

Seattle's vegetarians can count on Cafe Flora

BY LESLIE KELLY
Special to the P-I

Cafe Flora has really grown on Seattle. That much was abundantly clear during a recent Sunday brunch, when a long line of hungry diners patiently waited for a spot to open up inside the sprawling restaurant.

Since first sprouting in 1991, this vegetarian's haven in Madison Valley has flourished like a stand of morel mushrooms after a fire. An outdoor patio was transformed into an indoor atrium, expanding the restaurant's seating capacity to more than 150. The cafe's signature cookbook is going into its second printing after selling 15,000 copies, and the walls in a hallway just off the dining room are covered in dozens of awards.

Much of the credit goes to chef Janine Doran, who has been at the restaurant for 13 years, working her way up the line. Doran and general manager Nat Stratton-Clarke roam the farmers markets year-round for seasonal produce and local cheeses. They've developed relationships with at least 15 local producers, who are recognized on the menu.

It's easy to get your five servings of fruits and vegetables in one meal at Cafe Flora, but it's not the kind of stridently PC place that's going to make omnivores nervous.

Part of its inviting charm starts in the soothing dining room, done up in shades of butter, acorn squash and a splash of eggplant. In the toasty-warm atrium, a fountain bubbles in the ficus forest. Maybe it's a tad retro, but in a benign way.

There's nothing dated about the wildly popular weekend brunch menu. While I was bummed that they were out of the foraged mushroom scramble, maybe it was fate, because I ended up ordering the outstanding Hoppin' John Fritters. After the first bite, I felt so lucky.

These black-eyed pea cakes are a portrait of contrasting textures: both creamy and chunky in the center with golden crunchy breading on the outside, a squiggle of cayenne pepper aioli adding a little fuel to the fiery nuggets. A mess of mighty fine collard greens with smoked mushrooms, cheese grits and a succotashlike relish filled out the well-rounded plate.

If only I were a bottomless pit, I would have gorged on an order of vegan sticky buns to start, or a plate of New Orleans-inspired beignets. They sure looked good on neighboring tables.

I did snag a bite of the Cranberry Chai French Toast, which is housemade brioche dipped in eggy batter and grilled. The Vanilla Chai Creme Anglaise and cranberry compote that topped the toast was a winning alternative to traditional maple syrup. A side of soy sausage didn't add much to the meal, though. The grainy texture was too much like falafel to mimic the meaty quality you find in most faux sausage.

During dinner, I certainly didn't miss the beef in the wonderful Wellington, a grilled portobello mushroom tucked inside puff pastry. A smear of pecan pâté added heft and the velvety Madeira wine sauce gave the dish an elegant finish. The creamy mashed potatoes were good, but almost too much for this rich entree.

Smashed spuds were the star ingredient of the fine Oaxaca tacos: potato-stuffed corn tortillas embellished by three kinds of cheese (cheddar, smoked mozzarella and Mexican cotija) and a citrusy pico de gallo.

Though the dinner menu is fairly short, it manages to ramble around the globe. Start with one of the most original Caesars I've had in years. Fried capers stand in for salty anchovies.

Pizzas are built on a chewy herb crust, and the delicate squash and slices of apple topping one pie tasted like the essence of autumn. The black truffle pie was good, too, but a little one-note. It would be better to share.

The green dumplings managed to pull off a bit of Italian-Asian fusion, as ricotta-filled won tons floated in a lovely shitake mushroom broth. A shower of Parmesan and lemon zest provided a dramatic finishing flourish.

Cafe Flora features a \$35 three-course market dinner in addition to its regular menu, which often focuses on a single producer, such as Estrella Family Creamery. That

recent menu was spectacular from the start: an almost brie-ish cow's milk cheese resting on a cranberry-walnut crostini. This toasted cheese sandwich was accentuated by a tangle of spicy greens and juicy pears dressed in a honeyed cider vinaigrette.

That first course set the bar pretty high, but the entree was one hot pocket. Smoked cow's milk, Yukon gold mashed potatoes and sautéed leeks were tucked into a flaky phyllo turnover. A brandy-spiked cream sauce and a drizzle of arugula oil threatened to send this dish to over-the-top town, but the tart cranberry compote kept the plate grounded.

Still, it was so filling I had to say enough was enough when it came dessert time and asked for the cheesecake — made with Wynoochee River Blue — to be packed to go. It traveled well in its ginger-pear compote, honey glaze and spiced blackberry wine reduction. There was a whole lot going on there, but the nicely balanced blue cheesecake didn't get lost.

