



ARABIAN NIGHTS Clockwise from left: Diners enjoy traditional *fauadeia* at Olive Tree Restaurant in Brookhurst Plaza; fresh baked baklava at Forn Al-Hara, a small neighborhood bakery; grilled-to-order kebabs at Olive Tree.



Little Gaza Gourmet!

In a restaurant rut? Try traveling to the exotic Middle Eastern enclave that is Anaheim's *real* California adventure!

| By Joshua Lurie | Photography by Edward Duarte |

Adventurous travelers fly to places like Amman, Jerusalem and Damascus, and in Orange County, it's possible to get a taste of all three cities in a single day. Just drive to Little Arabia (also called Little Gaza), a pan-Arab community that sprouted in the shadow of Disneyland in the '80s to meet the needs of immigrants and students. The mile-long stretch of Brookhurst Street between Broadway and Ball Road now draws gastronomers from every ethnicity imaginable with its unique cuisine.

Mohamed Sammy Khouraki and wife Noha inspired other businesses when they debuted **Altayebat** market in 1983 (1217 S. Brookhurst St., Anaheim, 714.520.4723, altayebat.com). Initially, the market was called Cerritos Produce, but the couple relocated to Brookhurst and Ball in 1988, doubling the size and changing the name to Altayebat, which means "the tasty and delicious" in Arabic. Altayebat remains popular for offerings like lamb heads, goat chops, and snack-worthy melon seeds.

The restaurant that best captures Little Arabia's multinational flair is probably **Olive Tree** (512 S. Brookhurst St., Ste. 3, Anaheim, 714.535.2878), owned by Palestine native Abu Ahmad, a former textile engineer. You'll find kebabs galore, but it's Jordanian chef Um Alaa's daily specials that make this five-year-old Brookhurst Plaza restaurant a destination. Alaa produces pan-Arab dishes like Egyptian *molokhia* (okra leaves with chicken and rice), Saudi Arabian *kabsa* (rice and meat) and

Jordanian *mansaf* (rice with lamb or chicken cooked in yogurt). "Once you eat here, you're stuck with me," proprietor Ahmad promises.

Next door, **Forn Al-Hara** (512 S. Brookhurst St., Ste. 5, Anaheim, 714.758.3777) specializes in Lebanese flatbreads that have grown so popular that they've triggered a neighborhood arms race. Mo Alam's "neighborhood bakery" hosts only six tables and features Roy Herwick's murals of Lebanon, including a baker sliding a flatbread into a stone oven. A wall-mounted menu lists myriad flatbread options, like a fluffy one slathered with tangy *labni* (yogurt cheese) and dusted with zaatar, a spice blend consisting of oregano, thyme, sumac and sesame seeds. Cheese with spinach is topped with baby spinach leaves, zaatar and both goat and white cheeses. Display cases and countertops are bursting with baklava, *mamouls* and *knafeh*, gritty flour discs filled with goat cheese and topped with crushed pistachios. Baker Ali Farhat was raised in Beirut and worked at nearby Al-Sanabel for more than eight years.

Al-Sanabel (816 S. Brookhurst St., Anaheim, 714.635.4353) is the elder statesman of Little Arabia's flatbread peddlers, a 12-year-old bakery named for the Arabic term for a head of wheat. Look past the outdated children's carnival claw machine and you'll find more than 20 flatbread varieties. *Sphiha baalbakia* is especially popular, topped with a blend of lean ground beef, pomegranate syrup, pine nuts and spices. CONTINUED...



SPICE UP YOUR LIFE Clockwise from top left: Basmati rice stacks at supermarket Altayebat; beef feet at Altayebat; fresh flatbreads come out of the oven at Forn Al-Hara; traditional *fawadeia*, fried fish and rice at Olive Tree; fresh-baked pastries at Forn Al-Hara.



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...CONTINUED *Koki kiri* features a similar ground beef base and is piled with pickle spears, yogurt and spiced beef sausage called *soujouk*.

Abdallah Soueidan operated **Al-Amir Bakery** for eight years in Brookhurst Plaza before “the prince” was destroyed by fire. The new Al-Amir rose from the ashes in January, when Soueidan reopened the bakery down the street (2281 W. Ball Rd., Anaheim, 714.535.0973). The Lebanon native continues to make everything fresh daily. That includes grinding meat in-house and using olive oil, an expensive but effective touch. Al-Amir’s crispy flatbreads are layered with two kinds of house-made beef sausage, including smoky, spicy *soujouk*; and *kafta*, which is seasoned with black pepper, parsley and onions. “Cheese” flatbreads actually host three kinds of cheese: two different white cheeses plus a Bulgarian cheese called Ackawi. For added punch, get your cheese flatbread dusted with zaatar.

Falafel is yet another point of contention in Little Arabia, where competition once again benefits diners. Mike Hawari and wife Nazarene have occupied the back corner of a strip mall for 15 years, naming **Kareem’s** (1208 S. Brookhurst St., Anaheim, 714.778.6829) for their son, and the Arabic word for “generous.” Order at the window and snag a table. Most people choose falafel, which is fried to order, crispy outside and green inside, flecked with parsley, garlic, onions and secret spices. (Secret spices are a recurring theme in Little Arabia.) Hummus with “meat” is also popular, with marinated nubs of filet mignon, almonds and a dusting of paprika.

Mahmud Salem opened Sahara Falafel in 1995 (590 S. Brookhurst St., Anaheim, 714.491.0400). The space is dominated by a Sahara Desert mural featuring camels and Bedouin nomads. Salem’s take on falafel is donut-shaped and flecked with parsley and cilantro. The crispy cakes are supple inside and dunkable in creamy, sesame-enriched tahini, elegant hummus and fiery hot sauce. If falafel isn’t your thing, consider shawerma, heaping plates of spit-roasted chicken or beef.

If you’re indecisive, **Victory Bakery** (630 S. Brookhurst St., Anaheim, 714.817.6907, victorybakeryandrestaurant.com) is a one-stop shop for savories and sweets. The original Victory Bakery started in Lebanon as an ice cream parlor in 1955. The owners expanded stateside in 1988, to Montebello. Mohammed Awad owns the Little Arabia branch, which dates to 2007. The sprawling space features a bakery, juice bar, gelato case and restaurant. Middle Eastern pastries appear on trays, including mamouls filled with date paste or walnuts, buttery pistachio-studded pastries and grainy farina squares topped with shaved almonds. A sprawling buffet costs \$6.99 for lunch and \$9.99 for dinner during the week. On weekends, it’s \$11.99 but features *mansaf*, a hearty Palestinian rice plate with fresh-pulled lamb.

Little Arabia has grown a lot since Altayebat set the pace in 1983, and the neighborhood now stands as an Anaheim attraction in its own right. As Olive Tree owner Abu Ahmad says, “American, Chinese, Japanese, Mexicans... they all come here.” 📍