



Sarah Shaweesh

PROFILE

Khamisa Café

Khamisa Café serves more than just a tapestry of tasty dishes – it's a heartfelt sanctuary in an inner-Sydney suburb where Palestinian heritage, culinary mastery and community support converge to provide a taste of home and a platform for cultural advocacy. DANIELA AROCHE reports.

Earning the title of “the best falafel in Sydney” is quite a feat, as anyone who enjoys these crispy, golden bites of spiced chickpea will tell you.

There are hundreds of cafes and Middle Eastern eateries that no doubt aim for that distinction, or might claim to already have it – but only this place has been celebrated as the number one location to feast on the most scrumptious falafel you can get in the city by *The Sydney Morning Herald*. That spot is Khamsa Café in St Peters.

Proud owner Sarah Shaweesh is an unforgettable character, thanks both to her culinary establishment and her unique story.

Australian-born of Palestinian heritage, she spent much of her childhood in Jordan, and has lived in Malaysia and Saudi Arabia. Her background, cultural upbringing and the reasons for much of her movements around the world have shaped her views, activism and the way she lives her life now. These are integral to the Khamsa Café philosophy and menu – but how this happens, only she can really describe.

Ultimately, inspiration for the café came from her Palestinian heritage and the countries she lived in – dedicated to preserving culture through food, it encourages those who arrive at its doors to “come on a journey to Palestine”.

Each dish served at Khamsa tells a story, weaving together the vibrant tapestry of the Palestinian culture, and celebrates heritage, community and the warmth of shared meals. Shaweesh agrees that she’s created a space where Palestinian refugees can feel at home.

This makes the place extremely special – and plays a vital role that is firmly part of Khamsa Café’s existence. She says it’s also essential in general to have services that support refugees, available for those who need it most.

“I think it’s really important for anyone who has faced that difficult situation to have that support here and have someone to reach out to, to assist with things like mental health, or accessing resources. Those services that are available are so important,” she says.

“It was my family, my grandfather who were displaced in 1948. My dad was a couple of years old when he was made to move out of Jerusalem. The situation wasn’t good for them, so they were made to move back to Jordan.

“Palestinians are born ‘refugees’,” she adds. “We are never really given the right of citizenship or ‘statehood’. So, no matter where we are born there’s a feeling of having the aura or not having the right to return, because of the occupation. I’ve lived in five different countries, and we usually have a very choppy life where we have to keep moving and trying to search for a place to fit. Nowhere really feels like home, so we are kind-of born refugees.”

When her mother was pregnant with her, her parents were living in Saudia Arabia – and when the Gulf War broke out in 1991, they came to Australia and her mother gave birth here. The family returned to Saudia Arabia, then lived in Jordan, Malaysia, and then Australia again.

It’s been a rough road, but she says: “I guess it’s a very familiar story for a lot of Palestinians. To travel, trying to find a better life, outside.”

Khamsa Café is a sanctuary of sorts, for those who feel displaced and are seeking something to make them feel at home’. Khamsa Café’s menu – Shaweesh’s creation, cooked by her, her mother and a few other staff in its cosy kitchen – features all of her favourites, embracing everyone who enters. In this welcoming space, Palestinian refugees can feel they belong, comforted by foods they recognise and miss.

The menu also introduces anyone who hasn’t experienced Palestinian cuisine, to its tasty flavours. “I put all my favourite stuff, and the things I love on the menu... my parents always say: ‘You’ve got to make the menu smaller!’ But I can’t, it’s too hard, because I love everything and I want to share it,” she says.

Step into Khamsa’s cute space – snugly around the corner from St Peters train station – and find a polished venue with a fresh and refined look, with light timber tables and chairs and sage-green leather banquettes, a pleasing contrast to the building’s industrial elements.

The atmosphere is buzzing and delicious aromas of the latest brew mixed with whatever tasty dishes are being cooked up in the kitchen waft from the doors. A few outdoor chairs and tables line the footpath, and locals and lovers of Khamsa constantly come for coffee and takeaway wraps, or sitting around reading a book on the table, working on their laptops while sipping a coffee, chatting to each other, or shouting out a “Hey, how you going!” to the staff and family as they walk by. You really do feel at home as soon as you’re in its vicinity.

The menu’s mix of Middle Eastern classics is packed with delightful dishes that makes it hard to choose what to have. The famed felafel comes plain or in a scrumptious Bedouin Wrap. There are delectable harissa, hummus with pine nuts and baba ganoush are served with tasty pita bread. Fattoush salad combines tomatoes, cucumber, radish, mint, parsley with pomegranate molasses dressing and fried bread. Musakhan fatayer is a very popular savoury pastry filled with king brown mushroom, onion, and sumac. Mix them with other scrumptious delicacies that might be less known, such as beef fattet makdous, with slow-cooked tomatoes and baked eggplant on a



Jerusalem; The heart of the Palestinian people

bed of fried pita bread, garlic yoghurt, roasted almonds, parsley, chickpeas.

It's not just about the mouth-watering menu served though. Khamsa Café goes beyond offering a safe place, taste of exquisite flavours, and delectable fare – it holds events promoting Palestinian cultural identity. These include gatherings such as the recent Palestinian breakfast with works by artist Dana Albatrawi on show, the women-only 'End-of-Year Dinner Party, and classes to teach people Palestinian cookery. There are special Tatreez (Palestinian embroidery) workshops, among them one held in tandem with designer and Tatreez teacher Gina Barjeel, followed by a hearty dinner, all proceeds going directly to a Palestinian refugee family in need in Nablus, West Bank (Palestine).

Via these events, Shaweesh aims to foster an appreciation for Palestinian culture, heritage and traditions. Even in hardship, hospitality has always played a big part. Even in terrible times in Gaza, her cousins living there report, people cooking in the street were sharing water, dry goods, anything they had.

Hence, Khamsa Café offers Palestinian refugees a welcoming haven where they can gather, feel secure, and find a home away from home.

"I think as Palestinians it's now more important than ever to be stronger right now, and I just wanted to open a place where people can be safe to be Palestinian and come here. Everyone is welcome though, and there's no false narrative that is being put out from here. My café is a place for the community to come together," she says.

"We do lots of community building, where lots of people can learn about Palestine too; and when they come here and their friends open up the conversation, we're happy to talk. People ask us lots of things, and often have a lot of questions to ask about the current situation, and other things, and we're always happy to discuss things, and answer any questions they have. It's a really positive experience overall, and that's what we've always wanted to create."

Khamsa Café exudes vibrancy, hospitality, and – through its ambience and the universal language of taste and aromas – communicates much more than we read on the menus about the beautiful people affected by the humanitarian disaster that is Palestine today.

Reflecting on what makes it a unique place, she agrees there have been challenges, balanced by the rewards of helping Palestinian refugees, her community, and introducing others to the vibrant Palestinian culture through food and distinctive, beautiful events – focusing on the positive, beyond current hardships.

"Just meeting such a large majority of Palestinians, and also meeting our allies, and the people that really

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care about a free Palestine, is so important," she adds.

"We had to close earlier on, but since we've re-opened, it's been a really positive response, and everyone is really happy that we're back, and in a bigger space too."

Asked what sparked the concept for Khamsa Café from the start – and its unique celebration of Palestinian heritage and community, her answer is simple. "To reclaim our culture back."

Looking ahead, it's a bit more complicated, understandably, and for many reasons. "I can't really speak for the future," she says.

"The goal is to continue to make really fresh, homemade food, not cut corners, and I think people can see that in the food itself – everything is made from scratch. And the goals... well, it is just to always work on just surviving, and existing." R