

Open sesame!

When September days turn into Arabian nights

STORY BY DANIELLE GOMES

Closing out another dazzling summer at the shore calls for a celebration. While pool parties and barbecues are fun, it's time to move on. Try something new — such as hosting an Arabian Nights theme party.

Pull your inspiration from the pages of "One Thousand and One Nights." Infuse your party with the magic of Aladdin's lamp and the splendor of Prince Ali. With exotic décor, aromatic spices, decadent food and lavish entertainment, this is the perfect party to heat up those cool September nights.

"For an Arabic party, you need three things: a belly dancer, music and food," says Janet Tafankaji, owner of Hummus Taza Mediterranean Market in Egg Harbor Township. Tafankaji is from Damascus, but has lived in the United States for nearly 40 years. For the past five of them, Tafankaji has specialized in bringing hard-to-find, authentic Arabic foods and ingredients to South Jersey.

Music and entertainment are essential to an Arabian Nights party and should be woven throughout the event, according to Soraya, a Ventnor-local and world-famous belly dancer who performs and plans Arabic parties throughout the tri-state area. Soraya has created Arabian Nights themed events for several Fortune 500 companies. She also has planned more intimate Arabian parties and weddings throughout the country.

"I strive to not only be authentically cultural, but to bring the magic of the perfect Arabian Nights party to fruition, and

create an unforgettable evening of magic, merriment, mystery and art, fusing the best of East meets West and plenty of fun for an entire family," Soraya says. On a mission to bridge the cultural divide, Soraya shares her best tips for throwing a premier Arabian Nights party.

ARABIAN ENTERTAINMENT

While the soundtrack to Disney's "Aladdin" is definitely a viable option for the DIY playlist, you may want to work in some more authentic sounds. To build your own soundtrack, Soraya recommends checking out Amr Diab and Fares Karam. Diab is an Egyptian crossover megastar, famous for blending different styles of music. Karam is a well-known Lebanese singer celebrated for his traditional Dabke style, which reminds many people of the Horah danced to "Hava Nagila," Soraya explains.

To tip the authenticity of your Arabian Nights party, include belly dancing. There are many fun ways to weave this ancient art into your event. You could hire a belly dancer to perform throughout or opt to involve your guests in belly dancing lessons.

"Sometimes I'm asked just to perform, and other times clients will ask me to perform then teach the party participants belly dancing techniques," says Soraya, adding she will often teach guests how to feel, anticipate and move to the rhythm, melody and drum beat change, which is "the soul of Arabic belly dancing." She will also teach guests how to use the traditional zills or finger cymbals and even bring extra coin skirts to make things really festive.

From girls' nights out to family get-togethers to full-blown events, belly dancing can be the perfect accoutrement to your Arabian Nights party. Belly dancing is one of the most recognizable, although sometimes misunderstood, Eastern art. Much like ballet, belly dancing is an ancient and delicate art that

requires the same degree of dedication and study. In some Arabic countries it is illegal for women to dance in public. As such, belly dancing has become a form of expression for female empowerment and a celebration of "the divine feminine," Soraya explains.

"I try to be a sort of cultural attaché, bringing understanding through a shared love of food, fun, music and art," Soraya says.

A SULTAN'S FEAST

For Arabian Nights theme parties, Soraya and Tafankaji recommend offering a large selection of mezze and tapas.

For a DIY budget, Soraya recommends heading to your favorite grocery store or market. Mediterranean and Middle Eastern dishes are popular and widely available. Some of the dishes Soraya likes to include are olives, oils and a variety of dips, pita bread (sliced and stacked in pyramids), kababs (with grilled chicken, lamb and firm tofu) and individual cups of saffron couscous.

"Herbs like parsley and dill and spices like turmeric have been used for centuries in Arabic and East Indian cooking. They are not only great for their rich flavor but for their anti-inflammatory properties and benefits for the whole body and mind," Soraya says.

For more exotic and authentic options, Hummus Taza carries items not easily found in the supermarket, such as its wide selection of authentic, imported Arabic foods including pickles, olives, cheeses, oils, beans and more. Tafankaji also prepares homemade grab-and-go selections such as hummus, red pepper dip, varieties of baba ghanoush, tabbouleh, grape leaves, chickpea salad, beet salad, falafel, kibbeh balls and more.

For beverages, Soraya recommends Moroccan mint tea, Turkish apple tea, and Arabic coffee.

"I love adding cardamom to coffee, it adds such a rich flavor," Soraya says.

If you're are going to include alcoholic beverages, Soraya believes you should have fun with your drink selection.

"Many Middle East countries don't drink alcohol," says Soraya, but she likes to pair chilled tequila with fresh watermelon juice and mint. She also suggests developing fun names for your cocktails such as The Belly Dancer, Aladdin's Lamp or Desert Sand.

ALADDIN'S LAMP DÉCOR

Color is key when decorating for an Arabian Nights event. Cover small tables in a bright array of fabrics, Soraya says, then top the tables with a variety of candle-lit lanterns. If you're kids will be present, or candles make you nervous, Soraya recommends using the battery-operated tea lights inside the lanterns. She also recommends stopping by Pier One Imports for its selection of Moroccan, Mediterranean and stained-glass lanterns to create beautiful lighting.

Hang large pieces of fabric to create beautiful backdrops with lots of color and "don't be afraid to mix and match colors," Soraya says. Pull inspiration from richly hued Bedouin tents. If it's in your budget, add oversized pillows for extra seating around low tables or to create cozy alcoves.

To finish the tables, spread your food and drink offerings throughout the party on various tables, which will encourage guests to move throughout the venue and create a lively atmosphere. For some sparkle, Soraya recommends purchasing bags of plastic jewels and scattering them around the lanterns and food.

Lastly, include hookahs, a popular and authentic addition to a grown-up Arabian Nights party, for a special touch. Hummus Taza carries a variety of hookahs that start at \$35.

"We have everything you need for your hookah including, different flavor tobaccos and charcoal," Tafankaji says.

CONTACT INFORMATION

SORAYA'S MID-EAST DANCE AND MUSIC PRODUCTION
609-823-2029, BellyDanceBySoraya.com

HUMMUS TAZA MEDITERRANEAN MARKET
6825 Tilton Road, Egg Harbor Township; 609-380-7396