



<http://nashvillerestaurants.blogspot.com/2008/12/caf-rakka-mediterranean-grill.html>

Sunday, December 28, 2008

Café Rakka Mediterranean Grill



Nashville Restaurants and Food
Café Rakka Mediterranean Grill
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Hendersonville
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You hit the door and immediately get a vibe that Café Rakka is going to be different. It looks and feels like an upscale coffee house. In reality the tiny Hendersonville restaurant is turning out top notch, home style Mediterranean cuisine with crisp, engaging flavors in a laid back atmosphere.

Café Rakka is named for the hometown of the Syrian chef Riyad Alkasem, who also likes to go by the culinary name of Chef Rakka. He opened the café in October of 2007, with his wife Linda. They're aided greatly on our lunch visit by a staff member, with a soft voice and dreadlocks, who answers all of our million questions with a smile. It's clear the respect she has for the chef's vision, which is described on the menu as fresh, natural and healthy. The fresh part comes out from the very first bite, or in this case sip. We ask for water to drink and are shown a glass jar filled with ice water, and slices of lemon and cucumber. It's a refreshing alternative and a nice touch that speaks volumes about the place.

The menu ranges across the Middle East and Mediterranean with a Turkish emphasis. There are also a number of dishes that may seem similar to Indian cuisine. Chef Rakka explains that many Indian dishes have a Turkish influence and vice versa. The sign advertising the hummus bar drew our attention. The hummus is made daily. You choose from ingredients to top the creamy chickpea dish, including roasted eggplant, roasted jalapenos, pine nuts, almonds and mushrooms. We order from the counter and soon the plate arrives like a work of art emerging from a studio. The hummus is carefully whirled in a circle with shimmering olive oil and bright red spots of hot paprika. The mushrooms adorn the center and the pine nuts are sprinkled around the edges. It's almost too pretty to eat. We get over it quickly and dive in with warm pita bread. The daily preparation makes a big difference. The hummus is creamy, rich and yet a bit delicate, which could be used to describe many of the dishes at Café Rakka. The mushrooms burst with juice and flavor.

The falafel plate is served on a bed of tahini dressed greens, cucumbers and tomatoes. It's really a salad in and of itself. The falafel are crisp and with a moist, tangy interior. The tang is a bit of a surprise, and shows that the chef is willing to take a few twists and turns in the kitchen. The tahini is quite lemony and a perfect accompaniment to the lettuce. The tabbouleh proves to be nicely tart. The parsley and bulghur cracked wheat have a fresh snap and the lemon juice gives everything a pop. This is a departure from many places. Tabbouleh can be soggy and lifeless in less talented hands.

Chef Rakka says he makes everything in house, including the yogurt and cheese. That care was evident in everything we sampled. And speaking of sampling, you can order sampler portions of some of the menu favorites at lunch for just \$2.99. It's a great way to mix and match with your dining partner.

The chef pulls out the big guns, bold flavors and plenty of heat, for the meat dishes. The menu advertises that many of these are family recipes. Shish Tawook is chicken breast marinated for 48 hours to a fiery finish. Chicken cooked on the Saj (a traditional cookware like a Wok) is tamer and tasty. Kabob Halebi takes a different road, with savory grilled meat and herbs. They give you a choice of spice levels and medium will have most taste buds dancing. Lamb is well represented. Specials recently included Rack of Lamb, Lamb Biryani and Lamb Korma. Dinner entrees also venture into the seafood territory: Ahi Tuna and salmon are a couple of recent specials.

The little restaurant does get busy at dinner, even on a weeknight. The small staff hustles and the kitchen keeps the food moving. It's nice to see that they don't skimp on the details, even in a rush. The waitress made sure a piece of baklava had a drizzle of honey and a dash of cinnamon before hitting the plate.

Veggie Eater: Café Rakka rocks! There is plenty for the vegetarian here and even some vegan dishes. The hummus bar alone will bring me back for many more visits. I felt like a kid in a candy store and had to calm myself down and limit my hummus bar sides to just two (for a dollar each, you can add additional toppings). Hoping that the hummus would be as good as touted on the menu, I did not want the side items to steal the thunder from the main act. I was not disappointed. The hummus, falafel, tabbouleh, and tahini covered lettuce made for a fabulous

pita sandwich. You can get a vegetarian platter with all of those items for dinner. The chef isn't joking about fresh; they have pots of herbs sitting behind the counter. Eyeing tomorrow's lunch, I had to pry the plates of food away from the Meat Eater in an effort to package them up in the to-go box.

Meat Eater: Prices range from \$6-\$9 for lunch items and \$9-\$20 for dinner entrees. Diners may remember the place as the former location of September's. The interior is bright and comfortable with nice decorating touches. The only downside is the clunky patio furniture for tables and chairs. A meal this good deserves a better seat. You can finish your meal with a cup of intense Turkish coffee, with a flavor we decided was probably cardamom and cloves: certainly different from the usual American brew. We also made a last minute impulse buy. Mamool are cookies with a crumbly exterior and chewy date filling. They're not too sweet and were a fine end to a really good meal.

Posted by Eric and Katie at [6:56 AM](#)