

Dining in the Orlando Area

BY KRISTEN MANIERI

Orlando's main claims to fame are its sprawling theme parks and endless days of sunshine. Disney has done a fantastic job of catering to gluten-free guests, but what else is in Orlando? Thanks to a handful of avant-garde eateries that are serving up some noteworthy noshes while creatively accommodating gluten-free diets, Orlando is starting to get a name for itself in the foodie world.

Take a trip to Orlando's hub of hip, Park Avenue in Winter Park, where the area's newest herbivore haven is schooling a well-heeled crowd in the art of raw food cuisine. Café 118's menu, which boasts everything from delicious dairy-free shakes to hearty 'lasagna', has been exclusively designed by Executive Chef and raw food guru Matthew Kenny. Its organic "Living Cuisine" offers a modern twist on mealtime classics like ravioli and Pad Thai while still offering countless gluten-free choices from the savory start to the decadent finale. Café 118's Basil Wrappers have practically become a local legend owing to a clever blend of sweet herbs and cherry tomatoes smeared with avocado and macadamia nut 'cheese'. Follow this artful app with the Portobello 'Steak' or Spinach and Beat Ravioli. No doubt the meal's piece de résistance will be the cacao mint raw ice cream which should only be enjoyed in slow motion.

www.cafe118.com

Locals aren't sure if it's because of the cheerful vibe or the reliable chow, but vegan and non-vegan diners alike are flocking to the Loving Hut, located on Colonial Drive, about a three-minute drive from downtown's Lake Eola. This generically Asian eatery with unfussy décor and uncomplimented counter service dishes up a generous variety of robust salads, veggie-based sushi, aromatic soups, and stir-fry dishes packed with inimitable flavors. The staff, which each claim to meditate at least two hours a day, wears a constant expression of welcome and warmth while they whip up fresh carrot juices and avocado shakes. Italian sorbets and the silky Vegan Flan are a must munch at this happy diner. www.lovinghut.us

Also a short drive from downtown, Dandelion Communita Café is a hippy-ish spot with a strong commitment to local, organic, and gluten-free food. Pull up to the colorful little cottage on Thornton Avenue and hop up its wooden steps into a lively dining room with a handful of tables likely occupied by a conscious crowd sipping fair trade tea and discussing the merits of driving a hybrid car.

Owner, Julie Norris, heard her patron's call for gluten-free nosh and quickly altered several favorite dishes to accommodate. In the winter months, the kitchen can't serve enough of its famous chili loaded with organic tempeh, tomatoes, kidney beans, peppers, and sweet corn. Folks also love the gluten-free dressing that's lightly splashed over creative salad concoctions like the Polynesian Banana Fantasy, an atypical combination of coconut and curry flavors with a mix of banana, celery and tossed walnuts. Just looking for a quick snack? Opt for either the TexMex Trio of guacamole, black bean dip & salsa or try the Machos Libre which provides diners with another way to chow their yummy chili.

www.dandelioncommunita.com

Hidden within Orlando's lesser known Antique District, EthosVegan Kitchen presents a meat-, dairy-, and egg-free menu of comfort food and locally brewed, organic beer. While just a handful of standard items can be defined as gluten-free, the ultra-accommodating kitchen is keen to make on-the-spot adjustments like switching out bread for rice wraps in sandwiches like the Fungus Among Us; a scrumptious mix of portabella mushroom, tomato, roasted red peppers, and veganaise. Spare some time after eating for some serious antique shopping and boutique window gazing. www.ethosvegankitchen.com

These days, we've come to expect environmental and dietary consciousness from our eateries. But with its hybrid delivery cars and gluten-free pizza dough, Pizza Fusion on West Sand Lake Road is taking going green and lean to a whole new level. Slip inside this stylishly decked out locale where pizzas loaded with organic ingredients are served atop counters made from recycled glass bottles. A constant stream of Animal Planet shown on flat screens throughout keeps little ones distracted while moms and dads sip from a selection of gluten-free beer and wine. Clearly vying for the title of America's greenest restaurant, Pizza Fusion uses biodegradable utensils and packages and even gives a discount to folks who return their pizza boxes for recycling. www.pizzafusion.com/orlando/

MAP OF FLORIDA BY SKVOOR, FOTOLIA

