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## Mediterranean fare and a family's care

By Rick Nichols

Inquirer Columnist

On the flyers announcing Fish & Grill's debut in a modest commercial strip (jeweler's, Chinese take-out, pizza) along Bustleton Avenue near Grant, Riza Canca is proud to note, in his slightly imperfect English, that the hopeful enterprise is a "family operating business."

And so it is as the evening unfolds, a daughter eventually offering Turkish coffee, a son shyly peeking from his mother's side, Canca's wife, Gul (which translates as "Rose"), explaining her Mediterranean cookery, and, not least, a stolid grandmother, her head wrapped in a kerchief, coaxed to take a bow for the delicate, homey baklava that ends the evening.

Too many restaurants, frankly, rest on the laurels of "family," as if a portrait on the mantel excused slapdash food on the plate. So I'd approached Fish & Grill with expectations lowered by un-stellar experiences.

Those anxieties, happily, were dispensed with the arrival of the appetizers - a subtly seasoned (with parsley and dill) fried eggplant and tomato salad, and airy, still-warm zucchini pancakes, given loft with egg whites, and texture with a shred of zucchini and yogurt-cheese in a whole wheat-and-semolina batter.

The fresh-faced, 52-seat BYO is shades of coffee and gold, the Turkish platters of Canca's homeland decorating the walls, the imperative copper coffee tureen on a counter, the imperative Pepsi cooler glowing in the corner, white tablecloths and comfortable wooden chairs.

It is reminiscent, in that sense, of a couple of my favorite "family operating businesses" - Aya's Cafe at 21st and Arch, with its cilantro-infused Egyptian falafel and fava-bean dips; and at 23d and Grays Ferry (a block south of South), Balkan Express, known for its Serbian stuffed cabbage, house-smoked cold cuts, and chicken paprikash.

Those are family restaurants (wives, uncles and grandmothers at the stove) that rely on family not as mere labor, but for family recipes and carefully rendered dishes, the ingredients attentively chosen, the seasoning applied with precision, the cooking well-practiced and sure.

In the case of Fish & Grill, Canca, who has a hint of Richard Gere about his aspect, adds

food-pyramid consciousness to the menu: The grilled whole fish (we had a sweet, white-fleshed Mediterranean branzino, and royal dorado, moist and full-flavored, but bonier) are served with "fresh color way greens" - his way of saying a palette of baby arugula and shredded carrot. The tender grilled, marinated baby lamb chops, and perhaps the most luscious rendition of *kofte* - the herbed Turkish-style grilled beef and lamb patties - that I can remember encountering, are served with a vivid, vitamin-rich arugula-yogurt sauce.

It is unfussy fare, but indeed spare on fat and oils, showcasing the Mediterranean diet's focus on vegetables - cucumbers, peppers, onions and mint (in chopped salads that avoid the overly tart style of the genre) - fresh seafood, and grilled kebabs, chops and chicken.

Why now? Why here? Well, Canca's extended family ran a cafe in Turkey near the Bosphorus Straits where, in his youth, he cleaned the fish. As things came to pass, a cousin opened his own place, Liman Restaurant ("The Best Grilled Fish and Kebabs on the Bay") in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, where Canca oversaw the kitchen on weekends, ordering vegetables, checking food quality. Russian customers visiting from Northeast Philadelphia would lament the lack of a Liman in their neck of the woods.

The idea, at first, was a family partnership, bringing a taste of Brooklyn to Philadelphia's diverse Northeast. But the wife of a cousin didn't find the move quite to *her* taste, and Fish & Grill shortly became a solo family act.

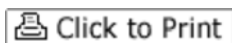
So it goes in a "family operating business" - the priorities of family sometimes trumping the imperatives of business.

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