

Pita Jungle tames beastly appetites

Story and Photos by Lynda Exley

Hunting for some tasty, nutritious grub at a reasonable price? Then book your safari for Pita Jungle at 1949 W. Ray Road, Chandler, or 1250 E. Apache, Tempe.

Pita Jungle, which specializes in naturally healthful and vegetarian cuisine, gives you fancy, award-winning resort-style food at strip-center prices.

For starters, try Pita's Spanakopita (layers of crisp filo dough stuffed with fresh spinach and feta cheese for \$2.95) or Dolmades (six grape leaves stuffed with rice, tomatoes, onions and parsley, cooked in olive oil and lemon).

Two Pita Jungle customer favorites are Lavosh Shawarma for lunch (\$6.50) and Spicy Mango Shrimp for dinner (\$12.95).

Lavosh Shawarma consists of grilled, marinated chicken breast, tomatoes, onions, pickles, garlic sauce and tahini in a soft, flaky Lavosh.

Pita Jungle's Spicy Mango Shrimp includes seven jumbo tiger shrimp stir-fried with caramelized onions and slivered mangos in a spicy sauced, all artfully served over stir-fried ginger rice.

Best of all, these dishes will arrive at the table picture-perfect and piping hot.

To wash it all down, consider ordering a premium wine from Pita Jungle's comprehensive wine list. A good Riesling is a great compliment to Pita Jungle's Mediterranean fare, which at times can be spicy.

According to Bassel Osmani, one of Pita Jungle's three owners, Pita Jungle's recipes utilize the most wholesome ingredients available.

"We believe in everything being fresh," says Osmani. "We really don't use cans at all. Probably the only can of thing you'd find is the tuna."

But good food isn't all that Pita Jungle has to offer. It's atmosphere is eclectic, yet cozy. Modern paintings by local artists give the inside a cosmopolitan feel, while the outdoor patio offers romantic, waterside dining.

Entertainment includes the Pita Jungle Jazz Jam Session every Thursday from 7-10 p.m. (see related story on Page 10), and Boogie Night each Saturday, featuring local funk, rhythm and blues bands from 7-9 p.m.

behind this happening place are, the answer may surprise you.

Nelly Kohsok, who is of French descent, and Foud Elkhodr, who is Lebanese, met Osmani (who was born in France, but moved to Lebanon) while attending Arizona State University. Elkhodr and Osmani majored in engineering, while Kohsok attended the Walker Cronkite School of Journalism.

"After graduating, everyone did their own thing for a little while," says Osmani.

Kohsok, who still has ties in broadcasting, recently returned from Australia, where she worked the Olympics.

Osmani explains that eventually the three of them became disinterested in their chosen careers, and that's when they decided to enter the restaurant business.

"Having gone to college here, we had pretty good experience in restaurants, because that's what we did," says Osmani.

The three of them put their heads together, and decided what they all liked best about the restaurants they worked at and frequented—both in the U.S. and their homelands. Their end product was Pita Jungle.

"We took dishes from all different parts of the Mediterranean basin and we interpreted them our way by taking away a lot of the fat and the things that made them less healthful, and we combined them in one menu," says Osmani.

Tempe's Pita Jungle was launched six years ago, with the Chandler location following four years later.

"We do this because we like doing it," says

Osmani. "It's really fun for us."

Good food, music, dancing—there are so many reasons to visit Pita Jungle. If you haven't checked it out yet, why not?

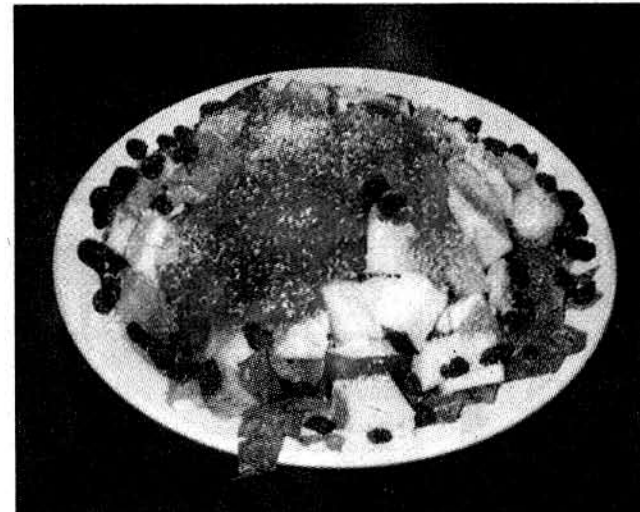
Information: (480) 786-4424.



Jason Kolber and Diane King enjoy a cozy lunch at Pita Jungle in Chandler



Falafel Platter: Crispy chickpea croquettes served on a bed of lettuce with tomatoes, onions and tahini sauce.



Caribbean Salad: Oranges, pineapples, grapefruits and bananas over lettuce, served with raisins and strawberry dressing

Wednesday night is Pita's Swing Dance Night. Customers receive free swing dance lessons from Jitterbug Arizona 7 p.m. weekly. Following the lessons, they can stay and dance to DJ swing music.

If you're wondering who the masterminds