

## Arya Global Cuisine

"Can I get you something to drink?" asked Fera Hashemi of Arya Global Cuisine (885 Middlefield.) "How about some Persian tea?"

That explained the two mugs in her hand as she sat down at the wooden table. The air smelled of rose water subsiding to cardamom.

She was excited that I liked the tea.

"This what I love to do," she said, "take people on a journey through Persian food."

A friendly giant, Michael Hashemi, Fera's husband and Arya's chef, joined us at the table, mug of tea in hand.

He wanted to be clear: at Arya he cooks Italian food and he cooks Italian and Persian food, but not fusion food.

Waving towards the open kitchen, he explained.

"One half of our kitchen is dedicated to Persian, and there on the other side of the pizza oven is the Italian side."

The division is understandable. Michael grew up in Iran learning his mother's cooking. Fleeing the violence that gripped his home country in the late 1970s, he landed in Italy, where he learned Italian cooking. He wouldn't dream of combining the two, which he considers irrevocably separate and distinct.

The air cleared on that subject, a large round of bread, taftoon, arrived at the table.

Fresh from the wood-fired oven, the taftoon is accompanied by a delicate bowl of cilantro chutney.

"We add jalepeño for people who come in looking for spicy," Fera explains, "People assume that Persian food is very hot, like Indian food. But it's much more subtle, with fresh and aromatic flavors."

The tour of the Persian half of the restaurant's cuisine had officially begun.



*Chef Michael and Fera Hashemi*

A thick column of stacked rice and vegetables rising out of a saucy sea of vibrant yellow quickly followed. Michael identified it as the VegeTower, pointing out the layers of basmati rice, spinach, caramelized onions, tomato and eggplant. A saffron yogurt sauce filled the surrounding moat.

The dish is rich and creamy, outstanding for what it does for familiar vegetables.

A dish called Red Velvet Salmon brought to light one of Fera's secrets.

"Michael made this dish for me because I'm so picky. I'm his food muse," she laughed

Michael only chuckled.

Directing the tasting as I dove into the salmon and its sour cherry reduction sauce, Fera indicated my fork.

"Now make sure you try a bite with all of the elements together. Get some of the garlic mashed potatoes."

When the eggplant and onion borani bademjoon arrived, Michael took his turn, sliding his remaining taftoon closer.

"Put some on the bread," he said, "and then add a little maust o'khiar (yogurt and

mint sauce)". Michael the craftsman chef, Fera the vibrant show woman, make the perfect pair, a classic case of chef-meets-hostess. Michael had moved from Italy to Newport Beach and began working at the same restaurant as Fera. The two were wed.

In the early 2000s they were ready to sign for another restaurant in Laguna Beach when Fera's parents announced that they were moving to the Bay Area.

"There was no way we could open another restaurant without the support of grandparents, so we moved, too," Fera said.

That was 2012, a year of surprises for the new restaurant owners.

"We opened and, right away, construction (of the Crossing 900 building) began. The streets surrounding us completely closed," Michael remembered. "The city was great, though. And I've never seen a more supportive Chamber of Commerce," added Fera.

The Hashemis relied largely on catering during the construction years, but one element of Arya can only be enjoyed in-house: a belly dancer on Friday and Saturday nights.

"We also have her perform on holidays, except Valentine's Day. We learned that it gets too many people in trouble," Fera laughed.

One holiday will be feted with dancing and a special menu, Persian New Year, March 20 and 21.

Just when it seemed another bite of food couldn't be possible, the bastani, a rose water ice heaped with a scoop of Persian ice cream and speckled with pistachios, arrived. The afternoon tour of Arya has come full circle, rose water to rose water, but the allure of future journeys is irresistible.

