

A Jewish Grandmother's Legacy

Tradition meets innovation at Denver's Safta restaurant

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DEEP IN THE CONCRETE jungle of RiNo's bustling arts district lies a culinary gem, where every dish is a Jewish grandmother incarnate, enlivened by the energy, intention and influences from homeland Israel and Bulgaria, Morocco, Turkey, Syria, Greece and Yemen.

The Denver-based restaurant, Safta, which means "grandmother" in Hebrew, pays homage to Chef Alon Shaya's late grandmother, Matilda. Every dish is an exposé that charts the chef's life as he rediscovers his heritage.

Safta opened its doors at The Source Hotel at 3330 Brighton Blvd. in 2019, offering reinvented Israeli flavors. Industrial meets contemporary modern in the hotel's main hall, home to independent art shops and eclectic eateries. Low-rise suede couches surround naturalistic wooden coffee tables, while dark leather chairs, office tables and austere accents intermingle for an edgy feel.



At Safta in Denver, Chef Alon Shaya crafts Mediterranean and Israeli dishes inspired by his late grandmother's cooking.



Safta's curated menu celebrates Israeli flavors and heritage, including woodfired, handmade pita bread made from a 100-year old starter.

Among the lights, concrete and decorum of the hall's interior stands Safta, subtly recognizable by its signature soft red sign and wooden counters that give way to a bright entrance. The restaurant's interior is both sleek and inviting. Warm pink tones, an open kitchen, light wood accents, ambient lighting and hanging plants decorate the space.

Vintage pink rose designs dot glassware, inspired by Alon's late grandmother's artwork. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer clear views of the Denver skyline, where a stellar sunset complements the snow-capped Rocky Mountains. A large mural painted in pastels beckons patrons to take a seat, reminiscent of pop-up restaurants of Tel Aviv's bustling alleyways and lively cafe culture, a bit like "your hip grandma's house," said Alon of the comfortable yet elevated fine-dining vibe.

With a philosophy of familial congeniality, hospitality and bonding, freshly cooked meals remain at the epicenter of daily Israeli life. Its cuisine is a diverse fusion of flavors, foods and dishes passed down through generations of Jewish tradition, with heavy Mediterranean and Middle Eastern influences. Alon's Safta recipes create a unique and tantalizing palate shaped by the stories and customs of this diasporic people.

"Whether I'm celebrating or mourning, or trying to console or impress, food has always been my avenue to do that, so hospitality is something that I love," Alon said, a connection that binds him to his late grandmother's caretaker tendencies. "She just knew how to make people feel better."

Matilda worked as a pharmacist in Bulgaria before fleeing after World War II, settling in the Israeli seaport town of Jaffa in 1948, the same year the country was founded. Although Matilda was known as a quiet woman, her actions and kindness spoke volumes and were known to bring peace to everyone around her.



Sweet details throughout the restaurant honor Matilda, Shaya's grandmother (left), including a rose she painted that's imprinted on the glassware and menu.

Alon reflects on the affection his grandmother showed him during early childhood visits to Israel. Matilda would whisk the young, shy Alon through every step of her kitchen processes as she made her most cherished meals for him. She would pause to let him taste subtle additions of anise and sweet paprika to her tomato soup. She assigned him to be her sous-chef by helping with crucial preparatory tasks under her diligent tutelage like grinding the fatty meat for Bulgarian lamb kebabs al haesh (over fire).

Back in the United States, upon coming home from school, the smell of roasted peppers and eggplant signified that his grandparents were visiting from Israel. Alon recalls the culinary spoils that saturated those visits, a central inspiration behind Safta's dishes, where guests choose from family-style entrées, small plates, drinks and a dynamic seasonal lineup.

As owner of Safta, and numerous restaurants across the country with his business, Pomegranate Hospitality, Alon has been nominated for five and recipient of two, prestigious James Beard Awards; named "Best Chef, South" for the Italian pizzeria, Domenica; and "Best New Restaurant" and "Chef of the Year" for New Orleans-based Israeli hotspot, Shaya. Southern Living magazine named Alon one of the "50 People Who Are Changing the South," and the independent Jewish newspaper, *The Forward*, listed him as one of the "50 Most Influential Jews in America."

