

TWIN CITIES

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PLACES AND FACES

ANNUAL
Garden Guide
TO SHOPS, PLANTS,
AND
GREEN
THUMBS!

CHERRY BLOSSOM TIME

WE TALK TO BARRY DIXON!

IN THE KITCHEN AT SAFFRON

NOON TO THREE IN HOPKINS

APRIL/MAY

Whet Your Palate

by Harry Covere



PHOTOS: MIKE KRIVIT



Out of (North) Africa

...And out of the Middle East—Saffron's sophisticated blend of flavors is thanks to young hotshot chef Sameh Wadi

ALTHOUGH HE WAS ONLY 23 YEARS old when Sameh Wadi opened his Minneapolis restaurant, Saffron, last year, he was quickly thrust into the ranks of the Twin Cities' top chefs. Wadi's wunderkind resume (cooking stints at Solera, Bayport Cookery, and an executive chef position at Café Europa before he could legally drink) and unique provenance (born in Kuwait and raised in Jordan by Palestinian parents before moving to Minnesota) had set diners and critics abuzz with anticipation. As such, his unique interpretation of Middle Eastern and North African cuisine instantly placed Saffron among the city's top restaurants.

At Saffron, Wadi blends flavors from his native land and around the

Mediterranean with a contemporary, fine-dining chef's aesthetic: braised lamb shoulder rests atop a bed of chickpeas, and salmon and clams are combined in a fragrant broth flavored with fennel, red peppers, and olives. The way he tells it, Wadi has been planning Saffron for most of his life. From an early age, he cooked at his mother's side: "I grew up in a family where food was the center of attention," he says. "It would take my mom all day to prepare a meal. It was Thanksgiving every day." When he was finally ready to open his restaurant, he teamed up with his big brother, Saed, who works in real estate.

Some have dubbed Saffron a "fusion" restaurant, others call it "upscale ethnic." To Wadi, it's just what comes naturally.

Saffron's creative menu gives diners a multitude of flavorful options.

Saffron Chef Sameh Wadi's Cauliflower Soup with Charmoula and Cilantro Emulsion

Serves 8

Charmoula

1 teaspoon saffron threads
 ½ cup fresh lemon juice
 1 tablespoon coriander seeds
 1 tablespoon fennel seeds
 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon cumin seeds
 1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon caraway seeds
 1 tablespoon sweet paprika
 1 teaspoon cayenne
 2 garlic cloves
 Extra-virgin olive oil
 Salt

