

LEWISBURG WITH A LEBANESE GARNISH

Ali Kabalan, a mechanical engineer turned Middle Eastern rug and art importer turned local Lebanese food purveyor, likes to describe his journey from Beirut, Lebanon, to Lewisburg as a destiny 30 years in the making.

He first came to the United States in the 1980s for graduate school, but was summoned home when his father fell ill. It wasn't until last year that another important person — his young grandson — lured him back.

Kabalan explains with a smile that helping daughter Amal Kabalan, professor of electrical & computer engineering, care for her baby was the spark that propelled him and wife Afaf to venture from Lebanon to Lewisburg. Having a son who teaches at Villanova University and a daughter who lives in Washington, D.C., added to the appeal for this family of engineers.

But while caring for their grandchild is fulfilling, the Kabalans, used to a bustling international city, sought another outlet for their abundant energy. Afaf says, "I have always enjoyed cooking for children, friends and for parties, but I never had my own restaurant or sold my food."

Then son-in-law David Heayn pro-

posed an intriguing idea. How about renting a space in the Wednesday Farmers Market on Fairground Road? When Heayn contacted the market's manager, he discovered a counter space was up for rent.

And so Fafa's Kitchen came to find itself wedged between Troutman Meats and the Country Cupboard along the south wall of the market. There, customers bored by the usual cheeseburgers and soft pretzels can sample the Kabalans' tabbouleh, kibbe, hummus, grape leaves, falafel and baba ghanoush, or purchase Lebanese spices, tahini and olive oil.

Every Wednesday the couple wakes up at 3 or 4 a.m. to begin prepping the food. They arrive at the market at 8 a.m. to fry the falafel and assemble the other dishes. Customers start flowing in by 9 a.m. to find the Kabalan waiting with broad smiles and a desire to chat.

Afaf says, "I like to connect with the people. The American people like to try new things. They ask us about our food and tell me it is very, very delicious." She believes she has repeat customers because "the food is really fresh."

Afaf does make some concessions

to American tastes, reducing the amount of garlic, black pepper and cumin she uses in some dishes. "But I keep the spirit of Lebanese tabbouleh," she says.

Like Afaf, Ali enjoys the cross-cultural opportunities the business provides them. "People come in and say, 'What is falafel?' We are introducing people to new things — it is not just a business," he says. "I can say, 'Today 10 people learned about tabbouleh.' People ask me, 'How should I use olive oil?' My response is, 'Always.' Our food is good and healthy."

The Kabalans are eager to expand their business, since the Farmers Market is open only once a week. The countertop they rent also is too small to allow them to produce much food. Ultimately, they would like to own a Middle Eastern grocery and deli in Lewisburg.

And while Bucknell brought them to central Pennsylvania to assist their professor daughter, the University is also the key to their successful adjustment as immigrants and businesspeople.

"Bucknell is behind everything here," says Ali. "It is what keeps the town busy. It is not just the mind, but the heart of the town." — Sherri Kimmel

Beet Hummus

Servings: 4

1/4 pound dried chickpeas
3/4 cups tahini
1/2 cup lemon juice
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 teaspoon baking soda
1/4 teaspoon cumin
1/4 teaspoon paprika
1 clove garlic
1 medium beet

DIRECTIONS

Wash the dried chickpeas thoroughly with water. Soak the chickpeas in cold water for 24 hours.

Wash the beets thoroughly and boil them for 30 minutes or until tender. Drain and set aside.

Place the chickpeas in a large pot filled with water and bring to a boil.

To boiling water add baking soda. Stir to prevent water from overflowing. Reduce heat to medium. Cook chickpeas for 20 minutes.

When the chickpeas are tender, drain and set aside to cool. When chickpeas reach room temperature, blend until very smooth.

As the chickpeas cook, mix tahini with 1-1/2 cups of water in a separate bowl. Stir well. Add lemon juice to the tahini and keep stirring, then add salt.

Peel the beets and blend them with the chickpeas. Finely crush the garlic and add it to the blended chickpeas. Add the tahini sauce to the chickpeas and stir well.

Once everything is well blended, serve the hummus with a pinch of paprika and cumin. Adding olive oil at the end will enhance the flavor even more.

(Recipe from Ali and Afaf Kabalan)

