



New ownership and extended hours at sumptuous El Morocco

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

The last time I had dined at El Morocco downtown was about 13 years ago on the occasion of a pre-wedding party. It was a kosher restaurant at the time, known for its fine Middle Eastern cuisine. Last summer the place came under new management. Owners Rabéa and Rhanim Semmar kept the exact same menu, as well as head chef Reza, but dropped their kosher certification. That meant they could remain open on Friday evenings and Saturday nights throughout the winter.

My friend Glenn joined me for dinner at El Morocco recently. Beautifully decorated with authentic Moroccan artifacts, the restaurant seats 100 and is also available for private functions and catering. On the menu, you will find many renowned Moroccan cooked salads and some classics such as pastillas, cigars, tagines (stews) and couscous.

The restaurant is also well known for its delicious grills, such as merguez (sausages), steak, kefta (ground meat kebobs), shish kebab and veal chops. Glenn and I opted for the Tour of Morocco special for two. At \$89 it is a terrific sampler of their main dishes.

Our waitress, Rania, started us off with a platter of hummus (a healthy mix of ground chickpeas and ground sesame seeds, mixed with a little garlic and some spice), cooked carrots and two salads: the Israeli salad contained tomatoes, cucumbers and onions, all very finely chopped up and with a little olive oil and salt; and the Moroccan salad, which looked and tasted more like a sweet and salty tomato sauce.

Next came the Moroccan cigars and pastillas, two of my favorites. The cigars are crispy rolls of

pastry filled with ground beef and a touch of chilli. You can ask for them to be as spicy as you wish. The pastillas are sweet and savory phyllo pastries filled with chicken, almonds, sugar and cinnamon.

We moved on to a lamb dish with prunes, cooked medium and containing a plate with flower shaped potatoes and carrots and a sweet jelly sauce.

Next came the fish — a choice between tilapia and salmon. We chose the former, which came on a bed of mashed potatoes and garnished with a sweet sauce made from cumin, tomato sauce, garlic and coriander.

The chicken was outstanding as well, simmered with almonds and with a delicious lemon sauce. It was accompanied by a generous serving of vegetable and honey couscous — versatile pasta made of tiny grains of dough that are steamed. It hails from Morocco and northern Algeria and is a staple throughout North Africa. This dish was served with zucchini, carrots, vine leaves and celery, with a nice broth on the side.

We finished off the meal with traditional mint tea and a variety of Moroccan desserts.

There were many other tantalizing options on the menu such as a variety of grilled fish, steaks, deep fried chicken schnitzel and braised beef with mushrooms, just to name a few. You can access the entire menu online.

El Morocco is located at 3450 Drummond Ave., corner of Sherbrooke. There is on-site parking for a reasonable price. Opening hours are weekdays 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. for lunch, and 5 to 10 p.m. (5 to 11 p.m. on Saturdays). Closed on Sundays. A new website is under construction. For more information or to make reservations, call 514-844-6888 or email r.elmorocco@hotmail.com.

