

\$20 and Under Restaurant Review: Taiim Falafel Shack in Hastings-on-Hudson

Israeli street food done right in Hastings-on-Hudson

BY JULIA SEXTON

Lacking a burger's greasy beef and pizza's lush cheese, falafel is a fairly ascetic type of street food. Yet these pita-wrapped spheres of fried chickpea mash are the (unofficial) national dish of Israel. Though in this country, falafel's biggest adherents were often found among the broke, the hippie, the college-aged, and the vegetarian. I know that in my days of Doc Martens and an endless Smiths loop, I downed more than a few falafels. Always, I felt veggie-virtuous, though in need of a beverage. That's because the falafels of my youth were mostly awful. Vegetarian, it's true, but dry and haunted by the taste of old frying oil; they offered cheap virtue at a price.

Hastings-on-Hudson's modest Taiim Falafel Shack redeems all those bad falafels. Its scallion-and-parsley-studded dough uses coarsely ground chickpeas, which give Taiim's falafel a nutty, toothsome crunch. Before frying, the dough is kept fluffy by avoiding ham-fisted compression; the beige-ish speckled dough is formed on a traditional falafel baller that keeps its air pockets intact. How do I know? Taiim's open kitchen hides few secrets—and actually provides entertainment in this cozy elbow-to-elbow restaurant. After frying, the falafels are rolled into a pita with lush, house-ground tahini; tart, pickled turnips; and chopped tomatoes. Refreshing crunch comes with scallion and parsley, and when the ingredients are taken in a single bite, this \$5 sandwich offers satisfaction in deep-fried carbs—but with nuttiness, fatty lushness, vegetal crispness, and an acidic bite.

Taiim's not a one-hit wonder. We've found a filling lentil soup (\$4.50), as homey as anything you've ever eaten, though its lavish use of orange zest might alienate a traditionalist. The salads are usually winners. We especially like the Israeli chopped salad (\$5/\$8), a meticulous dice of crunchy cucumbers and tomatoes, spiked with peppery dressing and made aromatic with generous scallion and parsley. Hummus is light on garlic (\$5/\$8), elegant, and super-creamy, but always hits the perfect point between tahini's peanut-butter stickiness and lemon's acid bite. To be honest, it's difficult to choose between a sandwich and an equally filling vegetarian sampler, which, at \$13, offers warm pitas paired with chopped salad, hummus, and (sadly) a somewhat wan baba ghanouj. For \$17, you'll also get a few falafel balls and Taiim's fabulous warm, stuffed grape leaves—a generous meal that promises welcome leftovers.

Shawarma is another draw at Taiim, and, when you enter, there you'll find it: leaves of marinated meat (chicken or lamb), tightly threaded onto a vertical spindle and held in place by a large onion. As the spindle rotates, the meat roasts, maybe getting a little love from that onion. When it's finished, the meat is carved off the now coherent, beehive-like mass and piled into a sandwich (\$8 for chicken, \$10 for lamb). The resulting very tender shreds of lamb still bear the acidic tang of the marinade, which makes them a good foil for pita, tahini, and the same vegetable shower that comes with the falafel (cucumbers, scallions, parsley, and turnip pickles). And, as with the falafel, the shawarmas are available as platters (\$15/\$18), which arrive with pita, tahini, pickles, turnips, olives, chopped salad, and a choice from a list of starches and grains, which includes yellow rice, bulgur, and couscous. Don't miss the opportunity for luxurious sides of sabich with egg (\$8)—silken and oily fried eggplant slices and hard-boiled egg served over Israeli chopped salad—or mujadarra (\$4/\$6), a hearty lentil-and-rice pilaf amply studded with a thyme-heavy za'atar.

Be warned: though Taiim is a brick-and-mortar restaurant, it has few seats, accepts only cash, and serves only soft drinks. Among those, you'll find sweet Israeli fruit nectars alongside the usual American ice teas and sodas. Rather than lingering, it is better to drop in for a quick and satisfying meal or to pick up a home buffet to dip from a score of containers.

Taiim Falafel Shack

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598 Warburton Ave, Hastings-on-Hudson

(914) 478-0006; taiimfalafelshack.com

Hours: Tues to Sat 11:30 am-8:30 pm

Appetizers: \$4-\$6; sandwiches: \$5-\$10; entrées: \$14-\$18; desserts: \$5

◆◆◆◆—Outstanding ◆◆◆—Very Good

◆◆—Good ◆—Fair