

MAGIC CARPET RIDE

By Sue Jackson

Competition winner on 'meetmethere' Melbourne and Victorian restaurant reviews online

I can be in Marrakech in five minutes.

Perhaps that's not quite true, but whenever I visit my local café, the Moroccan Soup Bar, with its strident colour scheme of yellow, ochre and cobalt blue, its enticing Arabic music, its decorations of multi-coloured jars of pickled vegetables, huge brass coffee pots and terracotta gourds and its cramped ill-assorted tables I'm instantly transported to a Moroccan street café.

And when the proprietor, the bold, wild-haired beauty and social activist, Hana Assafiri, handing us glasses of sweet mint tea, sits down at our table and enquires with intense interest (even though we are her thirtieth customers that evening) what we would like to eat, we are always happy to put ourselves in her hands.

Before we know it, a bowl of fresh unleavened bread and plate of hummus, pickled pink turnip and carrot, green olives, smoky cauliflower and coriander-scented artichoke hearts are delivered to our table. We've learned to resist the temptation to order the delicious classic soups as starters. They are so big they inevitably turn into 'finishers', and we don't want to miss what comes next.

The standout of the luscious Middle Eastern mains is the legendary chick pea bake, topped with caramelised slivered almonds, with yoghurt and tahini on grilled pita (how do they stop the pita going soggy?).

If we still have space left the sweet pastries, served with tiny cups of inky black coffee, include delectable items like cigar-shaped pistachio baklavas drenched in syrup and almond meal biscuits with date filling.

So, if you can cope with no meat, no alcohol, no written menu, eating with a spoon, close proximity to other diners and enjoy healthy, cheap, tasty food, and a great welcome and atmosphere, hop on your magic carpet and glide to the Moroccan Soup Bar.