

Saladelia Café Celebrates 20+ Years of Great Food with Trendy Green Renovation

Times have changed: 20 years ago, cooking with olive oil was exotic, fresh herbs were a mystery, and most folks thought hummus was a type of potting soil. Fast-forward to today and these foods are beloved staples of many people's diets. But for Saladelia Café, a gourmet café with three locations plus Mad Hatter's Bake Shop and a catering service celebrating more than 20 years in Durham, good food isn't about trends, it's about family—and turning the past into a passion. “These are the foods our mothers and grandmothers prepared,” Saladelia owners Fida and Robert Ghanem say about their childhoods in Lebanon. “We watched them cook with eggplant, fresh herbs and grains,” Fida points out. “They pickled and jarred vegetables. They rolled stuffed grape leaves by hand. We grew up on the fresh, healthy Mediterranean diet and wanted to bring those delicious flavors and, more importantly, wholesome, fresh, affordable homemade cooking to Durham.”

They did, but, with a twist. While stuffed grape leaves and hummus, falafel and baba ghanouj, tabouleh and pitas appear on the menu, so do Reubens and quiche, Greek gyros and breakfast burritos, soups and sandwiches—including a wide and satisfying offering of vegetarian and vegan selections. There's even good old-fashioned chicken salad—but with a difference: Saladelia's starts with all-natural, grain-fed chicken breasts roasted on-site in the restaurant in a special blend of lemon juice, olive oil, oregano and other herbs. Toss in your traditional chicken salad ingredients and you have something, well, spectacular—and a customer favorite for 20 years. “The difference is in the kind of farmed chicken we use and how we cook it,” Fida explains. But, it's more than that. To the Ghanems, the how and why are as important as the what. “We don't feed anyone anything we wouldn't serve our children—it's that important,” she notes.

That philosophy shows in everything the Ghanems do, according to regular lunch and catering customer Jean Neville of Chapel Hill who works at Durham's Hill Center. “I love it because Fida and Robert are such hands-on owners,” she states. “If you have a question or feedback, they're always ready to interact with customers in a positive and friendly way. And the food is consistently tasty, healthy fare. I feel like I'm doing myself a favor by dining there because it's good for me. And my friends and colleagues love it—friends visiting from Colorado always ask if we can eat there.”

It's the same with their ingredients: from farm to table, food gets the same careful scrutiny and meticulous yet creative preparation. No over-processed foods here: from Painted Hill all-natural roast beef to whole turkeys to vegetables to flour, it all begins with a quality product. Ahead of their times on the local foods front, the Ghanems buy from local farms—and they buy organic when possible. Even the flour used in their decadent desserts and delicate pastries baked by hand every day at their sister location Mad Hatter's comes from a local farm. The full coffee bar is fair-trade and locally-roasted. Local, natural, affordable, ethical—it's an approach to food that appeals to everyone, from the globe-trotting gourmand to the busy mom of three children to area college students to the road construction crew.

Rabbi John Friedman of Judea Reform Congregation in Durham and his family have been coming since the restaurant opened in 1988, a time when there weren't a lot of choices for

vegetarians. “If you don’t eat meat, there’s a limited number of places you can go for a meal,” he observes. “Usually a restaurant has only one or two vegetarian options—and one of them is a salad. Saladelia has lots of different choices and the food is always excellent. We love the Greek wrap, the veggie wrap, the chili, and the okra in tomato sauce. We like restaurants where we don’t have to spend a lot of time waiting; Saladelia is perfect for people with busy schedules.”

The Café is also at the forefront of the green movement. But, to them, going green is about more than just concocting succulent fare using fresh local vegetables and vibrant herb garnishes; it’s about preserving the planet. Their recent renovation has an environmental focus, with furniture made from recycled products and sustainable wood, and low-energy LED lights. Their restaurants recycle all glass and plastic bottles, mixed paper and newsprint. Containers, cups and plastic-ware are made from biodegradable corn-based products. They even recycle kitchen refuse, sending veggie scraps to local farmers to feed livestock and used cooking oil to a bio-fuel company to be turned into an alternative energy source. To the Ghanems, leaving a lighter footprint on the planet is an easy choice. “We’re not hogging this world for ourselves, we’re passing it on to our children,” said Fida. “We believe it’s our civic and social duty to recycle, to buy local and sustainably-made products. It’s our way of saying thank you to the community.”

Sustainability—of customers with healthy, homemade, affordable, fresh food and the planet with smart green practices—is what’s kept this restaurant thriving over the last 20 years. The secret to their success, says Neville, is consistent quality. “You can get lunch for one or lunch for 100 and it will always be tasty and well-presented. Saladelia is a great resource for wonderful food for work and friends. It’s always comfortable for you, no matter who you are.”

There are some restaurants people love because of the food. Others people love for how they do things. Saladelia combines the best of both—good food with green practices. NC State professor William Adler of Durham agrees. “It’s great,” he enthuses. “They know how important it is to stick to their main theme. The reason I first went all those years ago was for the Middle Eastern food and they still have that solid foundation, even though they’re bigger now and have expanded their menu. They built on their strength—which is good, healthy, fresh-tasting Mediterranean food. They still have items on the menu from 20 years ago. I like that. That’s why I keep coming back.”

“We are so grateful to the community for welcoming us and being a part of our restaurant family for 20 years,” Fida concludes. “It’s wonderful to see loyal customers from all those years ago who were then families with small children, now come in straight from the airport with their college-age children to Saladelia to enjoy their favorite meals. That feels good.”