

Rah-rah raw food

LEAH McLAREN, TRALEE PEARCE

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Live Organic Food Bar

264 Dupont St., Toronto, [416-515-2002](tel:416-515-2002). Lunch for two with vegetable juice, tax and tip, \$55.

Nothing is quite as it seems at Live Organic Food Bar. The turf floor is actually linoleum printed with photographs of green grass. The giant apples on the shelf above the cash are decorative faux. And the food, well, give us a second and we'll explain.

The reason we're here is Leah's digestive tract. Apparently there was too much bad stuff living in it, so she has gone on a two-week herbal cleanse. For the past week, to Tralee's amusement and occasional disgust, she has raved about the detoxified state of her liver, kidneys and colon.

We'll spare you the gory details, but suffice to say, she is forbidden from consuming anything remotely tasty or prepared, including pasta, bread, beer, wine, cheese, vinegar and sugar.

So naturally there was much jubilation when we learned that Live, formerly a five-seat hole in the wall on Dupont, has moved down the street to an expanded location where they are doing lunch and dinner with proper table service. We arrive without a reservation on Tuesday for a working lunch with one of our more health-conscious girlfriends in tow.

We are handed wooden menus decorated with tiny Velcro stick-ons listing the selections available. The menu, we learn, changes every two weeks and depends on what's local, available and fresh. Printed in black is the restaurant's solemn manifesto: "We believe that the only way food should be processed is through the human body. We believe that flavour comes first and that vegan foods are just a different palette with which to create a gourmet dining experience."

The raw food movement is based on the theory that food is best eaten as close to its original form as possible, untampered by extreme temperatures and preservatives. This rules out virtually all meat, dairy, eggs and fish, as well as baked goods, sauces or anything that isn't a fresh vegetable or whole grain.

We are skeptical, but our healthy friend (call her HF) assures us raw food can rock. She has a friend from California who makes blended nut and vegetable wraps in cabbage leaves that are "amazing." And it fits in well with her strict no-sugar or processed food regimen.

"It's the candida," Leah says knowingly. "You kill it by cutting out sugar and vinegar. The thing I miss most is wine."

"For me it's peanuts," HF says. "My naturopath says they're evil, but I miss them. Last night, I made organic peanut-butter bones for my dog and I broke down and ate some."

Tralee rolls her eyes and reads from the menu. "Lasagna? Pizza? I thought this was a raw food place!" she says, intent on making a bust.

But wait, on closer inspection things are not as they seem: The Live It Up Lasagna is made with "zucchini-like noodles with a cashew ricotta 'cheeze,'" and the Hawaiian Pizza comes on a crust of dehydrated sprouted buckwheat, topped with a hempseed and red-pepper mock-mozzarella.

The menu is limited and the portions are small, so we order a selection of everything and bolster ourselves with vegetable juice: the Liquid Plumber for Tralee (kale, cucumber, celery, dandelion with milk thistle) and Green Kicks for Leah and HF (pear, kale, ginger, dandelion). The lasagna starter arrives looking dishearteningly close to what it is: a pile of cold vegetables chucked on a plate. But on the tongue it's transformed. The marinara sauce is savoury with garlic, the cashew "ricotta" is creamy and rich and the "noodles" impressively al dente. One great thing about raw food, we note, is that it's impossible to overcook.

Next up is the sushi "tempura" made with sun-dried Cajun-spiced "cheeze" purée and crunchy sweet-potato crisps that look and taste deep-fried but are in fact, we learn, dehydrated. The whole concoction is wrapped in crispy nori and makes for a satisfying treat. HF asks the waitress for an order to go. On the way back, she will deliver it to her foodie boyfriend, who is working through his lunch hour.

Tralee's Hawaiian Pizza is the odd dish out: pineapple and red pepper purée on a crust that takes some serious chewing. No one mentions the word "cardboard," but Tralee complains that it tastes a little too "earnest."

Whether you dig the groovy philosophy or not, raw food is impressive just for the creativity it requires. The difference between raw and regular, we muse, is a bit like the difference between a sonnet and free verse. Free verse can be stunning for the imaginative freedom it employs, but the beauty of a sonnet is in its restraint. The way meaning (or in this case, flavour) is found within a rigid structure.

"I'd eat this way every day if I was Jennifer Aniston and had a personal chef," Tralee declares, digging into her mango, strawberry and cashew parfait. Leah and HF decline the dessert, for reasons of sugar content.

"But we don't use sugar," the waitress says.

"*Fruit* sugar," HF says.

"Candida caviar," Leah concurs.

There is a moment of tension before Leah and HF relinquish the dietary moral high ground and beg for a bite of Tralee's fudgy fig almond crumble.

Even health freaks have a limit.

Summer in the City runs until September. Joanne Kates will return Sept. 10.

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