Despite all the prestige and accolades, Alon came from humble beginnings, dating back to a poverty-stricken childhood. As a young immigrant living in Philadelphia, he battled isolation, constantly fighting the fear of standing out as a 5-year-old who didn't yet speak English and who was desperately trying to forget his native



Hebrew to “assimilate and put my past behind me,” he said.

Yet something about cooking kept him connected to his roots. Alon spent years learning about other cultures by exploring the world. Culinary school in Italy led to a serendipitous reconnection with Judaism. Throughout his career, he worked in a variety of chef and kitchen managerial roles, which blossomed with his return to remaking foods from his homeland – childhood classics like lutenitsa, hummus and Bulgarian lamb kebabs.

“As I got older and more confident in who I am and my abilities, I wanted to go back to my roots,” Alon said. Talking to his mother about foods he grew up with marked his return to “re-embracing” Israeli gastronomy.

After Matilda’s passing, regular trips to Israel continue to provide inspiration for Alon. There, he finds himself with invita-

tions into strangers’ kitchens. He samples the nostalgic farm-to-table flavors during his exploration of Israel’s outdoor food bazaars known as shuks.

Israeli meals typically begin with salattim, or starters, comprised of small dishes that include dips, salads and pickled bits, often paired with pita bread.

Safta recreates these culinary feats with carefully chosen ingredients and techniques gleaned from Alon’s global travels. He uses 100-year-old starter and freshly milled wheat from Lafayette to make pillowy, woodfired, 3-inch-high pita bread that pairs perfectly with Safta’s signature green olive oil and za’atar blend of herbs and spices. The hummus has an airy texture that comes from carefully removing the skins from each garbanzo bean before blending, which comes in variations that include soft-cooked eggs and foraged mushrooms.



Favorites like harissa roasted chicken, branzino with roasted peppers and Bulgarian lamb kebabs accompany za’atar-spiced olive oil and pita bread.

Many Safta diners start with a bright orange muhammara sauce made of roasted peppers topped with hazelnuts, cilantro and chili oil, or they try the crispy eggplant dish, complete with caramelized tomato and herbed goat cheese. Safta’s duck confit, cooked in a sweet apricot sauce and resting on a bed of Lebanese mujadara lentil rice and a tomato vinaigrette, offers a blend of light summer and hearty ethnic flavors.

A delicate balance of salt, fat, acid and heat differentiates Safta from other Middle Eastern or Israeli-specific cuisines, Alon said. While at the heart of Safta lives Alon’s grandmother’s simple recipes, the restaurant accomplishes much more – challenging diners to reimagine fine dining using modernized Israeli flavors.

Before Safta’s grand opening, Alon published a cookbook entitled *Shaya: An Odyssey of Food, My Journey Back to Israel*. The 400-page cookbook reads more like a novel, following the celebrity chef’s search for identity as a Jewish Israeli-American. Passing on traditions from the ages, a hallmark of Jewish culture, extends beyond the tenets of his grandmother’s cooking.

Alon and his wife Emily adore Colorado, where they spend their summers fly fishing. “Opening Safta in Denver has been a way for us to put some roots down and prioritize our happiness,” he said.

Being involved in the community is important to the Shaya family, the chef said. A colorful raconteur and endlessly creative, Alon recently reinvented several recipes from Holocaust survivor Steven Fennes’ 90-year-old family cookbook for a community fundraiser for the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Safta also regularly contributes to other philanthropic initiatives, including Jewish Community Center Denver and the Anti-Defamation League.

Above all, for Alon, Israeli food is a fusion of cultures and ethnicities most easily defined as “a melting pot” that blends flavors and stories from the vibrant Middle Eastern region. Food and cooking can capture, recreate and connect those cultures. And true to his childhood, Alon’s beloved Safta remains his guiding muse. 🌿

