



DÉCOR AND LIFESTYLE

Middle Eastern magic in Melville

A much-loved old Yeoville restaurant has been reinvented in Melville's vibey 7th Street

WORDS: KIM MAXWELL :: PHOTOS: MARK KHOURY



Many Johannesburg locals have fond memories of Ba-Pita

restaurant in Yeoville's Rocky Street during the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was an eclectic meeting, drinking and eating place, reflecting the upbeat mood of rainbow nation residents in the build-up to the first democratic elections in 1994.

"Rocky Street was the most vibrant place in the country – filled with iconic restaurants and bars, an amazing music scene and artists, a hub of political activity. For Joburg it was the first integrated suburb," says Gerald Elliott, Ba-Pita's former owner. "Our restaurant had black, Indian and coloured customers, ahead of its time. Liberal like-minded people frequented it."

Elliott had been a Ba-Pita Yeoville customer before he bought the restaurant in 1994. It traded successfully until 2000, when urban decay and increasing crime in the area caused it to close.

Elliott moved on to other businesses and planned to reopen in a better location, but the timing was never quite right. That changed after a chance meeting with former colleague and fellow restaurateur Toerie van der Merwe. "We decided to do a joint venture. Between the two of us we've owned about nine restaurants, give or take. When we found the Melville site, we said: this is a Ba-Pita."

Melville opens

The new improved Ba-Pita opened in Melville in late 2018. "It was a huge risk taking on a legacy restaurant but people have responded incredibly well," says Elliott.

"The old Ba-Pita used to be a bit of a late-night jol on your way home from a club. Now we close the kitchen at 10pm. So it's different but still a great space," adds Van der Merwe.

"Melville today is the closest to what Rocky Street was – the weird and wonderful, from all walks of life. Musicians, poets and politicians. A cosmopolitan and bohemian clientele."

Décor

The old Melville building needed a lot of work, so Elizabeth Joubert of TinLab Design was hired to modernise the space.

"I was very much stuck on the old Ba-Pita in my mind – gritty, with unvarnished tables, walls full of postcards and an 1980s or 1990s vibe," says Elliott. "But Elizabeth's design blew me away. I realised we've all grown up. Our customers no longer want to drink wine out of

Q&A



Elizabeth Joubert, founding interior architect of TinLab Design in Johannesburg

What works about this urban location?

Ba-Pita is in a newly renovated building in a bohemian suburb. It's the location of many restaurants and bars, mostly frequented by students from nearby universities. The developers renovated the corner building, keeping it true to its original style.

How were you involved in Ba-Pita's interior design?

The owners asked TinLab to bring to life their dream restaurant. As a full turnkey company, we designed everything in the interior, from plumbing and electrical and wet trades to finishes, fixtures and furniture. Part of our service was to consult with a lighting design company to ensure the correct ambiance and focal lighting.

How did you meet your clients' budget?

Because of the tight capital expenditure for the restaurant, we had to find ingenious ways to create the space. Between the three of us we sourced all the elements, suppliers and contractors. We found gems in unexpected places.

How did you implement the design?

The brief was a taste of the Middle East enhanced by the exciting flavours of the Mediterranean. We used typical Middle Eastern colours and patterns combined with a Med twist. Beautiful terrazzo tiles were sourced from Union Tiles. Colourful Moroccan pendants of various shapes and sizes were hung in a cluster over the dining area, and soft fabric drapery to the underside of the slab. A bold Moroccan pattern was used for the wallpaper, making a striking feature wall. A mixture of tables and chairs completes the picture.



red plastic glasses. The décor had to grow up too."

A tight budget necessitated creative solutions. So tables from one of Elliott's former restaurants were upcycled; chairs were revived with new upholstery. The partners scoured auctions and negotiated on prices.

Food

The menu is Middle Eastern with a Mediterranean twist. "It's not specifically Lebanese or Turkish or Israeli but our own take on a combination of Middle Eastern countries," says Van der Merwe.

"We have a small kitchen area, so we don't keep stock. We buy fresh daily and make it from scratch. Our menu is seasonal." There is a strong emphasis on creative vegan and vegetarian options in dips, sides and delicious salads. These include tabouleh, a quinoa fattoush

with pistachios and feta, and a cucumber and olive-based Greek salad

The vibrant platters are popular with groups. These arrive with dips, sauces and pita bread, and eating with your hands is encouraged. The signature Ba-Pita platter includes baked aubergine baba ghanoush, tzatziki and hummus, alongside homemade falafel and meaty kofta with freshly baked pita and spicy za'atar flatbread.

"Everything we do here is fresh. If you order a shawarma, we break off a piece of stoneground-flour dough and bake it in our wood-fired oven to order," says Van der Merwe. Fillings include beef rump, lamb shoulder and chickpea falafel, each served with the original garlic sauce Rocky Street was famous for.

Middle Eastern laffa flatbreads are toasted and

stuffed with hummus, homemade pickles and tahini, plus chickpea falafel or meat. The two meaty options are roast grass-fed lamb shoulder and beef short rib roasted with a special rub.

When it comes to dessert, the house baklava has a steady following. Or finish with a chai latte of cardamom, nutmeg, cloves, black pepper, fresh ginger, tea leaves and honey, all infused in milk. It brews for five minutes at the table.

"I'm getting people through the doors who tell us they had their first date at Ba-Pita," says Elliott. "The people who arrived with nostalgia for that time are now bringing their kids. That second generation is coming here independently of their parents too. We're very happy with our investment. And Melville is on the rise."

