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RESTAURANTS



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY DEWECK LOS ANGELES TIMES

QUEEN: Vintage Theda Bara looks out over the bar area, a still from the 1917 film "Cleopatra."

THE REVIEW

Cleo has an exotic air

Hollywood meets the Middle East, with bold flavors and a very noisy dining room.

S. IBENE VIRSILA
RESTAURANT CRITIC

This, after all, being Hollywood, if SBE's Sam Nasserian is going to name a restaurant for the queen of Egypt, it's obligatory to vamp it up a little. Set in the ornate Redbury Hotel, a stone's throw from Hollywood and Vine, Cleo references the ailing Egyptian with a giant, black-and-white photo of the silent film actress Theda Bara as a fierce, dark-eyed Cleopatra from 1917. More queens of the cinema grace the walls of the high-ceilinged room, but their Cleos look decidedly tame compared with Bara.

I used to dread checking out trendy new restaurants in

Cleo **



MORE THAN A BITE: Among the mezzes on the menu are *beslama* stuffed with spicy shrimp.

LOCATION
1717 Vista St., Los Angeles.
(323) 962-5711.
www.cleorestaurant.com

PRICE
Dips, kebabs and burritos.

service and ambiance, with price taken into account in relation to quality. ****: Outstanding on every level. ***: Excellent. ***: Very good. *: Good. N: Not recommended.

dishes are less than \$5. Those dips are \$6 each; kebabs and sausages the same. *Kebabs* — beef, lamb or chicken — come to the table sizzling, each very flavorful. But my favorite has to be the beautifully tender mussels of sweetbread.

Some dishes look to North Africa for inspiration, and that includes a couple of fine seafood offerings — a *lagime* of mussels cooked with tomato, chickpeas and spinach, and another that starts *domme* with mussels, tomatoes, pickled olives and a cotton-house-made *harissa*.

If you order *couscous*, the waiter spoons some from the *lagime* into a bowl and ladles broth over the top. The *couscous* is studded with vegetables, and if you want something more substantial, order *stew* chicken or lamb *kebabs* to accompany it. Or even better, a saucy meatball *lagime* with a soft egg in the center.

Eating at Cleo feels festive

everything, and while some were entertaining, mostly the food was forgettable, if not downright bad. But Hollywood has been busy upgrading its image with sleek condos, hotels — and restaurants. Cleo is something different, a contemporary Middle Eastern restaurant with exciting and accessible food and prices that for the most part won't set you back a month's rent for one meal.

On a weekend night, the restaurant draws a dressed-up crowd on the hunt for some Hollywood glamour and fun. The bar can be mobbed — and it can be crazy loud. After checking in with the hostess one night, we're caught at the back of a crowd surging toward the entrance to the dining room, angling to get a glimpse of what's going on in there. "Opa!" the diners inside roar to the sound of crickery shattering and excited claps.

"Oh, that's just someone breaking a plate," we're told. "It's a Greek tradition." One wonders what's to prevent everybody getting into the act, flinging their empty plates on the floor. But guests are all so well-behaved only the designated plate-slinger, usually someone celebrating a birthday or anniversary, has a go at it.

Pricey wines

We're torn. Should we order a drink? Maybe not, if it's really just a five-minute wait for our table. I check the small blackboard propped on a corner of the bar: a bottle of 1993 Dom Perignon "Oenoth-

\$8 to \$11; seafood, \$12 to \$16; meats, \$10 to \$16; flatbreads, \$12 to \$14; desserts, \$5 to \$8. Corkage fee, \$25.

DETAILS

Open noon to midnight daily. Valet parking, \$10, with validation.

Rating is based on food.

equé" for \$1,300. Next up, 1996 Dom Rosé for \$980. And at the very bottom, a bottle of Chateau Montelena Zin for \$90 (which you can find online for \$26). No, definitely not. Is anybody that dumb and/or rich to go for one of these bottles?

Fortunately, that clueless, high-handed attitude ends at the bar. In the past, SBE has banked on luxe and trendy spots, such as Katsuya, XIV and the Bazaar by José Andrés. And the latter is the only one with real food cred. Cleo, however, is perhaps closer to SBE corporate executive chef Daniel Elmaleh's heart. He grew up partly in Israel, and his food here is vibrant and respectful of tradition.

The sprawling menu with dozens and dozens of dishes can be confusing to someone unfamiliar with Middle Eastern cuisine. Waiters, fortunately, are adept at guiding guests through the myriad choices. They'll help decide what and how many dishes to order, and hopefully pace them so they don't come out all at the same time.

Start with a few dips — thick, garlicky *labneh* (yo-

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Come closer

Go online for a photo gallery look at Cleo at the Redbury Hotel, and some of the most popular dishes on the menu there.

gurt) with nuggets of feta, a dreamy *muhannara* (red pepper purée lighted up with pomegranate syrup and walnuts) and a smoky *baba ghanouj* with a pillowy *pitla* fresh from the oven.

Other not-so-small nibbles include *briouats* stuffed with spicy shrimp, a classic *spanakopita* or golden cheese puffs called *börek*.

Vegetarians can find lots to eat from the wood-burning oven. I loved the roasted artichoke leaves with Nicoise olives, earthy Brussels sprouts perked up with capers and almonds, and especially the cauliflower florets accented with *padouan* (French curry powder) and cashews. There's also ravioli stuffed with fresh farmer's cheese and tossed in brown butter with a soft egg.

Garnished flatbreads are delicious too, the crust crisp and cut into long, jagged shards. Tops on my list: the one with artichoke, crushed potato, mozzarella and a flurry of arugula leaves.

Eclectic samplings

Nothing here costs more than \$20, and most larger

for anybody who wants to enjoy their own plate in peace. The whole idea is to share as plates whiz around the table. Taste this and this and this.

The wine list is short but sweet, with all bottles less than \$50 (again, except for those "specials"). It's nice to see dry sherry and Madeira by the glass and even a Skouras red from Greece on the list. Watch the water, though. I noted we were billed \$11 for a bottle of Badoit. (On another visit it had dropped to \$7 a bottle.)

Desserts seem almost an afterthought. But if you're hankering for one, go with the rich, sticky date pudding or the clean, refreshing yogurt sorbet. On the other hand, a plate of tiny powdered sugar cookies and *baklava* isn't very enticing.

But then the noise factor doesn't encourage lingering. On my last visit to Cleo, on a weekday night, I might add, the noise level was so high I could carry on a conversation only with the person next to me, not across the table. And so, after dinner, my group ended up talking for a while on the sidewalk outside. For many, the noise factor at Cleo will be a deal-breaker unless you opt for an early dinner. Or a late one.

All in all, though, Cleo adds something new and exciting to the Hollywood scene. More than just another pretty face, Cleo has both style and substance, with a cuisine that's grounded in an authentic tradition.

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