



Taxim

RATING: ★★★

1558 N. Milwaukee Ave.,
773.252.1558

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;
★★ = good, above average;
★★★ = very good, well above norm;
★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;
★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambience and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Sandals and linen.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Melitzanosalata (roasted eggplant spread); duck gyro; saragli me staka kritis (spiced nut-filled phyllo pastry).*

WHEN TO GO: *Lunchtime. Though there's a limited menu, mid-day Taxim is quiet and relaxing and boasts one of the best lunches in the area.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Moschofilero, a white wine, is the Grecian equivalent to Pinot Grigio, and Taxim has some good ones.*

WHO GOES: *Lincoln Park-transplanted denizens of Wicker Park and Bucktown, and North Shore folks down for some weekend urban adventure.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$5-\$12; entrées \$18-\$32; desserts \$5-\$8.*

Greek Island

Far from Greektown, new Wicker Park hotspot Taxim stands its own ground with age-old dishes spiced up for a swank new crowd | *By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski* |

Four years ago, when the small Wicker Park storefront that houses new Greek restaurant Taxim was a dingy dive bar and middling taqueria called Big Horse Lounge, I often found myself there after wearisome nights of drinking, in various states of inebriation and usually dribbling burrito grease down the front of my shirt. Tonight, as a rivulet of pomegranate-flavored sauce from Taxim's duck gyro spreads across my crisp white button-down, it seems that very little has changed.

Well, that's not entirely true. It's actually a respectable hour and, instead of slouching over a worn wooden bar top, I'm reclining in a womb of woven fabric pillows while taking pinky-extended swigs of a mineral-rich Tselepos 2008 Moschofilero

"Mantinia." The pale white wine, dry and fruity, is just one selection from a deep, all-Grecian list that will banish all nightmares of cloying Retsina, and perhaps tastes even better under the soft orange flicker of shiny Byzantine brass lanterns.

But, while I'm trying to respect the grandeur of the castlelike interior around me, the sweet perfume of roasted duck swaddled in a springy house-made Pontian pita has me tearing at my dining partner's plate out of some sheer primal instinct—and in the process, tipping a few stray bits of juicy duck down the front of my shirt. I'd be horrified at my sloppy apparel, but I'm too busy reveling in a bite of the accompanying cucumber salad.

Such indulgent behavior would CONTINUED...

GYRO CHIC *Above, from left: Taxim's dining room; melitzanosalata, a spread made from eggplant, tahini and pine nuts. Below: Rampopita, a riff on spanakopita made with ramps, green garlic, fresh dill, goat feta and house-made phyllo.*



...CONTINUED bring a smack on the wrist from most tablemates, or at least an apologetic glance to any gaping neighbors. Luckily, I've brought along folks who make a living out of sharing their homes, their food and their kitchens: the chef/owners of one of Chicago's premiere underground dining clubs. Not only are they not reprimanding me, they're attacking my own crispy skinned, oven-roasted sea bass, throwing down their forks at the succulent lemon- and olive oil-kissed flesh like restless natives pitching spears.

Fittingly, we've ordered enough to feed a sizeable tribe. I wish I could comment on the knowledge of our server, but before our somber black-shirted friend could utter a recommendation, we had eagerly requested almost everything on the just-small-enough menu, leaving him with nothing to do but whisk

a rapid succession of rustic ceramic and clay pots of food our way.

Though Taxim's white alabaster archways and copper window-side tables share architectural kinship with many of Chicago's more nicely appointed Middle-Eastern joints, the "Greek" cuisine in front of us is unfamiliar. There are no béchamel-coated, brick-like phyllo pastries heaped with carelessly cooked meat. There's no flaming cheese; the only flash in the room comes courtesy of a few sequined halters from the bachelorette party at the next table. Taking this in, it's tempting to call chef/owner David Schneider's cuisine neo-Greek. But his lighter seasonal vegetable-, olive oil- and citrus-driven cuisine is actually representative of Greek culinary heritage before French influence, and is therefore, in a way, retro-chic.

No matter what you call it, however, it's damn good. In addition to an acumen for chowing like rock stars, one thing my chef contingent—who spend all of their working days (and most of their free time) cooking—knows and appreciates more than anything is great technique. When one of my friends coos louder than a pigeon over the crispy skin on Taxim's oven-roasted Amish chicken, which bursts with grassy wild oregano notes, I know there's no question that the

Taxim crew has some serious chops.

The greatest example is in the melitzanosalata, a roasted eggplant-, tahini- and pine nut-studded spread that's a velvety distant cousin to the often slimmer baba ghanoush. Smoky charcoal flavor uncoils through the rich purée and beguiles like a veteran chanteuse.

The caramelization on a goat kebab is uniform and the thigh on that aforementioned chicken so luscious, we barely shrug at the dryness in the accompanying breast or the touch of salt missing from the confit fingerling potatoes. For dessert, slightly bitter chocolate semolina halva isn't tempered with enough sweet citrus syrup. In fact, most of the sweet fare skews slightly savory, resulting in a bevy of half-eaten dessert plates.

One of my chef buddies laments after the meal that he'd almost forgotten what he'd eaten. And I almost know what he means. Taxim is like the culinary version of the Adele, Duffy and Amy Winehouse music movement: Here, there are no Madonna- or Britney-like fireworks. The restaurant is innovative relative to the fare you'd find down in Greektown, but the restraint of ingredients and the common pairing of flavors is pretty straightforward. That said, a dinner here *is* memorable, not because of some techno-bent or next-generation leap, but because of a commitment to solid, old-school ways. Silky, house-made pastries and pita; creamy, fresh-made yogurt; piquant marinades; expert roasting; and delicate grillsmanship are the real hallmarks of Taxim. I know I could certainly take a cue and get back to basics by learning to eat without spilling on myself. Thankfully, Taxim is affordable for a fine-dining establishment, thus leaving me enough coin to pay for some decent dry cleaning. ■

"Taxim is like the culinary version of the Adele, Duffy and Amy Winehouse music movement: Here, there are no Madonna- or Britney-like fireworks, but rather a commitment to solid, old-school ways."



From left: Diners at Taxim; chocolate semolina halva with preserved kumquats, citrus syrup, almonds and Chantilly cream.