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THE RESOURCE GUIDE TO NORTH CENTRAL MONTANA


DISCREET PALETTE— *Review and Photography by Anastasia Burton*



Mediterranean Grill

Sparkles in Helena's Historic District



 Anastasia Burton

When I ventured out to visit the Mediterranean Grill, it was one of those days that, being raised in Montana, I should have been used to by now. You know the kind – the weather man can't quite commit to rain, snow, or sun, so dress accordingly and don't put away your winter gear just yet. I hoped the bold, sparkling flavors of the Mediterranean could revive my spirits and transport me, at least for a bit, to some sun-drenched spot on the coast of the Aegean Sea.

Located next to another of the capitol city's favorite eateries, the Park Avenue Bakery, the Mediterranean Grill is one block away from Helena's historic Last Chance Gulch walking mall. The restaurant's interior features a celestial blue ceiling and colorful murals painted by local artist Gordon Zuelke, which were designed to create an outdoor Mediterranean alley atmosphere. Owner Ersun Ozer greets me warmly, eager to share his passion for Mediterranean cuisine and culture, as well as his affection for his new community and the business he began here four years ago.

As a young man, Ersun moved from Turkey to Colorado to attend college, and started working in the campus cafeteria. What started out as just a part-time job developed into a flair for cooking, and Ersun soon moved into food service management. Eventually, he was transferred to Montana and managed Sodexo food service at Carroll College in Helena for years before opening his own restaurant.

"I always wanted to open my own business and do something different: no fries, no catsup, no ranch dressing," he emphasizes. So, what is the secret to offering French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Moroccan, and Turkish food, all on a menu that caters to the well-traveled equally as well as it caters to those with more traditional palates?

"When I designed the menu, I picked dishes from each of the Mediterranean countries, but at the same time, I wanted to include comfort foods, like pizza and pasta, that people would recognize," Ersun said. "I've been very impressed with the willingness of our customers to try something different, and to appreciate Mediterranean food. To consistently meet their expectations, we keep the menu constantly updated with seasonal specials and make everything from scratch, including our staples like hummus and bread."

I begin my dinner by perusing the restaurant's extensive wine list, which includes an array of varietals from the American West, as well as France, Spain, Italy, Greece, and Chile. I chose Mas de la Dame, a blend of Grenache and Syrah organic grapes grown in Provence. A full-bodied red, its fruity flavors were accented by hints of spice.

I tell Ersun I'd like to try the most popular appetizer on the menu. He informs me it's the calamaretti fritti. My heart skips a beat (not in a happy way). Having lived in the Bay Area for several years before returning to Montana, I had unpleasant memories of heavily breaded rings of squid, deep fried until they had all the taste and texture of rubber bands. I agree to give them a try, and am completely surprised by the tenderness and delicate flavor of this dish, which was accompanied by herbed tomato and Alfredo sauces. Ersun attributes this to the skill of chef Mike McWilliams, the freshness of foods from local supplier Ocean Beauty Seafoods, and a speedy delivery from kitchen to table.

I sample a variety of other appetizers, guided by my waiter, John, who was extremely knowledgeable and pleasant. The mini lamb brochettes were broiled to perfection and accompanied by red onion and three spots of spices so I could season to my taste: cumin, salt/pepper, and baharas, a sweet blend of middle-Eastern spices. The dolmades (stuffed grape leaves) were filled with rice, onion, dill, pine nuts, currents, and mint, and were a nice accompaniment to the mozzarella caprese, which featured fresh mozzarella paired with medallions of Roma tomatoes on a bed of basil, lightly drizzled with olive oil and balsamic wine vinegar.

My favorite, though, was the warm flat bread baked in-house in the Mediterranean Grill's wood stone oven, served with spreads bisara and muhammara. Bisara is an Egyptian fava bean puree, flavored with an abundance of fresh green herbs, including mint, coriander, and dill. Muhammara is a Syrian blend of walnuts, red bell peppers and pomegranate molasses, and had an almost Southwestern taste. The heat of the muhammara contrasted well with the sweet pickled coolness of the bisara.

Impressed with the calamaretti fritti, I decide to sample more seafood for my entrée and choose one of tonight's specials, the Alaskan halibut, which was preceded by a hearty spinach salad. Chef Mike McWilliams again impressed me with his flair for seafood preparation, lightly breading the halibut and dressing it with a rich curry portobello aioli sauce, topped with toasted pistachios. This innovative combination made for an unexpected savory contrast, and blended well with the spirit of the more traditionally Mediterranean items on the menu. It was served with two sides: moist, nutty basmati rice and a medley of fresh squash, zucchini, red pepper and red onion. While nicely sauteed, I found the vegetables quite salty, surprising for an establishment which offers so many skillful blends of exotic spices in its cuisine. It was my only disappointment of the evening, and happily a minor one.

No Mediterranean meal can be complete without satisfying one's sweet tooth, so I ordered the tiramisu, the restaurant's most popular dessert. It was a heavenly composition of lady fingers dipped in a mixture of coffee and wine, then layered with creamy Mascarpone cheese and shaved chocolate, drizzled with caramel sauce. A comforting cup of Starbucks coffee was the perfect way to end the meal. Mission accomplished: My spirits have been revived, and I am lulled by the sounds of the Friday night crowd and Mediterranean music playing brightly in the background. *AM*

The Mediterranean Grill is located at 42 South Park Avenue in Helena; phone is (406) 495-1212. Reservations are accepted, walk-ins are welcome. It is a non-smoking establishment, and handicapped accessible. Open from 11 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. daily except Sunday, when it is open from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. for brunch. Outdoor patio seating is available during Montana's warmer months. Vegetarian and gluten-free selections are available, as is a children's menu. The Mediterranean Grill also caters for groups small and large.



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~Anastasia Burton was raised in northcentral Montana. She has worked in communications and public relations for 20 years. She lives in Helena, MT.