

FOODSERVICE NEWS

The News and Information Source for Restaurant and Foodservice Operations

Volume 22 • Issue 5

www.foodserviceneeds.net

June/July 2011

The Zakia Deli machine

By Mike Mitchelson

The Lebanese deli has been a popular lunch spot since opening in 2007. Fear not the line—it moves quickly.

It seems David Maalouf knows everybody who comes into his restaurant, Zakia Deli, which is tucked into one of many geographic anomalies of Northeast Minneapolis. Off Stinson Boulevard on Kennedy Street NE, near I-35W, the deli pulls in a monstrous lunch crowd from area businesses, their workers hungry for something beyond the fast food choices nearby (Zakia also serves breakfast and dinner). From behind the counter Maalouf greets many of those workers by first name, picking up on a brief conversation that started the last time the customer came in, and taking notice of anything. “When did you break your hand?” he asks one guest in a cast.

Maalouf’s Lebanese food, built from his mother’s recipes (for whom the deli is named), is by far the most popular on the broad menu, which includes some American favorites. The online reviews and comments tell a story of versatility: “The best gyros,” “I love their baklava.” “Come in Friday for the fish special!” “The stuffed grape leaves are great,” and “I had the best Philly cheesesteak.”

Philly cheesesteak? Yes. All part of Maalouf’s plan to please just about everybody. And a deli, rather than a traditional, full-service restaurant, was the logical concept to achieve that goal—and showcase Maalouf’s natural communication skills. “You’re more interactive with customers, and get to know them,” Maalouf said. “And with the food, you can try different things. We have different items every day.”

Operating a deli has been something of a family tradition. Maalouf’s parents, Zakia and Assaad, ran the deli at Joe’s Market & Deli—a convenience store known for its Middle Eastern meals—on Como Avenue in Minneapolis for about 16 years. Maalouf, when he finished college, helped his parents cook. When Assaad passed away in 2005, “my mom and I decided to open a place,” Maalouf said. All the recipes used are from dishes that she would prepare for the family (seven children!) growing up in Lebanon and when they arrived in the United States. Zakia herself worked at the restaurant when it opened in early 2007, but not so much now. “She’s 70 years old,” Maalouf said. “Time for her to rest.”

Zakia’s deli case offerings and daily

entrée specials are numerous, one can find Middle Eastern/Mediterranean standards like tabuli, falafel, kibbi, baba ganouj and hummus, to more unfamiliar items like mjadra, a lentil spread; and fasoolya, kidney beans tossed in a light dressing. All that can be packed by the quarter or half-pound, or paired with one of the daily entrée specials for a meal.

Those specials are a mixture of American familiarity and traditional Lebanese—a roast chicken with mashed potatoes, to kafta and rice and cabbage rolls. There are, of course, gyros, and that infamous Philly cheesesteak sandwich. Those that come in first for the cheesesteak, eventually gravitate to the Lebanese fare because of Maalouf and his staff. “When we opened, I was here all the time,” he said. “I explained the food, and gave samples.” His staff does the same thing.

Maalouf also listens to his customers for combinations he had not thought of (“Now they teach me,” he said). A regular told him that his mjadra spread with his tangy tahini sauce made a fantastic, simple vegetarian sandwich. Now he’s matching others, and finding great combinations. “I think if your ingredients are good, no matter what you mix it with, it’s good,” he said.

Those ingredients don’t come into the restaurant processed, Maalouf said. “Everything is from scratch. We focus on the healthy, there’s not a lot of deep-frying. We buy all our vegetables and chop them. It’s a lot of work, but that’s why it’s good.”

Deli catering

The deli’s location turned out to be ideal, not only for its proximity to local businesses and the interstate, but also for the spacious kitchen. Traditional delis such as Zakia that have a retail component, churn out large amounts of food, which folds easily into a catering business. Maalouf said he has enough capacity to easily accommodate preparing food for up to 300 people at an event.

Usually, it’s an event for business lunch for about 30 people, and the client list is broad. “The University of Minnesota is a big account with all their summer meetings,” he said. As are many high schools with the various faculty summer meetings. Weddings and graduation parties kick up in June, all of it combining to amount to about a 25 percent increase in business during the spring and early summer months.

Despite those numbers, the catering side of the business is limited to preparing



Zakia Deli owner David Maalouf always finds time to serve guests. “You get to know your customers,” he said.

the food for delivery or pick up. Adding full service or preparing food on-site is an entirely different business, Maalouf explained, requiring an investment in time and capital outside of his current plan—a plan that works very well.

Zakia Deli is a smoothly operating machine, but like any restaurant, requires constant attention. To keep quality high and prices low in a deli, high volume is required. To keep that high volume, service must be efficient to keep the long line moving at lunch. “If you fall behind a little bit, that last person in line is ten minutes late (on their lunch time),” he said, adding that he is well-staffed, so that doesn’t happen.

Maalouf is still almost always there

“I’ve been planning my vacation for five years now,” he joked, and he’s able to step in when things get crushed, which allows him the opportunity for the meaningful customer interaction. Which, coupled with the good food, keeps bringing more customers. “All my advertisement has been word of mouth,” Maalouf said. “Business has been growing since day one, even when the economy was really struggling.” **FSN**

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