



Hussein Abukhdeir, co-owner of the Heart of Jerusalem Café, stands at the service counter of Manitou's new open-air Mediterranean restaurant.

Jerusalem family opens restaurant in Manitou

By Jordan Schneider

Thirteen-year-old Faris Abukhdeir leans into the chest-high counter at Manitou's new Heart of Jerusalem Café, twirling his pencil and waiting for my order. I ask him if the owners are around for an interview.

"I'm the owner," he says, straightening up and grabbing a menu to show me. "Look, we sell lots of coffee. See? Here is all of our hot drinks," he says, pointing to the long list of espresso drinks, teas, and Turkish coffee. "And here are all of our cold drinks," Faris says. The list includes familiar fountain and bottled drinks, as well as smoothies and frappés.

Faris points out the menu items with a salesman's zeal, but I can't help looking around for another — taller — owner. Faris doesn't notice.

"Our customers say we're better than Starbucks," he says. "And most Mediterranean places sell frozen falafel, but ours are fresh. They're made from scratch. People seem to like it; I heard there are lots of vegetarians in Manitou."

Faris actually has six business partners at the Heart of Jerusalem: his four siblings and his parents, who are also the head chefs responsible for the fresh falafel, as well as the shawermah sandwiches and the baklava.

Faris's father Hussein, says he and his wife Nissreen, are from a Palestinian village in Jerusalem. According to Hussein, their decision to open a restaurant in Manitou is partly the result of an unfortunate coincidence.

"The post-Sept. 11 environment is a mess," he says, referring to the trouble he has faced in the courts to try to return to his career with the U.S.

government which requires a security clearance.

"I was three and a half years away from retiring when my clearance was temporarily suspended," says Hussein. For the past two years, he says he has been in a legal battle with the government to try to be reinstated.

With his career in litigation limbo, Hussein and Nissreen decided to open the Heart of Jerusalem Café as an income safety net. Faris, along with his siblings, take shifts at the restaurant to help out, says Hussein. He adds, however, that it has always been a dream for he and Nissreen to open a good Middle Eastern restaurant in Colorado Springs.

"We found this place for lease in the paper, and so it was really an accident that we moved to Manitou. But we like it here; people here are mellow. They look at us like we are one of them, and we have been doing very well," says Hussein. "My wife is an excellent cook."

Nissreen says that since everything is made from scratch, making the food can seem like an endless process — they even soak the garbanzo beans for the falafel. "But the end result is good," she says, "and that's what we care about."

Hussein is self-admittedly no businessman, although with his recent success in Manitou, he says he is thinking about expanding the business into a franchise.

The Heart of Jerusalem Café is located at 906 Manitou Ave. and is open for coffee in the mornings at around 8 a.m. and stays open until around 7 or 8 p.m.

"We're still flexible about our hours at this point," says Hussein. "It depends on the traffic."