

February 2006 | Tastebuds

Leaf Cuisine

Raw food for the rest of us

by Jessica Ridenour

In a city where raw food is usually expensive and somehow always inexplicably linked to Demi Moore, Woody Harrelson or the like, Leaf Cuisine is a refreshing change. A cozy, affordable café with casual counter service and zero attitude, Leaf offers tasty, healthy food that's accessible to everyone.

"I'm not interested in [making raw food] exclusive. What I'm trying to do is make it inclusive," says Leaf founder Rod Rotondi. To that end, nothing on Leaf's menu costs over \$10—and that's the way Rotondi likes it.

"People can afford to come here every day, and they get enough food so they actually leave full," says the chef, whose culinary adventures have taken him all over the globe, including training in Rome and Paris and a cheffing and managing stint at Santa Monica's Juliano's Raw. "It's not about money—it's about getting the food out there."

Leaf Cuisine's devoted clientele obviously agrees. Rotondi estimates 40 percent of his business is the dedicated raw foodists who come, some every day, for the 99.9 percent certified organic offerings (everything but the coconut, which is clearly marked on the menu). "It's what I always tell everybody—once you eat this kind of food for a while, you realize this is an oasis. It's a desert out there."

Both of Leaf Cuisine's locations, the original in Culver City (which offers catering and delivery, as well as "cooking" classes), and the new location in Sherman Oaks, share the same low-key vibe, friendly service and vivid orange and green color scheme—the visual equivalent of sniffing freshly peeled citrus.

Appetizers not to be missed include the tangy mock salmon nori rolls, a faux sushi concoction of mock salmon pate, avocado, carrots and sprouts rolled in nori and drizzled with wasabi sauce (\$5.95). Raw slaw (\$2.95) or sprouted chickpea hummus with flax seed crackers (\$3.95) are also winning openers.

Unexpectedly massive and immensely satisfying main course options include the Fortuna Fantasy (mock tuna with greens, red onions and sprouts) and the Bombay Burríto (sweet and moist lentil croquettes with creamy coconut curry sauce) that can be fashioned as a salad—adorned with red cabbage, carrots and an array of sprouts— or wrapped in a deep green collard leaf (each \$7.50). Beautifully presented, the dishes are a feast for the eyes as much as the taste buds.

Guiltless desserts include light and nutty strawberry mousse torte, strawberry cashew mousse in a date nut crust with strawberry sauce (\$5.50), or a chocolate brownie—made from raw cacao and topped with chocolate sauce, whipped "cream" and walnuts, it will cure a serious cocoa craving (\$5.95). Also noteworthy is the not-too-sweet blueberry bonanza smoothie (\$4.95).

Although Leaf Cuisine is dedicated to providing affordable raw fare to us everyday folk, Demi and Woody are always welcome to stop by. They won't be disappointed—and neither will you.

LeafCuisine.com On the Westside: 11938 W. Washington Blvd., Culver City, 310.390.6005. In the Valley: 14318 Ventura Blvd., Sherman Oaks, 818.907.8779. Both locations open 8am to 9pm, Monday through Sunday



Photo: Erik Daehler