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Step into another world at exotic Chaihanna

BY LEAH A. ZELDES

Daily Herald Correspondent

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Uzbekistan, a country in Central Asia, lies north of Afghanistan, surrounded by other -stans. For most of the 20th century, it was part of the Soviet Union, and influences linger.

Like many of what was once called "the Russias," Uzbekistan has a tea-drinking culture, and that's what's behind the name of Buffalo Grove's pleasantly exotic Uzbekistani eatery, Chaihanna, whose name means "teahouse." Olga Berin, who opened the restaurant - currently the Chicago area's only Uzbekistani eatery - last year with her brother and sister-in-law, says the word describes a place for congregating with family and friends.

In Uzbekistan, apparently, it's customary to gather around low tables for long sessions of tea drinking, consuming endless cups of black or green tea poured from fat china pots into handleless cups, and eating kebabs or the Uzbekistani version of pilaf, studded with chunks of meat.

You'll feel like you've stepped into another world at Chaihanna. The restaurant offers only one traditional-style table, set on a raised platform surrounded by pillow seating; the rest of the seating is conventional. The small dining room is beautifully decorated with colorful tile floors, charming murals depicting Uzbekistani scenes, white-draped tables and silken window coverings.

Overhead, a large flatscreen television playing frenetic Russian music videos counters the Old Worldliness of the atmosphere, but not much.

Especially on weekends, many customers will be speaking Russian. Berin, who came to the United States from Uzbekistan 13 years ago, said the owners chose the Buffalo Grove location because of the area's many immigrants from the former Soviet Union, who would be familiar with the restaurant's bill of fare.

"But we introduce it to everybody," she said.

Chaihanna would make a good choice for diners looking for something a little different from the usual routine of alternating steakhouses, Italian restaurants and sushi bars but who are wary of too much culinary adventure. The menu doesn't offer much information about its offerings, but English-speaking staff members can describe the dishes.

Meals come out on gorgeous blue and white china, traced in gold, but the food is more hearty than dainty. The cuisine of this region is savory, not highly spiced, and nicely out-of-the-ordinary without being challenging.

Appetizers, salads and soups constitute much of the menu. The salmon rolls, small pinwheels of smoked salmon rolled up with dilled cream cheese, are tasty, if tiny. A platter of pickled veggies offers an assortment of nicely piquant types, including pink-tinted cabbage, shaped into a rose, tart tomatoes and more familiar cucumbers.

One of the best dishes of this section are the "spicy" beets - by no means hot, but well-seasoned with garlic, this little bowlful of bright red shreds of chilled, sweet-and-sour root vegetables really wakes up the taste buds. Other cool starters include a similar dish of shredded carrots, marinated



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mushrooms, pickled watermelon and a cold meat platter. More salad-like options include achichuk, a piquant mix of tomatoes and cucumber pickles; andijhan, a mayonnaise-based slaw mixed with strips of beef tongue; and a caesar salad.

On the hot side, there are samsa, lovely, little, round, baked meat pies with a puffy dough crust and cumin-laced filling, a very traditional Uzbekistani accompaniment to tea, and chebureki, a Georgian-style fried meat pie.

Soups include the beefy shurpa, a broth laden with morsels of meat and cubed vegetables, nicely seasoned with cilantro, and a chopped-spinach-filled soup also based on a meaty broth, flecked with green onion and served with a little dish of sour cream to mix in at the table. With the soup or salad, you might want to order a round loaf of lepescki, a traditional Uzbekistani yeast bread baked in-house. Served warm, the dense, soft, pillowy white bread sports an attractive pattern of pinpricks and a sprinkling of sesame seeds.

The entree list runs mainly meaty, with a lone fried fish dish and cheese blintzes as the alternatives. Five kinds of kebabs lead off this menu - chicken, lamb, minced meat, liver and pork. The pork kebab certainly offers a winning choice, well-grilled but moist and flavorful, and served with potatoes or rice. Another kebab-like dish, urama, offers marinated beef chunks with a spicy, ketchupy sauce and braised vegetables.

The pilaf, or palav, an Uzbekistani specialty, mixes cubes of braised beef with rice cooked in broth, savory and comforting.

Chicken tabaka, another Georgian-influenced dish, should delight any poultry lover. I loved this garlicky herbed chicken on the bone, roasted to crispy-skinned, juicy-fleshed perfection under a brick. An oily sauce resembling South American chimichurri, filled with more garlic and herbs, accompanies it.

Other entrees include manti, large, steamed dumplings with a meat filling; meat-stuffed blintzes; and rack of lamb.

The desserts, made in-house, are mainly familiar ones, starting with a first-rate chocolate layer cake, covered in rich, gooey frosting. Skip the soggy napoleon, though. For something more unusual, you could try chak-chak, a crisp pastry of crunchy fried dough doused in honey, meant to go with tea.

A short list of wines and a few hard spirits like vodka and cognac are available, along with routine soft drinks. But the beverage focus fixes on the freshly and perfectly brewed green or black tea, served in a magnificent big pot with delicate, bowl-like china cups.

• Restaurant reviews are based on one anonymous visit. Our aim is to describe the overall dining experience while guiding the reader toward the menu's strengths. The Daily Herald does not publish reviews of restaurants it cannot recommend.

Chaihanna

19 E. Dundee Road (in Cambridge Commons shopping center; entrance on Buffalo Grove Road), Buffalo Grove, (847) 215-5044

Cuisine:

Uzbekistani cuisine from Central Asia

Setting:

Charmingly decorated small restaurant in a strip mall

Price range:

Appetizers \$2.50 to \$11.99; salads and soups \$3.99 to \$7.99; entrees \$4.99 to \$12.99; desserts \$1.30 to \$4.50

Hours:

Noon to 10 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays; 1 p.m. to midnight Fridays and Saturdays; 1 to 9 p.m. Sundays

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