

STILL EXCELLENT

Pars Cuisine continues to deliver quality Persian and Mediterranean specialties

BY RICHARD S. DARGAN
FOR THE JOURNAL

Pars Cuisine is one of the longest-running success stories on the Albuquerque restaurant scene.

Iranian immigrants and married couple Mohammad and Shahnaz Tafti opened the restaurant in 1984 in a small storefront on Montgomery. Their success spurred a move to a much larger spot on the I-25 corridor in 2001. An expansion followed to accommodate a burgeoning banquet business.

Prepandemic, it was an exciting place to be on a Saturday night. The sunken dining room under a ceiling draped with fabric called to mind a lavish tent in the middle of a desert oasis. You'd share plates of Persian, Greek and Turkish food and watch belly dancers put on a show, and when you left, you'd almost invariably pass a line of people waiting to get in.

It was just the kind of vibrant scene that the COVID-19 squashed.

Indeed, when I visited Pars for lunch recently, the server, who was otherwise bright and cheery, grew a little melancholy talking of the pandemic's effects. Business had been slow, she said, and to make matters worse, the takeout customers had stopped tipping.

The scene that day echoed her words. The dining room was empty save for a lone diner scraping leftovers from his plate into a Styrofoam container.

Conditions like these could cause a restaurant to loosen its standards, but the food coming out of the Pars kitchen that day was excellent. An appetizer of mast-o khiar



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Chicken souvlaki, one of the Greek dishes served at Pars.



An appetizer of mast-o khiar, a yogurt-based dip, with triangles of pita bread.

(\$6), Farsi for yogurt and cucumber, arrived on a plate with triangles of fresh, warm pita bread arranged around it like the points of a crown. Cool and sour, the dip

resembles Greek tzatziki and Indian raita, but the addition of walnuts and a heavy dose of dill gives it a little more heft. I told my friend we could cancel the rest of our order and just



Fesenjan, a Persian stew made with pomegranate and walnuts.

eat this.

Thankfully, we soldiered through the rest of the menu, which is divided between Persian and Mediterranean specialties. Pars offers a

PARS CUISINE

★★★★1/2

LOCATION: 4320 The 25 Way NE #100, 505-345-5156, parscuisine.us

HOURS: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday; 3-9 p.m. Sunday; closed Monday

BEER, WINE

stellar version the Persian stew Fesenjan (\$12) made from sautéed walnuts ground up in pomegranate sauce. The dish originated from an area of northern Iran along the Caspian Sea where pomegranates are thought to have originated. The fruit represented immortality and fertility in Persian culture. Pars' version is thick and earthy, with an intense sweet and sour flavor that you cut with spoonfuls of nutty, fragrant basmati rice served on a separate plate. Chicken, a customary accompaniment to this dish, costs \$4 extra.

Pars' Mediterranean entrees are heavy with Greek specialties like moussaka, gyros and dolmas. In an order of Souvlaki Chicken (\$13), big cubes of white meat chicken gilded with paprika and charred at the edges from the fire were served off the skewer. The chicken was moist and smoky and picked up a little zing of acid from the marinade. It was served with a cup of mast-o khiar and rice. The lamb or beef version is \$3 more.

The menu carries a long list of desserts, most for less than \$5. Persian Baklava (\$3.50) is a variation of the familiar Greek version. Instead of being

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Persian baklava, one of Pars' dessert options, with Turkish coffee.

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layered, the filo dough is wrapped around a ground almond and pistachio filling that drips with honey and rosewater; a common sweetener in Iranian cooking that, as the name indicates, imparts slight flowery notes. It was very good and, as with the Greek version, the small serving is more than sufficient.

There's a pretty extensive drinks menu with beer, wine and wine-based cocktails. At \$5, a cup of Turkish coffee in a demitasse cup works out to about a quarter a sip. Still, each one of those sips packed a wallop of sugar and espresso. It was served with a piece of Turkish Delight, the popular gummy candy coated in powdered sugar.

Pars has plenty of gluten-free and vegetarian options. The menu has several sampler plates that are a great way to share a variety of appetizers, kebabs and desserts.



Pars Cuisine serves Persian and Mediterranean dishes from its spot along the I-25 corridor.

The server had an extensive knowledge of the menu and was astute enough to steer me away from some misguided combinations.

Belly dancers or not, Pars is worth a trip. The pandemic hasn't affected its quality. It remains at the top of the city's Middle Eastern/Mediterranean scene.