

Yippee Yazuzu
YAZUZU
[from March 2007 issue]

Bored with your restaurant choices? Want to try something totally offbeat and a little bit wacky, as in off the charts? Then follow the red paint down the stairs to **Yazuzu** on 18th Street in Adams Morgan -- hidden beneath flourishing storefronts and minus really, really obvious signage. Shaped like a submarine -- that is, long and tubular -- painted red all over, except for the white overhead, and turned on full-blast AV equipment, and white modular seating, Yazuzu is spectacularly unusual. And, besides all that, it serves up really good, made-on-the-premises food.

But the catch is this: What kind of food, specifically from which country? It goes without saying that the menu is Middle-Eastern, and one can easily "ooh" and "aah" about the hummus, which has the edgy-earthly bite of very good extra virgin olive oil highlighting the blandness of the ground chickpeas, but reading through the menu leaves a big question mark. Moroccan? Tunisian? Egyptian? Lebanese? In the end, in our mix-and-match society, it really makes no difference, since Yazuzu describes itself as Middle-Eastern.

So what's for dinner? Without traditional sit-down service, customers are faced with making selections from a cafeteria-like setup, and fortunately, the counter guy takes the time to explain what's up. Otherwise, making a choice would be perplexing, despite their handy menu, because nothing is labeled. To further compound the culinary mysteries, it appears that not all menu possibilities are on display. Where are the pomegranate-braised beef short ribs or the apricot-braised lamb shanks? And is he really pointing to and offering mashed potatoes? That seemingly mismatched side turns out to actually be mashed potatoes all right, but with cardamom and ginger stirred in for an exotic twist.

Dips and salads -- i.e., the meze -- are plentiful, and among these, the ubiquitous hummus is a must. But you can load up on plenty of other dishes with less familiar names and exotic flavors. How about the mechouia, Tunisian twabil-spiced roast vegetables; hindbeh, Lebanese braised dandelion and caramelized onion; and bissara, fava beans and dill? Definitely not a menu for the meat-and-potatoes kind of guy.

On the other hand, if you suffer from culinary wanderlust and have a jet-age mindset, then you'll find plenty to eat here. Besides the main meat dishes noted above -- and including chicken tagine with green olives and preserved lemon as well as chicken and pistachio curry wrapped in banana leaves -- you can pare down the portions with one of their combo plates: the "zuzu 1," a choice of five sides; or the "zuzu 2," a choice of sandwich (panini wrap) with one side; or the "zuzu 3," which comes at you as a main with four sides for those who are truly starving.

Among the wraps, the merguez sausage with baba ghanough and zough tucked and pressed into a tight-knit sandwich is delicious, especially considering that even the sausage is made in-house. You get four other sandwich options, though the turkey with avocado and tahini seems very out of place. Of the sides, the wheat berries with lentils and dried fruit and the red lentil dal, though not heated through enough, had both flavor and texture. But had I known that the mashed potatoes were not just the typical butter-and-heavy-cream version, that would have been a choice as well.

Desserts aren't available yet, says the main honcho, but the kitchen team and the apparent main cook -- the lady who makes the sausages -- is working on devising one. That's a positive, since you walk out feeling slightly cheated, craving a scoop of halawah or a wedge of baklava. Even a cup of hot and bracing mint tea stirred with plenty of sugar would satisfy the inner dessert demon.

Too bad that this quirky eatery seems undiscovered as yet. Or could it be that most customers order out, taking advantage of the restaurant's "we deliver" policy? I hope so, because losing Yazuzu would greatly diminish the Adams Morgan restaurant scene, and deprive you guys of an offbeat gastronomic adventure.

Yazuzu / 2120 18th St., NW; tel., 319-8989; www.yazuzu.com. Hours: Tue.-Thu., 11am-12mid; Fri. & Sat. to 4am; Sun., 3-10pm; Mon., closed. Entrée price range, \$9.50-\$12.50; major credit cards accepted.

Copyright (c) 2007 InTowner Publishing Corp. & Alexandra Greeley. All rights reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited, except as provided by 17 U.S.C. §107 "fair use".

Alexandra Greeley is a food writer, editor, and restaurant reviewer. She has authored books on Asian and Mexican cuisines published by Simon & Schuster, Doubleday, and Macmillan. Other credits include restaurant reviews and food articles for national and regional publications, as well as former editor of the Vegetarian Times and former food editor/writer for the South China Morning Post in Hong Kong.

[Return To Index](#)