



LENA SAREINI PUTS HER FAMILY'S ROOTS ON EACH PLATE AT DETROIT'S SELDEN STANDARD

by Liz Grossman

Selden Standard's Lena Sareini calls herself "the Lebanese dessert wizard of the Midwest." Over the last four years at the Detroit farm-to-table restaurant, Sareini has earned two James Beard Rising Star Chef nominations and a cult following for her Middle Eastern-inspired desserts. Rhubarb and whey sundaes and flourless chocolate cake appear on the menu alongside halvah candy bars, saffron pavlova (\$13, recipe, plateonline.com), and other desserts that pay homage to her Lebanese-Irish upbringing in the suburbs of Detroit. We chatted with Sareini about her upcoming trip to Lebanon, Persian fairy floss, and why she can't stop dancing at work.

What are your early food memories?

My father is Lebanese and my mother is Irish, but we cooked food from all around

the world and made a lot of Lebanese food. My mom is really good at it. We're all going to Lebanon in September. My dad was born there but he moved here when he was three. He talks about driving down the road and just picking a pear off a tree through the window, and it's the best pear in the world. We're going to stay in my grandparents' house. My grandfather has an orchard and an amazing garden. He grows olives and makes his own olive oil. My dad calls him the original foodie; he was into it long before Instagram happened.

Have you always wanted to be a pastry chef?

Yes, it's my passion. My parents are self-taught cooks and I learned a lot from my grandmother. I went to culinary school after high school and my pastry teacher hired me as his sous chef. I worked with

him for three years and learned as much as I could. When I saw that Selden was hiring a pastry chef, I applied; I was 22 when I got the job.

How have your Lebanese roots translated to your desserts?

I did a spin on kanafeh, which is a Lebanese street food made with shredded phyllo. You load a pan with butter and press the phyllo so it gets soaked. Then you layer it with cheese—usually mozzarella and feta—and bake it until it's super crispy. It's topped with syrup flavored with orange blossom water and rose water, so you get the sweet and the salty. I used goat cheese and added pistachio paste. I was kind of nervous to tell my grandmother about it, but she tried it and loved it.

How else has your family inspired your desserts?

For a James Beard dinner, I made sfouf, which is a turmeric and semolina Lebanese cake. I paired it with tahini custard and Persian fairy floss, which is a snack my dad would bring home as a treat. We called it Arabic cotton candy; it's hand-pulled sugar flavored with blood orange juice or rose water.

Is it true that you have a habit of dancing on the job?

Yes! I've always loved to dance and sing in the kitchen. That might be a Lebanese thing because Lebanese people are always dancing. That's what our weddings are comprised of too, dancing 24/7. It's probably just in my blood.