

MIDDLE EAST EVENTS IN LONDON

JULY / AUGUST 1995

Restaurant Review



London Shishas

Many years ago, when I was living in Paris, one of the dreams of daily existence was a shisha, the Egyptian and more friendly word for the Levantine (n)argile, on the sides of the Seine. It was clear that such a pleasurable thing did not exist. As it turned out, the shisha was out of bounds owing to French law. It required tobacco, and the French *regie* of tabacs and tombacs, which is one of those remnants of French centralised monopolies, would not accept tobacco which wasn't registered in douze exemplaires with each of the twelve bureaux whose stamps were needed in order for the shisha licence to pass muster. As a consequence, no shisha in Paris cafes, which obviously continue to suffer severely from red tape. The crisis persists, and only a legislative revision of the law, which does not seem to be on Jacques Chirac's programme, could revive them.

So another vital fallout of natural British freedoms - and the rise of the London cafes - is the availability of shishas here. As I am writing to the faithful readers of Middle East Events, there is no need to explain the importance or mode d'emploi of the water and smoke engine a.k.a. hubble bubble. So people can fulfil their daily dreams and cravings - although not directly on the Thames, in the following two places.

The first is Abu Hammad, on Queensway, twenty yards south of Boot's. I discovered Abu Hammad last summer, when it was a run down

place, with a dark interior which was falling apart. It has been done up since. The inside is still dark, but it is now dominated by a huge video screen which blasts Arabic satellite news and some Egyptian movies, alongside MTV and other delicacies. My old-fashioned taste has been disappointed in the process, especially since Khaled left, whom I saw the other day at my local Safeway. He has complained of work conditions at Abu Hammad, long hours and, I suspect, poor pay. In the past weeks at Abu Hammad, I have also noticed the absence of 'Uthman. His smile used to tower over the place, which, despite being done up, is the closest you can get to real Cairo (minus the damn video screen) on the Northern shore of the Mediterranean, of which Britain is of course part. I hope 'Uthman has not joined Khaled in his disappointment, as the smile is particularly reassuring in that rather seedy place. But it is still endearing, especially after hours, and the atmosphere - though not totally convenient for ladies - is quite unique. The food is not very good, slightly expensive if one doesn't choose well - I recommend hummus and shawarma or kebab only, do not indulge in sweets and salads. I am less certain of the taste of the shisha when not prepared by 'Uthman, but my mu'assal held its ground the other day. Maybe a petition to the Egyptian owners of the restaurant could circulate amongst shisha lovers, for restoration of the original smiles. Abu Hammad deserves a visit, and I recommend that you sit on one of the

two outside tables in the summer for a view of Queensway in action. That is, if you do not mind Australian tourists invariably coming closer with an air entendu to smell the smouldering tobacco in unrequited reveries of especially mined shishas ("mined" as in the literal translation of malghum for the connaisseur).

A better held and cleaner shisha place is owed to my SOAS network of blue-eyed Alexandria-matured Arab-speaking students who, like me, miss their Middle Eastern bubbles and do not wish to smoke away at Abu Hammad on a nightly basis. This is the Moonlight at 190 Edgware road, opposite Safeway. The quality of the zaghul was remarkable. As I am composing these precious words on my portable, the place is swarming up with khalijs against a Fairuz record. The cafe looks very European from the outside - marble tables and all - but everything

else, fortunately, does not. It seems to be run by Iraqis, an extremely friendly lot with an Iraqi Khaled (Khaled Jawad) and the boss, also Iraqi, Abu Tareq (Jamal Rida). The kebab is of excellent quality, beside being remarkably cheap. The baqlawa is also appealing, as is the mint tea. I haven't tried it in the morning though, and the featured full English breakfast (£2.75) - with presumably halal bacon - must be a novelty in world cuisine if taken with a shisha.

The shishas in both places are about £4.00 to £5.00. I wonder at which table the local Naguib Mahfuz sits.

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