



General Manager
Jeffrey Spier

GREEN SPACE

Café Phipps delivers up fresh and healthy foods to Oakland's lunch crowd

BY VICTORIA BRADLEY | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM MILLIRON

Café Phipps is one of Pittsburgh's little-known foodie secrets. It's rarely front of mind as a lunch destination and more often dismissed as a fuel stop while touring the Botanic Gardens. However, the kitchen is under new management, home to a new chef, and the food is outstanding.

I meet Chef and manager Jeff Spier on a Tuesday afternoon. He's dressed up in a shirt and tie, which throws me. I think I'm talking to a manager until he starts waxing poetic about my peanut butter and jelly. It's technically a kid's menu item, but the wheat wrap pinwheels, layered with organic peanut butter and fresh, organic strawberries, definitely boast a certain maturity. There's a hollowed-out cucumber on the side, with nubs of organic carrots poking out, and a pile of organic raisins also populate the plate.

"The organic standard comes first here," Spier says. "Of course, we source as much local produce as we can, but most importantly — the food has to be as clean as possible, and that goes all the way back to the growing process."

It makes sense that a place like Phipps would place such a high priority on growing.

"A primary purpose of Phipps is to inspire and educate visitors with the beauty and importance of plants," says Richard Piacentini, executive director of Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens. "There is no more important intersection of plants and people than what occurs in the way we produce and eat food; and there is perhaps no greater impact on the environment and our health than the way this intersection currently takes place."

I didn't expect such a health-food initiative. The new chef has completely done away with the pizza, burger, hot dogs, and chicken nuggets typical of menus at so many of Pittsburgh's attractions. Instead, there's a whole wheat panini and a grilled chicken taco. The café has even done away with its sugary strawberry milk and replaced it with organic juice boxes. Phipps is also a partner on First Lady Obama's Let's Move campaign (see more on page 10).

The café is housed inside the first LEED-certified visitor's center and



The South Conservatory is staged like a modern garden party to showcase the "farm to fork" initiative.

is also home to a public garden. Café Phipps is Green Restaurant Certified. They've done away with all plastic waste; the water cup I'm sipping out of is made from corn and is compostable. The café uses real silverware and also has an aggressive recycling program. Piacentini says that American Association of Museums calls the green practices in place here more advanced than most any other museum in the country.

Phipps is also expanding its Children's Discovery Garden to include an edible garden and outdoor kitchen on one of Phipps' green roofs.

The initiative is aimed at educating kids about where food comes from. The Tabbouleh plate comes out like a sandwich: Warm Naan is slathered with earthy local mushrooms and roasted vegetables. There's crunchy Romane for the Tabbouleh. I'm told all of the veggies come from my friends at Yarnick farm, and that the farm art, featured on all of the kiwi-colored walls, are actually photographs from that farm, among others.


There's lots of vegetarian on the menu. In fact, the café has an initiative called Meat-Free Mondays, encouraging folks to try vegetarian options, and they showcase vegan and vegetarian soups daily.

The chef calls this a "living menu," one where he features dishes with at least one to two fresh local ingredients. In the summer, there's much more than that.

I love the shrimp salad, with sundried tomatoes and fresh mozzarella. There are roasted tomatoes and green beans as well, lending a rich grilled flavor. Minor assures me he can make this with a mean tofu.

Phipps is a family place, but with the inception of the new café philosophy, there are a lot more adult-only activities, such as Friday happy hours and Fridays in the Forest, a first Friday dinner with a prix-fixe menu, served in the Tropical Forest.

The catering business is also better than it's ever been. The café caters more than 100 weddings per year, hosted on the property, as well as other banquets and special events.

And you don't have to patron the gardens to enjoy the café. The eatery has become a hub for students and business lunchers, looking for a fresh bite. "I have an EMT who comes in every day," the chef says. "I made a soup card just for him." 

Café Phipps, 1 Schenley Park, Oakland. 412.622.6914.
phipps.conservatory.org.



Shrimp salad



Organic peanut butter and jelly