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News from Inland Valley in the Times Community Newspapers

Saca's takes diners on a tasty Mediterranean trip

By PAT RATHBUN

I came, I saw, I consumed. The object of my quest: what I had been told was the best falafel this side of Los Angeles. My tipster was right. If you like falafel or Mediterranean food in general, you can get a quick, satisfying fix at Saca's in the Claremont Village.

The setting is pretty much fast-food: You order at the cash register at the end of the counter, tended on this Saturday night by a rather youthful member of the Saca organization. He was nevertheless helpful in describing the offerings, despite the frenetic pace of the staff behind the counter -- and the crowd of customers, possibly larger than usual due to a classic car show in progress on the street outside. The flow of patrons was constant -- eat-in and take-out -- until the kitchen shut down at 9 p.m.

The menu isn't large, and we were able to make a speedy selection and find a seat. Sitting against the back wall, we could relax to authentic Middle Eastern music and observe the always-eclectic mix of people making the Village scene. Our meals were ready in short order: a chicken shawerma platter for me and a beef shawerma platter for my husband (both \$5.95). Platters come with hummus and two pieces of pita bread.

You then have a choice of salad or french fries -- not exactly Mediterranean, but good. OK, I guess France borders the Mediterranean. But at Saca's, I bet this is a concession to American taste. At Saca's, the hummus -- a dip made of pureed garbanzo beans, with spices, paprika and olive oil -- is creamy, smooth and a wonderful accompaniment to the meat. I spread the hummus on the pita, topped it with chicken and a little garlic sauce (a little goes a long way) and ate my dinner sandwich-style.

"Shawerma" means the meat is seasoned with Mediterranean herbs and roasted on a spit against an open vertical flame. After the meat is sliced off the spit it is sizzled in a pan right before serving. The result is meat that is flavorful but not spicy.

The highlight of the meal was, as expected, the falafel (\$1.35 for three patties). Again, garbanzo beans are pressed into duty -- well, actually ground -- and mixed with parsley and a "secret" blend of Mediterranean herbs and spices. Then the patties (somewhat larger than golf balls) are fried to a deep golden brown and served with a yogurt sauce. Inside they are a bright green, and overall they are delicious.

We thought about getting some to go so we could relive the experience later, but

we realized that these delicate morsels are probably best served hot and fresh. Instead, we ordered a side dish of tabbouleh to go. Here the garbanzo beans step aside and parsley takes the lead. This is a salad made of chopped parsley, diced tomatoes, onions, cracked wheat and a blend of herbs. All ingredients are chopped fine and blend well to make a pleasant-tasting chilled salad. Ours was excellent the next day with lunch.

Before we left Saca's, we shared a little queen baklava (\$1.25). This was mostly filo pastry formed into what might be considered a little crown, filled with ground nuts and topped with honey. This dessert was good but rather tiny. The square or finger versions looked to have a bit more substance even though they are cheaper (95 cents). By the time I went up to the counter to get my take-home, the crowds had thinned and the proprietor had time to ask me how I liked the dinner -- and seemed genuinely pleased that we had enjoyed it. The Sacas, no matter how popular their eatery, haven't lost the love of what they do -- and it shows.

Pat Rathbun is a restaurant reviewer for Inland Valley Our Times. She can be reached online at Mubs1@aol.com.

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FYI:

What: Saca's Mediterranean Cuisine

Where: 248 W. 2nd St., Claremont

Phone: 624-3340

Hours: 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Monday- Thursday, 11 a.m.-9 a.m. Friday-Saturday; closed Sunday. Catering is available.

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Also on the menu

- Rotisserie chicken with pita and garlic sauce (whole \$6.75, half \$3.95)
- Half rotisserie chicken platter with hummus, fries or salad, two pitas, garlic sauce and pickled turnip (\$4.95)
- Vegetarian falafel platter with six falafels, hummus, two full pitas, sesame sauce and pickled turnip (\$4.45)
- Vegetarian combination platter with two falafel, hummus, tabbouleh, baba-ghanouj (roasted eggplant dip), two half-pita slices, sesame sauce and pickled turnip (\$4.75)
- Salads, \$2.25 to \$3.95
- Sandwiches, \$2.45 to \$2.95
- Appetizers and side dishes, including dolmas (grape leaves stuffed with rice) and rice pilaf, \$1 to \$2.95