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Vegetarian falafel rides the wave of popular Middle Eastern fare

Vegetarian- friendly dish rides the Middle East wave

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Fast food is a flood of burgers, burritos and toasted sub sandwiches. But the vegetarian in search of convenience -- and flavor beyond roasted vegetables -- can stand firm against the carnivorous onslaught, falafel firmly in hand.

Long a favorite in the Middle East and Europe, falafel, a gloriously fried ball of spiced chickpeas (and/or fava beans) and herbs topped with everything from tahini to bissara (Moroccan fava bean dip) to zhough (spicy chili sauce) is piggybacking on the trending popularity of Middle Eastern staples such as hummus and baba ghanoush. That's why falafel shops are opening up throughout the Chicago area, including Ukrainian Village's Chickpea, Lincoln Park's Nesh Mediterranean Grill, Lakeview's Falafill and Albany Park's Zebda.

To see what the falafel hot spots have to offer, we anonymously visited four of the newest shops around and one suburban mainstay.

Chickpea 2018 W. Chicago Ave.; 773-384-9930

Restaurant appearance: Like a modern Palestinian or Lebanese café with subdued lighting and Egyptian movie posters of American blockbusters such as "The Fugitive" on the wall.

Service: Not particularly fast, but attentive. So attentive, in fact, that if you don't finish everything, Amni Suqi, the mother of owner Jerry Suqi, probably will ask if you enjoyed your order.

The falafel: Traditional, although not too supercrispy, served with hummus, cucumber and tomato in a pita (it's also available as an entree, served atop hummus).

Also available: Traditional dishes such as koosa (a zucchini, tomato and onion stew), mujadara (rice, sauteed with lentil and onions served with yogurt) and kharroof mihsheh (lamb and vegetable kebab).

The difference: Everything on the menu is based on techniques three or four generations old that were handed down to Amni Suqi, who said she doesn't use recipes. "Everything is in my head," she said. "We shop, then we eat. We don't have a freezer, so everything is really fresh."

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Falafel sandwich cost: \$4

Falafill 3202 N. Broadway; 773-525-0052

Restaurant appearance: Sleek and modern, with a salad bar filled with 22 fixings, from traditional items such as bissara to more international flavors such as pickled ginger and cilantro chutney.

Service: It gets busy. Really busy. During those busy times, service can be slow and lead to some shortcomings, such as fries or falafel that could have used a few more minutes in the fryer.

The falafel: Served in a pita or salad, the falafel comes with a few shreds of lettuce at the bottom but can then be topped with any and all of the choices at the salad bar. The best method is to first remove your falafel balls from the pita when you get to the salad bar.

Also available: Your options are falafel or falafel. Fries or sweet potato fries.

The difference: The salad bar. "It's not just raw toppings, we have an array of finished salads," said Maher Chebaro, Falafill's general manager.

Falafel sandwich cost: \$4.95

Pita Inn 3910 Dempster St., Skokie; 847-677-0211 (also 9854 N. Milwaukee Ave., Glenview; 122 S. Elmhurst Road, Wheeling)

Restaurant appearance: Somewhat dated with faux Mediterranean decor (think faux stucco walls and plants placed in every windowsill).

Service: Although lines are typically long, particularly during lunchtime, they move quickly.

The falafel: Crispy on the outside, yet moist on the inside, the falafel is served simply in a pita with lettuce, tomato and tahini sauce (also available in the "gourmet falafel sandwich," with sliced potatoes, finely diced tomatoes, cucumbers and pickles).

Also available: Lamb kebab and chicken shawarma sandwiches, as well as the combination feast, which includes shish kebab and kifta kebab (grilled and seasoned ground beef, minced onion and parsley).

The difference: Open since 1982, the Skokie location also features a market and bakery next door that sells everything from pita bread and grape leaves to flavored tobacco and pans.

Falafel sandwich cost: \$3.58

Nesh 734 W. Fullerton Parkway; 773-975-6374

Restaurant appearance: Clean and modern, with TVs at every booth.

Service: Not particularly fast, but not particularly slow.

The falafel: Traditional falafel served in a pita with a choice of traditional toppings such as Jerusalem salata, red cabbage, seasoned onions and tahini.

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Also available: Traditional Middle Eastern fare such as shawarma, kebabs and salads.

The difference: The recipes are based on those of a popular Jerusalem falafel shop where co-owner Rami Kashkeesh spent a month working for free to learn the business. "I got trained on everything from how to do shawarma from scratch to how to make pita bread and falafel," he said.

Falafel sandwich cost: \$4.99 for a pita, \$5.99 for "shrocks," a wrapped flatbread.

Zebda 4344 N. Elston Ave.; 773-545-7000

Restaurant appearance: Little ambience, just a few glass cases filled with Northern African and Mediterranean-style salads and a chalkboard with different sandwich offerings.

Service: Ordering is deli-style, and the sandwiches, including falafel, take a few minutes to cook and assemble.

The falafel: Crisp falafel (made with raw chickpeas, sweet potatoes, mint, garlic and parsley) served with lettuce, red onion, cucumber and tomato on a m'semene, a chewy Algerian flatbread with a yogurt cardamom dressing and garlic-mint sauce.

Also available: Sandwiches such as the lamb brochette, with eggplant, arugula, roasted peppers and a mint garlic spread on m'semene and entrees such as couscous-crusting salmon.

The difference: Featuring halal meat, Zebda aims to be a modern deli featuring ethnic food with a twist. For instance, the baba ghanoush features balsamic vinegar, sun-dried tomatoes and shallots.

Falafel sandwich cost: \$6 (comes with a generous salad or pita chips)

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