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The insider's report

ChowBella explores T.O.'s culinary hot spots

By ELIZABETH BAIRD

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New this year is a venture started by Trina Hendry whose knack and passion for organizing personalized culinary experiences for a major hotel chain launched her into founding ChowBella Culinary Experiences and Concierge. Her tours consist of chef-guided walks through some of Toronto's most fascinating ethnic neighbourhoods, including Little India, Kensington Market and West Queen West, as well as a one-of-a-kind gourmet trek to Stratford, Ontario's newest culinary hot spot. At the planning stages is Niagara.

Visitors to Toronto are in for a treat when they can explore parts of the city that interest them, but perhaps may also intimidate them a little. Like -- where do you start in Little India? Which is the best shop for spices and fresh curry? The most authentic vegetarian lunch? It's this lure of sharing an insider's knowledge that makes Trina Hendry's ChowBella service noteworthy.

In the hands of food activist, chef and tour leader Joshna Maharaj, you will experience an insiders introduction to Little India, a.k.a. Gerrard Indian Bazaar, enjoy a light lunch that includes an addictive masala dosa, a cooking lesson, a chance to taste Indian fudge (burfis) and sample street food like grilled corn, and my favourite, chaat. These tours are June 13, 20, 27, July 11, 18, 25 and August 15, they last 2 hours, start at 12.30 and cost an all-inclusive \$65.

For the Kensington Market Tour, you will join food writer/chef Signe Lanford around the market where Jamaican, Portuguese, Latin American and more make this area one of the most culinary diverse areas in the GTA. Dates are June 13, 20, 27 and July 4, 11 and 25: Price is \$55. For more information about these tours, and the Queen Street West, Stratford and Niagara tours, check the website: chowbellaconcierge.com or e-mail info@chowbellaconcierge.com. You can book online. Trina Hendry warns guests not to eat a heavy meal before the tour -- guess that means you are in for good eats and you need to save room.

GOING GREEK

It was a modest crowd, only about 60 for lunch. But the kitchen team at St. George's Greek Orthodox Church on Bond St., was all ready when the first guests arrived. Sixty doesn't compare to the crowds who used to fill the church basement during Caravan, crowds eager to see the shows and partake of Greek food -- more exotic then than now. But there were plenty to enjoy a spread of home cooked Greek food.

The lunch was for the Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada, hosted by Ryerson University Conference Chair and Associate Professor in the Department of Architectural Science, George Kapelos, who organized the conference and came up with the idea of introducing the delegates from across Canada to the flavours of his ancestral home. How appropriate was it that the church, built in 1897 as a synagogue, became the home of the parish of St. George (Canada's oldest Greek Orthodox parish) in 1937, a heritage landmark in downtown Toronto, worked in partnership with the Society and its neighbour, Ryerson University.

On the buffet table, a checklist of iconic Greek dishes: Chunky Greek salad complemented by a bowl of black Kalamata olives and fingers of feta cheese, a pan of rice, platters of spinach and feta pies, rolls, stuffed grape leaves with avgolemono sauce, lemon and oregano baked chicken and meatballs in a tomato sauce. Desserts included favourites like kourambiedes dusted with plenty of icing sugar, and honey-soaked walnut cookies. Judging by the heaped plates people took to sit at the long tables, and the empty plates they left behind, nobody left hungry. A few got sweets to take with them.

It's one of the pleasures of doing Baird's Bites that I get to talk to people about their heritage dishes. Niky Germanakos headed the team that prepared the lunch, and it was she who made the lovely tender meatballs spooned over a big helping of rice. Niky was also responsible for the golden brown chicken breasts seasoned with oregano, lemon and garlic. While exact quantities are not available from cooks who have been making their heritage dishes from memory, aroma and touch, and going back decades, Niky Germanakos gave me the outline, and I filled in the details.

MEATBALLS IN TOMATO SAUCE

Make the sauce first as it needs to simmer for about an hour before adding and simmering the meatballs. Serve over rice, mashed or baked potatoes, or pasta.

TOMATO SAUCE:

2 Tbsp. (30 ml) extra virgin olive oil
 3 cups (750 ml) very finely diced onion
 6 large cloves garlic, minced
 1 can (28 oz/796 ml) crushed or ground tomatoes
 4 cups (1 L) tomato juice
 2 cups (500 ml) water
 2 tbsp. (30 ml) chicken bouillon or stock granules
 1 tsp. (5 ml) granulated sugar
 1/2 tsp. (2 ml) freshly ground pepper
 Cornstarch (optional)

PORK AND BEEF MEATBALLS:

1 cup (250 ml) grated dried breadcrumbs
 Water
 1 tbsp. (15 ml) extra virgin olive oil
 3 cups (750 ml) very finely diced onion
 5 large cloves garlic, minced
 2 large eggs
 1/4 cup (50 ml) finely chopped fresh parsley
 2 tbsp. (30 ml) each finely chopped fresh mint and oregano or 2 tsp. (10 mL) each dried, crumbled
 1 tsp. (5 ml) salt
 1/2 tsp. (2 ml) freshly ground pepper
 1 lb. (500 g) each lean ground beef and pork

Tomato Sauce: In Dutch oven or large saucepan, heat oil over medium heat: Fry onions and garlic, stirring often, until translucent, about 10 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, juice, water, stock granules, sugar and pepper. Bring to simmer; reduce heat and simmer gently, stirring often, until slightly reduced and rich tasting, about 1 hour. Set aside.

Pork and Beef Meatballs: In a bowl, combine breadcrumbs and enough cold water to moisten; set aside.

In medium-skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add onions and garlic; fry until translucent, stirring often, about 10 minutes. Let cool slightly.

Meanwhile, in a large bowl, whisk eggs; mix in parsley, mint, oregano, salt and pepper. Dump breadcrumbs into a fine sieve and press out moisture; stir moist crumbs into egg mixture. Add beef and pork; mix just until combined, using your hands if necessary.

Using an ice cream scoop or dessert spoon, scoop out about 40 balls. Place on baking sheet. Dipping your hands in water if necessary to prevent sticking, smooth balls and form into ovals. Arrange on large rimmed baking sheets about 1-inch (2.5 cm) apart. Bake in 200C (400F) oven until firm, about 15 minutes.

Gently nestle meatballs into tomato sauce; bring to simmer and simmer to blend flavour, about 30 minutes. Taste sauce and season with salt and pepper if desired. If you want a thicker sauce, blend 1 Tbsp. (15 ml) cornstarch into 2 Tbsp. (30 ml) cold water and stir into sauce, avoiding meatballs. Simmer until thickened, about 10 minutes.

Makes 10 to 12 servings.

TIP: Some finely chopped fresh parsley is a nice final touch for sauce. Some Greek meatballs have a flavour of cumin. If you like this, add 1 tsp. (5 ml) to meatball mixture.

MAKE-AHEAD FEATURE: You can make the tomato sauce ahead, and freeze it if you like. You can also make the completed dish of meatballs in sauce and refrigerate for up to 2 days or freeze for up to a month. Thaw in refrigerator and heat thoroughly.

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