

Mediterranean Made Simple

by Caroline Barrett on October 29, 2015



Mamoun's Falafel

206 Washington Ave Ave, Albany, 434-3901, mamounsalbany.com. Serving 11:30 AM-10 PM Mon-Fri, noon-10 PM Sat-Sun. AE, D, DC, MC, V

Cuisine: Mediterranean, Syrian and Lebanese specialties

Entrée price range: \$4.95 (falafel sandwich) to \$17.95 (shish combo)

Ambience: a calming, charming respite from the busy world

We stepped into Mamoun's on a cold, blustery, gray day. My daughter and I had spent the morning shopping and running errands, stuff I hate—and we were hungry and ready to rest our feet. I was taken quite by surprise at Mamoun's, from the moment we entered. We expected less than what we saw. I thought the inside of Mamoun's would be simple and unadorned, more diner than restaurant. But the inside isn't like that. It's all warm and cozy, a sanctuary for the weary traveler (or errand-runner, as the case may be.)

We settled in to peruse the menu and ordered a Turkish coffee (\$3.25) and a house-brewed tea (\$2.25.) My hands were still cold from the icy air outside and I welcomed the very hot mug of tea. Their house tea is a magical blend of black tea and cardamom. I poured in a few creamers and a hefty measure of sugar and savored every sip. It was so good that I've thought about it again and again since.



My daughter had the Turkish coffee, described on the menu as being served 'black only.' It arrived steaming in a delicate cup with perfect, golden brown froth on top. The coffee was slightly sweet and oh-so-strong. One cup is satisfying and has more than enough caffeine. It was to her warm body what a cold beer is on a hot, summer day.

After debating for more than a few minutes (hummus or baba ganouj?), we decided on the baba ghanouj appetizer (\$5.95.) If you don't know it, you should. Baba ghanouj is hummus' more sophisticated cousin. It's made from grilled eggplant that's pureed into creamy wonderfulness with garlic and tahini. There were pita breads served alongside, and each bite was smoky, garlicky with a touch of bitter from tahini. I wanted to save a few spoonfuls to spread on my falafel, but it wasn't meant to be. We finished every bite.

We decided to share two entrees, the falafel salad (\$6.95) and the chicken kabob sandwich (\$5.99.) We debated again about what to choose, having a hard time deciding between the falafel and the fahtoush. I love fahtoush,

which is the Middle Eastern version of panzanella salad. But with falafel in Mamoun's name, I felt like we had to have it.

Falafel is a vegetarian meatball made from chickpeas, parsley and plenty of earthy cumin. I liked that their falafel is made into generous-sized balls, then sliced in half before frying. The slicing meant more surface area, and more surface area means more crispy outside. Inside was soft and steamy. The falafel was served on a bed of simple, crisp lettuce, tomatoes and onion and dressed with olive oil and a good amount of lemon. There was tahini dressing served alongside and the whole thing—the combination of tangy tahini, crisp falafel and sour lemon was harmonious.

The chicken kabob sandwich was a safe choice, for sure. Simply served on a small plate, the marinated chicken chunks were generously stuffed in a pita and sauced with tahini. It worked in a clean, straightforward kind of way. Enough said.

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The co-star of our lunch was the tabouli (\$6.95.) As it is with most things, there is tabouli that is just okay and truly great tabouli. This salad made of herbs and grains has as many variations as there are chefs. Mamoun's version is mostly herbs, so each bite is a fresh burst of parsley taste first, then nutty bulgur afterward. We declared Mamoun's tabouli to be truly great tabouli.

Mamoun's is a family-owned restaurant, opened in 1985. Fayah Chater came to this country from Syria, and brought with him the recipes used at Mamoun's. According to Chater, the cuisine "is Syrian and Lebanese. Mediterranean is hazy to most people these days." Their menu is small, and every time they consider expanding, the family decides that focusing on the few specialties offered feels like the right thing to do. So they keep making falafel and kabobs, hummus and baba ghanouj.

We were finished with lunch but dreading going back to the cold air, so we ordered up another coffee, one more tea, and one piece of baklava (\$3.69.) The coffee and tea were enjoyed as much as the first round and warmed us in preparation for reentry to the outside world. The baklava was served, like all of Mamoun's dishes, unadorned on a simple plate. We took our time, sipping hot drinks and using our forks to peel back layer after layer of filo. Each was drenched in honey, and between the layers were finely chopped nuts, doused in more and more honey. This is the kind of dessert meant to satisfy the most desperate sweet tooth. It worked for us.

Our bill, not including tax and tip, was \$40.53.

My daughter and I, knowing when enough is enough, gathered up our things and buttoned up our sweaters. With full and warmed bellies, we were ready to face the cold and windy world again.

photo by Caroline Barrett

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