

Israeli restaurant: Turn off phone, get discount

November 20 2013, by Aron Heller



Diners sit in a restaurant in the village of Abu Ghosh, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2013. A restaurant owner in an Arab village outside of Jerusalem says he is on a mission to save culinary culture by making diners a simple offer: Turn off your cellphone and get a 50 percent discount. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

A restaurant owner in an Arab village outside of Jerusalem says he is on a mission to save culinary culture by making diners a simple offer: Turn off your cellphone and get a 50 percent discount.

Jawdat Ibrahim says smartphones have destroyed the modern dining experience. He hopes the generous discount will bring back a more innocent time when going to a [restaurant](#) was about companionship, conversation and appreciating the food, rather than surfing, texting or talking to the office.

"I'm changing something. It might be something small, but maybe in some small way I'll be changing the culture of eating," said Ibrahim, 49.

Ibrahim is the owner of Abu Ghosh, a well-known restaurant named after its hometown, located about 10 kilometers (six miles) outside of Jerusalem. The town is known as a symbol of coexistence, and its restaurants, serving up platters of creamy hummus and grilled meat, are popular with Arab and Jewish visitors alike.

Ibrahim, who opened the restaurant in 1993 with winnings from an Illinois lottery, said mealtime conversations have long been a staple in this cellphone-obsessed country. But the situation has worsened in recent years as smartphones have become more sophisticated. He said he became dismayed as he saw groups of friends or married couples sitting in silence, staring at their screens and ultimately asking him to reheat their food.

"Technology is very good. But just when you eat, just especially when you are with your family and your friends, you can just wait for half an hour and enjoy the food and enjoy the company," he said. "A lot of people, they sit down and they don't enjoy their food, their company."

Ibrahim is in a better position than most to offer steep discounts. While living in the U.S. in the 1980s, he won some \$23 million in an Illinois state lottery.

He also is no stranger to publicity. Since returning to his homeland, he

has used his status to promote coexistence between Arabs and Jews.

In 2010, his restaurant briefly captured the Guinness World Record for the largest plate of hummus—a whopping four-ton concoction served up on a satellite dish. The entrance to his restaurant is covered with articles about him. A framed letter from Chicago's former mayor, Richard M. Daley, hangs, thanking Ibrahim for a meal during a visit to Israel.



Restaurant owner Jawdat Ibrahim speaks during an interview at his restaurant in the village of Abu Ghosh, on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Wednesday, Nov. 20, 2013. The restaurant owner in an Arab village outside of Jerusalem says he is on a mission to save culinary culture by making diners a simple offer: Turn off your cellphone and get a 50 percent discount. (AP Photo/Sebastian Scheiner)

Carleton English of Belus Capital Advisors, a New York financial research firm that tracks the restaurant industry, said the proliferation of

cellphones in restaurants is not all bad. Diners can share photos of their meals and provide recommendations to friends, while restaurants can connect with their customers.

"For groups of friends casually dining, mobile phones can be an enhancement. For someone hoping to gaze into their lover's eyes over candlelight during dinner instead of seeing their companion's forehead bent over the glare of an iPhone, it's definitely a hindrance," she said.

Even so, a Zagat survey last year found most respondents disapproved of texting, tweeting and emailing when eating out, though a majority accepted picture taking. According to the 2012 State of Mobile Etiquette Survey for Intel Corp., about one in five U.S. adults say they share online when eating a meal with others, and more than a third of teens do the same.

Ibrahim is not the first restaurateur to take aim at these trends. Eateries around the world have begun to offer discounts—generally far lower than Ibrahim's—to diners who turn off their phones. Some have even banned cellphone use altogether.

Samer Korban, co-owner of the Bedivere Eatery and Tavern in Beirut, said that since opening a year ago, he has given a 10 percent discount to people who hand over their cellphones.

"We want people to socialize, instead of sitting with their phones," he said, adding that at least 40 percent of his customers take advantage of the offer.

By offering half off the bill, Ibrahim appears to have taken the art of the discount to a whole new level. He admitted that he is taking a financial hit in the short term. But he believes in the long run, the move will pay off by attracting new customers.

Hagit Netzer, a 63-year-old tourist from northern Israel, stopped by the restaurant Wednesday after spending the day in nearby Jerusalem.

"What's the big deal not to use your phone for half an hour?" she said. "I wanted to see if this was really true." Her daughter was more circumspect, calling her husband to tell him that she was turning off her phone and would be out of touch.

As they received the bill, the original price, 158 shekels, or roughly \$45, was scribbled out. Scribbled next to it was the sum of 79 shekels. "I wonder what's in it for them. I can't believe they really do it for 50 percent," Netzer exclaimed.

Ibrahim said virtually every customer who has entered the restaurant since he began the promotion this week has taken advantage of the offer. The lone exception, he said, was a TV crew member who stopped in and needed his phone for work purposes. He would not say how long the offer would last.

"I have a lot of new customers," he said. "People come from Jerusalem. People come from Tel Aviv, and they all have one thing in common: This telephone is not good for me when I am eating."

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Citation: Israeli restaurant: Turn off phone, get discount (2013, November 20) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-11-israeli-restaurant-discount.html>

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