

Food & Drink

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Eat and drink your way through town Edited by **Guy Dimond**



Arabian sights *The road to Damascus, via Shepherd's Bush*

Photography by **Oliver Knight**

Shepherd's Bush food walk



Mezze around Eating in at Abu Zaad



Strong or stronger? Arabic coffee



Nutty boy Mr Nut Case himself, Jamil Chedid



On the pulse Provisions at The Nut Case



Damas Gate No, those aren't Pringles

Damascene cuisine

Think you've done London? Take a tour of Little Syria in Shepherd's Bush.

Guy Dimond visits the Middle East in W12. Photography **Oliver Knight**

'Why is there a Syrian community in Shepherd's Bush?' is a good question, but not as good as 'Why not?' Sometimes communities are drawn by employment, cheap housing, a church or mosque, or some other focal point; Shepherd's Bush has all and none of these, which is why the area is now Polish, Somali, Ethiopian, Eritrean, Moroccan, Vietnamese, Australian, Iranian and South African. There was no particular reason that Syrians began settling in nearby Acton in the 1980s, but they did. Their food shops started clustering on Uxbridge Road in the 1990s, and in 2001 Abu Zaad – London's only self-proclaimed Syrian restaurant – showed that the

Syrians had really arrived. The Syrian presence is now intriguing enough to merit its own walking tour, led by a Blue Badge-qualified guide (the ambulatory equivalent of The Knowledge) and sponsored by Hammersmith & Fulham Council.

We're gathered on a chilly day outside Shepherd's Bush Tube with Ann Jones, who lives in the area. Her interest in the area is personal as well as professional: she also leads tours of Polish Shepherd's Bush and notable gardens of nearby Stamford Brook. The council approached her three years ago to create walks that would generate local and visitor interest in an area with few obvious visitor attractions – unless you include Shepherd's Bush Market and a smattering of pound shops. These food tours last over an hour, and are free.

'Syrian food is much the same as Lebanese food,' Jones tells us – ie an array of small dishes called meze, often made from pulses and fresh vegetables and herbs, with grilled lamb or sometimes beef, often eaten as the 'main course'. 'There are some regional differences,' she



Spice girl Tour guide, Ann Jones

adds, 'but you find much the same ingredients used across the Middle East.' She recommends Claudia Roden's classic 'A New Book of Middle Eastern Food' as the most comprehensive recipe book for anyone thinking of exploring the cuisine further in their own kitchen. Our small group huddles in an aisle of **Al Abbas** supermarket where, among the olive oils, Jones points out the (not edible) jasmine hair oils, before talking us through the array of less familiar foodstuffs on sale: dried limes, zaatar spice mix, the young roasted green wheat called freekeh (which can be used in side dishes, soups, stuffings and salads). Note for freekeh freaks: apparently you should buy the Australian one (Greenwheat Freekeh) if you can find it, as it's cleaner and contains fewer stones than the Middle Eastern packs.

The display of sheep's feet at the halal meat counter at Al Abbas has us moving on swiftly past the own-label snacks, which include sweet pastries, to the preserves section and such curiosities as rose-petal preserve, sweet carrot con-

serve... 'Processed cheese in a can!' exclaims an Arabic member of our group. 'My parents used to live on this stuff. It's horrid, and authentically Middle Eastern.' Ingredients that did make their way into my shopping bag included pomegranate molasses, orange-blossom water, beetroot-coloured turnip pickle – and verjuice, described on the label as 'unripped [sic] grape juice'.

