

A VEGAN RETREAT FOR CARNIVORES, TOO

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A REVIEW OF G-ZEN, IN BRANFORD



The chocolate-hazelnut cake. Credit C.M. Glover for The New York Times

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By STEPHANIE LYNESS, New York Times Connecticut Dining | Branford, POSTED: MARCH 30, 2012

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A Vegan Retreat for Carnivores, Too

A Review of G-Zen, in Branford

THE décor at G-Zen — mandalas and other Eastern art forms, wooden tables with woven place mats — gives this Branford restaurant the feel of an upscale spiritual retreat center. The menu is entirely vegan, with lots of gluten-free dishes and a few raw ones. As noted on its Web site, G-Zen aims to appeal to a nonvegan audience, too: a tall order for a restaurant offering vegan versions of well-loved classics, like pizza and crab cakes, in addition to familiar vegetarian fare. But G-Zen often succeeds, and many of the best dishes here are the most daring.

G-Zen is owned by Mark Shadle and Ami Beach Shadle. Last May, they started up Gmonkey Mobile, a food truck that runs on biodiesel fuel and sells organic, vegan food in Hartford, Middlesex and New Haven Counties. (The Shadles grow some of the produce for the food truck and the restaurant at their solar-powered farm in Durham.) They opened G-Zen in October. Mr. Shadle, a former part-owner of It's Only Natural restaurant in Middletown (still open, under new ownership), is the chef; Ms. Shadle runs the front of the house and develops some of the recipes.

In a recent phone conversation, Mr. Shadle explained the unusual name: "G" stands for "green" business ethics; "Zen" follows because, unlike the food truck, the restaurant is stationary, and thus comparatively serene. The ingredients are, where possible, organic and sustainable (Mr. Shadle maintains that a vegan diet is, by definition, sustainable). Food remains are composted; the plates, glassware and utensils for the restaurant are recycled; and the tables are made from recycled and reclaimed wood.

From my nonvegan perspective, traditional vegetarian dishes would seem to translate best into a vegan format. This was often, but not always, the case. Of the three vegetarian dishes I tried, two — a spicy Moroccan vegetable-tofu stew laced with fennel and cinnamon, and a layered tofu-mushroom napoleon — tasted flat. The coconut Kama Sutra curry was brighter, and cashews provided a welcome crunch. The flavors were also pale on the dim sum plate, with the exception of the ginger- and turmeric-spiced vegetable tempura.

But the broccoli-tahini soup, with its pleasantly bitter, homey taste, was excellent. The sweet-potato enchiladas might have been hotter, but my vegan guest agreed that the stuffing was tasty and that the soy-based sour cream worked well enough. The accompanying black beans were fabulous, and tastier than those hidden under the enormous, otherwise satisfying pile of black-bean-chili nachos that I had ordered. Both dishes went well with glasses of chilled, fruity sangria made with organic wine and an organic juice blend.

Other dishes transcended their nonvegan origins remarkably well. The gluten-free pizza was made with a rice-flour crust topped with spinach, caramelized onions, thick slices of portobello mushrooms and Daiya, a mozzarella-style cheese. The nontraditional crust was delicious: chewy in the center and crisp at the edges. The tapioca-based cheese added appropriate stringy richness, although the aftertaste of the Daiya and the dairy-free sour cream eventually put me off.

The bland black-bean Zen burger didn't satisfy my taste for beef, though the sweet-potato fries were a big hit. I enjoyed the firm tempeh crab cakes, which were aggressively spiced with Old Bay Seasoning and accompanied by a zesty tartar sauce. Pure radiance salad featured a very good curried un-chicken mixture (made of raw, sprouted nut pâté), bedded on lettuces festooned with strands of carrot, beet, zucchini and daikon and topped with a carrot-ginger dressing. Raw pasta (beet, carrot and zucchini strips) dressed with an uncooked sun-dried tomato marinara worked nicely with a dusting of cashew Parmesan.

Making vegan desserts, I thought, would have been the hardest task to accomplish, given the lack of milk and eggs, but the moist carrot layer cake with cream-cheese-like frosting was an eye-opener. The chocolate hazelnut layer cake was a little dry, but the chocolate icing compensated. The lemon tart was beautiful and the nut crust delicious, but the filling, though pleasantly sour, was not quite lemony enough. The kitchen recouped with coconut custard, which was reminiscent of a Thai tapioca custard and thick with shredded coconut. And a root beer float was just fine with rice ice cream.