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Soothing, sweet smells of tradition

For centuries, citizens of Middle Eastern countries have shared in the rite of passage of smoking the arguileh. The trend is catching fire in the United States at places like Leila, a Middle Eastern bistro in West Palm Beach.

West Palm Beach, FL - Sweet smells waft through the air on the corner of Datura and Dixie, but they're not emanating from a bakery or a coffee shop. They're from the garden-inspired patio of Leila, a chic Middle Eastern bistro in the historic Clematis Street district, where guests partake in a centuries-old tradition of smoking the arguileh.

Originated in India more than 500 years ago, the arguileh is known by many names around the world. Shisha, nargile, hookah and hubble-bubble are among the examples. Many Americans may best recognize the device as a water pipe. Regardless of what it is called, the arguileh is surfacing at a growing number of restaurants and lounges across the United States. At Leila, the patio is a place where Middle Easterners can experience a taste of home and Americans can share in an ancient tradition that encourages conversation and camaraderie.

"It's a growing trend that continues to increase in popularity," Roy Assad, founder and owner of Leila, said about the arguileh. "It's soothing to sit around the table, smoke the arguileh and talk about daily life."

Unlike cigarettes, the arguileh's tobacco is a smooth, molasses-fused blend with the fruitiness of apples, apricots, cherries, plums, peaches and strawberries among other flavors.

The flavored tobacco is smoked from a 2-foot-tall device with a long tube that passes through water, or other liquids like espresso and milk, to cool the smoke. The tobacco is placed into a bowl at the top of the arguileh and then lighted. The smoke then passes through the pipe, through the water and into the tube for the smoker to inhale.

Like the arguileh, many Middle Eastern dining and social traditions are centered on sharing among friends and family. Featuring Syrian and Lebanese cuisine, Leila is a new bistro where Middle Eastern culture and cuisine are served.

A myriad of salads and dishes – such as falafel, tabouleh, stuffed grape leaves and hommous – dot tables accented by candlelight, creating a collage of Mediterranean fare. Dinner entrees follow and include such delicacies as grilled kefta kebab, shrimp with cilantro, gilled fish and lamb.

When their feast is done, many guests sip on Turkish coffee and shai (tea), and smoke the arguileh.

"Smoking the arguileh is a social experience," Assad said. "Sometimes people are curious when they first see it, but once they learn what it is and what the cultural significance is in the Middle East, they are interested in giving it a try."

Etiquette of the Arguileh

Not familiar with the Middle Eastern custom of smoking the arguileh? Follow these tips for a proper experience:

- By no means light your cigarette off someone else's arguileh fire—it's been thought by some to disturb the rhythm of the burning charcoal.
- Move around as little as possible while enjoying your arguileh. Not only can it be dangerous to move, but it detracts from the ceremonial effect.
- When accepting an invitation to enjoy an arguileh, don't plan to leave for at least a half-hour. To depart any sooner may be considered rude.
- When offering the arguileh to someone else, make sure you provide a temporary mouthpiece. The recipient will appreciate your thoughtfulness.
- When you are sharing an arguileh with others, and you would like the pipe to be passed your way, tap the hand of the smoker, and the pipe should arrive shortly. When passing the arguileh, do not point the metal tip at the recipient. To be polite, simply fold the pipe over the hose and offer the "curl" of the hose towards your neighbor when handing off the smoking end.

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