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Chopan Grill Sampler
photo by Chris Fritchie



A Different Taste – Chopan Grill

By Garry Beckham

IF YOU'RE TIRED of eating at regular chain food restaurants, Mexican food cantinas and burger joints, then try an adventure to the Chopan Grill, which specializes in Afghan and Mediterranean cuisine. The husband and wife owner-operated Chopan Grill opened in November 2007 and is located in Frisco Bridges, just north of Stonebriar Centre on Preston Road.

To ensure a good sample of the menu items and additional tasters, I took my

wife and daughter along on the dining quest. While we would have usually preferred outdoor dining the 100-degree day made the patio not as appealing. As we entered we enjoyed a refreshingly cool atmosphere with Afghan music playing softly. The dark mesh window shades, darkly painted ceiling and the dimly lit lamps hanging overhead brought a very calm and peaceful aura to the dining area.

We were met by one of the owners,

a friendly Mr. Ramon Ayoubi, and he escorted us to one of the white linen covered tables. As we reviewed our menus for drinks, Mr. Ayoubi chatted with my three-year-old grandson.

The menu was arranged in categories of Starters, Salads, Wraps and Soups, From the Grill, Entrees, Desserts, and Side Orders. As I perused the menu, I noticed the items weren't labeled by ethnic group or style. While I am an expert on eating, I am not an expert on all the different Mediterranean and Afghan dishes.

Mr. Ayoubi took our drink orders of one soft drink, one Dogh and one Lebanese Drink and a round of ice water for all. Dogh and Lebanese Drink? Mr. Ayoubi described the Dogh as a yogurt, cucumber, mint drink that was highly salted and enjoyed by different names in many Middle Eastern countries during the very hot and dry seasons. The Lebanese Drink was a malted non-alcoholic apple beer. In fact, no alcoholic drinks are served at the Chopan Grill. The soft drink and Lebanese Drink were of a normal sort, but we were intrigued by the looks of the Dogh. Is it like a malt or shake? It looks like an ice cream shake! Our daughter gently stirred the Dogh, building up the courage to take a sip. She finally raised the glass. As the elixir flowed onto her lips and into her mouth, her eyes widened and a frown arose as she pulled the glass away. She reported a very bitter and salty taste. We all tried a sip and decided it wasn't for us. In this case, I am sure the Dogh was very well prepared and authentic, but it wasn't something our palate had been trained to enjoy.

From the Starters category, we selected the Sampler (\$10.99) that included four of the six Starters' items and a Mediterranean Salad. It took

about 15 minutes to have the Sampler arrive at our table. We were not sure of the names of the dishes on the large orange serving platter, so we asked the friendly and smiling waitress to detail each item.

The delightful presentation of each dish enhanced our expectations. One dish stood out and looked intriguing. It was the Mantoo (steamed meat dumplings with yogurt and sauce). We each slid a dumpling onto our small yellow plates. Yum! Our taste buds vibrated with delight. There were four dumplings on the platter and we argued for the last one.

As we dipped some of the brown flat bread into the hummus (a mixture of mashed chickpeas, tahini sauce, lemon juice, olive oil and fresh garlic), we were very pleasantly greeted with tastes of the

Mediterranean and Afghan flavors. The Baba Ghanoush (mashed baked eggplant and olive oil) brought the same results. Next, we tasted the Dolmeh (stuffed grape leaves) that were filled with rice, chopped vegetables and cured. The grape leaves were very tender and sweet and made the Dolmeh yummy. Lastly, we tried the delicious Mediterranean prepared salad of diced lettuce, tomatoes, onions, cucumbers, olives and feta cheese with an olive oil and vinaigrette dressing. The Sampler was well worth the price.

When we had finished our appetizer we chatted about how delicious each item had been and how well prepared each of the samplings were. Our main course selections from the Grill and Entrees categories were: One Chicken Kabob (\$10.99), chunks of boneless chicken breast marinated in a special Chopan Grill seasoned sauce, one Beef Teka Kabob (\$11.50), chunks of sirloin beef marinated in a special Chopan Grill seasoned sauce and one Korma



Chopan Grill Dogh

photo by Chris Fritchie

Chalao Lamb (\$10.99), chunks of lamb slowly simmered with garlic, onions and tomatoes.

The delightful presentation of each dish enhanced our expectations. One of the dishes stood out and looked intriguing.

Each of the charbroiled Kabobs came with a heaping pile of Afghani brown rice and the Korma Chalao Lamb came with a large dune of white long grain rice, both artistically arranged on large oval mustard colored plates. Having shared bites of each of the Kabobs, we all agreed they were very tasty and well prepared. However, the lamb Korma Chalao was

a little disappointing for my taste. Not being an expert, and in fact I have never eaten Afghan food, I found this stew-like entree somewhat bland. While working and living in Korea for 12 years, I know some of their foods are intentionally prepared to be bland until condiments are added at the table to either spice the dish up or enhance the taste. This may be the same for the lamb Korma Chalao.

To top off the meal we ordered the Firnee (\$2.50), chilled custard sprinkled with pistachios and Baklava (\$2.50), paper-thin layers of walnut filled pastry drizzled with light syrup and pistachios. The lightly sprinkled pistachios on the smooth custard melted in our mouths. The walnut and sweet syrup taste of the Baklava was an excellent finish to the meal. Both of the desserts were scrumptious. Our daughter had Turkish coffee that she shared with me. During my Air Force days I had traveled to Eskeshir,

Turkey and had Turkish coffee there. The Chopan Grill's Turkish coffee was authentic and had the same rich flavor as that served in its namesake.

While the ladies said their main course was plenty, it may not fulfill the requirements of hearty eaters if not accompanied by one of the Starters.

To our pleasant surprise, Mrs. Mahnaz Ayoubi came out and chatted with us as we were finishing our dessert and coffee. She was very pleasant and friendly. My daughter talked with her about the Dogh drink and the Afghani culture.

Our dining experience at the Chopan Grill was very rewarding. Total cost for the three of us was \$60.66 plus tip. For those new to Afghan and Mediterranean food, I would recommend getting the Sampler and one of the selections "From the Grill." And, of course, a selection of dessert is a must!

Garry Beckham is a freelance writer living in Plano.