


you ought to know chef...

TANYA FUQUA

TO YOUR HEALTH WITH LOVE 

words jessica ridenour

“We could solve the world’s problems with a much healthier diet,” declares vegetarian chef Tanya Fuqua. As co-owner of Avanti Café (along with partner Mark Cleveland) in Costa Mesa, Calif., she aims to prove that vegetarian cuisine can be both delectable and healthful. “It’s not scary-vegetarian,” she says, combating the common misperception that vegetarian food is nothing but flavorless tofu mush. Instead, Avanti Café offers up “handcrafted world vegetarian cuisine,” such as shiitake artichoke pesto sandwiches, tamales deliciosos and ciabatta breakfast scramblers, combined with thoughtfully selected teas and wine.



“We could solve the world’s problems with a much healthier diet.”

Her mission to educate diners on the joys of eating organic, local and sustainable food is catching on. “We’re not preachy about it; we don’t get on our soapbox,” she says. “We don’t want people to feel guilty. But we feel that there’s a place for everyone in their diet to start introducing healthier food.” According to Tanya, it usually takes most people about three or four visits to Avanti to understand, but after that, they’re hooked.

“Avanti,” which means “forward” in Italian, is just that—progressive and forward thinking. Sourcing most of their produce from South Coast Farms, a certified organic farm in nearby south Orange County, Avanti not only offers the freshest organic grub possible, but also helps local farmers.

Tanya’s longtime love of healthful fare started early. “My mother used to pride herself that I would want a piece of fruit instead of a candy bar,” says the Houston native who, having now lived over half her life in Southern California, considers herself a true-blue Californian. Her early gigs included a lengthy stint at Whole Foods Market where she managed various departments and acted as a food consultant. She later studied at the California School of Culinary Arts’ Cordon

Bleu program in Pasadena and spent a couple of seasons working for a small hotel and restaurant in Alaska. It was during her time in the land of the midnight sun that she learned the ins and outs of running a small business and experienced the satisfaction of cooking with indigenous ingredients, foraging for wild mushrooms, blueberries and wild Alaskan roses that would later become sorbet. “It was a phenomenal experience,” she says.

Now a Santa Ana, Calif., resident, Tanya lives close enough to her two-year-old café that she can walk or ride her bike, not only contributing to her own health but the health of the planet. She and her partner Mark looked at lots of locations before settling in progressive-minded Costa Mesa, a city that not only welcomes but celebrates nontraditional eateries. “They really get what we’re doing here,” says Tanya. “We’re trying to make good vegetarian food that’s fun to eat and good for you.”