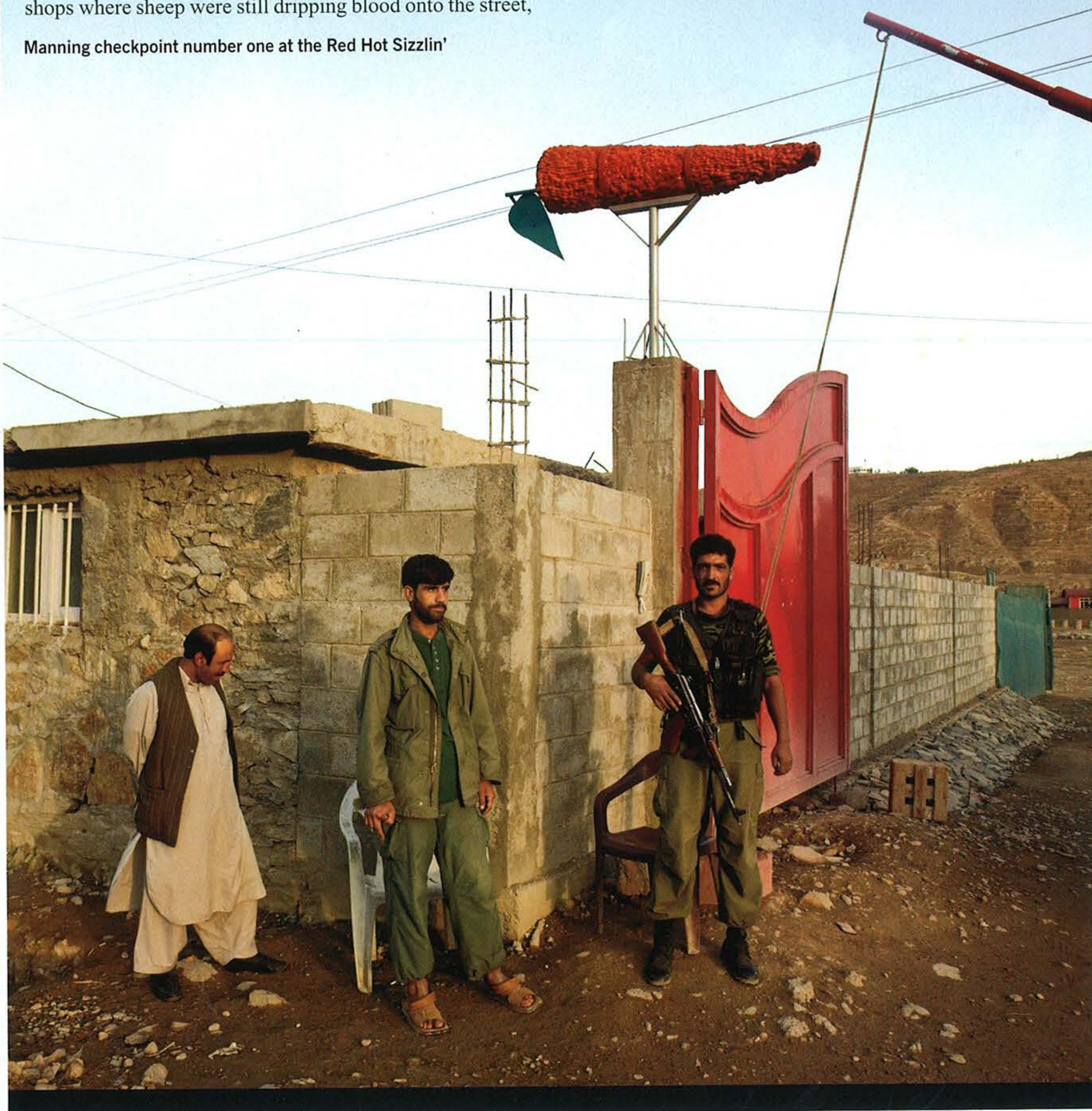


KABUL NIGHTS

Six years after the fall of the Taliban, dining in the Afghan capital proves equal parts sobering and delicious. BY KRISTIN OHLSON

WE'D BEEN LURED INTO THE DWINDLING LIGHT and rising dust of Kabul's streets by the rumor of barbecued pork. Our driver aimed the van down a street with so many ruts that our conversation continued in hiccups. We rattled past a herd of goats grazing on a mound of garbage, then veered onto a busy street where the driver zigged and zagged around other cars, turbaned old men on bicycles, water buffalo, and women in burkas hurrying to get home before dark. We flew past butcher shops where sheep were still dripping blood onto the street,

Manning checkpoint number one at the Red Hot Sizzlin'





WE SPOTTED A GATE WITH AN ONION-SHAPED DOME AND A KNOT OF MEN WITH MACHINE GUNS. THE GUARDS OPENED THE GATE TO A LOVELY GARDEN AND RESTAURANT.