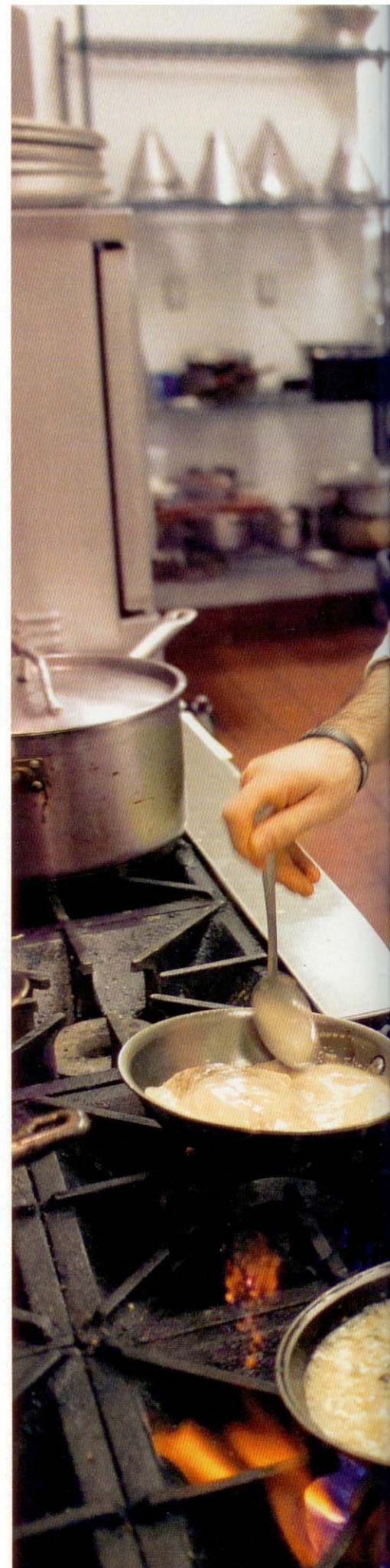
Cauliflower Soup

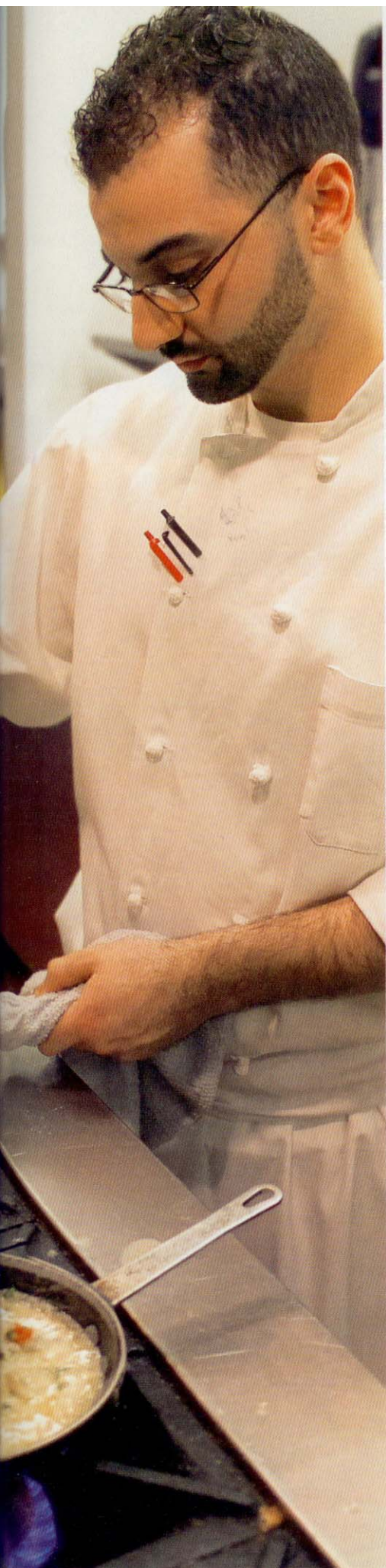
5 cups cauliflower florets (from 1 to 2 heads)
 ½ stick (4 tablespoons) unsalted butter, divided
 1 medium onion, diced
 10 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
 1 large potato, peeled and diced
 ¼ cup whole milk
 Water
 Salt

Cilantro Oil (optional)

3 bunches of cilantro
 1 teaspoon salt
 1 garlic clove
 Extra-virgin olive oil

1. A day ahead, soak the saffron: In a small bowl, place the saffron in the lemon juice and let sit overnight.
2. Make the charmoula: In a skillet, toast the coriander, fennel, cumin, and caraway seeds until fragrant, then grind in a spice grinder or mortar and pestle. Place the garlic and saffron mixture in a blender and add the paprika and cayenne. Blend until smooth. Pour the mixture in a bowl and whisk in the ground spices. Slowly whisk in olive oil until the charmoula reaches a sauce-like consistency. Season to taste with salt; it's not meant to be particularly salty—think chimichurri or another citrusy sauce. Set the charmoula aside; extra can be refrigerated for another use.
3. Make the cilantro oil: Blanch the cilantro in a pot of boiling water for 30 seconds, drain, and place in an ice bath for 30 seconds to cool. Drain the cilantro and squeeze it dry with paper towels. Place the cilantro, salt, and garlic into a clean blender and blend until pureed. With the blender running, slowly drizzle in the olive oil. Set the cilantro oil aside; extra can be refrigerated for another use.
4. Make the soup: In a soup pot, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter. Add the onion and garlic and sweat over low heat, stirring, for 3 minutes. Add the cauliflower and cook over low heat for 2 minutes; season with salt. Add the potatoes and enough water so that three-quarters of the vegetables are submerged. Simmer over moderately low heat for 10 minutes. Add the milk and simmer over low heat until the potatoes are soft.
5. Pour the vegetable mixture into a blender and puree, adding additional water to thin the soup to desired consistency. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter and season with salt.
6. To serve, pour the soup into warm bowls and drizzle with the charmoula and cilantro emulsion.





Saffron's Sameh Wadi

Wadi's version of cauliflower soup is a perfect example. Here, he garnishes the creamy, garlicky soup with a squirt each of cilantro oil and charmoula, a traditional marinade in Morocco and Algeria. In its region of origin, charmoula is mostly used on fish or seafood, but Wadi uses the blend of lemon juice and spices to give his soup a twang of Northern African flavor. "This soup has all the flavors of the Middle East and North Africa, but you'd never find them pureed togeth-

er like this," he says. "I want to cook the food of my ancestors, but in my own way. I've been in America for so long, I've become a piece of fusion myself, in a way." ■

Harry Covere writes about food and dining in Minneapolis and New York City.

WHEN YOU GO

Saffron Restaurant and Lounge
123 N 3rd St., Minneapolis
612-746-5533
saffronmpls.com