

A Quick Bite: Top Nosh Cafe in San Jose

By Amy Pizarro
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For a restaurant menu that essentially offers just one kind of item — that being a savory, hand-held pie — it's awfully hard to decide what to eat at the Top Nosh Cafe.

There are 10 filling combinations to choose from, and each description is mouthwatering. As for what ends up on your plate, well, that's even better.

This Willow Glen eatery opened in April in the Garden Theatre Building. It's the first storefront for this Sunnyvale company's pies, which are popular at Bay Area farmers markets and grocery stores. The cafe is spacious and bright, and on each table sits a tumbler of water holding a miniature calla lily.

Pie fillings are all over the map — literally, with ethnic flavors like Thai, Mediterranean, Indian and Southwestern — but no matter what you select, you're guaranteed several things.

First, all the pies pack big flavor. The baker isn't timid with seasoning, and when you combine that with top-notch fresh vegetables and herbs, the result is truly delectable. Even more importantly, the crust is just right — perfectly golden, flaky and light. The filling-to-crust ratio is perfect, not too much or too little of either.

Beyond that, options abound. My favorite pie is the wild mushroom and Gruyere. The earthy flavor of mushrooms — dark, delicate slices of shiitake and porcini — is nicely countered by flecks of fire-roasted red bell peppers.

We were also wowed by the chicken, apple and cheddar pie, which tasted nothing like we thought it would. Granny Smith apples added a surprising tartness to tender shreds of dark free-range chicken meat mixed with a bit of curry. I could barely taste the cheddar, but I'm not complaining — the flavors work. And I liked being surprised and then delighted by each bite.

Pies cost \$5.75 when you dine in, or \$5 for a frozen pie to take home. I highly recommend getting a combo, which cost \$7.90 and include a half-salad or cup of soup. The pies are not huge — probably the size of your hand, and on the thin side — but a little something on the side makes for a hearty meal.

Especially since the salads are quite large. My half-salad of mixed greens and apples filled a dinner plate and lasted long after I finished the last crumb of my pie (though admittedly, that was a darned good pie). Tender greens and thin slices of Fuji apple were lovely and fresh, tossed with a generous sprinkling of Point Reyes blue cheese and caramelized pecans. The salad was lightly dressed in balsamic vinaigrette.

My girlfriend paired her pie with a salad of arugula, radish and cucumbers. Tossed with a lemon vinaigrette, it contained crumbles of feta cheese, broken pita chips and two fat Greek olives. Radish and cucumber slices felt like a bonus.

I wanted take a frozen pie home to test the reheat factor, but I had such a hard time deciding that I picked two: the spicy beef pie, whose ground halal beef was mixed with cilantro, mint and jalapeno, as well as the chicken and yam with coconut curry, which contained an exotic and flavorful blend of lemon grass, ginger and lime. You can heat a pie in the microwave frozen or thawed, and while the crust isn't as nicely crisped as when it's fresh at the cafe, it's still mighty tasty.

I also took home a cup of Santa Fe tortilla soup, with a broth that was thick and rich, like the base of a really good chili. Red and green peppers, onion and tiny cubes of carrot gave it body. I was very sad when my bowl was empty.

There's no shortage of sweet treats to finish your meal, and I quite enjoyed the caramel-drizzled raisin bread pudding (\$3.50), which is made by store owner Yasmin Tyebjee. But there are so many tantalizing house-baked goodies in the case that, much like your lunch, you may have a devil of a time deciding.

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1167 Lincoln Ave.,
San Jose
408-995-6674,
www.topnoshsf.com

Hours: 7 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Friday; 8 a.m.-7 p.m. Saturday; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday

Types of food: Hand-held pies, salads, soup and baked treats

Average price: \$8

Good choices: Wild mushroom and Gruyere pie, spicy beef pie

Not recommended: Everything we tried was outstanding.

Attitude: Very friendly and enthusiastic about their menu

Amenities: Free Wi-Fi, as well as a guest PC system you can rent on-site

Vegetarian options: Three salads and five pies are meatless

Drinks: Lots to choose from "" flavored San Pellegrino, Izze sparkling juice, Kemper root beer, juices, coffee, tea and soda. The coffee is made to order, brewed in your cup with freshly ground beans.

Eat in car: The beauty of a hand-held pie "" eat it anywhere!

Next-day edibility: Wonderful. (Buy a baker"s dozen for \$60, you can also eat them the next day and the next day and "...)

Who goes there: Lots of Willow Glen shoppers and workers

Credit cards: All major ones accepted

Parking: There"s a lot behind the Garden Theatre Building, or you could try to find street parking.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.