

July 6, 2018

ABA

302 N. Green St., 3rd floor
773-645-1400
Fulton Market District

4 diners at 7pm

cuisine: Mediterranean style (“more meat” than Ema)

Opened: June 7, 2018

Owner: LEYE. Marc Jacobs, managing partner
Exec chef: CJ Jacobson (Ema)

THE PLACE

Crazy *hot* hotspot. The second this place opened it was jam-packed. It’s got a very open feeling, gardenlike, and desertlike, all at the same time. Fun, lively environment. The bar is SRO at all times. When we left—it must have been after 9 pm—there were no signs of slowing down. People, in the entryway, the bar, and on the terrace, seemed perfectly content to wait out the wait. TG we had a reservation.

The weather was a little too cool—for us—to go the terrace route, but there was no shortage of folks who were happy to wait and/or dine outside.

Did I mention you reach the dining room via elevator? That is the shtick of the day (decade?), for sure. Gibson’s Italia, Fig & Olive, Fred’s at Barney’s, Del Frisco’s, Esquire Champagne Room, Jellyfish. Not to mention the rooftop bars.

Not really an open kitchen. No open kitchen at Ema either. Thank you. *Today* (“thank you” in Hebrew).

Aba opened exactly one month ago, so it’s no surprise that Rich Melman is hanging out. That’s what Rich Melman does: He hangs out at new LEYE restaurants.

THE MENU

Definitely similar to Ema, but with fewer veggies and more meat: See Mediterranean Butcher section. Not that a vegetarian wouldn’t be perfectly happy here. There are plenty of hummus choices, vegetarian spreads, and vege-heavy cold mezze options.

THE SERVICE

I am known to the Melmans and **service was a non-issue**. I imagine, with Rich Melman on the premises, service was a non-issue at every table in the room as well as on the terrace.

THE MEAL

Hummus

Avocado & fava bean \$9.95

Jalapeño, scallions, mint, lemon

Green, grassy, and lovely. And **don't discount the jalapeño kick**. Complimentary, house-made pita comes in mighty handy.

Crispy Short Rib (signature)

Crispy short rib \$15.95

Grilled onions, sherry, beef jus

Slightly chewy and stringy in a comforting way. An irresistible street-food kind of meat dish.

Spreads

Muhammara \$7.95

Roasted pepper, isot chili, walnut, pomegranate molasses

I wasn't familiar with "isot" chili is [dried Turkish chili; smoky] and neither was anyone else in my party, but this spread was **a table fave**. (So, are we somewhat tired of knowing the genealogy of every ingredient in any given dish? Chilis, unless described as "sweet," tend to be spicy.) More pita for everyone!

Red beet tzatziki \$8.95

Horseradish, dill, finger limes

I'm pretty sure I had this at Ema. A very **lively way to get the ever-popular beet onto the menu**.

House-Made Stracciatella (signature)

House-made sracciatella \$14.95

Marinated tomatoes, sherry vinaigrette, croutons

I know I had this at Ema. Isn't it really a version of a caprese salad? The stracciatella is particularly stretchy and creamy. Super fresh tomatoes. Bright and refreshing.

*Mediterranean Butcher
Prime Cuts*

Skirt steak shawarma \$19.95
Za'atar, chili, Israeli salad

Among the many enticing "butcher" offerings, the waiter raved about this as *the meat dish* of the menu. We loved it. Tender, juicy. All around delish. The only way to find out if the skirt steak is the "best" meat dish is order the beef tenderloin, the char-grilled lamb chops, and the Mishima 5-star sirloin the next time around. Sounds like a plan.

Everything Jerusalem Bagel (signature)

Everything Jerusalem bagel \$7.95
Whipped honey labneh, za'atar, lemon zest

A word about Jerusalem bagels and za-atar: An incomparable treat in the Old City of Jerusalem. The giant, just-baked, crispy, sesame-studded Jerusalem bagel comes with a little bag of powdery za'atar, which sticks to every bagel bite.

Aba's bagel is mighty good, but this gussied-up version is no match for the real thing. That said, we ate the whole thing and left not a dab of labneh.

Kebabs (served with local basmati rice)

Chicken kefta \$13.95
Lemon, olive oil, tzatzaki

Top score for *savory texture*; *wish it had a bit more seasoning*.

Desserts

Kulfi \$7.95
Turkish coffee, coriander caramel, Marcona almonds

Great way to enjoy *the luxurious flavor of Turkish coffee*.

Double chocolate tart \$8.95
Whipped cream, Moroccan mint

Didn't seem particularly Middle Eastern, but it was mighty good chocolaty chocolate.

Halva \$9.95

Medjool dates, candied nuts

An appropriate finish to a Middle Eastern meal.

Another personal note: I've had the best of the best halva in markets in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, and Aba's is reminiscent enough to end dinner here on a satisfying note.

THOUGHTS

Lots of food you can relate to, now that Middle Eastern flavors are mainstream, and they keep the Middle Eastern breads coming.

Clearly a spinoff of Ema, yet has it's own personality and verve. I like Ema well enough, but I'm all in for Aba.

Seems everyone else in Chicago is, too, since there is a two-month wait for a reservation. Pro tip: Seating on the terrace is first-come first-serve.