

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Zhug offers amazing hummus and more

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Battles have been fought over who makes the best hummus. There are blogs and lectures and even episodes of TV shows devoted to the hot-button Middle Eastern topic. There have been lawsuits and petitions to the U.N.

I think I have found the world’s best hummus — and it is right here in Cleveland, at Chef Douglas Katz’s new restaurant, Zhug.

Katz’s harissa peanut hummus (\$10) is absolutely divine, a rich and creamy, zesty hummus with nuts and harissa pepper oil that gives it a decadently unique flavor.

This is hummus like you have never had before. It nearly led to a battle between the three people at our table over who got the last spoonful. We almost had to ask for a second serving of clay-oven flatbread to soak up the very last bit of flavor, but our keen-eyed server brought it before we asked.

It’s not just the hummus that stands out at this chic Middle Eastern-flavored café that opened in November on Cedar Road. This is dining like Cleveland has never had before. Served all small-plates style for sharing, Katz and executive chef Andrew Mansour’s inspired menu is a fantastic culinary journey through the rich, intermixed cuisines of the Middle East, from Israel to Yemen, Lebanon and beyond.

My husband, 13-year-old and I traveled Zhug’s spice route on a recent Sunday afternoon. We all left feeling like we had visited the best new Cleveland restaurant in years.

The hummus was just the beginning of our journey. We also started our meal with an order of house made labneh with extra virgin olive oil (\$5), a creamy cheese-yogurt spread, similar to a savory Greek yogurt. Rich and silky, it went perfectly with the hummus and flatbread.

Both were served with the restaurant’s namesake “zhug,” a Yemeni serrano chili sauce with green cardamom and herbs. “It’s hot,” our server noted as she put the small bowl on our table. She was right. We heeded her caution and used it sparingly; it definitely added a nice sweet-hot edge to many dishes.

We turned to our sever for advice throughout our meal at Zhug. With all of the spreads, vegetable dishes, seafood and meats listed together in one section on the menu, she provided advice on the best pairings and number of dishes to order. She also helpfully explained things like the “squash donuts” and “local cracked wheat.”

She recommended five to six dishes for three people. We ordered six, and were glad we did as they varied widely in portion size (the price gives a good indication).

She also provided advice on Zhug’s nicely crafted cocktail menu, which includes both alcoholic and non-alcoholic concoctions. I finally decided on the Zhug No. 2 (\$12), made with blackberry gin, Campari and orgeat. With its bittersweet yet nutty flavor, it was one of the most unique drinks I’ve had, though perhaps not for everyone. My husband had their take on a Sazerac, the Zhug No. 7 (\$13) on another visit. He praised the use of anise-flavored arak instead of absinthe.

We ordered everything at once, but dishes come out at a loose pace at Zhug. Not haphazard, but causal — making for a fun, culinary adventure. It’s all served in colorful pottery dishes, a vibrant contrast with the sleek white plates and silver flatware. Served in a chic and airy, high-ceilinged space that seats 80 at a mix of varied-sized tables, it’s like a café in Tel Aviv or Beirut transferred to Ohio.

Done up in subdued earth tones with Scandinavian wood tables and chairs, rustic lighting and lots of pillows, the vibe is “sophisticated urban bazaar.”

Next up, after the labneh, came the mejadra, basmati and wild rice, black lentils and crispy onions (\$7). Very good, but definitely more of one-person side dish than small plate. The big and crispy schmaltz



Zhug’s rich and creamy labneh with flatbread and peanut harissa hummus. Photos by John Petkovic, The Plain Dealer



Douglas Katz’s chic Middle Eastern-flavored café Zhug opened in November on Cedar Road.

potato tostones served with mustard crème fraîche (\$7) was a heartier small plate, but again seemed best suited as a side rather than main course.

Of the 27 “mezze” dishes on Zhug’s menu, eight feature meat or seafood. For our two meats, the adults at our table opted for the fantastic butter roasted shrimp, tender and flavorful, stewed with garlic and biber chili and served with crunchy toast points to soak up the oil (\$ 14). All three of us shared the Yemenite curry fried chicken, served with a harissa honey dipping sauce (\$14). Recommended by our server when we inquired about a “bigger” small plate a young diner might like, the choice was spot-on. The big, boneless dark-meat pieces were aromatic and tender with a light, gluten-free breading that went fabulously with the sweet-and-hot sauce.

Before we ordered our mezze, my daughter had already scoped out the dessert menu and was debating between lemon cake with rosewater and a tahini ice cream sundae. After sharing six small plates, though, she decided to bypass dessert — until next time. With so many possible combinations, a meal at Zhug is a dining adventure with almost



Zhug’s warm white beans with tomato and basil aioli is a hearty small plate.

limitless variety. We’re already planning our next excursion at this stellar addition to the Cleveland restaurant scene.

It will be sure to include hummus.

Note: Go early to dine at Zhug, or be prepared to wait. They don’t take reservations and tables fill up quickly. We arrived at 4:04 p.m. on a Sunday and there were already two groups in front of us. It’s worth the wait.

Zhug

Where: 12413 Cedar Road, Cleveland Heights

Contact: 216-862-2508; zhugcle.com/

Hours: 4-10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 4-11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Prices: Small plates, \$5-\$21.

Reservations: Not taken.

Credit cards: All major.

Kids: Children welcome, many items adventurous kids will like.

Cuisine: Middle Eastern

Service: Casual and informative.

Accessibility: Restaurant fully accessible.

Grade: ★★★★★

Notes: We make two anonymous visits to restaurants we review for dinner, and we do not accept complimentary meals. One star means fair; 2 stars, good; 3 stars, very good; 4 stars, exceptional; Zero stars, not recommended.

BEST BREAKFASTS AND BRUNCHES

At Nighttown, classic fare with Irish and literary touches

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CLEVELAND HEIGHTS — Our brunch and breakfast series checks out Nighttown. Here’s a look at what to expect:

Location: 12383 Cedar Road, Cleveland Heights, 216-795-0550.

Hours: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

Menu or buffet: Menu.

About the place: Nighttown must be doing something right; it’s been around since 1965. With a great clubby feel, the restaurant has had brunch for years but recently expanded it to include Saturdays. It features live music.

About the menu: More than 20 offerings include lobster Benedict, lox and bagels, homemade quiche and a tempting Brioche French Toast, which is dipped in Grand Marnier batter and served with Canadian bacon. We tried an omelet du jour with apples, cheddar

and bacon — a nice mesh of salty-sweet flavors — and bangers and eggs, with choice of eggs. (If you’re going to try bangers for breakfast, an Irish restaurant is the place to do it. The thick sausage has great flavor, is not overly fennel-tasting, and is mildly spicy.)

The restaurant’s signature dish — the Famous Dublin Lawyer — also is available for brunch, if that’s your thing. It’s lobster sautéed in a mild cayenne butter-cream sauce with mushrooms, scallions and Irish whiskey and served with rice pilaf.

About the drinks: Full bar.

Don’t miss: The art on the walls. Peruse and take in the works depicting James Joyce, classic Cleveland history and other nostalgic touches that hang throughout the restaurant’s nooks.

Did you know? The restaurant is named after the Dublin red-light district in Joyce’s 1922 tome “Ulysses.”



Nighttown recently expanded its brunch to Saturdays. Right: The bangers and eggs go easy on the fennel and spiciness. Marc Bona, cleveland.com photos

