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Review

Kinz, London W11: 'No bells, no whistles, just Lebanese food cooked with immense pride' – restaurant review

Grace Dent
Sun 16 Aug 2026 06.00 BST

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Kinz, London W11: 'There's something cinematic about this elegant setting.' Photograph: Amy Heycock/The Guardian

Home cooking, but in the most complimentary sense

Some developers would rip the soul out of a 1930s banking hall, but Kinz, a new all-day Lebanese brasserie housed in a former Lloyds Bank in Notting Hill, instead makes a feature of its chunky vault door. Where W11 residents once kept their cash, diners can now take a seat and sip Lebanese wine from the Bekaa valley. After all, what visit to the bank wouldn't be improved by a cold glass of Chateau Musar Jeune?

This triple-height room with mezzanine seating is a very different proposition from all those tiny, homespun Lebanese restaurants typically anchored around Edgware Road since the 1970s. Kinz may offer *kibbeh nayyeh* (finely minced raw lamb and beef with bulgur, spices and pine nuts), *shish barak* (tiny lamb and herb dumplings in yoghurt sauce) and *warak enab* (lamb-stuffed vine leaves and baby courgettes), as do many places in pockets across west London, but there is something altogether more cinematic about this elegant setting.

I sat with my pot of mint tea thinking that the place has all the hallmarks of a 1980s Duran Duran video, in which the boys pitch up somewhere sophisticated in Lebanon for mysterious hijinks. Kinz's mezzanine seems almost built for John Taylor to sip a *babunaj* negroni (Hayman's gin, Lillet Blanc, Suze and chamomile) under his tousled fringe. Large-format photographs of Lebanese life line the walls, including one of an impressive matriarch on a visit to the hair salon.

'Home cooking in the most complimentary sense': Kinz's spiced chicken with rice.

Even so, Kinz is far from showy – in fact, it feels a bit like an upmarket but still everyday Lebanese canteen. Pop in for a plate of spinach *fatayer* and end up staying for the Sunday special *molokhiye* – slow-simmered jute mallow with chicken, rice, pitta and a sharp, mignonette-style sauce.

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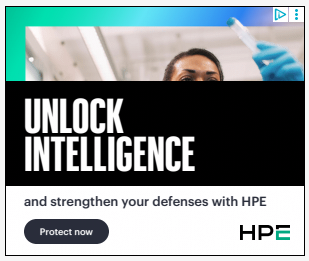

Fans of Akub, the well-loved modern Palestinian restaurant just a few streets away, may well recognise the name of that formidable restaurateur, Rasha Khouri Bruzzo. Here, she has joined forces with brothers Jad and Karim Lahoud, both Londoners raised by Lebanese chef parents. The result is a deeply personal space, where the chocolate cake is the Lahouds' mother Elene's recipe - she's even been known to turn up in the kitchen of a morning simply to test that this gooey, dark chocolate sponge is up to her standards.

The vibe across much of the menu, meanwhile, is elegant sparseness: nothing is over-garnished or served with frippery. Mint tea comes in tiny, functional, stainless-steel pots. Cheese *rikakat* (filo pastry cigars) arrive on a plain plate looking for all the world like M&S party food ... until you bite in and find them hot, crisp and delicately seasoned with fresh mint. I reckon I could eat at least 17 of these things in one sitting. It would not be pretty, but it would be a testament to their beige deliciousness.

'I could eat at least 17 of these in one sitting': Kinz's cheese *rikakat*.

Rich hummus comes topped with tahini, with the option of adding pine nuts or *awarma*, a spiced, slow-cooked minced lamb. There is *baba ganoush*, obviously, but also *moutabal,* or smoky chargrilled aubergine with tahini. Cod fillets come with walnuts and tahini sauce. All are understated, yet effective: no bells, no whistles, just Lebanese food cooked with immense pride and an urge to be accurate.

The staff are a genuine delight - warm, knowledgable, unhurried - and the food is definitely decent. You might even mistake the *fattet* aubergine, baked in tomato sauce and served on yoghurt with broken toasted pitta, for parmigiana, but they are very different beasts. Parmigiana is rich, oily, cheesy and baked into submission. Fattet, however, which in Arabic means "crumbs", is built on crisp bread soaked in yoghurt, and as a result is much lighter, sharper and altogether more refreshing.

'Light, sharp and refreshing': Kinz's *fattet* aubergine.

The slow-cooked spiced chicken with rice is a standout: home cooking in the most complimentary sense, with properly stewed bird, roast almonds, a sharp sourness running through the rice, and a rich gravy served from a long-handled, copper-coloured pan.

For pudding, we ordered *osmalieyeh*, or crisp kataifi pastry layered with ashta clotted cream and orange blossom syrup, which is delicate, not over-sweet and a gentle way to end. But it is Elene's chocolate cake that is the real star of the dessert show: dense, dark, damp and oozing. We even ordered a second piece to take home, complete with specific instructions not to refrigerate it or Elene would be cross. I've never met the woman, but I was suitably chastened.

Kinz was busy as heck on the lunchtime we visited, and it's plain to see why. I've been recommending it to anyone with a large group to feed in west London. There is a very real sense that this re-loved bank and its new inhabitants are here to stay. Kinz will get my trade any time I'm passing - and I will *always* order that chocolate cake.

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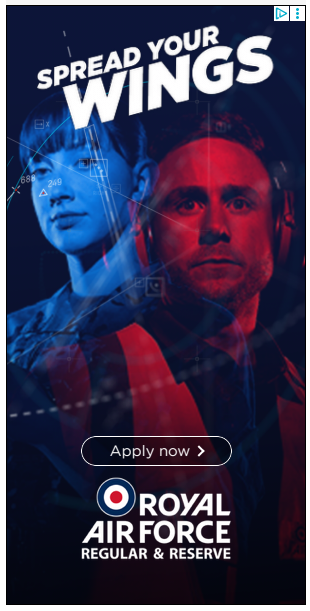

Kinz's *osmalieyeh* pudding is 'delicate, not over-sweet and a gentle way to end a meal'.

- **Kinz** 50 Notting Hill Gate, London W11, 020-4637 5068. Open all week, noon-11pm (midnight Fri & Sat). From about £40 a head à la carte, plus drinks and service

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