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A true form of art and modern exercise

Leila, a new high-end restaurant that specializes in Syrian and Lebanese cuisine, also serves guests the mystical and misunderstood Middle Eastern cultural treasure of “raqs sharqi” or “belly dancing”

West Palm Beach, FL - Named after an Arabic word that means “exotic night,” Leila is a place where mysterious and scintillating Middle Eastern culture is as much a part of the dining experience as the superb Syrian and Lebanese cuisine.

Located at the corner of Datura and Dixie – regarded as a key element in the renaissance of the Clematis Street district in downtown West Palm Beach, the cosmopolitan restaurant will open May 17. When the doors open, patrons will be treated to generous portions of Mediterranean fare, the centuries-old rite of passage of smoking savory fruit tobacco from the hookah, and observing a Middle Eastern dance that dates 4,000 years and is one of the most misunderstood art forms in the country.

Known in the Middle East as "raqs sharqi" in Arabic and "Oryantal tansi" in Turkish – which translated is “Dance of the East” or “Oriental Dance” - the “belly dance” did not originate as a dance of seduction done by concubines to tantalize the Sultan. Instead, it was created and performed by women for women as a ceremonial custom in preparation for childbirth. Today, it is considered a celebration of the female spirit. To many connoisseurs of culture, it is also renowned an art form like ballet and Broadway-style dancing.

“In ancient times, it was a method of helping pregnant women get ready for having their babies. The dance incorporates muscles all over the body, but especially the abdominal and pelvic areas,” said Dawn Askins, who teaches and performs Turkish and Arabic belly dancing. Imperial Jade Belly Dance (www.imperialjadebellydance.com), teaches Turkish and Arabic belly dancing. She will appear for two shows at Leila (www.leilawpb.com) on Saturday evenings. “Then, when it was time for the delivery, relatives, friends and neighbors of the pregnant woman’s community would dance around her and get her to mimic the movements.”

It was at the Chicago World Exposition of 1893 that the enigmatic art form was dubbed the “belly dance.” A savvy promoter named Sol Bloom brought Middle Eastern dance artists to the attention of the American public by publicizing the scandalous "belly dancing" to lure more visitors to the event’s entertainment venues.

Since then – partially because of continued misleading representations of the dance in movies and television shows - images of midriff-baring exhibitionists parading seductively before groups of stimulated men enter the minds of Americans when they

think about belly dancing. With performances at public locations like Leila, and through classes at recreation facilities and fitness centers, Askins is one of several belly dancers who are striving to educate anyone who will listen about the art form's cultural significance.

First mesmerized by the moves of belly dancing when she was 11, the 34-year-old Askins studied and performed ballet and modern dance before deciding to pursue her beloved specialty.

“Belly dancing requires just as much practice and dedication as ballet and modern dance,” Askins said. “In a way, it demands even more because you must have a comprehensive understanding of music, choreography, and improvisation. You also have to do all this while playing an instrument (finger cymbals).”

As Askins explains, the moves of belly dancing are extroverted and fast, yet controlled and focused. Many women choose it as a favored exercise over jogging and aerobics since the dance strengthens, tightens and tones muscles throughout the entire body. There are extremely beneficial moves like the abdominal undulation, which is a slow stomach roll that works the tummy area; and shoulder shimmies that help define the flabby flesh on the upper arms.

Askins admits that belly dancing is sexy, but stripper-like it is not. Feverishly twisting the hips is done gracefully, and not reminiscent of a harem girl on the big screen.

“This is a classy art form,” said Askins, who studied belly dancing with world-renowned performer Amira Mor at the Broadway Dance Center in New York City. “Most people don't know that the techniques of belly dancing are very similar to relaxation and breathing exercises done in Lamaze classes. In ancient times, it was rarely performed in front of men. It was a celebration of sisterhood and spirituality.”

A native of Damascus who also lived in Beirut before his family moved to the United States in 1973 when he was 18, Roy Assad envisioned a casual chic restaurant where guests could experience the romance and mystery of Middle Eastern culture while enjoying Syrian and Lebanese cuisine when he created the initial plans for Leila (www.leilawpb.com).

Amid an inviting ambiance where contemporary design complements interpretations of classic Moroccan style, guests can drink ethnic wines and partake in the art of mezze, the Middle Eastern tradition where generous portions of cuisine are shared among friends. A myriad of salads and dishes – such as falafel, tabouleh, stuffed grape leaves and hommous – will 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.

For a taste of Arabic culture, guests can smoke the arguileh and savoring the smoothness of the fruitful pipe tobacco; sip on Turkish coffee and shai (tea); listen to professional

musician Joe Zeytoonian play the electric ud (a Middle Eastern fretless stringed instrument) on selected evenings and watch Askins illustrate belly dancing on the art form it originated as in ancient times.

“Leila is designed as a place where guests will have a cultural experience and not just a meal,” said Assad, who owns the restaurant with his wife, Evelyn Assad. “Belly dancing is an integral part of Middle Eastern heritage, and we believe that – by showcasing it as it was intended to be performed – our guests will see that it is a true art form.”

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