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Turkish Meatballs, Courtesy of Kabab-Burger

By Susie Iventosch



Michaela and Avi Ben-Ari of Kabab-Burger in Lafayette Photo Susie Iventosch

It seems the perfect recipe for landing a job as a restaurant owner is a love of cooking and a husband who has always dreamed of owning a dining establishment. This is how Michaela and Avi Ben-Ari came to own Kabab-Burger in Lafayette.

"I have always loved to cook and entertain for large groups," said Michaela Ben-Ari, "and owning a restaurant was always one of Avi's dreams, so we finally opened our own restaurant."

After 30 years in the printing business, Ben-Ari now realizes his dream comes with a lot of work! Though the hours are long, the Ben-Aris are very satisfied with what they are building in their community.

"I really enjoy the social aspect, and it is very rewarding to receive great feedback from our customers," Michaela said. "I absolutely love being in the kitchen ... my adrenaline kicks in when I have a stack of orders waiting to be filled!"

This might make some people nervous, but for this chef, trained at the Tadmor Culinary School in Herzlia, Israel, the more bustling the kitchen, the better!

Aside from the pita bread and the pistachio baklava, which they have delivered from specialty vendors, everything is made from scratch, right from soaking the dried garbanzo beans for their hummus, to the tahini (sesame seed paste) and the babaganoush (roasted eggplant with olive oil, garlic, tahini and spices).

Ben-Ari, who thoroughly enjoyed his mother's cooking as a boy, and ate a lot of it, does not have much time to really get in the kitchen, but says he helped create the recipes for the meats they serve, especially the kababs and shawarma. The Turkish meatballs featured in this food column come from his mother's recipe collection, and they are incredibly delicious!

Speaking of meat recipes, I finally had the opportunity to learn about the differences between Greek gyros, Turkish doner kebab and Israeli and Arabic shawarma from the Ben-Aris, something that has always piqued my curiosity. Although they are all cooked on a vertical spit of sorts, the gyros and doner kebab are made of ground meat and spices, while the shawarma is made from whole pieces of meat. Kabab-Burger makes their shawarma with dark meat to keep it very moist.

There wasn't time on this visit, but one of these days, I hope to observe how they make their shawarma!

Michaela has special dietary needs due to a recent onset of Celiac disease, so she offers gluten-free items on the menu. In fact, she keeps the menu as healthy as possible, because so many clients are concerned about health and fitness. They also offer family meals to go, and cater to groups as large as 300 people. And, if all you need is an appetizer for your next gathering, they are happy to prepare that for you, too.

This summer, Kabab-Burger will offer a fast "sandwich-to-go" option, for people wanting to pick up a quick lunch. The falafel and shawarma sandwiches will be available on this menu. There is also a regular kids' menu, featuring schnitzel made of real chicken breast, in addition to other kid-friendly dishes.

For more information visit: www.kabab-burger.com or call (925) 297-6343. Hours are Monday through Saturday 11:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m., Sundays from 11 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.

Kabab-Burger 3647 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette.

Turkish style meatballs in tomato sauce

INGREDIENTS

For the meatballs:

1 1/2 lbs. fine ground beef or lamb
1 crushed garlic clove
1 small onion, finely grated
2 thick slices of stale white bread
1 medium egg
1 teaspoon ground cumin
2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
Salt to taste
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
White flour for coating
1/4 cup oil
Some water

For tomato sauce:

1 1/2 cups chopped, peeled tomatoes
1/2 cup finely chopped bell pepper
1/2 teaspoon sugar
Salt to taste
Freshly ground black pepper to taste
1/2 cup water



Photo Susie Iventosch

1 can finely diced tomatoes in puree (14 ounces ... this is my addition to extend the sauce)

1. In a mixing bowl combine meat with garlic and onion. Soak bread in cold water, squeeze dry and crumble into bowl. Add egg, cumin, parsley, salt and pepper to taste. Blend thoroughly to a smooth paste.

2. With moistened hands shape tablespoons of the meat mixture into oval, sausage-like shapes. Coat lightly with flour.

3. Heat butter in a deep pan and fry meatballs until lightly browned on all sides. Remove to a plate when browned.

4. Add tomatoes and chopped pepper to pan and stir over medium heat for 5 minutes. Add sugar, salt and pepper to taste, and then stir in water. Bring to a boil and return meatballs to pan. Bring to a slow simmer.

5. Cover and simmer gently for 1 hour, until meatballs are tender and sauce is thick. Serve with rice pilaf.

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