



**Natasha's Cafe : Exotica shimmers in the Bluegrass** By  
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Take a young chef from California, a boutique selling crafts from around the world, an interior that looks like Sydney Greenstreet's Blue Parrot Cafe in the movie "Casablanca" (except it's a lot cleaner) and you have Natasha's Cafe in Lexington.

The heart of the Bluegrass is not exactly where you expect to find such exotica, but there it is, on a short side street in the middle of downtown.

Friends and I ventured to Natasha's last week and had a first-rate meal. And the dishes were not at all the usual suspects.

Vegetarians will be cheered to know that Natasha's serves such meat-free dishes as ghivetch-marinated Japanese tofu; angelhair pasta with butternut squash, basil, tomato and garlic in a white white sauce; linguine with Egyptian pesto (basilico) and mushrooms; and a mushroom stew.

We started by sharing another vegetarian offering, a Mediterranean sampler platter and an order of smoked salmon (each \$7).

The platter contained four spreads and a pile of sliced French bread. Baba ghanoush (garlic, tahini and eggplant spread) was accented with fresh chopped tomatoes and olives. The chickpea flavor of the hummus was enhanced, rather than overwhelmed, by garlic. We all commented on the deliciousness of a dish we hadn't had before, the Israeli salad made with finely chopped mushrooms and parsley in mayonnaise with garlic. And the tabouli was an eye-opener. Instead of the usual mint, the herb in the cracked wheat, parsley and tomato salad was fresh basil.

The salmon, which has just been added to the menu, was meltingly tender and tantalizingly smoky. It was served on a bed of champagne gelee (the most decadent gelatin you'll ever taste.)

The four of us shared a bottle (\$15) of 2000 Luna de Luna chardonnay/pinot grigio with the starters. (Natasha's has a wine and beer license only.)

Main dishes come with a choice of salad or soup. The beetred house borscht was filled with potatoes, cabbage, tomatoes and onions. The Greek salad with cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and lots of feta cheese was tossed in a fresh olive-oil dressing. Especially satisfying was the spinach salad dubbed "A Roslyn Affair" (there's a story here, no doubt). Garnished with pecans and mandarin orange slices, it featured a marvelous sour balsamic-vinegar dressing.

Entrees were just as scrumptious as the starters. Midnight chicken (\$13) was a melange of stewed chicken, onions, spices, raisins and fresh garlic cooked in a sour cream sauce, spiked with curry and served over rice. The thick, hearty Hungarian goulash (\$13) was a perfect main dish for a cool night. The lean beef was simmered with paprika, tomatoes, onions and peppers and served over fluffy mashed potatoes. Tyrnova pork (\$16, named after a city in Bulgaria) was tenderloin stuffed with dried plums and heady with the aroma of garlic and bay leaf. It, too, was served with mashed potatoes. A side of walnut brown butter was equally wonderful with the meat and the potatoes.

## Natasha's Cafe

112 Esplanade,  
 Lexington, Ky.  
 (859) 259-2754

<http://www.natashascafe.com/>  
 ★★☆☆½

**Cuisine:** Global, including many Russian and Middle Eastern dishes.

**Good:** Chef Anthony Shwartz' eclectic menu, Casbah decor, funky Web site.

**Not so good:** Casual service is OK but doesn't match the food level.

**Price range:** Entrees, \$10-\$16. Pizzas and wraps, \$8-\$9.

**Reservations:** Accepted.  
 Credit cards: AE, DS, MC, V.

**Children's menu/portions:**  
 No.

**Smoking:** Smoke-free. (But the place really looks like there should be a section for hookahs.)

**Accessibility:** Fully accessible to unassisted wheelchair users.

**Hours:** Monday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.; Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.

### Guide to the Ratings:

★★★★★ outstanding  
 ★★★★½ excellent  
 ★★★ very good  
 ★★½ good  
 ★★ fair  
 ★ poor  
 ☹ bomb

For an extra \$4, I upgraded the Once in a Blue Moon pasta (\$10), made with vegetables and angel hair, with a smattering of fresh, sautéed shrimp. It probably had the simplest flavor profile of anything we sampled, and I added a dash of salt, which made it just right.

We switched to red wine for our entrees and had a bottle of 2000 Niebaum-Coppola zinfandel (\$22), a spicy wine that was especially good with the pork and the goulash.

Turkish coffee is a specialty of the house. So we finished dinner with regular Turkish coffee and cardamom-scented coffee Cairo (each \$2), made in the beautiful brass pots called cezves and poured into demitasse cups at our table; and a zebra shake (\$5), made with Turkish coffee and chocolate.

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