The Red Hot Sizzlin' draws foreigners with its barbecued ribs.

past one of the now closed Chinese “restaurants” notorious for trafficking in a different kind of flesh, past one of the glittering new villas going up behind the walls of a compound. We passed the heavily barricaded avenue leading to the American Embassy and mounted the bridge over the Kabul River where there were still a few cars idling on the shore, their drivers tossing buckets of water to wash away the dust. We passed bullet-riddled, bomb-ravaged apartment buildings, then skirted a vehicular graveyard where smashed blue buses were stacked five high.

“I think it’s over there,” said Gay-LeClerc Qader, one of my companions. She spoke to the driver in her soft Dari.

The driver pulled into what looked like the entrance to a prison, except for the giant red chile pepper mounted on a pole over the gate. Two guards were lounging on white plastic lawn chairs, cradling their machine guns. One of them made the universal sign for eating, pressing his fingers together and raising them to his open mouth. When our driver nodded, he opened the gate and waved us through. We drove across several hundred feet of torn-up terrain that could have been either a construction site or a minefield and came to another gate. When the guard threw back that gate, we saw a green lawn and outdoor benches and the painted brick walls of the Red Hot Sizzlin’ restaurant. Inside, we settled into our seats and the tables around us filled up—one with bulky security guys,

another with an international cast of idealists from some aid organization. The rumor of barbecued ribs—happily true—had drawn many pork-starved, *haram*-heedless foreigners from their isolated compounds in this Muslim country.

I was a wide-eyed visitor on my second trip to Afghanistan, in spring of 2006. I was there to help Debbie Rodriguez, my other dining companion, put together a book about running a beauty school and salon in Kabul. And she and Qader—both American—were in the final weeks of preparation for a joint enterprise with their Afghan husbands. They would soon open the Cabul Coffee House and Café, the first Western-style coffeehouse in Kabul, complete with blues musicians, Wi-Fi, piles of books, and honey-nut lattes, as well as kebabs and burgers. They were eager to check out some of the other dining establishments in town and to talk to the proprietors. Or, at least, that was our excuse as we ventured out night after night.

NOT ALL OF KABUL’S RESTAURANTS were as tucked away as the Red Hot Sizzlin’, but most were still tough to find in a city with few named streets and no addresses. One night, we drove in circles looking for the now-closed Samarqand and finally made an educated guess after spotting a gate with an onion-shaped dome and a knot of men with machine guns. The guards opened the gate to a lovely garden and restaurant. Another night, we went looking for a Middle Eastern restaurant called Taverne du Liban. Again, we drove up one street and down another, then finally pulled up in front of a compound with a cluster of guards and the aroma of roasted meat. Upon closer inspection, we saw that there was a sign. It wasn’t much bigger than the luggage tag on my suitcase.

Western-style restaurants—meaning those that adhere to Western standards of sanitation and quality, serve alcohol, and allow men and women to mingle—keep a low profile in Kabul. Most foreigners themselves keep a pretty low profile, either because they don’t want to impose their presence on a country



struggling to rise from the ruins of nearly three decades of strife brought on by foreign meddling—or because they're afraid. And they have some good reasons for their fear. One foreign doctor told me that a warning circulated through the international community last year that terrorists were focusing on soft targets, including Westerners frequenting restaurants. He continued to go out to eat, but the nongovernmental organization that employed him insisted on having guards on motorcycles patrol the block to make sure that no one was idling just around the corner, waiting to snatch him away.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS LIKE THIS. Before the Soviets invaded, in 1979, and the fighting began, Kabul was called the Paris of the East. In *An Historical Guide to Afghanistan*, from 1977, Nancy Hatch Dupree wrote that "tall modern buildings nuzzle against bustling bazaars, and wide avenues fill with brilliant flowing turbans, gaily striped *chapans*, miniskirted school girls, a multitude of handsome faces and streams of whizzing traffic.... Travelers have written glowingly of Kabul for centuries, and modern visitors continue to be captivated by its lively charm." Her book listed 12 Afghan and European restaurants in Kabul, most with bars and several offering dancing.

A few of the restaurants attempted to stay in business after the fighting began—first the mujahideen against the Soviets, then the civil war that followed the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. Those that lasted until the Taliban victory, in 1996, quickly closed their doors, since alcohol and mixed-gender gatherings were now strictly forbidden. Kebab shops continued to draw customers, but they offered little more than kebabs, rice, and naan, and they served only men.

