

Review: Oakland's vegetarian Encuentro expands and delights

By Daniel M. Jimenez

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Chef Lacey Sher is photographed with some of the vegetarian dishes from appetizers to desserts at her restaurant Encuentro in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)

A confession: Until I dined at Oakland's Encuentro, I had never eaten tempeh.

Tofu and I have, at best, a cordial relationship. We meet once or twice a year for pad thai, we promise to stay in touch and then ... nothing.

So maybe I'm the wrong person to review a place like Encuentro. Or maybe, in the age of Meatless Mondays, weekends-only carnivores and everything in between, I'm just right.

If you're a meat eater who wonders if you'll find something to like at a vegetarian/vegan restaurant, put your mind at ease. Encuentro -- which recently moved to a new space, still near Jack London Square, and half a dozen blocks from its old home -- is making interesting, original dishes from fresh, local ingredients and doing it with a skilled hand. You won't miss a thing.

Lemon curd cheesecake with raspberry sauce is one of the desserts served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23,

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A collaboration between head chef Lacey Sher, wine director Linda Braz and Millennium chef Eric Tucker, Encuentro offers a varied selection of vegetarian appetizers and entrees, all inspired by seasonal ingredients.

An appetizer plate of chipotle hummus with carrot-pumpkin seed crackers, smoked chili oil and cilantro (\$8) was almost too gorgeous to eat. Smearred with the gently spicy hummus, the delicate crackers' flavors still emerged on my palate.

Bruschetta with avocado, olive oil, chili jam and black salt (\$5 for two pieces, \$10 for four) was a bit hard to balance between the plate and my mouth but worth the work when it got there.

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The star of our appetizer selections was the macadamia ricotta (\$12), spread on grilled bread and topped with rosemary-roasted grapes and a salad of arugula, shallots, herb salt and toasted hazelnuts. The richness of the nut cheese, the sweetness of the grapes, the pepper of the arugula and the savory touches on top combined in a sublime mix.

And then it was time for tempeh. I had nothing to be nervous about. Encuentro's barbecue tempeh (\$18) had a great grilled texture on the outside but was still tender on the inside. Stacked on a pile of root beer-baked beans, with sauteed greens and green onion cornbread, it was a hearty barbecue platter.

An empanada (\$18), stuffed with pumpkin seed picadillo, was a great surprise, the nutty flavor of pumpkin playing off the richness of avocado. The peppered portobello mushroom sandwich (\$12), with caramelized fennel and onions, smoked pecan cheese and a caper aioli was decadent. It's clear that combining complementary flavors is one of Encuentro's strengths.

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Avocado, olive oil and cilantro with chili jam and black salt on bruschetta is one of the appetizers served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group) (RAY CHAVEZ)

The wine list splits nearly evenly between French and American whites, and tips more to the domestic side with reds. Several bottled and tap beers are also available, including Russian River's delicious Pliny the Elder.

For dessert, I had to try the zucchini pumpkin bread pudding with coconut vanilla ice cream (\$7); my wife enjoyed the magic cookie ice cream sandwich (\$7). Truthfully, though, we had enjoyed everything else so much, there just wasn't a lot of room left in our stomachs.

No matter where your dietary choices fall on the spectrum, Encuentro is going to have something you'll love. Dig in.



Empanada stuffed with pumpkin seed picadillo with avocado cream, pinto beans, cashew cream and garlic sautéed di ciccio broccoli is one of the main entrees served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)



Mustard baked tempeh with red wine shiitake gravy, sautéed greens, mashed celery root and fingerling potatoes with braised red cabbage and apples is one of the main entrees served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)



Peppered portobello mushroom sandwich with caramelized fennel onions and smoked goat cheddar accompanied with caper aioli, house made pickles and roasted potatoes is one of the main entrees served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay ...



Burrata or macadamia ricotta with grilled bread, rosemary roasted grapes and shallots, arugula, herb salt and toasted hazelnuts is one of the appetizers served at Encuentro, a vegetarian restaurant in Oakland, Calif., on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2014. (Ray Chavez/Bay Area News Group)



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ENCUENTRO

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WHERE: 550 Second St., Oakland CONTACT: 510-832-9463, <http://encuentrooakland.com>

HOURS: 11 a.m.-2 p.m. and 5:30 p.m.-10 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays

CUISINE: Vegetarian, vegan

PRICES: \$\$

VEGETARIAN: Everything on the menu is vegetarian; almost everything can be made vegan.

BEVERAGES: Wine, beer, soft drinks

RESERVATIONS: Credit card required; \$25 fee if not canceled before 4 p.m. day of

NOISE LEVEL: Moderate

PARKING: Street parking

KIDS: No specific kids menu

PLUSES: Affordable, expertly prepared variety of vegetarian and vegan dishes; carefully curated wine list, comfortable setting

DATE OPENED: May 2014 in new location

Policy

We don't let restaurants know that we are coming in to do a review, and we strive to remain anonymous. We pay for our meals.

Ratings

Restaurants are rated on a scale of one to four, with four representing a truly extraordinary experience for that type of restaurant.

Price code

\$ Most entrees under \$10 \$\$ Under \$20

\$\$\$ Under \$30

\$\$\$\$ Under \$40