



Marie Husni, chef and owner of Marie's Lebanese Cuisine, with a bowl of mohallabieh—rice pudding made with milk, sugar and rose-blossom water.



Oxford is home to the Husni family of Marie's Lebanese Cuisine.

From Lebanon with love

Marie Husni's Lebanese specialties handmade in the hills

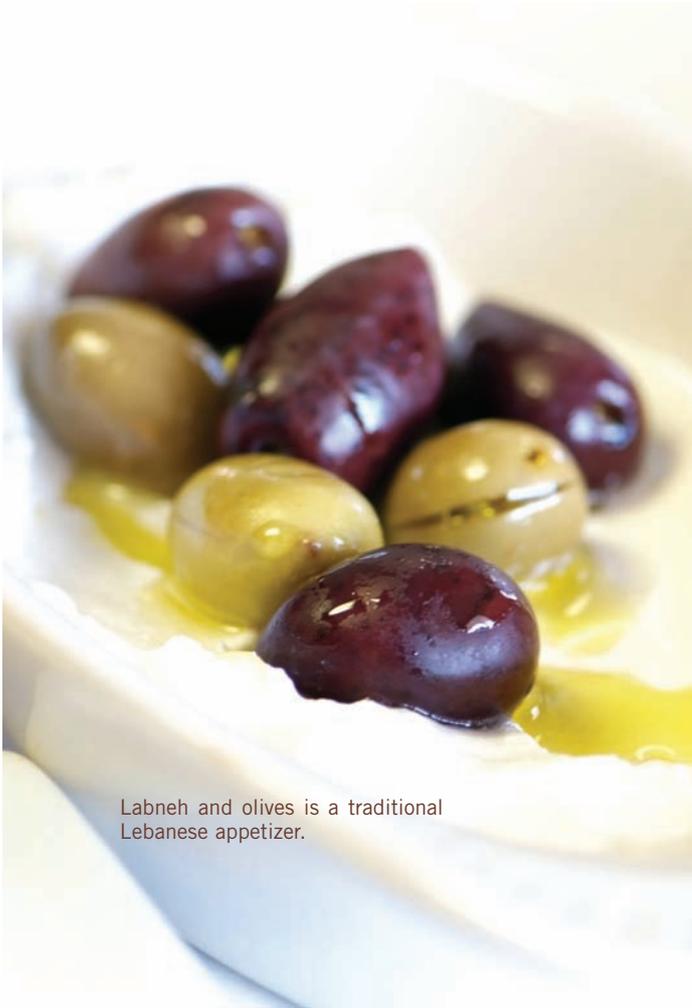
BY JENNIFER CHANDLER • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAY ADKINS

“Because it’s handmade with love” is the explanation Marie Husni offers when asked what makes the food at her namesake restaurant so popular. And she is right. With each bite of her authentic Lebanese offerings you can be sure that it was made with tender loving care.

Back in the early 1990s, Marie’s first restaurant venture was a popular dining spot located just off the Oxford town square. Her newest venture, opened in the fall of 2007, is a family affair created out of

love. “To be honest, I re-opened my restaurant because of family,” Marie explains, as she proudly points to several photographs of her grandson. “I wanted to have my family close together.”

Lebanese food is not something that is unfamiliar to the neighboring Mississippi Delta. Lebanese immigrants arrived in Mississippi in the late 1800s and early 1900s looking for a new life. Many first worked as merchants and then went on to become the grocers and restaurateurs of the region.



Labneh and olives is a traditional Lebanese appetizer.



Marie's homemade baklava.



Baked kebbeh is often considered the national dish of Lebanon.



Marie makes all her rolled grape leaves by hand.

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Often regarded as one of the world's healthiest cuisines, Lebanese cuisine has earned its heart healthy status from its abundant use of vegetables, whole grains, legumes and nuts. Meats are either grilled, baked or sautéed in olive oil...deep frying is not part of the repertoire. Instead of using heavy cream-laden sauces, food is flavored with aromatic spices and herbs.

Whereas many of the Delta's restaurants known for their Lebanese specialties are now owned by the descendants of the turn-of-the-century immigrants, Marie and her husband Samir are the first generation of their family to be in America. They came to the United States in pursuit of higher education, and after 24 years, they are still here.

As the only cook in her kitchen, Marie prepares every authentic Lebanese dish based on the recipes she learned from her own mother back in her homeland. "I cook here just like I do at home—just for a few more people," says Marie.

Marie's flavorful Lebanese dishes exude the exotic flavors of the Middle East. Aromatic spices such as thyme, anise, turmeric, garlic and cinnamon permeate her dishes. After each bite, you are left wondering what blend of fragrant spices she used. And don't bother asking; Marie will not divulge any of her secrets no matter how much you beg.

On her menu are popular appetizers such as hummus and grape leaves. But her homemade versions are far superior to what is available at local supermarkets. Everything is made from scratch, including soaking dry garbanzo beans overnight for the hummus and painstakingly hand preparing each rolled grape leaf.

Daily offerings include a rotating selection of plate lunches. Marie's baked chicken breast with potatoes sounds bland...but the dish I enjoyed was anything but. Served with lobia (green beans in a fragrant tomato sauce), this flavorful dish was light yet satisfying. Kebbeh, often considered the national Lebanese dish, is a permanent fixture on the menu. Made with eight different spices, pine nuts and cracked wheat, this ground beef dish resembles a dense meatloaf.

In addition to entrees, Marie also serves the Lebanese version of wrap sandwiches. Choose from shawarma meat or chicken gyros or handmade falafel. "These sandwiches are served by street vendors in Lebanon. Every time I go back home, my

mom tells me not to eat street food...but I just can't resist. It's so delicious," she jokes.

Be sure to save room for dessert. Marie's from-scratch baklava is a must. Usually associated with Greek cuisine, baklava is also a popular Lebanese dessert. The main difference between the Lebanese variety and its Greek cousin is Lebanese baklava often contains pistachio nuts and is drizzled with a rose-water syrup whereas the Greek variety usually contains walnuts and honey.

So in Marie's own native language, "sahteen" —that's *bon appétit* to you and me.



Lebanese Tabbouleh

Marie Husni, *Marie's Lebanese Cuisine*

- 2 medium tomatoes, cut into small pieces
- 1/2 cucumber, peeled, cored and cut into small pieces
- 1/3 cup fine bulgur (cracked wheat)
- 2 cups fresh parsley
- 4 stalks green onion, chopped into small pieces
- 2 tablespoons dried mint or 1/4 cup chopped fresh mint
- 1/2 cup fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 cup olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

Soak bulgur in water for 30 minutes. Drain in a sieve, pressing on the bulgur to remove any excess liquid. Then toss the bulgur with the rest of the ingredients until well combined. 

Marie's Lebanese Cuisine is located at 505 Heritage Drive in Oxford.



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