

# Soul Soothing and Wholesome! Altali's is a bit of culinary heaven in Pepperell!

By Janet Bohling

Nestled among pines and close to the heart of Pepperell lies Altali's Mediterranean Bistro where the scent of warm exotic spices set the stage of a great dining experience. To Ned, the owner of Altali's, food is an opportunity to give to others, to garner friendship and to share an impassioned life. It is in this spirit that Ned welcomes you to dine and taste the vibrant soul-warming flavors of Syria and the wholesomeness of old world fare prepared only with the freshest ingredients from local farms.

Ned grew up in Syria and dreamed of one day of owning his own restaurant. He wanted to share his family's rich heritage of hospitality and it's legacy of old-world culinary techniques. His dream came true when he moved to Pepperell and opened Altali's Mediterranean Bistro on the property that was the old Scotch Pine Farm. From the moment you enter the grounds you sense you're in for a real treat. The driveway is lined with fragrant pine trees and century old elms, stately oaks, majestic spruce, and weeping willow surround the restaurant. The rolling lawn is dotted with goats that Ned raises for milk to make several different types of cheese that he serves fresh in his restaurant along with fresh homemade fig jam. The woodland landscape is magical and is an inspiring backdrop for dining and for weddings and other events.

Dinning at Altali's is an immersive cultural experience. The air is fragrant with the aromatic spices that play a central role in the food's preparation. Guests enjoy Arabic music and the dishes are generously and artistically plated. Nothing is plain, and food here is love expressed as an art form to be soaked in with all senses. Altali's roots lie in family recipes that are native to Damascus, one of the oldest cities in the world and close to Ned's hometown of Saydnaya. Syrian chefs pride themselves on freshness, as honor hinges on the quality of food prepared. So whenever possible Ned only chooses locally sourced ingredients and his herbs are grown on site. Ned is exceedingly generous and his graciousness is evident in Altali's lavish portion sizes. But make no mistake, it's all about purity and quality here, so you leave feeling nourished, not stuffed. Whole grains, legumes, fresh vegetables, grain fed cattle, organic herbs, heady spices and imported olive oil, are all used in abundance at Altali's. The result is intoxicating; delicious, clean, healthy, balanced food, rich in nutrients and simply delicious.

As an honored guest, your meal begins with the welcoming tastes of mezze (appetizer) and the gracious smile of a host eager to introduce the kindness of Syrian hospitality and the unique flavors of a beloved culture, that is all but absent from the area until now. Baba Ghannouj is one of the mezze plates. Baba Ghannouj is an eggplant dip made with tahini, garlic and lemon juice. However, at Altali's the eggplant is roasted, not boiled, which imparts a delicate sweet earthy flavor to the dish. The hummus is absolutely outstanding as well. It is swirled with olive oil and garnished with Arabic sumac and cumin. It's pale color and silky smooth texture is evident of a dish that was made to order.

The national dish of Syria is Kibbeh. At Altali's, Kibbeh is an intriguing spindle-shaped croquette filled with meat and delicately flavored with onions and spices. They are almost too beautiful to eat, and yet



I couldn't wait to take a bite. As I cut into the Kibbeh with my fork, I first experienced the pleasant scent of aromatic spices. And so it is with all of Altali's dishes; you experience first, then taste! And the flavors are remarkable. In fact as you are eating at Altali's you hear yourself and others include the phrase, "best ever" when speaking. The reason is that there is an army of talented creatives behind every authentic dish at Altali's who have expertly developed the flavor of every ingredient.

Entrée choices include stuffed grape leaves, falafel, baked kibbeh, stuffed vegetables, and shish kebab. I tried the lamb and chicken shish kebab and enjoyed a side salad. The marinated lamb skewers are roasted over an open flame and as a result the outside is slightly caramelized making the meat (all locally sourced) tender and sweet. Shish kebab is served with vegetables on a bed of Syrian rice pilaf that is to die for. The flavor is delicate and the rice is so flaky it's as if each grain was cooked separately. The fatoush salad was outstanding. It was super fresh and included chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, mint and parsley. The lemon dressing was a very light and appetizing. It was served with fried Syrian bread chips that made the entire experience of eating this amazing salad very fun. For dessert I ordered the baklava. And I must say, if you only visit Altali's for the baklava it is well worth the trip! It is intense experience. If you can, imagine a confection made from layers of crispy phyllo pastry stuffed with nuts, honey and seductive spices and then you will only begin to imagine the trance like state this sweet treat can induce. The flavor can be summed up by one phrase, "warmth of heaven". One bite and you are hooked into the whole lot. It is true celebration eating, of which I am now an addict.

Among the many choices of their lunch and dinner menu, Altali's offers daily specials. They are famous for their shwarma wrapped in homemade flat bread, lentil soup, Syrian beef stew, and fried and baked potatoes that are stuffed with vegetables. Altali's also serves breakfast on Saturday's and Sunday's when traditional American breakfast dishes are featured along with Altali's characteristically unique specials that include: baked eggs in avocado, banana foster waffles and their famous breakfast skillet served on a wood plank in a cast iron skillet so you can savor every bit of the melted cheese and caramelized vegetables.

Eating with your hands at Altali's is perfectly acceptable if not expected since often times meals are served with more than one type of dipping sauce along with fresh traditional Syrian flat bread, intended to be used throughout the meal as an edible utensil. Syrian food is meant to be shared and so each enchanted dish is served with the expectation of great conversation, laughing, and at the very least, the delighted smiles of a palate well pleased from across the table. So bring your family and friends for breakfast, lunch or dinner and enjoy the warm hospitality of Syria, and Ned's authentic wholesome dishes that are served with an open heart and with the outstretched hand of friendship.

*Altali's is located at 87 Elm Street, Pepperell. They serve lunch and dinner, Tuesday-Friday, and breakfast lunch and dinner Saturday and Sunday. They offer dining in, catering and local delivery. Altali's also caters and hosts weddings and other special events. Altali's offers vegetarian, gluten free and dairy free options.*