



WRITING

A LEGACY OF GOOD TASTE

TO DINE FOR

"...the menu at To Dine For is filled with our recipes from home. They are from our aunts, uncles, and grandmas."

Paula Cofman & Rafca Cardoos of To Dine For in Hull.

You start with the best of intentions. Remembering the happy times spent in the kitchen with your mom, you plan a day of cooking with your kids so they, too, can learn the treasured



family recipes that have been favorites for generations. But, after a few hours, with the kids sniping at each other and the kitchen a mess, you wonder if it is all worth it. Paula Cofman and Rafca Cardoos, friends and co-owners of To Dine For, a take-out and catering restaurant in Hull specializing in Middle Eastern

and Greek foods that is also a popular vendor at many South Shore farmers' markets, are proof that time spent in the kitchen with your children is time well spent. Their passion for food and the successful business they have built are rooted in the culinary traditions passed on to them by their families.

A tasty selection of To Dine For's spreads and salads.



And, oh what they learned! According to Rafca, the menu at To Dine For "is filled with our recipes from home. They are from our aunts, uncles, and grandmas." Along

with well-known Middle Eastern foods such as hummus, kabobs, and falafel, To Dine For serves spanikopota, baba ghanouj, fatayer, mousaka, and kibbeh.

For those not familiar with these foods, here is a quick primer. Spanikopota, a Greek specialty, is a spinach and feta pie in a phyllo crust. Baba ghanouj is an eggplant spread. Fatayer is a savory pastry stuffed with meat or spinach. Mousaka, a kind of Greek casserole, is usually made with eggplant, cheese, and ground beef or lamb. And finally, kibbeh, the pride of the Lebanese kitchen, is made with finely minced lean lamb, bulgur wheat, onions, mint, and spices.

However, simple descriptions do not do justice to the food at To Dine For or the way it is lovingly prepared by Paula and Rafca. As they were taught by their families, they make each dish from scratch: the fatayer dough is homemade, the olives are marinated in a special blend of herbs and spices, the Lebanese salad dressing is made from an old family recipe, and even the yogurt and some of the cheeses are homemade. The yogurt, cold and tart, is the base for a delicious tzatziki, a divine dip for crudités or Syrian bread. To Dine For also sells four types of cheese: a marinated feta, a unique apricot cheese, and two cheeses that Rafca makes from scratch—Syrian and mozzarella.

The addition of any of these cheeses to a dish, even something as simple as a salad, elevates it to a new level.



Lebanese roast stuffed chicken with a stack of fresh pita.

From their families, Paula and Rafca learned lessons central to many ethnic culinary traditions: use the best ingredients and let them shine in simple recipes that have stood the test of time. And, both women were fortunate to have many family members who passed along these important lessons. Rafca was born in Lebanon and moved to the States twenty-four years ago. Because her mother died when she was young, her aunt taught her to cook the dishes central to her Lebanese heritage. Once married, Rafca continued to learn from her husband, who, she says, “is a wonderful cook.” Stints working in a Middle Eastern bakery and owning a seafood shop that also sold some classic Middle Eastern dishes helped refine her skills.

Paula, whose family is of Lebanese and Greek descent, was schooled in Middle Eastern cuisine from an early age. Her aunt

owned El Morocco, a landmark Worcester restaurant, where Paula spent countless hours in the kitchen. Reminiscing about her time in the restaurant kitchen, Paula said, “ I learned from the best.” Before opening To Dine For with Rafca four years ago, Paula worked as a personal chef.

The women, who have known each other for fifteen years, started To Dine For because the business gave them flexibility to be with their families while still allowing them to engage in work they loved. Watching them in the kitchen of their Hull store, it is apparent that they have the same sensibilities about food. “Both Paula and I are very fussy,” noted Rafca, to which Paula concurred, “We are like two grandmothers cooking in the kitchen.”

Although they have four employees who assist them with prep work and help in the store and at the farmers markets, the two women do all the cooking. “We want our recipes and our flavor to stay the same,” Rafca said. Although they generally serve classic versions of Middle Eastern and Greek fare, there is one dish where they give their creativity full reign—hummus. Over the years they have developed many inventive flavors of this classic, and at last count they make thirty flavors ranging from cayenne to avocado to black bean.

In addition to the Hull store, To Dine For is a regular vendor at several South Shore farmers' markets, including Braintree, Scituate, Hingham, and Marshfield. Each week, they bring a wide variety of their top selling hummus flavors, salads, several cheeses, olives, dressing, desserts, and bread to the markets. For To Dine For, as for many other specialty purveyors, farmers markets' have been an excellent source of new customers and an opportunity to gain valuable exposure.

David McMorris, a regular customer at the Hingham farmers' market, raved about To Dine For's food: "It is consistently outstanding. We have tried pretty much everything. I have to try not to buy the baklava—it is so good!"

Last year, To Dine For began a foray into wholesale distribution. Several of its products are carried at the Fruit Center (Hingham and Milton locations), Riddle's Supermarket in Hull, and All the Best in Cohasset. Helped in part by the customer recognition garnered at the farmers' markets, To Dine For's products quickly became strong sellers at the grocery stores. Diane Nolan, supervisor of the gourmet department at the Hingham Fruit Center, noted, "they [the customers] look forward to it, they know it, they want it. It's fabulous. We always get positive feedback."

Thanks to the strong culinary foundation they received from their families, Paula and Rafca have built a business whose loyal customers have an almost cult-like devotion to their food. And now, a generation later, both women have daughters who, not surprisingly, spend time in the kitchen with their moms. As both women know, that is time well spent!



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Classic and luscious roast chicken, stuffed with lamb and rice.

BRING IT ON HOME

Rafca and Paula can help you provide a splendid but homey Lebanese meal.

Open the meal with a leisurely meze table—a tasty selection of To Dine For's spreads and salads served with a stack of fresh pita. Follow with this classic and luscious roast chicken, stuffed

with lamb and rice. Serve baklava and strong sweet cardamom coffee for dessert.

Julia Powers is an avid home cook and a regular patron at the Hingham Farmers' Market. She is mildly addicted to To Dine For's black bean hummus and has no intention of kicking the habit.

To Dine For

520 Nantasket Avenue

Hull, MA 02045

(781) 773-1678

www.ToDineFor.net

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