



(From Left to Right) Natasha and Gene Williams pose with Abu Bakar and ----.

BRINGING THE WORLD TO THE BLUEGRASS ONE BITE AT A TIME

By Julie Smead

Abu Bakar is a friendly young nomad from the Nigerian Tuareg (TWAR-egg) tribe—and about as foreign to the Bluegrass as a flying saucer. Yet every few years, Bakar makes the long journey to Lexington from his arid homeland to sell intricately hand-crafted Tuareg jewelry, knives, woodcarvings, and textiles. The items are created by traditional artisans of an African co-operative that was formed to help support Tuareg driven from their desert homes by decades of drought and local political upheaval.



These proud, camel-herding nomads are called Blue Men, due to the brilliant indigo robes worn by both sexes. Unlike some indigenous tribes that succumbed to modern encroachment, the Tuareg actually thrived in the harsh Saharan desert until the 1970s, when drought killed many of their herds. Today, Many Tuareg live in semi-modern towns where money, and the old ways of the bush, are scarce. Because they no longer live in the desert, the Tuareg feel their centuries-old culture slipping away. But some, like Bakar and members of his



Natasha's Café
New Year's Eve
Time Zone Buffet

DECEMBER 31

RESERVATIONS ARE REQUIRED

For seating details, call (859) 259-2754 or visit
www.beetnik.com or www.natashascafe.com.



Purse

co-op, are devoting their lives to preserving the old customs.

One woman in the Bluegrass regularly opens her doors to the Tuareg by purchasing their wares and serving as overnight host to Bakar. Natasha Williams first met Abu when he showed up on her doorstep unannounced, offering a mutual friend's name as an old-world calling card. A native of Russia, where such open-door courtesies still exist, Williams honored her African guest and purchased Tuareg goods to sell in her boutique. Bakar counts Lexington as an important stop on his U.S. sales trip and considers Williams a good friend.

Williams is co-owner and executive chef of Natasha's Cafe and Balagula Boutique. Her sophisticated slice of exotica is housed in a spacious contemporary setting. The cafe serves international cuisine, and the boutique sells handmade goods six days a week. "Every time you carry a bag out of my store, it means you and I have fed a family or sent a child to school," said Williams. "And we did it with respect and honor."



Williams moved to Lexington in 1990 to marry Gene, a Russian goods importer and Central Kentucky native. The cafe and boutique emerged out of necessity, circumstance, and sheer invention. Williams, a former teacher and translator, couldn't find work in Lexington, and Gene's Russian import business was "collapsing as fast as a former socialist state." So, they thought, why not open a business, the kind they themselves loved to frequent? "Where I come from, coffeehouses and cafes are important social out-

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Recipes

Recipes like the following
may be included in the next Time Zone Buffet.

Foule Mudammes

(fava bean stew or Egyptian chili)

TIME ZONE GMT + 2 hours; GMT + 3 hours EAT (East Africa Time);
EEST (East Egypt Summertime)

olive oil
small yellow onion, diced
2 medium tomatoes, chopped
Medium green pepper, or two jalapenos
4 - 15-oz. cans fava beans, drained
1 heaping tsp. ground cumin
1/2 tsp. ground coriander
1/2 tsp. ground cinnamon
1/2 tsp. ground turmeric (for color)
2 stalks green onion, chopped
2 tbs. chopped parsley
2 tbs. cilantro, diced
2 cloves fresh garlic, diced
feta cheese (optional)

In a few teaspoons of oil, brown the onions. If you are using bell peppers, chop them and add to oil after onions have browned. (If you use jalapenos, DO NOT chop them or your stew will be too hot! Instead, remove the stems and sauté them whole with the onions.) Add beans and bring to a gentle boil. Add tomatoes and spices. Cook until stew thickens. Add fresh herbs, turn off heat. Add garlic. Use a potato masher to mash the beans. ('Mudammes' means mashed.) Top with crumbled feta cheese, and drizzle with olive oil. Serve over rice or with pita bread.

Cucumber Sunomono

TIME ZONE GMT + 9 hours JST (Japan Standard Time)

4 tbs. rice vinegar
3 tbs. soy sauce
2 tbs. sugar, mirin (Japanese vinegar), or honey
1 tsp. grated ginger with juice
1 large European cucumber or 6 scrubbed,
blemish-free pickling cucumbers

In a small bowl, combine rice vinegar and next three ingredients. If the cucumbers are waxed or thick-skinned, you may peel them; then slice thinly and spread on paper towels to drain for 30 minutes. Toss dressing with drained cucumber slices and divide into portions. If desired, top with cooked crabmeat or baby shrimp.

lets,” explained Williams. “When I came to Lexington, I wondered where to go.”

A self-described romantic, Williams also wondered where to find the kinds of eclectic clothing, housewares, and accessories that she'd seen on purchasing trips to New York City. With loans from friends, including a borrowed espresso machine and secondhand display equipment, they opened a boutique and small cafe. Over the next few years, Natasha's became a haven for those seeking others of like mind.

