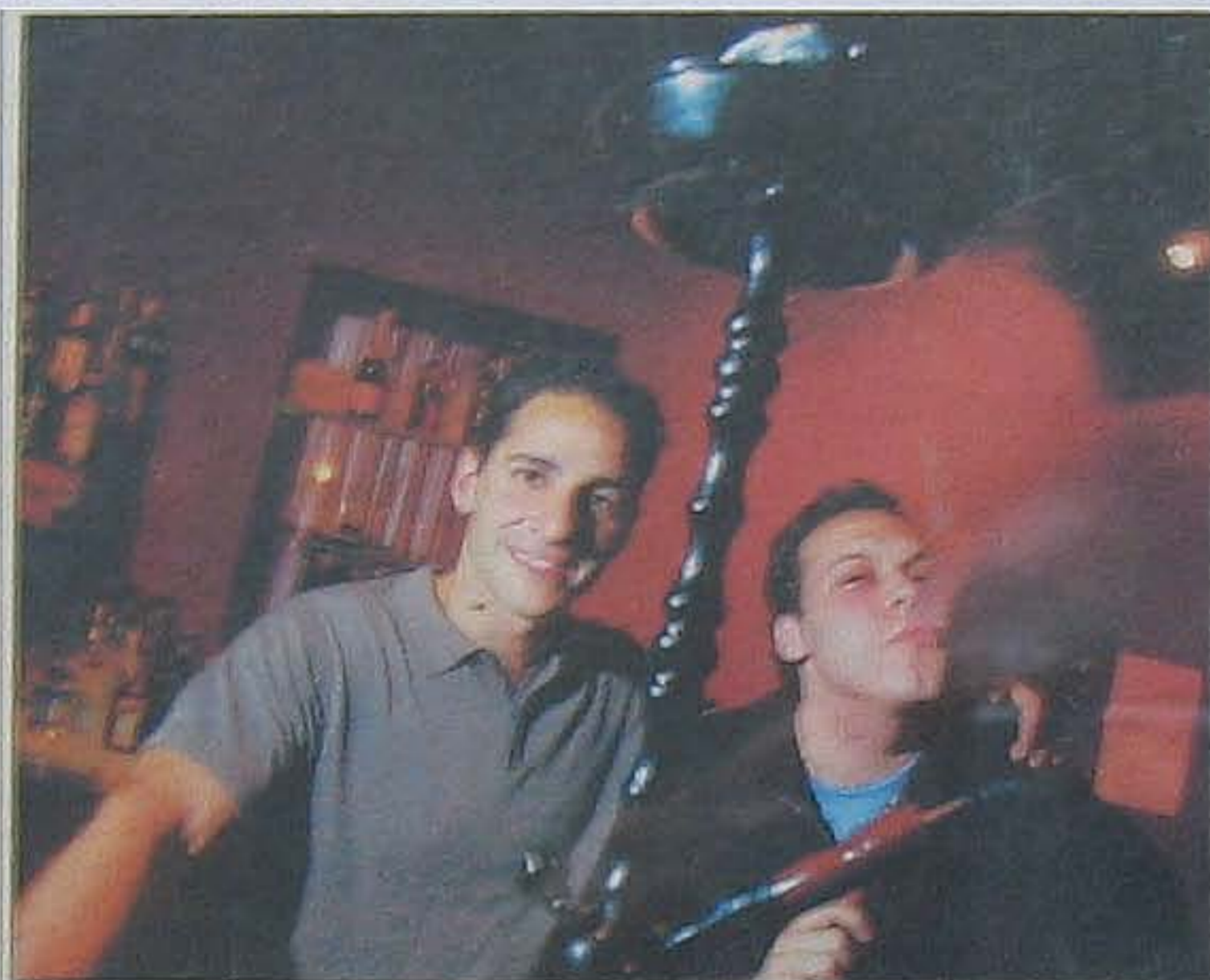


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Jacques Habra, left, and Amer Zahr have opened Oz, a new nightspot in downtown Ann Arbor.

Nightspot Oz offers a place to relax, dance, smoke a hookah

It's a lounge, not a nightclub, owners say

BY ROGER LELIEVRE
News Arts Writer

There's no yellow brick road leading to Oz, the Middle East-themed nightspot now open on Fifth Avenue in downtown Ann Arbor, and that's intentional. The place is not meant to be an homage to a movie about a wizard.

Nor are there any flashing lights or fog machines. That's

also part of the plan.

There are, however, hookah pipes, a once-weekly belly dancer (check out Jessica Elkins on Friday nights), live bands and a DJ mixing tunes with a Middle Eastern flavor alongside the likes of hip-hop and '80s retro jams.

"The idea was when you think of Oz, it's this other place. It's mystical and you're there and you are sort of not yourself. You get to rediscover yourself," explained Jacques Habra, co-owner.

"Also it's just easy to say," added his partner, Amer Zahr.

Habra, 30, was born in Beirut, Lebanon. Zahr, 25, is a Palestinian born in Jordan. Both have been in the United States for most of their lives.

Oz is located at 210 S. Fifth Ave., in the building that once housed the Ann Arbor 1 & 2 movie theaters and, more recently, the software company WebElite, of which Habra was CEO. It comes hard on the heels of Cafe Oz, which Zahr opened last June and reopened as Oz at the end of April.

SEE OZ, B2

OZ FROM B1

Patrons will order their own hookah pipes from waitresses

Zahr said that the hookah-only format at Cafe Oz was popular, but ultimately too limited. "We wanted to go bigger," he said.

Oz is divided into two sections. The front contains the bar and tables around which patrons gather to smoke the exotic-looking hookah pipes, which are ordered like a cocktail and delivered by a waitress. The larger, tiered second room contains a stage on which the DJ spins records, a dance floor, comfortable-looking sofas and a VIP area finished in plush suede and velvet pillows.

"We really want this environment to feel like a living room,"

said Habra. "It's always going to be like a home you are invited to."

"This is not a nightclub," he continued. "This is a lounge and we have dancing. We want people to feel like they don't have to come here and dance. They can come and sit on a sofa with their friends and chat and have a normal conversation at a normal level in the front. They don't have to wear the latest fashions to feel comfortable. But if they want to look great on the dance floor, they can go right back and look great on the dance floor."

Oz also offers a menu of Middle Eastern appetizers and gourmet

pitais, a feature the owners hope will be popular with the "after Oz" crowd, those who come to hang out and wind down between 2-4 a.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Despite its focus on tobacco, Oz is not smoky. The atmosphere is lightly aromatic, reminiscent of fine pipe tobacco.

The tobacco, combined with fruit flavoring - 13 from which to choose, including mango, double apple or strawberry - and molasses goes in a small vessel atop the pipe. When lit, the tobacco filters through water at the bottom of the pipe as the smoker inhales.

"We don't want to be consid-

ered 'the hookah lounge' - it's just one of the things we offer," Habra added. "It's a Middle Eastern way of gathering ... what I think our generation would call going to a coffee shop and having a coffee. In the Middle East they get together and share a hookah, or one person would have a hookah by themselves."

Oz is not associated with Oz's Music Environment, 1922 Packard Road, a store that hosts live music and offers music workshops and other related events.

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