

## Serving hummus, building community: Group holds high hopes for new Oakland kosher restaurant

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Eighteen months ago, a small group of Jewish men in the East Bay, all active in the community and most with kids at Oakland Hebrew Day School, began tossing around the idea of opening a restaurant.



When the men got serious and started planning, they had all kinds of ideas. They wanted to have a cuisine that was Middle Eastern, kosher and vegetarian. They wanted to have the best hummus in the Bay Area. They wanted it to be in the perfect location.

But, perhaps most importantly, they wanted the restaurant to accomplish something that other Bay Area Jewish institutions have been hard-pressed to pull off: community building.

Amba, a 6-week-old establishment in Oakland's Montclair district, seems to be doing just that.

"Every time you go there, you meet someone you know, or people you don't know, and that's an important part of any Jewish community," said Rabbi Yaakov Kagan of Chabad of Contra Costa County. "That's something which is sorely missed in the Bay Area — access to creating a social community. I think Amba goes a long way toward building that.

"Oh, and of course the food is great, too."

The 45-seat eatery is proving what an Orthodox rabbi once told one of the co-owners: that restaurants are the second most important thing (behind synagogues) in Jewish community building.



Amba is located in the Oakland district of Montclair. photos/cathleen

Since opening in late December, Amba has had good crowds. Chabad rabbis are scheduling get-togethers at the restaurant. Reform Congregation Temple Sinai is holding a staff meeting there. Orthodox Beth Jacob Congregation is going to have its teen club meet there for learning programs and game nights.

As for daily customers, the owners said they are seeing some of the same faces two or three or even four times a week, and that no one is bashful about keeping their kippah on.

"We're not trying to pretend we're something we're not," said Jonathan Wornick, one of the owners. "We're not

hiding our Jewishness or our pride. We are proud of who we are."

Wornick, of Berkeley, is one of four investors in Amba, along with Reuven Kahane of Piedmont and Dustin Eber and Clive Gavshon of Oakland.

The latter three all have children attending Oakland Hebrew Day School (a Modern Orthodox K-8 school in the Oakland hills) and are members at nearby Beth Jacob. Wornick is a member at Reform Temple Isaiah, just on the other side of the Caldecott Tunnel in Lafayette, and serves as vice president and campaign chairman for the Jewish Community Federation of the Greater East Bay.



The investors decided early on to feature kosher food. "There's a need to serve that community, and we're filling that niche," Wornick said.

But it has to be more than that.

"The key is to make it work for all clientele," observed Beth Jacob's Rabbi Judah Dardik, whose already had dined at Amba five times (his synagogue is only two miles away). "Most people are just there for the restaurant and couldn't care less that it's kosher."

Dardik said his early favorites are the tostim (a grilled cheese pita) and the pita chips. Rabbi Mark Bloom of Temple Beth Abraham, a Conservative synagogue in Oakland about four miles from Amba, said his early favorites are the falafel sandwich and the cauliflower soup.

Amba has a small menu of Middle Eastern fare, and it is the type of establishment described as "fast casual," meaning that patrons order at the counter and get their food cooked to order in a few minutes.

The menu includes four types of hummus plates, four types of Middle Eastern sandwiches and five kinds of soups and salads. No item is more than \$8. There are also side orders, snacks and crispy french fries, as well as "seasonal" offerings that change daily, based on whatever fresh ingredients are available.

Amba (which rhymes with samba) is a tangy pickled mango sauce that's very popular in Israel. The restaurant has it in ketchup-like squeeze bottles.



Another thing Amba has is a seal of approval from Vaad HaKashrus, the kosher certification board of Northern California. It is closed on Shabbat, and will also be closed during Passover.

"We knew we wanted to have a kosher place, and we knew we wanted it to be moderately priced," Kahane said. "So Middle Eastern food was the way to go. Most vegetarian restaurants feature alfalfa sprouts or soy meat products. But we didn't want that."

Middle Eastern food was the perfect choice, Wornick added, because "it's not taking a cuisine and making it vegetarian. It is what it is."

While the kosher and vegetarian factors are nice selling points for Bay Area diners, the price factor cannot be overlooked in helping Amba achieve its goal of becoming a community hangout spot.

"We really worked hard on price, keeping it cheap," Wornick said.

In part because of that, "it's a great gathering place," Dardik said. "It's one thing to have people over to your house, but it's another to be able to go out with friends. It provides a place to go that's not too expensive at all. You

can be with friends, and it has a peppy, upbeat feel.”

The walls are awash in a warm orange glow, which plays perfectly off the butcher-block tables (including one community table) and the faux hardwood floors.



There is an open kitchen, and some of the Israeli salads and other foods are colorfully displayed in heaping bowls near the counter, rather than buried in industrial-style metal trays.

“We wanted to make this place feel comfortable and clean,” Kahane said.

Two other big things the owners wanted: a safe, central location and ownership of the building.

Both fell into their laps when a tenant vacated a spot in a building owned by Kahane, a non-practicing rabbi and former lawyer from New York who now deals in real estate.

The location in Montclair is just what the owners were looking for: Though not near a BART station, it’s just off Highway 13 in a picturesque commercial district in the Oakland hills, convenient to residents of Berkeley, Oakland and Contra Costa County.

Owning the building gave the investors the hands-on control they were looking for, allowing them to renovate the 2,100-square-foot spot to suit their own needs and desires.

All of Amba’s owners brought different elements to the table. Eber has long been an executive in the fashion industry; Gavshon is an executive with a restaurant company; and Kahane has real estate, restaurant and legal experience (he helped launch Jerusalem’s first chain of bagel shops in the 1990s).

Wornick was an art director in the film industry for 10 years, and now runs an architect and landscape design business. He oversaw the design and the look of the restaurant, striving for something “with clean lines ... that looked more modern than I had ever seen before.”

“It’s nice to have somewhere to come that’s five-star, that makes kosher look like it should — something to be proud of, a really classy environment,” said Kagan of Contra Costa County Chabad, who ate at Amba three times in its first two weeks of business.

The menu and food were developed by chefs Jared Schulman and David Babani, who hail from Philadelphia and Seattle, respectively. Both trained at the Jerusalem Culinary Institute, where Kahane found them last year on a “recruiting trip.” The general manager is Brian Walden, who has 17 years experience in the restaurant business.

Amba opened with a bang, hosting a Chabad-Lubavitch event for more than 100 people the second night it was open. The restaurant has been doing a lot of catering, as well. And by the time spring arrives, the plan is to have al fresco dining, with 30 or so seats on an outdoor patio.

While all of the owners are happy with the restaurant’s early success, Wornick is perhaps most excited. A participant a few years ago in the prestigious Wexner Fellowship program for emerging Jewish leaders, he is heavily involved with the East Bay federation, AIPAC and several other Jewish institutions.

“When I was in the Wexner program, the focus was always on the big question: How do we bring Jews into the community?” Wornick said. “By accident, I’ve fallen into a way to make community. Maybe this restaurant will be the solution.”

**Amba** is located at 6464 Moraga Ave., Oakland. Information: (510) 339-8000 or <http://www.ambafalafel.com>.