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as seen in . . .

avanti café

by jessica ridenour

bridging the gap between the farm and the table

While the past five or so decades have brought numerous advancements in making the way we eat more convenient—delivering what we want, when we want it, regardless of time or place—some of this so-called progress has backfired. Besides consuming mass-produced food that's gorged with preservatives, trans fats and enough daily calories to fuel two or three people, we no longer seem to know where our food comes from or what to do with it in its natural form. Ask a child where his food comes from, and he'll likely answer that it comes from the grocery store, not the farm. Our bodies, and the planet, are paying the price.

Costa Mesa's Avanti Café offers an antidote to empty calories trucked in from who-knows-where. As a purveyor of hand-crafted, world vegetarian cuisine, this Orange County eatery serves up healthful, lovingly prepared gourmet grub, most of which is grown at San Juan Capistrano's organic South Coast Farms, less than 30 miles away. Contrast that with produce found in grocery stores, which is typically a week or two old and has traveled an average of 1,500 miles from farm to plate—a journey that zaps nutrients and does the environment no favors.

"Food is what nurtures every aspect of our life," says Avanti co-owner and chef Mark Cleveland, who spent his Midwestern childhood visiting farm stands and cooking with his Italian family. "In many cultures, food is a big celebration." As a result, Avanti's philosophy is that food is best when it's fresh, local, seasonal and slow. In other words, it's meant to be an experience.

Cleveland's partner Tanya Fuqua shares his passion for this nourishing, mindful way of eating and believes that many of the world's problems could be solved with a healthier diet. "We're not preachy about it," she says. "We don't want people to feel guilty. But we feel that there's a place for everyone in their diets to start introducing healthier food."

As such, Avanti blends the best of Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, Asian and Latin flavors for a taste that's uniquely exotic, yet fully wholesome. "Sometimes there's a certain scary connotation that comes with the word vegetarian," says Tanya, who asserts that there's much more to vegetarian cuisine than brown rice and tofu.

Rest assured, there's nothing scary about Avanti's tofu tempeh Bolognese pasta, shiitake artichoke pesto pizettes or organic purple beans with goma shio and lemon soy roasted cabbage. Craving some good, old-fashioned comfort food? Quiche tartlets, soup and salad combos with freshly baked bread or cheddar and corn mac and cheese might just be the ticket. Even dessert—the likes of rhubarb pie, peach cobbler, and blueberry swirl cheesecake—seem nourishing here.

Tucked inside a non-descript strip mall, Avanti sees both a steady stream of dedicated regulars and veg-curious step into its cozy space—its walls lined

with a rotating collection of funky art and racks of pickled veggies, jams and spice combos, all homemade. Costa Mesa—perhaps in response to being home of South Coast Plaza, one of the nation's largest ultra-luxury shopping centers, as well as neighbor to ritzy Newport Beach—has reinvented itself as a haven for artists, musicians and foodies, with many vegetarian and slow food restaurants sprouting up across the city. Fuqua and Cleveland pride themselves as being part of this progressive locality and hold regular events such as special dinners, cooking classes and biweekly CSA (community supported agriculture) pickups, where members receive a basket of organic produce delivered straight from South Coast Farms, all to build community and to educate diners about the benefits of being fully aware of what they put into their bodies.

If the growing popularity of farmers' markets is any indication, we're hopefully reacquainting ourselves with the joys of farm fresh foods: knowing where it comes from, how it's grown and maybe even knowing the person who grows it. "There are no simple answers," says Cleveland. "It's important to raise that awareness. Shopping (and eating) is political activity."

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Photo courtesy of Avanti Cafe

community restaurant