
OTTAWA CITIZEN

Zizis Kithcen & Wine Bar: Mediterranean menu worth the detour

**“Zizis Kitchen is 7th haven, Veteran restaurateur
Ferdie Ozkul now cooks in Riverside South”**

**“Zizis Kithcen and Wine Bar nails it
with its Mediterranean-inspired menu”**



For a buddy of mine, the situation is a bit like Sarah Palin (apocryphally) being able to see Russia from her house.

He lives in Barrhaven, not far from the Rideau River. From his second storey he can see Zizis Kitchen & Wine Bar, across the water, in Riverside South. If the Strandherd-Armstrong Bridge were finished, he could get from his living room to Zizis’ dining room faster than you could say tzatziki. Instead, the roundabout route via Manotick adds about 10 kilometres to the trip. I, too, have gone out of my way, twice, to get to the six-month-old restaurant. Good thing the food there has been worth the drive, thanks to Zizis veteran chef owner, Ferdie Ozkul.

A small, narrow, orange-walled place that seats about 30, Zizis is Ozkul’s seventh restaurant in Ottawa since he came to town from Turkey in 1986. Among others, he’s opened Zolas, Mangia, La Cucina, Cyranos, Paesanos and Tavola — all Italian eateries. At Zizis, where Ozkul and a sous chef work in an open kitchen, he’s broadened his menu, cherry-picking dishes and inspirations from the breadth of the Mediterranean region to fire out a range of pastas, pizzas, fresh fish dishes, plates of shareables and main courses.

For example, Greek fare is represented by chicken souvlaki, lamb kebabs and meze selections such as dolmades. But on a platter of five items of your choice, those stuffed grape leaves could be nestled next to tender, zestily spiced Turkish kofte meatballs, well-made cubes of potatoes (patatas bravas, as they say in Spain) with roasted garlic aioli and cold, cumin — and feta-enhanced Moroccan carrots. I overheard that one nightly special was flavoured with “Armenian spices.” More significantly, the dishes I’ve tasted have been well crafted, with proper attention paid to all the elements. More often than not, the food has struck me and my fellow diners as Mediterranean-inspired food should — fresh, bright and healthy. If there’s been a niggle, it’s been that a few dishes have been underseasoned or undersalted, but never criminally so.

Better to recall that in a special of linguini with pesto, sun-dried tomato and brown butter shrimp, the pasta was toothsome and the shrimp were plump, just-cooked and tasty. Another uncomplicated but successful pasta was the menu’s penne in a rose sauce that mingled with lots of impressively grilled chicken, mushrooms and spinach.

At lunch, a chicken piccata special brought capers and lemon into play nicely, and the cutlet was moist and flavourful. Panko-crusted cod, while a little undersalted, was similarly cooked with care and generously portioned. Also at lunch, those Turkish kofte meatballs were available in a sizeable wrap, tucked into fluffy pita and given added zip with Aleppo pepper, flanked by a big mound of fresh, varied salad. Shrimp, once more sweet and succulent, topped a platter of tomato-infused tabbouleh that had lengths of asparagus and herbs worked into it.

The restaurant’s pizza oven is a conventional one, but the thin-crust offering I tried (made with Gorgonzola, pepper salami and tomatoes) was just fine — better than some recent wood-fired examples I’ve had.

Of five desserts I’ve seen offered, all were made in-house, and most were warm and worth having again. Crème brûlée was better than many, still warm and served as in a larger, shallow ramekin that afforded more torched, crunchy topping. More exotic was künefe, a Turkish dessert, served in a similar ramekin, which combined a topping of phyllo “noodles,” ricotta and a honeyed syrup. Also available were slices of lemon cake in a moat of warm, lemony sauce, some light and impressive zuccotto cake, and a pear crumble. Ozkul told me in an interview that when he was able, he had a Turkish caramelized quince dessert as an option.

Except for one visit when the service lagged a little bit (the restaurant was busy on a weekend night and a new server was being trained) hospitality’s been strong, beginning with warm, freshly baked rolls with olives, olive oil and balsamic on the side.

The planned completion date for the Strandherd-Armstrong bridge is this September. Until then, if you live on the other side of the Rideau, cross at Hunt Club Road or Manotick to get to Zizis. For a few extra kilometres, your taste buds will thank you.