brick dwellings are well-preserved, and everything from bread to rugs to metalwork is still done by hand.

More than two decades later, Mohammed Benali and his brother, Abdelfetah, still do almost all the cooking. Restaurants they once worked in have long since closed, Benali attributes Casablanca's success to the business being the right size—not too small, not too big.

Forty-five years ago, Benali came to the U.S. because "We follow the bread. Our proverb in Arabic: You follow the bread, wherever it takes you." Born in Rabat, he went to school for hotel and restaurant management, and learned to cook through immersion: "My mother cooks, grandparents cook, wherever you go, family cooks," he says. And wherever he went, he cooked Moroccan food in Moroccan restaurants, from San Francisco to Seattle to Honolulu. He and his brother opened Casablanca in 1994, after Hajjaba in Kailua, where he worked, shuttered.

The dishes, served as part of a \$44.50 prix fixe menu, hew to the traditional, like the *bsilla*, a saffron chicken pie wrapped in phyllo dough and dusted with cinnamon and sugar, a seductive blend of savory and sweet. The lamb tagine, also tinged with sweetness, is stewed in a complex combination of spices, including coriander, turmeric and ginger. Benali bakes a Moroccan round bread that also serves as utensils for the food. The menu declares, "No Fork. No Knives. Just Fingers." Says Benali: "If you eat with a fork and knife, you're going to feel the metal [in your mouth]. But when you eat with the bread—dip it in the sauce, you carry the sauce in the bread, it absorbs the flavor." He motions with his hand, as if expressing warmth and spice in the mouth versus cold metal. "Better pick it up with your hand. Some people bring their own fork—they hide it. They don't have to hide it. We have if you ask. We don't like to give fork and knife, but if they insist we do. We don't like them to suffer."

As long as he can work, Benali, 68, says he will, "spread the flavor of Morocco. We don't know when we're stopping. Wherever you live is your country, but never forget where you're born."



Though Islam is the second-largest religion in the world, after Christianity, it is a minority in the U.S. The Pew Research Center estimates that Muslims make up 1.1 percent of the population in America, and the Muslim Association of Hawai'i estimates there are about 4,000 Muslims in the state.



Couscous with vegetables

Lamb tagine with honey

Cornish hen with preserved lemons and olives

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Amina Pizzeria

AMINA CHAUDHURI DIDN'T GROW UP MUSLIM, AND SHE DIDN'T GROW UP EATING ITALIAN FOOD. And yet, she

runs the only restaurant in Honolulu serving halal Italian food. (Halal refers to what is permissible according to the Quran. Restrictions include no alcohol and no pork.) From Saigon, Vietnam, she arrived in Honolulu in 1994 and married a Muslim from Malaysia. She converted to Islam and they opened Amina Pizzeria in Kailua in 1998, and then moved to the current location on Kalia Avenue in 2008. She studied the cuisine by trying Italian restaurants in Honolulu and studying cookbooks. "I love to learn something different from my country," she says. "And I love Italian food." She put her favorite dishes on the menu, such as lasagna, pizza and calzone, and tailors the flavors to her own palate, so the tomato sauces border on the sweet and sour. Eighty percent of the dishes are halal, including the pepperoni pizza, which Chau sources halal, all-beef pepperoni for. Sometimes customers are surprised that she cooks the dishes, expecting an Italian chef, or maybe just a non-Asian one. In the kitchen, "I do everything: cooking, dishwasher, cashier," she says. "It makes me happy, makes me peaceful."

Open daily, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 4 to 9:30 p.m., 1694 Kalia Avenue, #B, 949-3548 [PZZA](#)