

Food

Taboonia, a new Israeli Druze restaurant in NYC, is run by a Nova music festival survivor

Taboonia is the city's second Druze restaurant — and the first to seek kosher certification.

By [Jackie Hajdenberg](#) March 14, 2025



Raif Rashed, an Israeli Druze and the owner of Taboonia, wraps up a pita with labneh. (Jackie Hajdenberg)

Opening a kosher restaurant in New York City wasn't always in the cards for Raif Rashed, a Druze from the village of Usfiya in northern Israel.

But as Rashed, the owner of Taboonia — a new Druze restaurant in the Garment District that's currently seeking kosher certification — will be the first to tell you, sometimes life can take an unexpected turn, especially after a tragedy.

An engineer by trade, Rashed, 40, moved to Hackensack, New Jersey, in 2019 to take a job at an Israeli manufacturing company. In October 2023, he was

visiting family in Israel when he extended his trip to could help his brother, Radda — who had run a catering business and food stall there, also called Taboonia, for a decade — work a busy event.

Fatefully, that event was the Nova Music Festival. Intended to be a 15-hour party overnight dance party, the festival was the site of one of the deadliest massacres that occurred when Hamas invaded Israel on Oct. 7, 2023.

During the violent chaos that unfolded, Rashed was separated from his brother, who ultimately survived. He sought cover behind a car belonging to his friend Erick Peretz, who was at the festival with his 16-year-old daughter Ruth, who had cerebral palsy and used a wheelchair. Rashed watched Peretz and his daughter seek cover behind an ambulance, then, to his horror, witnessed Hamas fighters burning the vehicle. [Erick and Ruth Peretz's bodies were identified 12 days later](#); they were among the more than 380 people murdered at the festival that day.

The experience turned Rashed's life upside down. "I was in crisis [for] a year," said Rashed, who added that, in the aftermath of the attack, "I looked middle-aged within hours."

Rashed was stuck in Israel for several months, as his passport was stolen in the attack. When he finally returned to the United States, he quit his engineering job. Seeking comfort, he found himself cooking the foods of his childhood, like manakish — a type of flatbread served with toppings like za'atar, hummus, and labneh — or the very thin, crispy Druze pita, rolled into a wrap and filled with cucumber and tomato salad, hummus, hard boiled eggs, feta and chickpeas.

The Druze are a small religious and ethnic minority in the Middle East, with a population of about 1 million spread across communities in Syria, Lebanon and Israel. (Israel has vowed to protect the Druze in Syria if they come under attack from the new regime there, and this week Syrian Druze [visited a Druze site in Israel](#) for the first time in decades.) In Israel, Druze communities, comprising less than 2% of the population, tend to be patriotic and serve in

the military, as Rashed did. “We don’t have [a] country, but we serve the country we live [in],” he said.



Raif Rashed replaces a sticker on his phone that combines the flags of the Druze people with the American and Israeli flags. (Jackie Hajdenberg)

Inspired by reconnecting with Druze cuisine, Rashed decided to open an American outpost of Taboonia.

“For me to sell the food from our culture, and especially my mother’s recipes, this is my baby,” he said.

On Oct. 5, 2024 — almost exactly one year after the terrorist attack — he launched the Taboonia food stall, selling Druze food and coffee at the New Meadowlands Market at MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey on Saturdays and at the Grand Bazaar on the Upper West Side of Manhattan on Sundays. It was an instant hit.

The same month he opened his food stall, Rashed met his future business partner, Ray Radwan. Radwan, a Druze born in New Jersey whose family is from Lebanon, works in the restaurant industry, and the pair decided to open a brick-and-mortar outpost of Taboonia at 832 Sixth Ave. Construction on the

fast-casual dining space, which seats roughly a dozen people, began last November, and the restaurant had its soft-launch opening last month.

Until recently, the only Druze eatery in New York has Gazala's, an Upper West Side restaurant run by Gazala Halabi. When Gazala's was targeted with anti-Israel vandalism in February 2024, [scores of local Jews turned out to show support](#). The pattern repeated that July: Following a Hezbollah rocket attack that took the lives of 12 children and teens in a Druze town in northern Israel, [Jewish New Yorkers showed up at Gazala's in droves](#).

"It really feels like a family," Halabi said of the Jewish community's support at the time. "I really feel, again, like I'm not alone."

But the city's significant population of kosher-keeping Jews could not join in the rush. Gazala's is not kosher and serves shellfish alongside serves Middle Eastern specialties like kibbeh, meat-stuffed grape leaves, shawarma and lamb.



Raif Rashed's creation, the 'everything' bourekas, pays tribute to his New York and Druze identities. (Jackie Hajdenberg)

Taboonia is vegetarian, making it relatively easy to achieve kosher certification. Rashed said the restaurant is expected to receive its certification

from Rabbi Zev Schwarcz at IKC in the coming weeks, and that there will be a grand opening celebration, likely after Passover. And because Taboonia isn't owned by a Jew, it should be able to stay open on Shabbat and maintain its kosher status — an added perk.

“See, to be Druze, is a plus,” he said.

Rashed said it's just good business to seek kosher certification. “Kosher, everyone can eat, OK?” he said. “But not kosher, not everyone can eat.”

But he is also grateful to the support he's gotten from Jews in New York and beyond — including through [a recent viral video](#) that the actress and pro-Israel activist Noa Tishby posted about him on Instagram.

“My community is Jewish,” he said, adding that he attended school alongside Jewish students, and that his Hebrew is better than his Arabic or English. “I am around Jewish since 13 years old.”

Rashed's six years in New York and New Jersey have influenced his palette, as well as the restaurant's menu. In addition to traditional Druze foods, Taboonia also serves some cross-cultural treats, like everything bagel-seasoned bourekas, filled with mozzarella cheese.

Rashed hopes that Taboonia will be a place of repast and respite for New Yorkers of all stripes.

“Me and other Druze, Lebanese Druze, we [are] all of us all together [in the] middle of the war, in the middle of New York, to show the world we can make it a different way, and maybe we can make a change for some people, yes?”

Rashed said. “Because [in] this place you're going to hear Arabic, Hebrew, and English. No one is going to judge anyone about anything.”