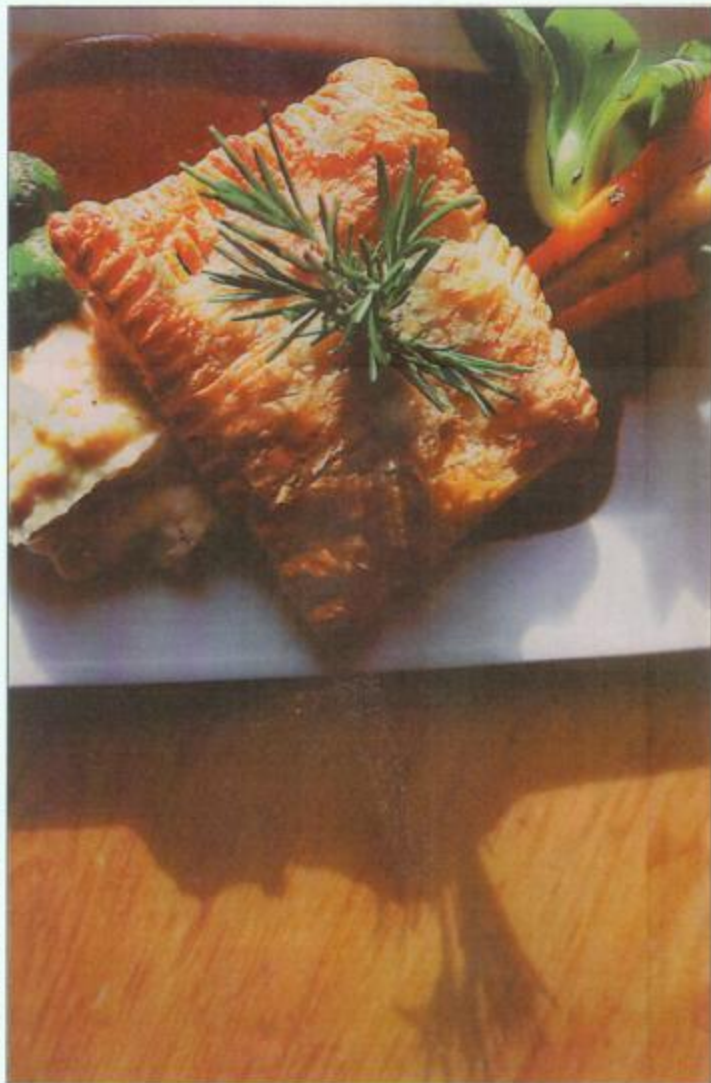


Transforming an outdoor patio into an indoor atrium at Cafe Flora expanded the seating capacity to more than 150. A fountain bubbles in the ficus forest.

When Cafe Flora falters, it's in trying to do too much. Sometimes, pristine ingredients are obscured by ultra-rich cream sauces or in a dizzying rainbow of finishing touches. Sometimes less is more, as in the beautifully restrained delicate squash and apple pizza.

The service staff deserves special mention for being attentive, informed and downright cheerful, even in the midst of a weekend brunch blitz. When I had to wait, there was always a "thank you for your patience," a small gesture that goes a long way. Even the busboy was effusive in explaining how the water was filtered throughout the restaurant. Many of the staff — in the front and back of the house — have been at Cafe Flora for years, which speaks well about the restaurant's mission of building a community.

Post-intelligencer food critics arrive unannounced and pay for all meals and services. Contact Leslie Kelly at leslie.dines@gmail.com.



The Wellington is a grilled portobello mushroom tucked inside puff pastry with a smear of pecan pâté and Madeira wine sauce.



RESTAURANT REVIEW

CAFE FLORA

PHONE: 206-325-9100

ADDRESS: 2901 E. Madison St.

WEB SITE: cafe flora.com

PRICES: \$5.50-\$10.50 brunch; dinner starts \$4.50-\$8.75, entrees \$10-\$18

HOURS: Lunch 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; light afternoon menu available 2:30 p.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 5-9 p.m. Sunday-Thursday and 5-10 p.m. Friday-Saturday; brunch 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday-Sunday

BAR: Wine and beer

RESERVATIONS: Accepted only for parties of eight or more

PAYMENT: Visa, MasterCard, personal checks

SOUND: Moderate

ACCESS: No barriers; handicap parking spot and wheelchair entry in the rear of the restaurant

PARKING: Two free lots, one directly behind the restaurant, another at 2917 E. Madison St.

KID-FRIENDLY: Yes; special children's menu offered

BEST BETS: Three-course market dinners (\$35); Oaxaca tacos (\$15); Portobello Wellington (\$18); Caesar (\$6.50 small, \$8.50 large); yam fries (\$4); Hoppin' John Fritters (\$10.50); Cranberry Chai French Toast (\$5)

RATINGS:

Food: ★★

Service: ★★★

Ambience: ★★

STAR RATINGS GUIDE

★★★★ Extraordinary

★★★ Excellent

★★ Good

★ Fair



Many of Cafe Flora's desserts, like this Lava Cake, are decadent.