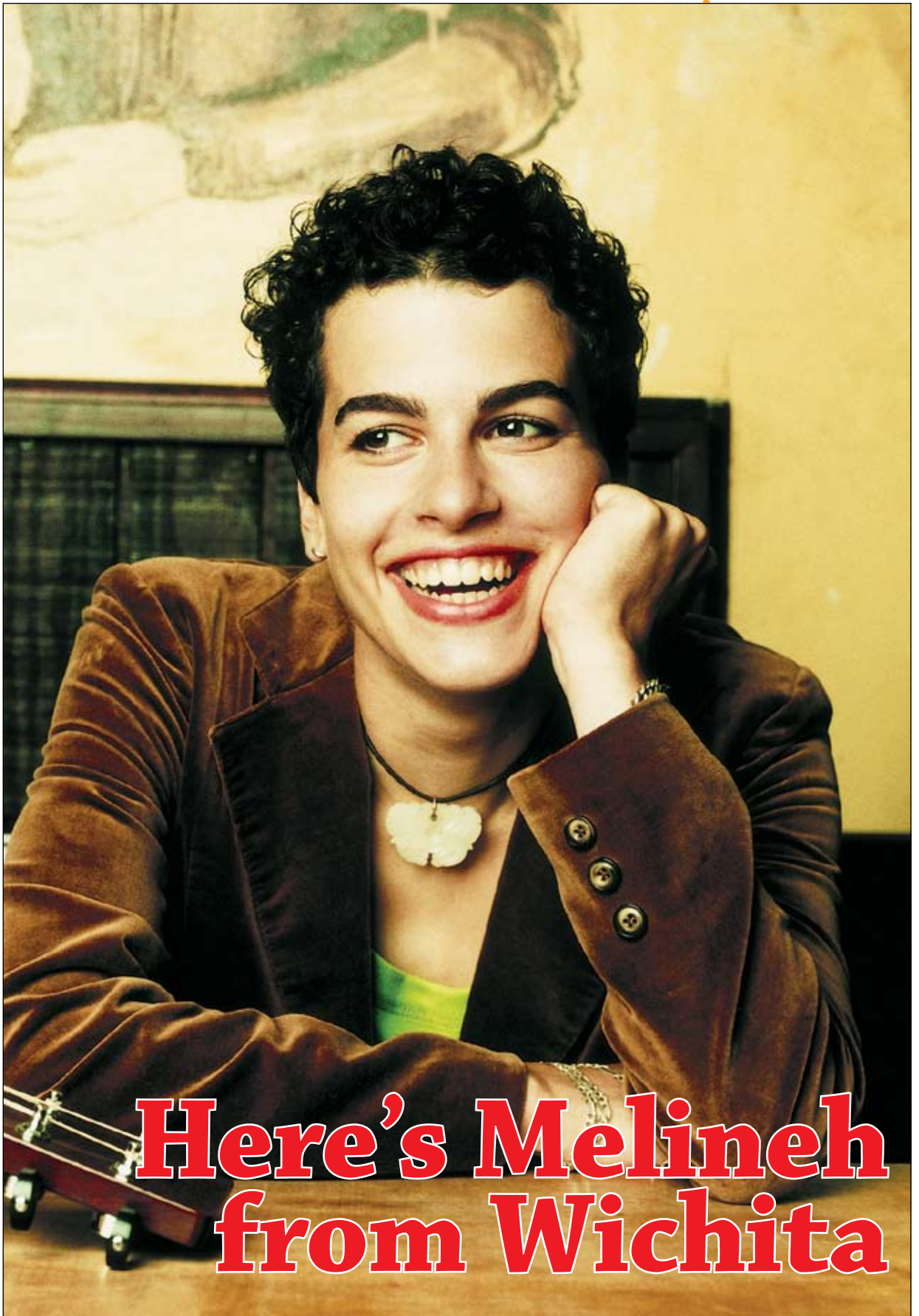


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reporter

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arts &  
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**Here's Melineh  
from Wichita**

# What happens here must happen again

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## Phoenicia and the art of Middle Eastern feasting

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by **Ishkhan Jinbashian**

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When it comes to Middle Eastern restaurants in Los Angeles, they fall roughly into one of two categories. There are the plebian establishments: your hole-in-the-wall falafel and shawerma joints, the strip-mall warriors hawking pita sandwiches of luleh kabob and garlic chicken. Then there are the patrician destinations: full-fledged, pedigreed oases that offer extensive menus and even live entertainment.

These days one of the joys of living in or around the City of Angels is the plethora of excellent such restaurants you can choose from. There is the venerable Carousel in Glendale and Hollywood, the vivacious Alcazar in the Valley, the lovely Grapevine in La Verne, to name a few. But given a healthy measure of competition, what is it that makes some of these places stand out from the crowd? What is it, after all, that enables a restaurant to become the darling of gourmets when, for instance, its frog legs are not markedly better than the next guy's? In a word: ambience.

During the months of construction before its opening last year, Phoenicia Restaurant in Glendale created a frenzied buzz around town. As people drove by and updated their friends about the progress of the next big thing, they wondered whether executive



Photo: Dicran Kassouny.

chef-owner Ara Kalfayan, formerly of Mandaloun, could pull off the delicate trick of both appealing to popular taste and fashioning a distinct personality for his venture.

Today, after several dining excursions to Phoenicia, and following the inevitable early snafus of a restaurant in bloom, I agree with the throngs: this place rocks.

