

G R E A T C H E F S O F B O S T O N

Vlora's Spicy Shrimp Couscous



Aldo Velaj

By Clint Hamblin

Chef Aldo Velaj loves to cook his favorite dishes from the North Mediterranean region, including Southern Italy, Greece and Velaj's homeland, Albania. His subterranean restaurant Vlora, named after the city where Velaj was born, is located on the lower level at 545 Boylston Street, and if you haven't been, stop what you're doing and make a reservation. The food is outstanding, and that's because the talented Velaj knows how to combine fresh ingredients with exotic international spices and turn a totally delicious and surprisingly healthy dinner into a memorable feast.

The Fork-Tender Grilled Octopus appetizer is better than I've ever had. Okay, it's octopus! Forget about that part. This dish is easy to eat and difficult to share. What has become a Vlora signature dish, the Watermelon and Feta Tidbit, partners the sweet of the melon with the salt of the Feta cheese. These two dishes alone are worth a trip to the restaurant.

One of Velaj's outstanding menu items is couscous, but not just any couscous.

"We prefer Israeli Couscous," Velaj said. "It's light and tender and very versatile. It works with everything."

At Vlora, couscous is served in several forms, including an amazing cooked had-dock wrapped in phyllo and served with shaved fresh fennel on a bed of vegetable couscous. The taste is buttery, but there is no butter in this recipe.

"Olive oil gives it that buttery taste," Velaj said.

Israeli Couscous is actually round toasted semolina pasta, quite different from the tiny yellow North African couscous. These tiny pearl couscous, or Maftoul, resemble small white peas and are very cheap to buy, easy to prepare and absolutely delicious to eat. Chef Velaj recommends adding Israeli Couscous as part of your home-cooking repertoire. It's a low-priced ingredient that will add interest and fun to your culinary creations, and like most pasta, nearly anything can be added to the couscous making it an ideal side dish or main meal. Leftover dishes can be cut up and mixed with couscous, or serve it under a piece of chicken or fish.

Velaj's Spicy Shrimp with Couscous is unlike any seafood dish I've ever had. The spice in the dish is called harissa and comes from a hot red sauce or paste made from smoked or dried chili peppers and garlic. This North-African sauce sometimes contains coriander and caraway or cumin and is usually served with olive oil. It's a killer red sauce and should always be treated with great respect.

Spicy Shrimp Couscous

Ingredients
(serves 4)

Harissa Dressing

1/2 of a lemon, juiced
6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
4 tablespoons harissa
(depending on level of heat desired)
3 tablespoons vegetable stock

Couscous

2 3/4 cups vegetable stock
2 1/4 cups Israeli couscous

Additional ingredients

1 bunch cooked green beans, blanched or steamed
1 pound large raw shrimp without tail



Spicy Shrimp Couscous

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped
Sea salt and pepper to taste

Preparation

Mix together lemon juice, olive oil, harissa and stock in one bowl and set aside.

In a heavy three-quart saucepan, bring stock to a boil and stir in couscous. Stirring occasionally, simmer uncovered for approximately 7 minutes. Cover pan and remove from heat. Let stand 10 minutes. Spread couscous in one layer on a baking sheet and cool for 15 minutes.

Heat a small frying pan and add a little of the oil. Stir in the shrimp and toss, adding salt and pepper to taste. Remove and set aside.

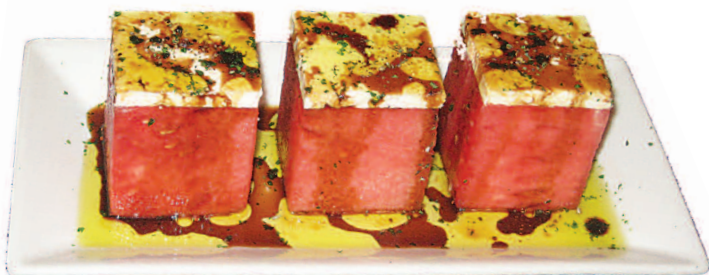
Transfer couscous to a bowl and stir in harissa dressing, green beans, cooked shrimp, parsley, and salt and pepper to taste. Right before serving, lightly toss in extra-virgin olive oil.

Note: Harissa dressing and couscous can be made one day ahead and kept separately, covered and chilled. Ingredients should be brought to room temperature before plating the dish.



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Vlora's watermelon appetizer

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