

Honey & Co - a modest dream realised

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When a close friend announced that she was about to spend several months in and out of University College Hospital, London, as she underwent stem cell replacement, I was able to offer her one crumb of non-medical comfort: she and any visitors would be just round the corner from Honey & Co in Warren Street.

Honey & Co is a recently opened small café and restaurant where I have enjoyed numerous good meals. These have ranged from a cappuccino with a milk bun in the morning and various lunches of carrot, butternut and tarragon fritters with a yogurt dip or vine leaves stuffed with grapes and leeks or a chicken tagine with chestnuts, raisins and date molasses inevitably followed by their cold cheesecake, curly Kadaif pastry and honey. Other meals have included a lamb shawarma with pomegranates; a fillet of sea bream with a fragrant tomato sauce; and a veal shank soffrito with quince.

I have sat outside and enjoyed a cup of Turkish coffee. I have bought several pots of the various jams they make themselves as well as the small jars of mixed spices which they grind on the premises and which add a very distinctive flavour to stews and casseroles. I have also bought several of their excellent cakes and have managed to resist the temptation to pass them off as my own creations.

The credit for all of the above, and for transforming what was an unprepossessing Italian restaurant with an entirely orange interior, goes to husband and wife, Itamar, 34, and Sarit Srulovich, 35 (pictured above and below by Charles Bibby). Although they both modestly hand the credit for what Honey & Co has become to the neighbourhood in which they have unwittingly landed, having met in their native Israel and then spent the past eight years cooking in various London restaurants.

Warren Street is an exceptionally quiet part of town, particularly given its proximity to the much noisier Tottenham Court Road and Euston Road. Over the years it has become home to an interesting community of residents, offices and distinctive shops such as French's Theatre Bookshop and All Flutes Plus, the definitive flute centre. It has never lacked for cafes and pubs but hitherto there have been few restaurants of note.

Yet it was to here that Itamar was first drawn a year ago. He had left behind the world of professional kitchens and was cooking for private clients while looking for almost two years for a restaurant they could call their own. Sarit had graduated to become head chef at NOPI restaurant working for their mentors, Yotam Ottolenghi and Sami Tamimi. What they had in mind was a 'posh kebab place', as they put it, and definitely somewhere close to where they live in south London.

That they have ended up with a Middle Eastern cafe close to north London they both ascribe to the charm of the location that subsequently dictated what they should cook. I have to say, however, that as I spoke to them I came to appreciate that, as always when talking to any husband and wife team, there are invariably two sides to every story.

Their disagreements mainly centred around the detail of what has been a very effective and highly inexpensive transformation so that even a few minutes in Honey & Co seem like a brief sojourn in the Middle East.

A shelf by the front window holds the cakes and the bags of crystallised cedro, the large lemon-like fruit from the Mediterranean. Another holds the jars of jams (of which Sarit told me with pride she has sold over 1,000 in six months) and of preserved lemons. Behind the bar hanging across a small window are half a dozen metal teapots bought in Jerusalem, while down the stairs a tiled floor and a panoply of plants continue the pretence that a warm sun may be shining overhead.

All this has cost £30,000, half their original budget. While it was a great advantage to take over a former restaurant with a kitchen, they have managed to achieve so much for so little by doing almost everything themselves. 'We bought a lot on eBay and second hand', Sarit explained, 'and when we had tracked down the furniture, Itamar brought it back on the Underground - including this banquette that we then reupholstered ourselves. The most expensive single items were the new tiled floor and having to pay the sign writer to put the sign above the cafe. But I watched him do it and I think I could do it myself the next time.'

In establishing Honey & Co, the Sruloviches have not only created another expression of Middle Eastern cooking but also what is obviously now a highly popular rendezvous for all those who live and work nearby. The immediate challenge is how to structure their evening menu now that they are open for two sittings on Thursday and Friday evenings, to the same effect.

Honey & Co seats no more than 20 but has already repaid its initial investment. Both appreciate that on top of the continued pleasure of cooking, the biggest changes in their professional lives have been the opportunity to talk to their customers and to watch them coming back for more. 'That', Sarit said emphatically, 'is the most fun'.

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