# Lebnani, Reigate: ‘Small but perfectly judged’ – restaurant review

One taste of its gloriously zingy Lebanese flavours and you know you’re in the right place

[**Lebnani**](https://lebnani.co.uk/)**, 11 Church Street, Reigate RH2 0AA (07495 528919). Messe £5.95-£6.95, larger dishes £9.50-£17.50, desserts £5, wines from £24.95**

With the bad places, the moment never comes, however much you might wish it were otherwise. Perhaps you make allowances for the clumsy service, or the overblown decor, or the try-too-hard menu splattered with simpering adjectives – Sumptuous! Delectable! Toothsome! – which leave you muttering, “I’ll be the judge of that.” You accept all of that in the hope that something you have ordered will arrive and you’ll take one look at it and know, in the way you know your own name, that everything is actually going to be fine. With the bad places, that dish never arrives.

With the really good places, the moment always comes early. At Lebnani in Reigate, the first reassuring sign comes very early indeed: a glass bowl of small, intensely flavoured black and green olives, delivered to the table with the water. It is as if their compactness has concentrated their very brackish essence within the taut, shiny skins. They are mixed through with salty, chopped preserved lemons, and flecked with the red of diced peppers. We pick at them compulsively, sometimes with cocktail sticks, sometimes with our fingers until their tips are shiny with the oils. We soothe the lightly bitter edge with glasses of their own lemonade, flavoured with apple and ginger, or pomegranate and orange blossom.

Then the Beirut fattoush arrives and we know, from the merest glance, that we really have found our way to the right table. It’s a beauty. The thin curls of deep-fried flatbread are golden and lightly oiled, and dusted with the deep purple of sumac. Some of that citrus promise has found its way on to the bright green of the leaves and cucumber beneath. Shiny, pert, ruby jewels of pomegranate finish the picture. You know it’s going to be fabulous to eat, long before you even lift your fork in ardour, and it is: crisp and fresh, bright and zingy. It is food that makes you feel like you are engaged in an exercise of profound self-care. It’s “me time” in a succession of beautifully dressed plates.

The executive chef and proprietor at Lebnani is the Beirut-born Jad Youssef who, back in 2008, set up what became the small [Yalla Yalla](https://www.yalla-yalla.co.uk/#come-visit-us) group of Lebanese restaurants in central London before selling up. For a while he led the kitchen at the much fancier, now closed, Fakhreldine and then joined a similar restaurant in Hong Kong as executive chef. Now he’s also here in Surrey’s commuter belt, with a menu of meze at around £6 a plate and bigger dishes in the mid-teens. From Tuesday to Friday, they’ll do you a wrap with salad, hummus and pickles for £11.95. Apparently, Youssef divides his time between the two restaurants which, given the 5,989 miles between them – thank you nice Mr Google for that precise figure – sounds like a challenge. In truth, it sounds like a recipe for phoning it in.

Clearly, however, he knows how to staff a restaurant and transmit recipes from afar. Or perhaps we should just give all the credit to the people who actually cook and serve the food here on a daily basis. Lebnani is a small but perfectly judged, perfectly run restaurant, with its pretty half-tiled floor in white and blue and its turquoise cushioned banquettes and its open kitchen pumping out the smells of good things grilling over charcoal.

Little of the proposition will surprise anyone who considers themselves reasonably well versed in the classic repertoire of the eastern Mediterranean. Versions of these dishes can be found from one end of the Middle East to the other. Here is the offer of falafel and hummus, of tabbouleh and shish kebabs. But at Lebnani it comes with an especially light, fresh touch. Bring on the squirts of lemon juice and the dribbles of deep green olive oil and the finely chopped fresh herbs. Bring on the sunshine.

It is a reminder to me of how much I love the cooking of Lebanon. The small, tightly wrapped, rice-stuffed vine leaves, topped with a dice of tomato, are each a perfect mouthful. There is an especially light, almost frothy aubergine purée, smoky from the grill, the flavour deepened by the generous addition of garlic and tahini. The well in the middle is filled with that olive oil, dancing with the green of chopped chives. The hummus here is extremely creamy: it dollops on to the soft pillows of flatbread like the best garlicky whipped butter. For an extra £1.50 they add a small heap of their sweet, tender beef shawarma, banging with the baharat seasoning in which it has been marinated overnight, a billow of nutmeg and cumin, of paprika and clove and more.

We have two of the charcoal grills. There are hunks of chicken shish, the breast marinated in lemon and a paste of red peppers, to give the charred meat a rich bronze lustre. On the side is a pot of their [toum](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2020/jul/25/yotam-ottolenghi-recipes-for-summery-green-side-dishes), the brilliant white whipped garlic sauce. Then there’s the kebab of minced and spiced lamb shoulder, seasoned with allspice, with its own little dish of tahini sauce to help it on its way. Both come on the same impeccable bed of rice, spun through with vermicelli, that Lebanese miracle of rice cookery in which every buttery grain is merely hanging out together rather than clinging starchily to the next for security. There are roasted sweet peppers and sumac-marinated tomatoes, and a red onion salad.

The only thing they do not make here is the baklava. It’s a fine example, but pay more attention to the muhalabia, a soothing set milk pudding topped with crushed pistachios and sweetened with a light touch of rosewater syrup. Bar a prosecco, the entire wine list comes from the great houses of the [Bekaa Valley](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2011/oct/02/wine-in-lebanon-bekaa-valley) and [Mount Lebanon](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2020/sep/20/buy-wine-south-africa-or-lebanon-to-help-hardest-hit-coronavirus-producers?CMP=gu_com), and includes affordable offerings from the venerable [Chateau Musar](https://chateaumusar.com/). Next door is a branch of Café Rouge, which seems to be doing rather better business this lunchtime. It’s not better priced; indeed, if anything, you’ll run up a smaller bill at Lebnani. I do, of course, accept some people would prefer faux French to banging Lebanese. I know people make these choices. The problem is, I just don’t understand why.