



In many larger cities you'll find more than a few mom and pop places that serve Middle Eastern/Mediterranean food. But there are far too few chefs in the land willing to take this style of food to the next level. So, what a pleasant surprise it is to find a 25-year-old chef doing just that with great fanfare in the downtown warehouse district of Minneapolis.

Sameh Wadi is wowing customers and critics with his confident fusion of North African and Middle Eastern cuisines at Saffron Restaurant & Lounge. After culinary school, Wadi found a mentor in Tim McKee, a nationally recognized chef who owns both La Belle Vie and Solera in Minneapolis. "Sameh is a real smart guy. His food comes from a part of the Mediterranean other cooks don't seem to be interested in. But I just love the flavors he's working with [at Saffron]," says McKee in admiration.

Perhaps Wadi has captured the imagination of local foodies because he is not aiming for complete authenticity. He's willing to elevate dishes and/or make them more accessible. Consider, for example, his take on the classic BLT. His version employs bacon made from lamb (not pork) bellies. The bread for the sandwich is vanilla egg challah, which is brushed with rendered lamb fat before grilling. The bread is then smeared with tarragon-flavored aioli and saffron tomato jam. Arugula stands in for the usual lettuce. Is it any wonder Food & Wine declared it Minneapolis's Best New Sandwich?

"Everything on the menu [from Moroccan-inspired tapas to the signature lamb shoulder] is deftly cooked and delightfully creative," declared *Gourmet* magazine. *Minnesota Monthly* concurred, naming Saffron the 2007 Best New Restaurant.

In a part of the country that doesn't get enough culinary attention, Sameh Wadi is making eyes look north.

—Michael Sanson

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