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ISTANBULEATS

Asuman: Specialties from east of the border to serve homesick Iranians

From istanbuleats.com

Considering the fact that Iran is Turkey's next-door neighbor and so many Iranians call Istanbul home, we've always found it more than a bit baffling that there are hardly any Iranian restaurants in the city. Imagine New York with all but a handful of Mexican restaurants. The one Iranian restaurant in town that we did know about – a tourist-oriented place with an in-house musician who played "Hava Nagila" on his zither – mercifully closed down years ago.

Several months back though, we caught sight of a sign by the side of the road in Persian script. Intrigued, we looked closer and realized that it belonged to a restaurant called Asuman, run by a nearby travel agency with the same name that specializes in trips to Iran.

Asuman's location – just at the edge of Laleli neighborhood, a wholesale clothing district where many Iranians come to shop, and Aksaray, a district popular with migrants – seemed to indicate that this might be a place that serves homesick Iranians rather than gawking tourists.

Asuman revisited to taste the food

With visions of steaming, saffron-infused rice pilafs filling our heads, we returned to Asuman recently to try the food out. After climbing a short set of stairs, we entered a small, fluorescent-lit dining room that overlooked Atatürk Boulevard, a busy thoroughfare that runs through the heart of the area. The room was decorated in a style that hovered somewhere between tacky and elegant, with light-green tablecloths on the tables and chairs upholstered in fake-brown leather. There was no zither player, although Persian music was playing in the background.

The year-old restaurant, we found out, has a chef from the northern Iranian city of Tabriz. Most of its business involve catering to



Although Iran is Turkey's next-door neighbor and so many Iranians call Istanbul home, it is more than a bit baffling that there are hardly any Iranian restaurants in the city. Several months back though, we caught sight of a sign in Laleli neighborhood, which indicated Asuman, a place that serves homesick Iranians with traditional cuisine



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private functions for Istanbul's Iranian expat community (they prepared food for an engagement party of 200 people the previous night).

The menu, meanwhile, was short and to the point: A few soups, kebabs, pilafs and stews – a kind of Iranian greatest hits collection. We decided to skip the kebabs and go for the other

dishes on the menu, starting off with a refreshing cold yogurt-cucumber soup that was topped with chopped walnuts and golden raisins. That was followed by khorost gheymeh, a tomato-based stew made with yellow split peas (and, somewhat incongruously, topped with crinkle-cut French fries) and ghormeh sabzi,



a stew made with chopped greens and kidney beans. Both dishes at 15 Turkish Liras each had a dark orb swimming in the middle – a preserved lemon, it turned out – which gave the stews a funky, but pleasant musty hint.

Along with the rib-sticking stews, we also ordered two pilafs, one topped with chopped pistachios, barberries (red, currant-like dried berries with a piquant taste) and a crown of vivid yellow saffron-colored rice, and another that was infused with dill and fava beans. Both were very tasty. Stuffed to the gills, we finished off our meal with a glass of strong tea.

The search for more Iranian spots will continue. For now – until we can find another one – we declare Asuman our favorite Iranian restaurant in Istanbul.

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