

IT'S A **Jungle** OUT THERE!

You may not know it, but there's a jungle in Tempe, AZ. You don't need khakis, a snakebite kit, or a pith helmet to visit this unusual one though—you just need a hearty appetite. The Pita Jungle lies almost hidden in a nondescript strip mall near Arizona State University where, for the last two and a half years, it has been serving up its own unique blend of Greek- and Italian-influenced "natural, healthful, and vegetarian cuisine."

Although Pita Jungle offers healthy fare, it is not a "health food" restaurant. In fact, an investigating diner could eat most of the 40-plus items currently on the menu and encounter nary an alfalfa sprout (they are available for those of you who really, really want them). Variety and flexibility are the hallmarks of the restaurant. If you are a vegetarian, look no further—veggie burgers and soy cheese are available in abundance. If you want meat, that's there too. Chicken is a Pita Jungle specialty and its most popular item (after all, a vegetarian society in England recently declared chicken to be an honorary vegetable), with turkey and tuna offered as well. At this restaurant, vegetarians and meat eaters coexist peacefully.

A recent family lunch exemplified the variety available at Pita Jungle. Daughter-in-law Barb—a vegetarian who won't eat anything that had a mother—ordered the falafel, her longtime favorite. This crispy concoction is a healthy but scrumptious blend of chickpeas, cilantro, and cumin, served on the trademark pita bread with tomatoes, pickles, and onions and smothered in a creamy *tahini* sauce. She pronounced it delicious "as usual" and absolutely refused to share.

Valley Notebook

Son Andy had *shawirma*, a type of Mediterranean-Asiatic roasted chicken with garlic sauce and onions on a pita. He added a side order of wonderful new potatoes, loaded with spice and garlic, for good measure. Both were hot, fresh, and delicious.

Andy, who is especially fond of baklava, described the Jungle's rendition as "amazing."

Diminutive wife Wanda was literally dwarfed by her spicy chicken pita wrap. This sandwich, which looks like a burrito on steroids, contains a bodacious mix of brown rice, mixed beans, zucchini, grilled

cauliflower, red peppers, broccoli, onions, and, of course, spicy chicken. When this incredible culinary creation was set down in front of her, Wanda's eyes went wide as she wondered exactly how she was going to eat it. Eventually, she ate half and opted for a doggy bag. I treated myself to it the next day.

Never one to back down from a culinary challenge or order one item when two will do just as nicely, I ordered the Mediterranean platter, which features a masterful combination of Pita Jungle's best offerings. The platter is ideal for those who don't mind eating with their hands. It includes a generous helping of pita bread and three mouth-watering dips: *hummus* (chickpeas mashed with tahini sauce and seasoned with garlic and lemon juice), *baba ghanoush* (broiled eggplant mixed with sesame sauce, garlic, and lemon juice) and *tsatziki* (a creamy yogurt and cucumber mix). As if the pita bread and dips weren't enough, Pita Jungle adds *taboule*, feta cheese, green

beans, and *dolmades* (stuffed grape leaves) into the mix. The *dolmades* are particularly good, as Pita Jungle successfully avoids the bitterness and slimy texture that often ruin this, one of my favorite delicacies. I topped the platter off with homemade split pea soup and some of those tasty garlic potatoes.

Wunderbar!

The braintrust behind Pita Jungle is as diverse as the food it offers. Pita Jungle was founded by three friends who started the restaurant as a hobby. Fuad Khodr, who sat with us during our lunch, is half Lebanese, half Greek. When the restaurant opened he was working



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full time as a mechanical engineer. Since then, Pita Jungle has become a full-time job. Although he doesn't rule out returning to engineering, Khodr admits that he's having too much fun with the restaurant right now and doesn't relish having someone else as his boss. Nelly Kohsok is a French-born sportscaster who is still active in the business. She is in great demand and even worked the Atlanta Olympics last summer. The 3rd member of the intrepid trio is Bassel Osmani. Like Kohsok, Osmani splits his time between the

restaurant and other endeavors: his Ph.D. in biomedical engineering. Clearly, there's plenty of brainpower among the three.

The restaurant also doubles as an art gallery. Colorful canvases and photographs both large and small cover the walls. The art ranges from primitive to abstract to expressionist. Pita Jungle offers many local artists a chance to show and, with any luck, sell their work. Although the art may not suit your tastes every time you visit, chances are you'll eventually find an inexpensive treasure you can't live without.

Pita Jungle is expanding both its menu and its hours to cater to the breakfast crowd. The restaurant will open at 7am, and 20 to 30 breakfast items will be added to the menu. In addition to the breakfast pitas and omelets available now, Pita Jungle will offer crepes (adding French cuisine to the mix) and other breakfast staples. Plans are also in the works to add gourmet coffees and teas. Barb, a native of Seattle, where a coffeehouse is never far away, is delighted.

As might be expected, the threesome plans to expand more than just Pita Jungle's hours and menu. If certain details, such as parking, can be worked out, the restaurant itself will be getting larger. Kohsok, Osmani, and Khodr have also been deluged by requests to open a second location (Scottsdale and Ahwatukee are the two most requested sites) and have been approached several times regarding the possibility of establishing franchises. Although the prospects are exciting, the trio are hesitant to jump into expansion plans right now. According to Khodr, they want to make sure everything is absolutely right with the restaurant they have before opening another. In my opinion, they should start drawing up the plans.

Pita Jungle, 1250 E. Apache Blvd., Ste. 110, Tempe; 804-0234

