



BAILLIAGE CHARLESTON | APRIL 21, 2026

A Taste of Lebanon at Leyla Fine Lebanese Cuisine

By Bailli Paula Traktman Duncan

Photography by Bailli Paula Traktman Duncan and Chevalier Stephen Duncan

On April 23rd, sixteen members and guests of the Bailliage de Charleston, SC experienced the cuisine of Lebanon by visiting Leyla Fine Lebanese Cuisine, a warm and welcoming restaurant on Charleston's prominent King Street. Leyla first opened in 2013, pausing briefly during COVID, and has been thriving ever since. The restaurant is owned and operated by Dolly Awkar, who emigrated from Lebanon with her family in the early 2000s, in search of a more peaceful and manageable life than was possible in their war-torn homeland.

While pursuing a successful career as Professor of Economics and Arabic Language at the College of Charleston, Dolly and her family also dreamed of opening a Lebanese restaurant. They were ultimately persuaded by the superb King St. location they discovered, and Leyla

Fine Lebanese Cuisine was successfully opened. After COVID, it was difficult to find Lebanese chefs whose cooking met Dolly's standards. So, she courageously took on the responsibility herself, relying on family memories, treasured cookbooks, and determination. This is a testament to her resilience, and it is our good fortune that her cooking is so delicious and soul-enriching.

We shared a generous family-style meal that allowed us to sample many dishes. To begin, we enjoyed silky-smooth chef's hummus and smoky, rich Baba ghanouj, both topped with pomegranate seeds and served with pita flatbreads. This duo was complemented by the wonderful stuffed grape leaves. Although many of us have sampled mezze platters countless times, Leyla's offerings stood apart for their freshness, balance, and depth of flavor. The final appetizer was shankleesh, featuring aged feta topped with vegetables and an herb medley. Our meal was off to an excellent start.

The dishes were paired with Lebanese wines made from grapes grown in the Bekaa region. Guests enjoyed Château Ksara Blanc de Blancs, 2020, blended from Sauvignon, Sémillon, and Chardonnay grapes, as well as Château Ksara Sunset Rosé, 2020 blended from Cabernet Franc and Syrah grapes.

For the main course, we were served generous portions of Chicken Legs in a Cream Sauce with leeks and saffron, along with Braised Lamb Shanks served with au jus and topped with cashews; both dishes were accompanied by beautifully seasoned rice. The chicken and lamb were exceptionally tender, bathed in velvety, complex sauces that made the dishes rich and deeply satisfying. With the main courses, guests were also served Château Ksara Le Prieuré, 2019, a red blend of Cinsault, Syrah, Mourvèdre, and Cabernet Sauvignon grapes, which paired particularly well with both entrées. For many of us, this immersion in the wines of Lebanon was a new adventure.



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One final dish completed the meal: Osmallieh, a dessert made with clotted cream and shredded filo dough, topped with outstanding pistachio ice cream. The dessert was flavorful and memorable without being overly sweet—a fitting finale to a wonderful evening.

The décor at Leyla's is warm and inviting. Images of Lebanon adorn the walls, while exposed brick, wooden floors, and simple furnishings create a timeless, homelike atmosphere. The service was graciously efficient, and Dolly herself presented each dish to our guests with warmth and pride. She is justifiably proud of a restaurant that she and her family have sustained for thirteen years.

There is no doubt that Charleston has become a culinary destination, with an ever-expanding collection of restaurants showcasing cuisines and trends from around the world. Alongside this growth has come a rise in restaurant groups that own multiple establishments across Charleston and beyond. Leyla stands apart as one of Charleston's truly family-owned and operated restaurants. Does this matter? For the food itself, perhaps not. But for the spirit and soul of the restaurant, emphatically yes. For Dolly Awkar, Leyla Fine Lebanese Cuisine is far more than a business; it is an expression of her heritage, her family, and the hospitality that defines Lebanese culture. Diners feel less like patrons and more like welcomed guests in her home: that feeling, reinforced by the superb food, keeps them returning again and again.

