



Sophie Nantel dances for diners at La Couscoussière d'Ali Baba. Even without the dancers, the atmosphere is enchanting. PHOTOS: DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE

Ali Baba is a whole other world, with belly dancers

La Couscoussière d'Ali Baba Good bet \$\$

1460 Amherst St.
(near de Maisonneuve Blvd.)
Phone: (514) 842-6667
Open: Mon. to Fri. 11 a.m.
to 11 p.m.; Sat. & Sun. 5 p.m.
to midnight
Licensed: BYOB
Credit cards: Cash only
Wheelchair access:
One step up
Vegetarian-friendly: Limited
Smoking: Yes
Price range: Table d'hôte
\$27.95

The door to this Tunisian hideaway opens with the shimmering sound of beads against glass. Step inside, and the decor whisks you away, not just to another country but possibly to another galaxy.

La Couscoussière d'Ali Baba is a gilded cave, where spray-painted stalactites mingle with intricate patterns and textures. It looks so much like a vintage Star Trek set that I expected to see Spock stumble from the kitchen after a mind meld with the cook while Captain Kirk got busy with one of the belly dancers.

Actually, there are often live dance performances here on weekends, and the business card is crammed with a harem of scantily clad, heavily made-up lovelies. The mid-week atmosphere was nevertheless enchanting, as we installed ourselves in the window seats, separated from



Belly dancers (from left) Sophie Nantel, Mylène Khairy and Maude Gauthier with a funky take on the traditional brick appetizer (front) and tagine berbère.

the street by a gauzy veil.

Management was clearly pushing the table d'hôte, which offers five courses for under \$30 – no starters were listed for à la carters.

The soup set us off on the right foot, a low ceramic bowl of cracked wheat, lentils and chickpeas in a homemade lamb bouillon, freshened with herbs and tomatoes.

Next up, a funky take on the traditional brick: crispy sheets of filo dough folded diagonally like a napkin, set into a lemon for display. The piping hot parcel of egg, tuna and capers was extremely tasty, even better with a smear of vegetable mash, a tangy blend of peppers, onions and, apparently, pumpkin. Good but

greasy, this one left us with butter fingers.

Main courses didn't raise the bar any further, however. In the couscous combo, the golden grain came out nice and fluffy, the veggies soft and simmered, but the meats were neither as tender nor as juicy as they could've been. Although falling off the proverbial bone, the lamb shank was decidedly muttony and the spicy merguez sausage overcooked.

Served in a traditional clay dish under a peaked lid, the tagine berbère released intense, fruity aromas. It was full of plumped-up raisins, huge lima beans, morsels of artichoke, tiny potatoes and prunes in a sweet and salty

sauce that soaked into the boneless chicken and saved more of that unremarkable mutton.

Finally, Turkish coffee laced with a too-generous splash of orange blossom water (a bit like drinking belly-dancer perfume) accompanied a dessert of ultra-fresh baklava oozing nuts and honey on a little silver tray.

La Couscoussière is full of fun and flavours and with a little effort, the food could be as memorable as the setting – which is saying quite a bit.

Sarah Musgrave is the author of *Resto à Go-Go: 180 Cheap and Fun Places to Eat and Drink in Montreal* (ECW Press, \$16.95).