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\$25 AND UNDER

In Bay Ridge, Newcomers Bear Treats

By MATT GROSS

IN the popular imagination, Bay Ridge is New York's Midwest: more conservative, less diverse and distinctly unhip.

But the world at the end of the R train is a far cry from the neighborhood [John Travolta](#) strutted through in "Saturday Night Fever." Italian, Irish, Scandinavian and Greek populations have (somewhat grudgingly) made room for Arab and Asian communities, whose cuisines are a fascinating counterpoint to the diners and old-time Italian joints.

Fifth Avenue, which runs through the heart of the neighborhood, is the place to witness — and taste — the changes.

Grocery stores with signs in Arabic script sit next door to kitschy Irish pubs, while Turkish butchers load lamb carcasses into shopping carts down the block from Christmas tree stands. Halal Chinese restaurants promise no wine, no pork, and Astoria European Foods (507 84th Street at Fifth Avenue, 718-745-5242) sells Polish pickles, Israeli couscous and Georgian hot sauce. Meanwhile, the waitresses at Hinsch's Confectionery (8518 Fifth Avenue at 85th Street, 718-748-2854), still call you "sweetie" and "darling" when they bring your juicy hamburger.

On one corner sits Al Safa (8002 Fifth Avenue at 80th Street, 718-238-9576; alsafa-restaurant.com), an unassuming Lebanese restaurant. Its wraparound windows reveal a handful of tables and a glass display case of marinating meats. The restaurant would be chilly were it not for Zein Safa, the silver-haired owner whose warmth and enthusiasm pervade the space. He takes particular pride in a staggeringly fresh tabbouleh (\$4), but he should be equally happy with his baba ghanouj (\$4), mildly smoky and doused with fruity olive oil, and his mujadara (\$4), warm lentils and rice laced with sweet strands of caramelized onion.

Kebabs (\$5), in pita with lettuce, tomato, pickles, sumac-dusted onions and a tart, powerful garlic sauce, are even better. Shish taouk — grilled chicken — has a wonderful char, and the spicy sujuk sausage an addictive earthiness. Veal tongue, advertised without shame on the light-board menu, is deeply beefy but has a funk that declares this isn't filet mignon. Veal brains, alas, are unavailable, Mr. Safa said, because of city Health Department restrictions.

Salve that loss with jallab (\$3), an aromatic date-juice-and-rosewater concoction that manages to be super-sweet but not syrupy.

Bay Ridge's Middle Eastern community is hardly homogeneous. Syrians, Moroccans and [Palestinians](#) also

run restaurants there, the latter seeming to specialize in desserts, like Nablus Sweets (6812 Fifth Avenue at 68th Street, 718-748-1214, nablussweets.com). Dozens carpet the counter in a bright, tiled room — a branch of a 14-year-old Paterson, N.J., business.

There are [cookies](#), flavored with walnuts, almonds or pistachios, and small dense cakes of semolina, some sweetened with sugar, others with honey, topped or stuffed with a medley of nuts. You'll notice members of the baklava family, and a kind of Fig Newton, fresher and lighter than what you would find in a supermarket. You won't, however, find labels, but just point, or request your favorite nut. Some sweets are \$5 to \$9 a pound, others can be bought by the single piece, at \$1.50, \$2 or \$3.

Two, however, are worth asking for by name. The house specialty is k'nafee, a wide, warm disc of Italian and Arab cheeses, bound with syrup and semolina, and topped with a scattering of crushed pistachios. It's rich, and only barely sweet, as is the m'halabia, an ethereal block of whiteness made from fresh milk. Eating it is like nibbling a cloud.

Though Al Safa and Nablus are new (both opened in the spring), the Middle Eastern presence actually dates back to the 1960s. (The restaurant Tanoreen, for example, has been puréeing eggplant and grilling lamb for almost a decade.) The real new arrivals are East Asians, thousands of whom moved to Bay Ridge and surrounding neighborhoods in this decade, according to census figures. The tastiest sign of their presence is Grand Sichuan House (8701 Fifth Avenue at 87th Street, 718-680-8887). It loosely resembles Manhattan's Grand Sichuans (the chef, Din Wang, used to cook at the 56th Street branch), but the owner, David Chan, said the restaurants are unrelated.

Indeed, Grand Sichuan House, which opened in September 2007, is smaller, cozier and cooler than its (non) brethren. The walls are a homey yellow, and avant-jazz plays on the sound system, courtesy of a customer who donates CDs. The waitresses are chatty, the tables as likely to be occupied by young Chinese sophisticates as by non-Asians enthralled by the surpassingly spicy flavors.

Grand Sichuan certainly has dishes to make you sweat. Chengdu spicy and aromatic fish (\$16.95), served in a basin big enough to bathe a newborn, is a worthy test for a chili hound. But beneath all that fire is an array of flavors: funky soybeans, sweet cabbage, crunchy peanuts, supple and soothing [tofu](#). Likewise, spicy crab (\$12.95) is less about the heat of 100 dried chilis (give or take) than the heat of the wok, which fries the crustaceans so thoroughly that you can chomp through the shell to reach the meat. Shredded duck with spring ginger (\$14.95) is hardly spicy at all — smoked over tea leaves, it tastes like the work of a North Carolina barbecue-pit master.

Despite all the changes, some of Bay Ridge's older communities are keeping pace. Agnanti (7802 Fifth Avenue at 78th Street, 718-833-7033, agnantimeze.com), a branch of an Astoria restaurant, opened three years ago with a welcome take on Greek cuisine: embrace the archipelago.

Fried pita with olives (\$6.50) is from Cyprus, fruity fava-bean dip from Santorini (\$6.50), light zucchini-and-cheese croquettes (\$7.50) from Mykonos.

Agnanti's geographical fixation really shines with its Tastes of Constantinople, dishes that reflect the Turkish influence on Istanbul's Greek community. Stuffed grape leaves (\$6) are meatless, sweetish and pure; baked lima beans (\$6) an ideal comfort food. And then there's the rooster (\$16) — chunks of male chicken in a mild

tomato sauce with odd twists of pasta — which may be pan-Greek but is clearly an Agnanti point of pride.

Agnanti meals tend to finish with a dessert of little semolina cakes, a puddle of thick yogurt and fat marinated raisins.

That it arrives free (occasionally with glasses of muscat) is no surprise. Like Nablus, Al Safa and Grand Sichuan, Agnanti embraces you more readily than do most restaurants in Manhattan. It's the kind of thing that binds a neighborhood together.

Well, that and a little hummus.