Kalfayan understands that atmosphere is key to satisfying diners who have vowed never, ever to give up their nostalgia for those presumably carefree nights when they lounged about at sprawling restaurants in Beirut, Damascus, or Baghdad. Funny thing is, that nostalgia has seamlessly carried over to the next generation, and the next, most of whose numbers have never set foot in the Levant.

Putting together the main elements of that atmosphere is deceptively simple. You've got to have a large patio for alfresco dining, but not as a mere afterthought. The outdoor section must claim

a character all its own. You need to offer hookah service. Ah, the soothing, downright meditative gurgle of a nerghile. You must feature the kind of decor and architectural elements that do a decent job of evoking the Old World. You should also provide a fair amount of quality entertainment, something beyond the Arabic top-40 emanating from the CD box. And yes, the service and food must be up to par, if not exceptional. Mess up a tabbouleh once, and 200 patrons will know about it within 24 hours.

Phoenicia has pulled it off – and then some. A night at the restaurant can quickly tap into your softer side, and that's partly because by the time the first round of mezas rolls out and the arak glasses are raised, you feel strangely at home. It also happens, as it invariably does with this reviewer, that you come across a friend or acquaintance you haven't seen in months. A decade ago, when

L.A.'s Armenian community could claim a tad more cultural vibrancy than it does now, such bump-ins occurred mainly at the theater or concert hall.

Kalfayan's micro-management style is amply evident in Phoenicia's menu staples. The chef pays close attention to basics such as hummus, baba ghannuj, fattush, tabbouleh, and arayas, the teaser fare that keeps you happy while you whip up an appetite for the next helping of mezzas. These may comprise kibbeh nayeh (steak tartar), which would be a grave crime not to pair with arak; quite an accomplished dish of frog legs; and spicy potatoes, reminiscent of Carlitos Gardel, pan-fried with garlic and cilantro. Phoenicia also features a complement of rather unusual appetizers including slow-cooked lamb tongue, lamb fries (read: testicles), and an inventively marinated and sautéed platter of chicken liver. How inventive? Try glazed with pomegranate and fresh lemon juice.

True to the rustic credentials of Middle Eastern cuisine, Phoenicia features a serious variety of vegetarian dishes. Apart from the salads and a robust lentil soup, nearly half the mezza menu is meat-free. The omnivores among us, however, have plenty to celebrate when it comes to the seafood and grill selections. While the barbecued stuff is mostly reliable, Phoenicia serves up a nice surprise in the form of lamb shank, braised with red wine and accompanied by vegetables.

No Middle Eastern restaurant worth its grain will fall short in the fish department, and here Phoenicia positively shines. Whole Mediterranean sea bass and the famous Lebanese sultan ibrahim can be had pan-fried, grilled, or oven-baked. You might find it hard to decide which cooking method to go for, as all of the varieties are outstanding.

Phoenicia does have a foible. This has to do with a fixed menu

served on Friday and Saturday nights, as part of a dinner-and-entertainment package. Though the selections change on a weekly basis, this particular menu has often raised eyebrows because of its less than titillating ensemble of dishes. Precious few of the main menu's more interesting items are featured here, and you might be out of luck should you wish to order something extra.

Still, dining at Phoenicia can be such a rewarding affair that a weak spot such as this can well be ignored, especially given Kalfayan's

open ears to customer feedback. Late into a weekend night, when the revelry shifts gears with the live music of Koko Hayitian and a jaunty belly-dance show, what stays with you are not the minor glitches but the genuine glow of a happy camper. Life is good. ☞

Phoenicia is located at 343 North Central Avenue, Glendale, California 91203. Phone: (818) 956-7800. On the Web: phoenicia.us. Full bar. Valet and street parking. Open Sunday through Thursday 11:30 AM – midnight; Friday and Saturday 11:30 – 2 AM.

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## Face-to-face with the mountain

by Elyssa Karanian

I woke up this morning before my alarm to a wonderful, cool, refreshing breeze, which is a rare thing in Yerevan in August. I was instantly in a good mood and I was smiling even as I plated my breakfast of a single, cold hard-boiled egg and leftover borscht and wished it was Special K with blueberries. A bit later, I was walking to work from the bus stop across from a beautiful church set on a hill, listening to some song on my iPod – the kind that soothes your soul and makes you think only of beauty – and as I rounded the bend in the road I was face-to-face with Mount Ararat – the biggest, most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

I've seen the mountain dozens of times since I've been here in Hayastan, and almost every day since I've been in Yerevan, but nothing can describe how I felt when I saw it today. This past week the weather has been unbelievably hot and the sky has been mostly a bluish-gray haze. The mountain hasn't been visible at all, not even an outline or

a snow-capped peak, and in the two weeks that I've been working at the *Reporter*, I hadn't a clue it was there at all, just waiting for me around the bend. It was so close to me today. I felt I could walk to it. Masis is something that all Armenians connect to in a way that, I think, is unique among cultural groups – such a tangible (ironically) connection to a piece of the world. Ararat represents so many different things to me, and perhaps to all of us, that it's hard to separate feelings of national pride, of ethnic consciousness, of Armenianness from the images that it evokes.

I've been thinking a lot and reflecting on my connection with this place lately, trying to grasp some concrete word, expression, trying to pen a sentence or take a picture that captures these evasive emotions somehow. This morning I realized, in some way, that this connection is simple: I'm here. As much and as little as that simultaneously means...that's it. And despite all my swings in mood and frustrations and confusions, I am thrilled that here is where I am. ☞



Elyssa Karanian.