

During my late-October visit, Marquez Deli was still in the process of becoming itself, with deli counters yet to be installed. There was folksy artwork on the walls, and what Yiddish speakers call chotchkes (pronounced CHOCH-kees, aka knickknacks) scattered on high shelves, brightening the lightly industrial environment of cement floors and gray walls. Hadidi and his business partner, Crae Kaplan, 58, began our conversation (and nibbles) with a vegetarian mezza plate, which consisted of ajvar (pronounced EYE-var), a creamy dip made of roasted eggplant and red bell peppers; shakshuka, made from tomatoes and green chile poached in olive oil and garlic; and a dollop of lemony hummus, served with kalamata olives, feta cheese, and pita bread.

The shakshuka had impressive heat, and Hadidi said green chile is a natural complement to many Jewish foods. (See: bagels and cream cheese.) The ajvar was sweet, smoky, and creamy, and rather substantial in structure. Kaplan recommended adding a few crumbles of feta cheese as she mused about opening for socially distanced dining a few nights a week. (Check the Marquez Deli website for current hours of operation.) “A mezza platter and a glass of wine,” she said dreamily, obviously eager to fully engage in the business of hospitality at the eventual end of the pandemic. They plan to offer a slightly lower price point than some Santa Fe eateries.

“I’m tired of paying \$60 to go out to dinner. That’s fine for places that cater to tourists, but we’re here for locals.”

A woman came into the restaurant and announced that she was starving. Marquez Deli, though still in

slight disarray from construction, was up for the challenge. She ordered a sandwich and a cup of soup, declaring her meal’s deliciousness every few bites.

Then came the falafel, which Hadidi makes with a mixture of garbanzo and fava beans. They’re fried crispy on the outside but are still light and soft on the inside, served with yogurt tzatziki sauce. As I munched, Hadidi prepared ras el-hanout (ras el-haNOOT), a Moroccan spice mixture that’s used for special-occasion food.

Translated from Arabic, “It literally means ‘head of the spice store,’” Hadidi explained. He said a spice store might just be a hole in the wall, selling spices in bulk. “When you say, ‘the master of the house,’ the reason why is they don’t measure. They just take the ladle of about 16 spices, and this is ras el-hanout. It goes into stews, soups.”

It’s in the Roman shorba, a chicken soup in a light tomato broth with chickpeas that’s finished with fresh mint, cilantro, and lemon juice. The shorba was slightly oily and incredibly savory. As exotic as it tasted to me, the next soup took me home with one slurp. Billed as “NYC matzo ball soup,” it was the same stuff I grew up on, only better. Hadidi’s matzo ball cut easily with a spoon, but it didn’t fall apart in the broth that was studded with delicate carrot slices and bits of diced chicken. He’d skimmed the broth of fat and saved it for schmaltz, the rendered chicken fat that’s the secret ingredient in his matzo balls.

“Schmaltz is revered around here,” Kaplan said.

The main course was Algerian lamb tagine. “Here,

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ALEX’S POTATO LATKES

2 lbs. Idaho potatoes
1 medium onion
3 scallions
1/2 cup finely chopped leeks
2 large eggs
1/4 cup matzo meal (optional)
3 tbsp. butter
salt and pepper
1/4 tsp. baking powder
1.5 cup any seed oil

Shred the medium onion and the potatoes on box grater. Season with salt and pepper, let sit for two minutes, and then squeeze most of the water from the onion-potato mixture. Drain using a colander over a salad bowl. Discard the water from the bowl, but keep the pasty starch in the bottom of the salad bowl. In a food processor, pulse together leeks, two scallions, eggs, matzo meal, baking powder, and soft butter. Fold in the potato-onion mixture using a rubber spatula.

In a frying pan, heat the seed oil to medium-hot. Spoon latke mix into the medium hot oil and flatten with a metal spatula or spoon. Cook each side three to four minutes, or until golden outside and soft inside.

Serve hot, with apple sauce and sour cream. Garnish with the third scallion.

AJVAR

1/2 eggplant
3 medium red bell peppers
2 tbsp. smoked paprika
1.5 tbsp. raw sugar
2 tbsp. olive oil
3 tbsp. vegetable oil
2.5 tbsp. Chopped garlic
1/4 cup apple cider vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste
Preheat oven to 400°

Oil a baking pan and place the eggplant skin-side up. Coat the red bell peppers lightly with oil. Roast until the peppers turn golden; place peppers in a zip-lock bag to facilitate peeling.

Scrape the eggplant from skin and pulse until finely chopped. Heat oil in frying pan to medium-hot and add the sugar. Once it starts caramelizing, add the garlic. When the garlic starts roasting, add the finely chopped eggplant. Peel the peppers, and chop them coarsely using a food processor or knife. Cook eggplant for 10 minutes and add the peppers. Cook for five minutes and then add the vinegar and smoked paprika. Cook at low heat for 25 minutes, mixing occasionally. Cool, and then add 2 tbsp. of extra virgin olive oil.

Serve cold, with pita chips.

— Recipes courtesy of the Marquez Deli