

## NEIGHBORHOOD JOINT

# *At Mocha Hookah in Brooklyn Heights, Tasting Mint, Orange and Home*

By Jennifer Miller

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New York is famously the melting pot. But in reality, maybe the city is more like a Middle Eastern meze platter: varied tastes and colors neatly and randomly assembled to please a range of tastes. This is the case at Mocha Hookah, a 24-hour hookah bar and cafe on Atlantic Avenue, and probably the only public place to smoke a water pipe in the heart of brownstone Brooklyn. There, on a recent Wednesday night, three friends huddled around an iPhone, drinking milkshakes and blowing sweet smoke from a burbling glass carafe.

“There’s no drama here,” said Melissa Melendez, a student with cheek studs and a smattering of tattoos. Ms. Melendez learned about Mocha Hookah from her older half brother. “He’s half Palestinian, half Puerto Rican,” she explained.

“That’s hot, right?” Meghan Santos, 21, said enthusiastically. After a pause she asked, “Anybody want cheese fries?”

At Mocha Hookah, the eclectic cuisine is part of the draw. In addition to meze plates and traditional Yemeni dishes like lamb ghallaba, the menu includes gelato, cappuccino, even bubble tea.

All of these items populate the table tops, around which sit a mix of first-generation Arab-American 20-somethings, Yemeni men in their 50s, yuppies on a date and fashionable real estate agents.

Still, the place feels very much like a traditional hookah bar on the West Bank or in Algiers. There is no alcohol, and the mounted televisions are tuned to Al Jazeera and spicy Arabic music videos. There’s also a dark and smoky back room, where regulars (mostly men) watch movies and chat in Arabic.

A co-owner, Ammar Sulaiman, 34, whose family is from Yemen, said the cafe appealed “to the guys who want to feel like they’re back at home.” Before Mocha Hookah, “they’d go to Bay Ridge or Astoria,” he said, but that is too far. At another banquette, Bangladeshi Uber drivers played a high-speed Bengali board game called Ludo. They come in almost every day and sit for hours. A 23-year-old waitress named Layla exhaled thick smoke clouds from her own hookah. “Those guys always tell me they’re not coming back,” she said. “I tell them, ‘If I slapped you in the face, you’d be back tomorrow.’ ”

Layla approached the table. She was dressed in her typical work uniform: a black hijab and a long-sleeve, floor-length jilbab, and she was chewing the requisite waitress gum. After taking the order, she teased one of the players about his accent. The whole table laughed.

“We can play and chill as long as we want,” said Hassan Uddim, 33, not looking up from the board.

They were smoking molasses-soaked mint herbs packed in a scooped-out orange. Like all of the flavors at Mocha Hookah, theirs was a purely herbal concoction — no tobacco, no nicotine. Just as important was the natural coal, which sat on the tinfoil-covered orange. Many hookah bars use chemically treated discs. They light quickly, but aficionados say they grill your lungs.

After taking the drivers’ orders, Layla delivered milky Yemeni tea to two African-American real estate agents wearing hijabs and statement jewelry. (They asked not to be identified, because their friends might not approve of their smoking.) As they sipped the sweet drink, the women discussed the changing neighborhood, lamenting how big chains were taking over.

They considered Mocha Hookah a victory for old Brooklyn. “It’s like the African-American barber shop,” one woman said. “It’s a congregation spot. We like our Trader Joe’s, but we need some place to call home.”

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