

# **RALEIGH** DOWNTOWNER MAGAZINE

VOLUME 5, ISSUE 4

ENTERTAINMENT, ARTS & CULTURE, BUSINESS, DINING, EVENTS, MUSIC, AND MORE

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## Sitti BY BRIAN ADORNETTO

From the full-length windows which give you a front row view of downtown activity, to the refreshing flavors of lemon, mint, and sumac used to season the food (more on that later), Sitti (pronounced Se-thee) is a welcome breath of fresh air in the midst of Raleigh's bustling epicenter.

Longtime Raleigh real estate developer Greg Hatem and the Saleh family of Neomonde fame have joined together in refurbishing the historic Heilig-Levine building, transforming it into an authentic Lebanese restaurant with "local influences." Sitti, Lebanese for grandmother, is stylishly furnished complete with an original 1930s art deco bar from Chicago that has been beautifully restored to its Golden Era glory. In the center of the main dining room sits a large communal table, the top carved from Lebanese cedar, resting on a base once located in the United States Library of Congress. Also displayed in the dining room are several ornate hookahs,

Middle Eastern water pipes for smoking, and an entire wall of historic family portraits from both Hatem and Saleh families. As enticing as the main dining room is, the restaurant also boasts a wonderful urban courtyard (which can be heated in winter and complete with a stage area for live music), perfect for al fresco dining or



a private gathering. There is also a hidden dining room tucked away in the quaint downstairs basement, perfect for a business meeting or birthday party.

The menu may at first seem slightly daunting due to the Lebanese names given to many of the selections. However, general manager Todd Henderson has successfully trained his staff not only in the important art of hospitality but also in translating, explaining and teaching the pronunciation needed to help guests enjoy all that Sitti has to offer. For example, as we sampled the warm, bilowy homemade pita and aromatic dipping sauce, our friendly and enthusiastic server, Christy, adeptly helped us navigate our menus which were broken into cold and hot mezze (small plates similar to Spanish tapas), soups, salads, entrees, pizzettes (house-made flat breads with toppings), and homemade desserts.

While Sitti's menu features traditional recipes from each of the owners' families,



Chef Ghassan Jarrouj's experience and traveled background helps keep the food exciting and relevant by interlacing both modern and local sensibilities. Born just outside of Beirut in the Bekaa Valley, Chef Ghassan has lived in several major U.S. cities, cooking in French, Italian and American restaurants. He has also worked as the private chef for the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon.

We followed the opening basket of pita bread with a feast of mezze selections. High on our list were the Cheese Rolls—gruyere and Parmigiano-filled crepes, rolled and fried until golden brown and

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seasoned with a touch of mint. They were light, crispy, and intensely addictive. Bathed in a bright sauce of lemon, white wine, shaved garlic, and cilantro, the Graides (Lebanese for shrimp) were tender, moist, and one of the most popular hot mezze among our group.

The Laban bi Khair (Lebanon's answer to Greek Tzatziki) is a favorite of Sitti regulars as a condiment for their pita but we found it to be the perfect accompaniment for our marinated and masterfully char-grilled Lamb Chop mezze. We also enjoyed the citrusy pan-seared salmon, marinated in fresh herbs and Lebanese spices and served with a refreshing yogurt sauce.

For our next course, we had the Sitti Salad (romaine lettuce with tomatoes, cucumbers, and surprising mint vinaigrette) and the Goat Cheese and Orange Salad with mixed greens, dates, and walnuts tossed with a lemon vinaigrette. The mint vinaigrette received rave reviews but the goat cheese salad stole the show. It was wonderfully balanced with sweet,

tart, creamy, and crunchy elements. The salad was just one of many selections available for our vegetarian-dining friends.

Among our favorite entrees were the Fattah with Lamb and the Chicken Kabobs. The Fattah, braised and shredded lamb served over rice studded with pine nuts and crisp phyllo shards and drizzled with garlic whipped yogurt, was superb. The textures and flavors played off one another perfectly and it was one of the many appetizing highlights of the night. The Kabobs included juicy char-grilled medallions of marinated chicken served with zesty pickled red onions, scrumptious, cloud-like garlic whip and the inspiring Sitti rice with roasted almonds and sumac. For those who haven't been exposed to the spice, sumac is a fruity tart-flavored seasoning made from the dried brick-red colored berries of the sumac shrub common in the Middle East and southeast Europe



(not to be confused with the poisonous North American Sumac, but the two plants are related). This spice is used in many sauces, spice blends and marinades and

is considered essential for cooking in much of the Middle East.

If chocolate is your pleasure, don't miss the Chocolate Fondant, a warm gooey chocolate cake served with old-fashioned real vanilla bean ice cream. If you're feeling a bit more adventurous, Sitti's Baklava is deliciously sweet and buttery. It's wonderful for sharing and pairs well with an after-dinner cup of Larry's Beans fragrant coffee.

Whether you sit at a table near the windows and watch Raleigh pass by or dine al fresco in the courtyard, Sitti is a welcoming, elegant yet affordable, fun and romantic restaurant with fresh flavorful food. Pick almost anything on the menu and you won't be disappointed. 🍽️

*Our favorite local foodie, Fred Benton, is taking some time off from his Food Editor position at the Downtowner. Local chef, culinary instructor, and freelance food writer, Brian Adornetto is helping out during Fred's absence. He teaches regularly at A Southern Season in Chapel Hill and his business, Love at First Bite, specializes in private cooking classes and intimate dinner parties. For more information, please visit him at [www.loveatfirstbite.net](http://www.loveatfirstbite.net).*



#### SITTI

137 South Wilmington Street  
Raleigh, NC 27601  
919.239.4070  
[www.sitti-raleigh.com](http://www.sitti-raleigh.com)

#### HOURS:

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