

## HANGOUTS

# Hookah and hip-hop at Oz

New downtown nightspot draws crowds with its lounge atmosphere



ROGER LELIEVRE, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Katie Beck enjoys a hookah with friends at Oz on a recent Thursday night.

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With a name like "Oz," you'd think there'd be at least one passing reference to that movie about a girl and her dog caught up in a twister. But pay no attention to your expectations: This Oz is more about being somewhere other than where you are, rather than being at any place in particular.

Think "I Dream of Jeannie" in your living room, especially if your home includes a belly dancer and a live DJ.

Tent-like fabrics and overstuffed sofas lend an "Arabian Nights"-ambience to Oz, a former movie house that blends old-world mystique with new-world chic.

In the front section (the part closest to the street), the sweet fragrance of flavored tobacco floats in the air, thanks to a couple dozen hookah-smoking customers (almost no one here smokes cigarettes). Don't be intimidated by the hookah pipe: a waitperson will be happy to explain the ins and outs of the device, which looks as if at any moment it could blast off and enter orbit above your head.

In the large back room, a DJ spins tunes ranging from hip-hop to reggae and '80s retro, often with a Middle Eastern flavor. A belly dancer performs on Fridays. A menu of Middle Eastern appetizers and gourmet pitas adds to the authenticity.

## SPECIFICS

### Oz

210 S. Fifth Ave., Ann Arbor  
(734) 222-4770

**Who's hanging:** Student types, young professional types, international types. Ages 21 and over only.

**What's the buzz:** "I don't smoke, but the hookah is fun – it makes me tipsy," said Thursday customer Katie Beck, who is known to her friends as Crazy Kate. "It's a great place to go after you've had too many drinks," added Amber Harling, referring to the club's after-2 a.m. action.

**Essentials:** Oz is open six nights a week, with the following particulars: (Call to confirm times and cover, which varies from night to

night.) **Tuesday:** Fusion (club music); **Wednesday:** Lounge Night, with DJ; **Thursday:** Foundation (DJ Billy the Kid spins reggae tunes, 10 p.m.-4 a.m.); **Friday:** Middle Eastern Dance Party (8 p.m.-4 a.m., DJ spins tunes with a Middle Eastern flavor and belly dancer Jessica takes the stage around 11 p.m.); **Saturday:** Loungin' and Dancing (Hookahs in the main room, bands or a DJ, 8 p.m.-4 a.m.); **Sunday:** Hookah and Wine (opens at 6 p.m., and may include live jazz). **Monday:** Closed.

**Libations:** Full bar; justifiably proud of the margaritas.

**Last words:** Less of a nightclub, more of a lounge.

The wizards behind Oz are Jacques Habra and Amer Zahr, born in the Middle East but raised in the United States.

"It's difficult to be simple," Habra said, gesturing around a VIP room furnished in suede and commanding a perfect view of the entertainment.

Speaking of which – the dance floor is smallish but workable. The sound system has plenty of boom. It's loud where it should be loud, but quiet enough for

conversation if you're not on the dance floor. There are no strobe lights – in fact, no flashing lights at all – or artificial fog. If the place looks a little casual, that's the intent.

"If you throw a party at your house, you don't hang a disco ball and put strobe lights on your front wall," said Zahr.

"And more people will dance without lights because they don't feel self-conscious. It's very relaxed."