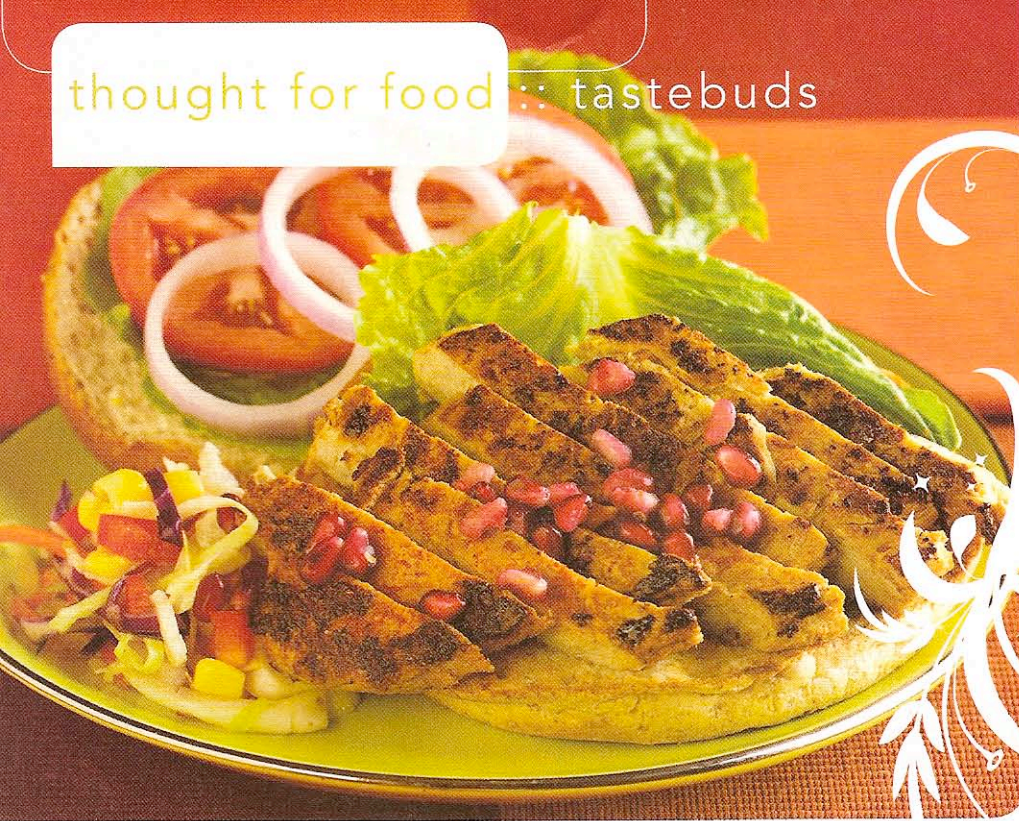


thought for food :: tastebuds



The Veggie Grill

Comfort food never felt so good

BY JESSICA RIDENOUR

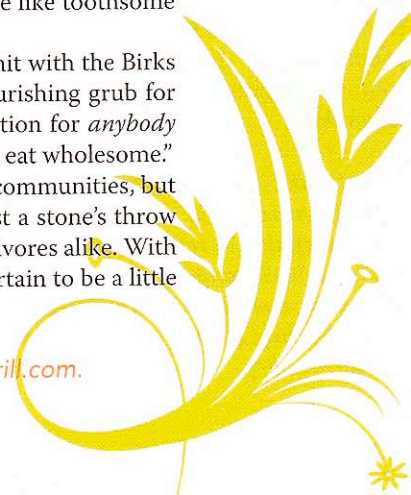
If the thought of sinking your incisors into another ho-hum veggie burger tends to devolve into guilty Burger King fantasies, you might want to give Irvine's newly opened Veggie Grill a shot. Here, comfort food — like fries, wings and hearty sandwiches — gets a healthful makeover using savory meat substitutes that don't skimp on taste.