After the fall of the Taliban, in 2001, a few Western-style restaurants opened to serve the thousands of foreigners and

diaspora Afghans who had begun to pour into Kabul. There are now more than 20 such places. While the government tolerates—albeit uneasily—the drinking of alcohol by foreigners, it prohibits restaurants from serving alcohol to Afghans. This bifurcated policy creates a great deal of awkwardness when someone who looks and sounds Afghan—and presumably Muslim—arrives at the gates of a restaurant. The guards often demand to see a passport. If the prospective customer doesn't hold a foreign passport, they deny entry. Sher Dil Qader, who is Gay-LeClerc's husband and a former mujahideen fighter, lived in the United States from 1989 until shortly after 9/11. He holds a U.S. passport. On the one evening he joined us at a restaurant, he was grudgingly granted entry by the guards and looked uncomfortable all night.

The Qaders met in a refugee camp in Pakistan in the mid-1980s while working with a program that trained field medics. They left Pakistan at the beginning of the Afghan civil war. Sher Dil had no formal restaurant training, but he found a job in Washington, D.C., working with an up-and-coming chef. By 2000, the couple had moved to Reno and opened their own place: One-Stop Burgers and Kabobs. Sher Dil managed the restaurant and occasionally worked the grill, and Gay-LeClerc served customers when the restaurant was busy. The two returned to Afghanistan after 9/11 to distribute donated school supplies and clothing to orphanages. Eventually they started a community health program in Bamyan. Later, in Kabul, they opened a hamburger kiosk at the American military base. Then they hit upon the idea of the coffeehouse with Rodriguez, imagining the kind of mellow yet hip atmosphere that tends to be in short supply in conflict zones.

While Rodriguez and the Qaders met at the coffeehouse to address a few final details before their grand opening, I sat at one of the tables and admired the compound's yard. The walls were freshly painted a creamy white, the tables were arranged under green canopies, the

(Continued on page 118)

The menu at the Cabul Coffee House and Café runs to burgers, kebabs, and lattes, and the entertainment to live blues performances.

rosebushes were blooming, and the guards were chatting amiably near the gate in matching blue bulletproof vests. A smiling young man hustled through the gate with a wheelbarrow full of gravel, which he raked onto one of the pathways. He then ran back out the gate for another load. Suddenly, the coffeehouse partners looked out the window and stared at him.

"Who is that guy?" Rodriguez asked the Qaders. "Did you hire him?"

"I didn't hire him," Gay-LeClerc said, looking quizzically at her husband. He shook his head.

This is one of the challenges of opening a restaurant in Kabul. The city is swarming with impoverished refugees, and the unemployment rate is around 40 percent; locals desperate for a job will simply start working and hope someone decides to pay them. I was glad I didn't have to be the one to tell this young man that all the jobs there had been filled.

There were many other challenges as well. Electricity was intermittent at best, so the Qaders needed a generator to keep things running. They may eventually have to harden the place with barbed wire on the walls, blast film on the windows, and rocket barricades along the top of the building so that people who work for organizations that are bullish on security can come. "And everything has to be brought in from outside the country," Gay-LeClerc said. Except the chairs we were sitting on. The partners couldn't find an Afghan company that made or imported restaurant furniture, so they decided it would be cheaper to have a carpenter make some rather than ship it from Dubai—the source of almost everything else they were using. They ordered walnut from a lumber dealer and had a carpenter craft the wood into tables and chairs out in the compound's yard.

Supplying the coffeehouse will continue to be a challenge, because many things have to be ordered a month in advance. The partners can't afford to run out of coffee or Equal or stirrers, and they can't call a local restaurant-supply store (there aren't any) or run out to Costco for necessities. Even when they start serving kebabs and burgers, the meat will be from outside the country. "The local butchers hang meat outside in the dust and flies," SherDil said. "People get sick, but they don't care. They're always sick—they think this is just the way life is."

On my last night, Rodriguez and I and a friend went to one more restaurant.

First, we sat in Rodriguez's salon—now under new management, as she has left the country—and shared a bottle of wine, which is a fabulous hostess gift in a country where only a few places sell it. The city's power was down, and the generator wasn't working, so we talked and sipped by candlelight. Then we set out for the restaurant. It took the usual amount of driving around in circles, this time in total darkness. The friend finally spotted an alley where a few guards were hunkered down. They peered into the car and waved us through. The restaurant was down the alley, behind a hidden wall. When we walked inside, it was as if we were in another city.

When we left, a few hours later, our driver bore down on the gas pedal and we streaked through the empty streets. Every once in a while, I realized that certain compounds must have had generators running because I saw the flickering light of a television or rooms that glared with brightness. Then I noticed that the driver was slowing down. Two men were standing in the middle of the dark street waving us down with flashlights.

"Why are they stopping us?" I asked, my heart pounding just a little.

Rodriguez shrugged. "They probably just want to make sure we're not being kidnapped. Look happy."

So when they shined the light on my face, I smiled. ☺