

## DINING OUT



# Eating Armenian and Other Adventures

BARBARA ANN ROSENBERG

It's gotten to the point where almost every neighborhood has sprouted a Chinese restaurant or two, but who ever heard of a suburb spawning its own friendly Middle-Eastern joint—complete with belly-dancer? It's in Ardsley, a small village just north of Jenkintown.

The Ali Baba, like many of its local Chinese counterparts, operates out of a store front—at 2906 Jenkintown Road—and doesn't waste much money on decor. The atmosphere is *ecch* modern, "decorated" by someone who leans heavily to red. Not even an oriental rug or two bears testimony to its ethnic origin.

The food, like the owner, is Armenian, and of the same general genre as Lebanese, Syrian and Israeli, with emphasis on lamb, eggplant, rice and garlic, with bulghur wheat and chick peas surfacing in appropriate dishes from time to time.

The menu is all à la carte and, while individual items are all fairly reasonable, a full-course meal *can* mount to \$10 or more per person if you're hungry enough to do the whole bit (appetizer, soup, salad, entrée, dessert and coffee—oriental or regular).

They feature an appetizer assort-

ment called "Ali Baba's Maza," a generous sampling of all their first-course goodies, served for two at \$5.95. If you're not up to that much (food or money) there are also individual servings at about \$1.50. Stuffed grape leaves are especially noteworthy, moist, tender and flavorful.

Bulghur wheat may seem an odd ingredient for a salad, but it comes off pretty well, coupled with parsley, tomatoes and appropriate dressing. Recommended.

Entrées do pretty well, too. Kus-kus, a North African specialty, appears here as the Armenians have adapted it, a delicately seasoned stew full of chunks of lamb. Shawerma, touted on the menu as "a traditional Middle-Eastern dish available for the first time in the U.S.," turned out to be a rather ordinary marinated beef, broiled a bit long and served on a bed of rice.

Butter-rich nut-stuffed pastries cap the meal, and if the heavy dose of sugar in oriental coffee does you in, order it half-sweet.

On Friday and Saturday they trot out one properly *zaftig* belly dancer, replete with "diamond" in navel, to slither about under the male patrons' noses. Some of them hiss their appre-

ciation in true oriental fashion, but mostly they just look embarrassed if she undulates too close. The major fly in Ali Baba's ointment is the music—it blasts you right out of your seat, no matter *where* your table is, reducing all possibility of normal conversation to zero.

Bring your own ouzo or other potable. There's no liquor license. Because of the size of the place (seats 42), reservations are pretty much a must on weekends (TU 4-9289). Dinner only, served until midnight. Closed Monday.

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It's a long way from Wawa, Pennsylvania, to the sea, but somehow a salt tang permeates the air at the Lobster Pot, a simple cabin situated on Route 1, about 12 miles from center city, but vaguely reminiscent of places scattered along the New England coast. No airs, no frills, just gifts from the sea in the form of all sorts of crustaceans and finny things.

No question, though, lobster is king here, ordered by the pound (\$3.25 per), steamed to order. No problem for purists who allow steaming to be the *only* fit treatment anyhow for this

crustacean monarch. If you prefer it broiled, however, and you go at a time when they're not busy, they'll be glad to honor your special order, and stuff it with crab to boot.

Oysters, clams, mussels, crabs, shrimp, trout and, oddly enough, lobster tails round out the seafood selection, but the menu wisely includes a sirloin and fried chicken for those recalcitrant members of your party who can't abide anything that swims, but would like to join you for the evening.

On the other hand, for *real* seafood lovers, there's the Lobster Pot Special (\$8.50), a gargantuan platter heaped high with the "works"—clams and oysters on the half-shell, spiced hot shrimp, steamed clams and mussels, topped off with a whole chicken lobster. Unfortunately, in its desire to make a really spectacular presentation, the management overlooked the fact that for maximum enjoyment, even when they're part of the same offering, clams and oysters on the half-shell should be iced and the steamed foods piping hot, instead of both being lukewarm. But the quality of the ingredients couldn't be faulted, plump, tender, sweet and delicious.

The bar, in general, serves generous drinks and offers a variety of draft beers, imported and domestic, and a pitcher of this ice-cold brew, served in frosted glasses, rounds out the briny repast just beautifully.

And the best part of it all is that unless you make a pig of yourself on the melted butter, you can plow through it all and still feel smug in the knowledge that your total calorie intake has been mighty low.

Two criticisms: The oddly incongruous entertainment in the form of a one-man band who plays loudly and interminably. (If he's still there, sit in the *other* room.) And, second, the service could be sharpened up, at least enough that the waitress brings water without being asked *too* many times.

The Lobster Pot at 1432 W. Baltimore Pike (near Media) opens at 4 p.m. for dinner only (served until 12:30) Monday through Saturday, Sunday 4-8 p.m. Reservations are accepted for parties of five or more (GL 9-9990).

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Blue plastic is the prevalent note here—*lots* of blue plastic, *shiny* blue plastic. It covers the bar, the chairs, and even the tabletops after dinner when the tablecloths are whisked off and the restaurant transforms into an ultraslick drinking joint. The walls are

blue, the floor is blue, and you guessed it, even the name is blue. **The Blue Fox**, 11 South 21st Street, offers a limited dinner menu including steaks (\$5.50-\$6.75), roast beef (\$5.95), lobster tails (\$5.75), shrimp (\$3.95) and three selections "for the gourmet." Of these, the fettucini Alfredo (\$4.85) turned out to be gummy Pennsylvania Dutch-type noodles with bits of prosciutto and the paella Español (\$3.95) looked predigested, with tiny morsels of fish, seafood and chicken mixed throughout. The sirloin was tender and tasteless. Ditto the roast beef, unless you count the flavor of Worcestershire. And the ketchup and A-1 bottles were plunked on the table even though no one asked.

Mama runs the room and Papa (who is a magistrate judge by day) helps out. They're trying hard to create an "ambience" but all that blue plastic doesn't help.

Open for lunch from 11:30. Dinner 5:30-9:30, Monday through Friday only until September 15th, thereafter Saturday hours as well. Phone LO 7-9895.