Eventually, customers requested more than baklava and lattes. “Not being a fan of big hamburgers, we created our own light meals,” said Williams. Williams's mother, who accompanied her to the United States, helped her create dishes like curried midnight chicken and mushroom stew—menu items that are still popular today. “When you are a foreign person, you don't know your customers,” said Williams. “You know the language, and you've studied the culture, but how do you relate to the people? In my culture, any culture, the first thing you offer a person who walks across your threshold is food. So, opening the cafe was a natural progression,” said Williams.

On Independence Day 2001, 10 years after the opening of the first cafe, the couple moved to a refurbished warehouse in downtown Lexington. Inside the large, colorful space, which the Williamses decorated themselves, stand huge carved wooden figures from Africa and Bali, brightly

painted Russian nesting dolls, henna-decorated lamps from India, brass filigree from Morocco and the Middle East, and stunning stained glass by local artist Julie Lively. As Williams puts it, part of her mission is to “help Lexington discover the world.”

Mixing cultures in a pot has always been a form of artistic expression for Williams, a proponent of the worldwide Slow Food movement. She describes her cooking style as “not Jewish, Russian, Ukrainian, or Polish, but also somewhat Armenian, Georgian, and Greek, with a touch of Bulgarian travel, a visit from Chinese friends, and a dreamy flavor of my Cuban first love.” Customers can sample Williams’s unique style during the ‘Kiev to Cairo’ lunch buffet or during a relaxed, full-service gourmet dinner from the menu. Whenever possible, the café uses locally grown produce to create its ethnically inspired meals. Cuban espresso drinks; Turkish, Greek, and other coffees; plus fine wines and beers from around the world round out the café’s beverage menu. Entertainment by ethnically inspired acts, like the Rakadu Gypsy Dancers and Jaleos Flamencos, a flamenco music and dance group, is regular fare. The whole atmosphere is eclectic, worldly, urbane—and spiritually delicious.

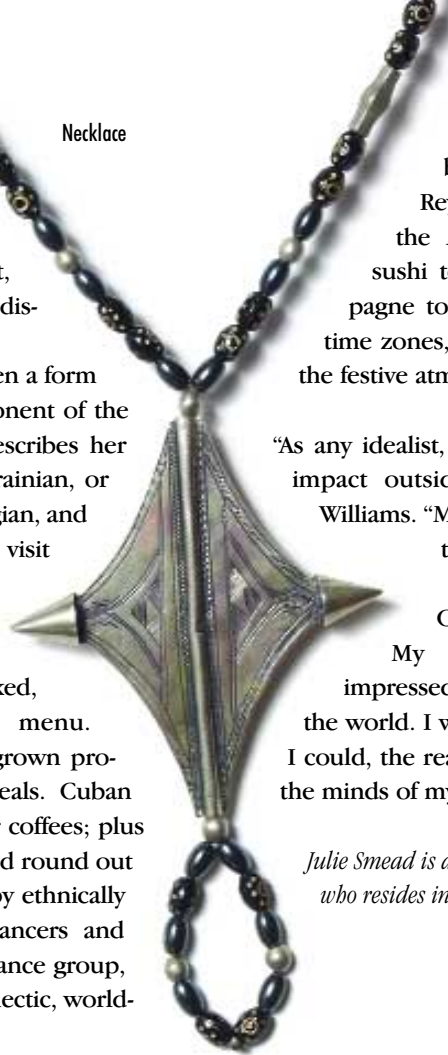
Another way the Williamses celebrate global culture is through their New Year’s Eve Time Zone Buffet. Three years ago, the world watched as 24 major time zones celebrated the new millennium on the hour, every hour. Williams noted



(From Left to Right) ----, ----, and David Minton enjoying an intellectually stimulating conversation.

the unity displayed in those New Year’s Eve parties around the world. “For a moment, we really thought globally,” said Williams. To recreate this feeling, in 2002, Williams and her crew created their own annual world party. This fledgling tradition includes dishes from many of world’s major time zones. Depending upon which of three scheduled reserva-

Necklace



tion times guests choose, they’ll celebrate the New Year with Morocco, Reykjavik, or a cruise ship in the middle of the Atlantic. The selections range “from sushi to American meat loaf.” Hourly champagne toasts mark the New Year in additional time zones, and live entertainment contributes to the festive atmosphere.

“As any idealist, I have to feel that whatever I do has impact outside my own life and interest,” said Williams. “My life has to make sense for the good of the community, in this case, the global community (that part of my old Communist upbringing is with me yet.) My new American community had impressed my as being isolated from the rest of the world. I wanted to bring back, to the extent that I could, the reality of the world and rehumanize it in the minds of my customers.”

Julie Smead is a free-lance writer who resides in Lexington.

The Slow Food® Movement

The Slow Food movement was born in Bra, Italy, in 1986, to “counter the tide of standardization of taste and the manipulation of consumers around the world.” With more than 60,000 members worldwide, the association holds that “any traditional product encapsulates the flavors of its region of origin, not to mention local customs and ancient production techniques.” Slow Food works to protect the historic, artistic, and environmental heritage of places of gastronomic pleasure—cafes, inns, and bistros. It also labors to ensure agricultural heritage through crop biodiversity, artisan techniques, sustainable agriculture, rural development, and food traditions.

www.slowfood.com