

Eatery is pita-full, wonderful

It might be the quintessential Tempe, near-university, almost fully occupied, L-shaped mall.

There's a generic bar festooned with neon beer signs. A tattoo salon. A bartending academy.

A coin-operated laundromat. A closed branch of Planned Parenthood. A karate dojo.

In the parking lot, a free-standing building slightly larger than a film drop-off or a "We Make Keys" kiosk houses a new branch of a 24-hour drive-through taco chain.

Three small restaurants tucked into the L convey their culinary specialties with one or two words: "Bagels," "Pita," "Tasty Kabobs."

"Pita" stands for Pita Jungle, a casual eatery where students — graduate and undergraduate — along with the rest of us can easily and affordably partake in the "Mediterranean diet" that's all the rage these days.

Housed in a high-ceiling space possessing the look and feel of a counter-culture coffeehouse, Pita Jungle specializes in "Healthy, Natural & Vegetarian Food." The carnivores among you needn't despair, however. Chicken, turkey and "dolphin-safe" white albacore tuna make appearances on the lunch and dinner menu, while honest-to-goodness eggs show up at breakfast (served till noon).

RESTAURANT REVIEW



PENELOPE CORCORAN
Republic Columnist

As you can imagine, this greatly pleases Mr. Chicken-and-Vegetables, who is in the mood for a meal, not a sacrifice.

We are standing at the counter at the back of Pita Jungle. This is where "eat here" orders are placed and paid for and takeout orders are picked up. Our faces are cast upward as we read the handwritten menu on the wall.

"What sounds good?" I ask Mr. C&V. Being the fine hostess that I am, I first ask my guest accomplices what they'd like to eat. I then gently strong-arm them into ordering some-

thing I want to try. (And you thought it would be fun to eat out with a restaurant critic. Hah.)

"Uh, the Mediterranean Chicken (\$4.35)?" he answers in interrogative form. (He's well-trained.)

I give him the go-ahead and order a Greek Salad (\$3.95) and the vegetarian Mediterranean Platter (\$5.95). We (I) pay, grab some silverware and Tabasco sauce from a side counter and find a table, where our order is delivered to us.

On this and other visits to Pita Jungle, I enjoy prompt, courteous service. My food arrives appropriately hot or cold. Servings are generous. The music playing on the decent-quality sound system is soothing, educational and never annoying: Sometimes it is opera, other times eclectic "world beat." It is almost never in English, which I find expansive.

The Greek salad arrives first. It is excellent: a bed of gorgeous greens topped with slivered tomatoes, feta, olives, green pepper and pickles, dressed with a tart lemon vinaigrette. Ah, to be a poor ASU graduate student now instead of eight years ago. I would have consumed this salad weekly, if not daily.

We are still stabbing away at it

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PITA JUNGLE

1250 E. Apache Drive, Tempe;
804-0234 (phone), 804-0230
(fax).

\$ Inexpensive

Food



Service



Ambience



What the ratings mean

Wow

Very good

Good

So-so

Ugh

Hours: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. Reservations not accepted. Most major plastic. Smoke-free, except for outdoor seating. Handicapped access.

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Taste the Town, Penelope Corcoran's 1995 dining guide puts you in the know with tips on more than 130 of the Valley's best restaurants. To find out where it's sold, call 271-5656, then press 2006.

Casual Tempe eatery is pita-full, wonderful

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when the rest of our order comes. Mr. C&V's garlic-and-lemon marinated chicken breast *shawarma* pita proves slightly disappointing. The marinade flavor is so subtle that if your bite doesn't contain raw onion or garlic sauce, you bland out.

Meanwhile, the Mediterranean Platter scores high points for its creamy, smooth hummus; thick, sweet tahini eggplant dip; deep-fried flavorful falafel balls; and very green, parsley-and-tomato tabbouleh. Less en-

trancing are the overcooked green beans in tomato sauce.

Successive visits turn up other flavorful fare. I'm intrigued by the delightful flavor contrasts in the Sweet and Sour Salad (\$3.55) of romaine lettuce, sliced apples, golden raisins, dates, cucumber and tomato drizzled with bleu-cheese dressing.

Daily fresh soups (99 cents) include a pleasing, homey vegetable-broth potato-and-vegetable soup, as well as a terrific vegetarian pea soup (that means no hambone) lightly seasoned instead with hints of mint, lemon, gar-

lic and onion.

Two other taste treats include the crisp, flat Pita Pizza (\$3.25), featuring mozzarella cheese melted over assorted veggies and feta, and Herbs & Spices (\$3.50), a pizzalike creation of oregano, basil and thyme-flecked pita dough, topped with sliced tomatoes and melted feta and Swiss cheeses.

I run into an old graduate-school buddy waiting for takeout at Pita Jungle. "I love this place," she says. "We come here all the time. It's the most

sincere place I know. Try the One Thousand Beans."

We do, it turns out, in a Pita Burrito (\$2.50) loaded with legumes like navy, red kidney, pinto and adzuki beans, lentils and black-eyed peas mixed with onions and cabbage in a muted yet full-flavored Indian-style *garam masala* sauce.

She's right, not just about the beans, but about the sincerity of Pita Jungle. Almost makes me wanna go back to school. *Almost.*