



## Café beckons Middle Eastern connoisseurs

### NOURA'S CAFÉ

For those who adore Middle Eastern food, Noura's Café is more than a restaurant, it's a destination.

In Arabic the name "Noura" means "the light," and the name is a perfect beacon for this one-of-a kind café that specializes in authentic Lebanese cuisine. Owned and managed by the husband and wife team of Raymond and Noura Abi Khalil, the Lakewood café offers the kind of dishes mama used to make, if she grew up in Beirut.

On the menu are traditional tapas – "mezzah" for the aficionado – including kibbeh ball, za'atar dip, tabbouleh, hummus, baba gannoush, grape leaves, and falafel – and authentic Arabic Turkish coffee. Entrees include pita and hot sandwiches, oven pies, kabab and gyro platters, as well as several vegan dishes and salads that resonate with flavorful, unique ingredients known only to a Mediterranean palate.

Open from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., the café serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and includes a store where Lebanese spices and groceries can be purchased. The couple recently expanded the restaurant to include a private room,

where fine dining and parties can take place. Noura's Café also caters weddings as well as corporate parties either at the restaurant or other locations. On-line delivery is available via Bite Squad, Uber Eats, and Grubhub.

A Lebanon native who emigrated to the United States in the 1980s, Raymond has more than 25 years of food service experience and previously established two Jacksonville Restaurants – Akel's Delicatessen and Ray's Café – before opening Noura's Café with his wife in 2009. Before she married Raymond, Noura, who holds a master's degree in psychology and previously worked as a banker in Beirut, never envisioned herself working in a restaurant, let alone one in the United States. But after she wed and emigrated to the U.S., she said loves her customers and cannot visualize herself doing anything else.

"My husband takes care of the inside (the kitchen) while I look after the outside (dining area)," explained Noura, noting at 11 a.m. each day she joins her husband in personally tasting every dish to ensure its quality before it is serving it to their diners.

But Noura's Café is perhaps best known for what is not on its menu.

The restaurant serves five authentic Lebanese off-the-menu specials daily, drawing clientele from throughout Northeast Florida. The café began serving its well-known specials by popular request after curious diners smelled fragrant aromas coming from the kitchen at 2 p.m. each day when Noura cooked Raymond a special lunch from family recipes they brought from Lebanon.

"The customers would ask 'what are you eating?' and my husband – he is such a good salesperson – he would say to me, let the people try your food," Noura recalled. "So now we offer five hot meal specials every day, and the customers love them. The same way we used to eat in our kitchen back home is the same way we serve them," she said.

"It's very time consuming to prepare our cuisine," Noura continued. "There are a lot of very healthy ingredients and a lot of flavor in one meal. We grew up on these recipes. We have not Americanized anything."