

» Food

Fine dining happy hour

STORY BY CARLA WALDEMAR PHOTO BY ROBB LONG

Sameh Wadi probably looks as cool in a tuxedo as he does in his chef's whites, and that's a good thing. Sameh — co-owner, with brother Saed, of Saffron — has been nominated for this year's Rising Star in the James Beard Award competition, the industry's equivalent of the Oscars.

Who knew? →

→ Well, more than a few local foodies, who welcome the turnaround of a former nightclub in the Warehouse District into one of the most innovative kitchens in the metro. (Metro? No, let's think bigger; if the Beardies have spotlighted it after just two years in business, let's make that "in the country.")

The Wadi boys grew up in Palestine, and Sameh honors the cooking traditions of his home in the Middle East. But don't expect the usual been-there, done-that list of kofta, tabouli and baba ganoush of tradition-bound cafes. Indeed, he honors the lush market fare of the Mediterranean/North African region — lamb, eggplant, olives, yogurt, and the endless intricacies of the spice bazaars of that sun-kissed part of the planet — but first he deconstructs that archetypal food, then remakes it with the exacting techniques of today and new marriages of flavors, worthy of fine-dining status.

But when you're feeling not quite so fine, or flush, here's the deal: Stop in for Saffron's happy hour (weekdays 4–6 p.m.; weekends 11 p.m.–1 a.m.) to enjoy the same white-tablecloth setting (though I prefer a stool at the generous bar) in which to savor your choice of six nibbles, typical of Sameh's thinking, and irrigated by discount prices on libations.

Parking can be iffy, but at least there's no Kraft truck taking up space, for everything — and I mean everything — is made in house, including the lamb bacon featured in the happy hour menu's mini lamb BLT. Man, it's tasty! What comes your way is, essentially, half a sandwich composed of thick-cut, toasted bread spread with a slide of Sameh's tomato jam (you'll scent a hint of saffron), spicy arugula leaves (who need iceberg?) and crispy strips of the house-smoked bacon from the Middle East's favorite source of protein, lamb.

Want more? Silly question. Then order the potato samosas, a pair of phyllo-wrapped triangles stuffed with spuds spiced with India's garam masala blend, then flash-fried and plopped atop a pool of thick, lusciously tart, dill-laced yogurt, rife with chunks of cucumber.

Or the baby-size tagine in its clay casserole — a long-cooked collaboration of piquillo peppers, cilantro, chickpeas, tomatoes and hefty chunks of housemade lamb sausage that warms its way into your heart. Last fillip: The whole thing is topped with a baked egg, whose still-limpid yolk you stir into the stew. It serves as harbinger of good things to come, for there are several entrée-size tagines on the regular menu.

The mini lamb BLTs feature lamb bacon made in-house at Saffron.

Saffron • 123 N. 3rd St., • 746-5533 • SaffronMpls.com

from the desk of ...



Lynn Schulte is a freelance graphic designer who has worked Downtown since the mid-1970s. She's stayed at the Savoie building on 3rd Street North for the past 15 years, and the office is stacked to the ceiling with classic car models, antique signs and other collectibles. Schulte is a big car buff, and you'll find her 1955 Hudson Metropolitan at a Convention Center car show this month.

1

Schulte designed the icons on these Bath and Body Works bottles. She's created other icons for coffee roasters, liquor stores, NRG and Target Corporation, and her work has earned her the tagline "Icon Woman." The "Icon Woman" decal is now branded on Schulte's business cards and on a poster that covers the front door to her office.

2

Schulte adopted two children from Korea, and she and her husband produced a documentary of



PHOTOS BY MICHELLE BRUCH

their adoption process. The video, called "Full Circle," sold hundreds of copies at a

time when adoptions from Korea were becoming more common. The documentary

features Schulte in Korea visiting the adoption agency, the pediatric hospital and a home for unwed mothers.

3

Schulte can become very engrossed in her work and forget about the time. This giant timer keeps her on track.

4

"Almost everything in my office is salvage," said Schulte, and she said that includes the desk and chairs. She said she makes great finds at the Salvation Army.

5

"Schulte's office is crowded with vintage trucks, and her favorite is the Wyandotte, a model made in the 1930s and 1940s in Wyandotte, Mich. She likes the streamlined, industrial look of the vehicles, and the style is often reflected in her graphic designs.

If you have a unique or interesting workspace, or know of someone who does, contact us at dtjournal@mnpubs.com or 1115 Hennepin Ave. S. Minneapolis, 55403.

— Michelle Bruch