

# LET'S *Eat* OUT!

## Café Phoenicia offers Mediterranean ambiance, international menu

By Howard Arceneaux

When business partners John Mekari and Menam Abdalla opened Café Phoenicia in Denham Springs, they wanted to create a mood, one that reflected the entire Mediterranean region, a large geographic area rich in history and culture.

Every aspect of the 3,200-square-foot restaurant reflects that attention to detail, from the colorful scenes of ancient Phoenicia that decorate the walls to the menu offerings of authentic food recipes of the Middle East and Southern Europe.

Indeed, what they produced is an artistic reflection of the Mediterranean culture as unique as the traditional dishes of the expansive region. Since Café Phoenicia opened in May at 240 Range 12 Blvd., Suite 111 near Bass Pro, diners have been treated to the classic Mediterranean food that Mekari and Abdalla have made their specialty.

"We wanted it to reflect the ancestors of the Middle East and Lebanon, where the Phoenicians were from," said Mekari, who extensively researched the history so the restaurant would accurately reflect that culture. "They traded across the entire Mediterranean, from Lebanon to Spain and across Northern Africa."

The restaurant is Mekari's and Abdalla's second featuring Mediterranean-inspired food. The original was opened in 2002 in Zachary and continues to be one of that city's most popular dining destinations.

"We followed the same design as the restaurant in Zachary," said Abdalla. "The staff trained there for over a month and the employees can work in either place because it's the same system."

Music, mainly jazz, plays quietly in the background. Guests are served by a friendly, attentive wait staff.

The menu offers a wide variety of Middle



Owners John Mekari, left, and Menam Abdalla recently opened their second Café Phoenicia in Denham Springs near Bass Pro.

Eastern, Greek and Italian dishes. Mekari's sister, Rania, is a nutritionist and she consulted on the menu.

"We wanted to serve healthy food and people that consume Mediterranean cuisine have 30 percent less heart disease," said Mekari.

For example, almost all the dishes use olive oil instead of vegetable oils and butter. Many of the menu items are low in carbohydrates and calories.

The food is made daily with only fresh ingredients. Meats are carefully marinated for 24 hours to ensure the flavor.

"Every dish is made from scratch, every day,"

said Abdalla.

The servings are generous, with various seafood, lean meats and chicken, vegetables and pasta entrees. There are usually daily specials introduced by Abdalla that are not on the menu and they're very popular. A popular dish is the Phoenician sampler, with a number of different examples of Mediterranean foods. Chicken shawarma and gyros are also top selections.

Many different drinks are available to choose from, including a large selection of red and white wines from various countries, as well as domestic and international beers and mixed drinks. Also popu-

lar is the distinctive Lebanese tea.

The dessert menu features indulgent sweets, like baklava, ashta and the "Mr. Brownie," a brownie topped with vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce.

"We've been doing very well since we opened, more than what we expected," said Abdalla. "People have been writing good things on the comment cards."

"The city of Denham Springs was been very helpful as we prepared to open. The area is growing and I'm confident the people will be pleased with our food and service."

Takeout is also popular for people who can't dine in, and the restaurant offers catering for functions of all sizes.

Khalid Abu-Sada is the manager of the Livingston restaurant, supervising every aspect of the day-to-day operations. He checks nearly every dish before they're delivered to customers to ensure the food meets the restaurant's high standard of quality. The Livingston restaurant employs 25 full and part-time.

Mekari was born in Lebanon and came to the United States to study engineering at LSU. Abdalla is from Jordan, and also came to the U.S. to study engineering. Abdalla, who has almost 20 years in the restaurant business, said he and Mekari are partners in four other restaurants. While Abdalla manages the restaurant operations, Mekari has a full-time job managing an engineering company with offices in Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

Café Phoenicia is open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday and 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m. on Sunday. The restaurant also features a daily happy hour from 3 to 7 p.m. Call 243-6998 or visit [www.CafePhoenicia.com](http://www.CafePhoenicia.com) for more information.



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