

## Foul for Falafel

*The falafel at Cairo's El Shabrawy set the standard for all falafel sandwiches to come*

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Cairo market, courtesy David Hammond



By **David Hammond**

In the market stalls of Cairo's old city, Egyptologist

### **Jerusalem Cafe**

1030 W. Lake St.

Oak Park IL, 60301

Ahmed Bekheet called my attention to El Shabrawy, a stand offering falafel, the fried grain balls that I've praised at Oak Park restaurants like Jerusalem Café and the soon-to-be-opened Falafill.

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I ordered one sandwich for one Egyptian pound (about 17 cents), which may very well be the Food Deal of the Century.

Unlike the ball-shaped versions of falafel I've enjoyed all over the United States, many Egyptian street stands offer disk-shaped falafel, and unlike the chickpea mixture I've known, these falafel were made of fava beans. Fava, or broad beans, are also the primary constituent of fowl, the Egyptian national dish of crushed beans, cumin, lemon juice and garlic (foul, or ful medames, was my breakfast of choice whenever I could get it – Bekheet enlightened me that it's usually breakfast food and I like beans for breakfast).

Vendors usually start frying up the falafel around noon. Wandering past the ruins of the temple at Luxor which is right downtown (kind of like Tenochtitlan in Mexico City), I was distracted by long lines forming in front of small shops that were starting to serve the day's falafel. Though available all day long, lunch is really when falafel is most usually enjoyed (just as fowl is usually a breakfast food – not sure what typical bean dish is enjoyed at dinner in Egyptian households).

Like the taco, the falafel is a beautiful hand-food, easy to eat while walking, though unlike most tacos, the pita-type bread contains only a few fried disks of fava bean meal, and they're closed on the sides, so they're unlikely to spill out on onto the sidewalk or you while eating (taco lovers, we have to admit, one has to kind of stop moving when you eat one).

The falafel at Cairo's El Shabrawy has set the standard for all falafel sandwiches to come. Fried at high heat, the exterior was a matrix of lacy threads of fried legume, and the green interior was herbaceous with a light touch of garlic, each element distinct and not overwhelmed by the frying or each other. There was no lettuce or tomato, but I didn't miss those condiments: this sandwich was so moist and flavorful that it hardly needed anything else.

The falafel disks were soft, with just a lightly fried exterior that gave way with a delicate crunch. Inside, the texture was marvelously fluffy; a woman who was running a stand directly across the covered alley from El Shabrawy told me that the secret was sodium bicarbonate, which helps the falafel stay soft and airy rather than pasty and thick.

"You really like them?" asked Bekheet, with an incredulity I've come to recognize in many foreign friends who can't believe I find their indigenous cuisine so remarkably wonderful.

"Yeah," I said, "I like them a lot. A lot."