Hold the Beans

True Bistro offers higher-order vegan fare with international flair.

Beans, beans" are good for the heart...but many vegetarian restaurants mistakenly offer “1,001 ways to mash, mix, and fry the garbanzos” instead of dreaming up more creative and beautiful plant-based fare—paired with fine wines and cocktails.

Enter True Bistro. Opened in 2009, this Teele Square gem offers all of the latter in a sleek black-and-white setting with tablecloths, candles, and usually a bouquet of flowers on every table. The high ceiling lends airiness while tall windows smartly admit light through frosted glass that blots out the ugly sight of frenzied traffic. The place holds about 30 people and feels very calm, especially with jazz oozing softly from well-placed speakers.

An eclectic menu is evidence of chef Stuart Reiter’s extensive travels: a San Francisco native, he has explored some of the best non-animal-based dishes the world’s cultures provide. At True Bistro he taps into the cuisines of Italy, India, and Southeast Asia, among others. (He also likes grits, a food of the Native Americans, and serves them alongside some entrées—and as a side dish, for $5.)

On a recent night we started with the tenderest pillows of house-made ravioli we’ve had in a long time ($8). They were packed with spinach and cashew cheese (nut paste that has been fermented with a culture he grows from wheat, called rejuvenac) and served in a subtle garlic broth, which we soaked up with caraway-seed rolls. The excellent salads included a hearty wilted spinach option with pecans, dried cranberries, slivers of red onion, and delicious smoked tofu (a stand-in for bacon)—all lightly dressed in balsamic vinegar ($8).

We also loved the lighter combination of Boston lettuce with slices of rose-colored beets, cashew-cheese chunks, and toasted walnuts in a champagne vinaigrette.

Entrées range widely: from the blackened seitan (sounds devilish, but is only cooked gluten, which has a chewy, meaty texture and lots of protein), to the red curry Chinese-style tofu and vegetables, to the Vietnamese crepe. The last ($17) was a deliciously delicate, sometimes crusty envelope filled with hon-shimeji mushrooms, fried tofu, and mung sprouts, with a spicy, rich hoisin-style dipping sauce. Bolder was the whole eggplant roasted South Indian-style ($18). Laid out like a fish fillet, it was stuffed with a long-simmered mixture of onions, garlic, sesame seeds, and coconut spiced with cumin, coriander, chili, and tamarind. It sat atop coconut basmati rice with a side of tangy apricot-cherry-currant chutney and a bracing red cabbage slaw with jalapeno pepper, lemon juice, and cilantro. Perfectly satisfying on a cold winter night.

For dessert, we had the silky pumpkin cheesecake ($8). Reiter makes his without tofu, common in many other faux versions; instead, borrowing from the raw food movement, he thickens soaked cashews and agave syrup with coconut oil, cinnamon, and cardamom. This produces an unusual consistency: a cross between a semifreddo and a block of cream cheese. The mango crumble, flavored with ginger and macadamia nut ($7), while tasty, was not cooked through: it lacked the merging of bubbling-hot fruit and pliable, crunchy, sweet topping that makes this dish time-less “comfort food.”

Reiter also serves a weekend brunch with items ranging from $8 to $10: crepes, waffles, tofu scrambles with homemade biscuits, and seitan burgers served with exquisite house-made French fries and an earthy ketchup. With its diverse menus, attention to nuanced cuisine (dearth of beans), and refined ambiance, True Bistro is a truly meaningful addition to the region’s vegetarian scene.

True Bistro’s spare, calm room sits in busy Teele Square. From the menu: phyllo triangles filled with caramelized onions, chard, and tofu, in a sorrel cream sauce, and a vegan “death by chocolate” cake.

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