The idea for a wholesome eatery in the thick of the OC grew out of "personal frustration with our inability to eat well without feeling punished for eating smart," says co-founder Kevin Boylan. After scoping out healthy restaurants across the country, Boylan and partner T.K. Pillan coaxed Ray White, co-founder of SoCal vegan chain Native Foods, into partnership. And like Native Foods, The Veggie Grill places tempeh and "wheat meat" (also known as seitan) at the heart of most entrées. Both marinate well and have a hearty, chewy texture similar to meat — which may prove a pleasant surprise for even the most diehard carnivore. Chill Out Wings actually do taste like toothsome chicken tenders and Bali Bliss could satisfy any meat-lover's burger craving.

But don't call The Veggie Grill a vegetarian restaurant. While it's bound to be a hit with the Birks and patchouli crowd, the owners emphasize that it's simply quick, affordable, nourishing grub for the masses, free of cholesterol, trans fat and refined sugar. "We want to be an option for *anybody* who wants delicious, high quality food," says Pillan. "Our vision is to make it fun to eat wholesome."

Irvine might be best known for shiny new office complexes and master planned communities, but Veggie Grill's founders are banking that its primo location beside Trader Joe's, just a stone's throw from UC Irvine, will draw adventurous college students and health-conscious omnivores alike. With a menu that includes appetizers, salads, soups, sandwiches and desserts, there's certain to be a little something for every dietary persuasion.

The Veggie Grill, 4213 Campus Drive, Irvine 92612. 949.509.0003. VeggieGrill.com.



DON'T JUST GET MAD... GET ACTIVE

If those long dark winter nights had you dreaming of a spring break-style getaway, "voluntourism" — combining vacation with volunteer service — offers a meaningful alternative to boozing it up in Cabo or joining the Hawaiian tourist throngs. Here are a few sample itineraries:

- Thailand's Andaman coast is still reeling from the 2004 tsunami that leveled its villages and devastated its fragile economy. Join **Go Differently** on one of its many planned '07 excursions where you may clear debris, plant seedlings, teach children or even help tsunami widows craft handmade soaps. *godifferently.com*
- **Globe Aware** offers one-week, tax-deductible service vacations in a number of exotic locales. Help construct a community center in a small Brazilian village, teach Peruvian children first aid, English and computer skills, or refurbish dilapidated schools in Vietnam. *globeaware.com*
- If an overseas voyage is too far or too expensive, stay stateside and lend a hand down in the Big Easy. **Relief Spark** needs able bodies to gut homes destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and salvage personal belongings. *reliefspark.org*
- Prefer to stay closer to home? A drive down to Orange County may feel like vacation for a frazzled Angelino. Help **Adopt-A-Park** with trail maintenance, plantings and non-native vegetation removal in Laguna Niguel, Newport Beach and San Juan Capistrano. *ocparks.com/adoptapark*

— JR

The Kids Are Alright

Seeking an inspirational alternative to LA's much-maligned public school system? Muse Elementary, in Malibu's lovely Las Flores Canyon, is a progressive independent school for Kindergarteners and first graders that takes a holistic approach to early education.

Adhering to the Italian philosophy of Reggio Emilia, which views children as competent, resourceful and inventive learners, Muse follows the kids' lead, allowing students' interests to direct the lesson plan. That's not to say that the little nippers are swinging from the chandeliers, sans adult instruction. On the contrary, Muse teaches the standards like math, science and phonics, art, music, French and Spanish, as well as some more enlightened offerings like regular yoga classes and talks from experts on topics like heart-centered communication and inner awareness.

Muse kids also learn the importance of treading lightly on the earth by tending to an onsite organic garden, eating healthful, organic meals and using natural soaps and recycled paper products. "We're trying to instill in these children a globally conscious mindset and to teach them to be aware of their environment, as well as being respectful of living things," says Muse administrator Rebecca Amis, sister of the school's founder.

Muse has big ambitions for the future, including expanding to include grades K through 5, but to Amis the goal is simple: "We absolutely want to be an inspiration to children," she avers.

For more information, contact Rebecca Amis at 310.428.0799 or musemalibu@gmail.com. Muse Elementary, 3504 Las Flores Canyon, Malibu.

— JESSICA RIDENOUR