'I'm taken by the lupin seeds, the pumpkin seeds and the mulberries, which are a revelation'

Next, the nuttiest shop in Shepherd's Bush, **The Nut Case**. Lebanese owner Jamil Chedid is thrilled to have the interest handing out free samples of Turkish delight as well as dry-roasted nibbles. 'I introduced dry-roasting to the UK, you know,' he says as he passes round a plate of Lebanese sweet pastries. You won't just find peanuts and cashews here. I'm taken by the lupin seeds, the pumpkin seeds and the mulberries, which are a revelation. 'Pistachios and almonds are thought to be the only two nuts mentioned in the Bible,' says Jones. 'The Queen of Sheba was supposedly partial to them, and they've been cultivated since around 6000BC in the Fertile Crescent.' Agriculture originated in the fertile land we now know as Iran and Iraq; Syrians were ancient masters of irrigation too, as anyone who's visited Syria can testify. As my eyes settle on Chedid's collection of Arabic pop CDs and DVDs, including a movie called 'Reckless Husbands' that clearly does not feature George Clooney, it's time to move on.

Across the road is **Damas Gate**, established in 1988 and still one of the largest and best Middle Eastern food stores in London, providing everything from a very busy halal butcher counter to lots of fresh vegetables and herbs. Even more impressive are the prices. 'How much would this cost at Tesco?' is the rhetorical question as we peruse the big tubs of juicy olives, labneh (yoghurt cheese), feta, halloumi, Persepolis green sultanas and a score of specialist breads



You can call me Halal Al Abbas

such as lavash and khobez. It's a feast, and all at prices that a shopper in Aleppo could hardly object to.

One hour of this is enough to generate a healthy appetite, so the tour winds up at the cosy **Abu Zaad** for lunch. As Jones says, if you're already familiar with Lebanese food – the dominant culinary style in most of the Middle East – you'll recognise most of the dishes. Order a round of hot and cold meze (small dishes to share) and you'll be bowled over by the smoky allure of the moutabal (grilled aubergine purée); the taut lamb meatballs called kibbeh that are stuffed with pine nuts; and the zinging freshness of the chopped parsley, lemon juice and mint salad called tabouleh. Best of all, a lunch here will set you back only around a tenner for some of the most carefully prepared Middle Eastern food you'll find in London.

Who'd have thought that visiting Shepherd's Bush could evoke a Road-to-Damascus moment. *The next Middle Eastern food tour will be led by Ann Jones on Saturday March 18 at 2pm. The group is limited to 15 people, so contact Catherine Knight (020 8735 4171/tourism@bbf.gov.uk) to book.*

Levantine Shepherd's Bush

Four of the best

Abu Zaad
29 Uxbridge Rd, W12 8LH
(020 8749 5107). Open daily
11am-11pm.

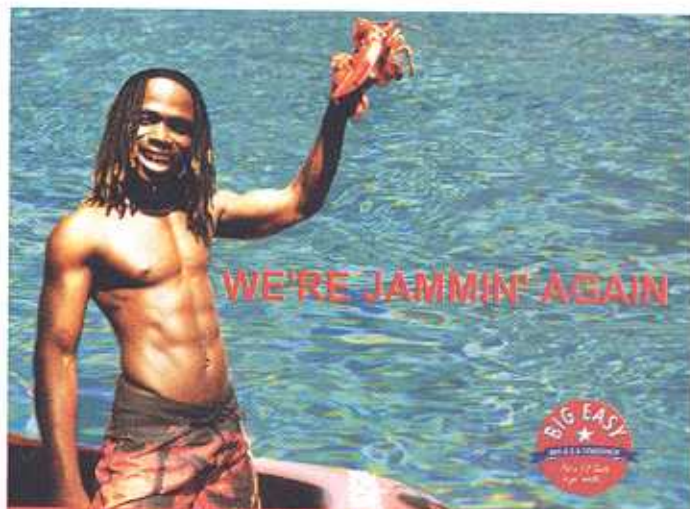
Al Abbas
258 Uxbridge Rd, W12 7JL (020 8740
1932). Open daily 7am-12midnight.

Damas Gate
81-85 Uxbridge Rd, W12 8NR (020
8743 5116). Open daily 9am-10pm.

The Nut Case
352 Uxbridge Rd, W12 7LL
(020 8743 0336). Open Mon-Sat
10am-9pm; Sun 10am-5pm.



Hot to trot Lamb's feet at Al Abbas



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