



Spinach Ricotta Ravioli

An International Flair

The Ethnic Flavors and Simple Charms of Mountain Oasis

By Gamin Summers | Photos by Jenn Ireland

While Christmas shopping downtown more than a year ago, my daughter and I grew fatigued and ravenously hungry. We slid into Mountain Oasis International Restaurant, out of the cold and into the cheery warmth of this local haunt. To be honest, I had not eaten there much, but the special pumpkin soup piqued my interest. We snagged a couple of bowls to go.

In my years of dining out, few dishes truly stand out in my memory — ones I can taste in my mind by thinking about them. This soup was one of those magical numbers. Rich, thick,

creamy, slightly chunky and with all the proper spices and subtle sweetness of pumpkin pie, this soup became an instant addiction. After wolfing down the first two cups, we went back for more.

Needless to say, when I recently returned to Mountain Oasis to sample their latest cuisine, I was thrilled to learn some pumpkin soup was left over from the day — albeit only a cup or so. I again devoured the warm joy of it with relish.

The ambience of Mountain Oasis aptly reflects its name. Tiny white lights accent the trees and plants. Rustic, historic orange-red brick on two walls extends to the high ceiling of original, ornate white tiles. A local photography exhibit, reflecting such

regional scenes as Hart Prairie, Locket Meadow, and Cathedral rock, adorned the walls during my visit. Varied hues of glass lamps provide soft light with their frosted shades. High windows provide a lovely view of Heritage Square and beyond, and the cozy space contains 18 tables (more outside in the summer), creating an aura of intimacy. The place has the look and feel of a haven.

Though originally known for being a vegetarian paradise, owner and chef Jeff Oppen and his close cohort, Linda Kouragian, have spent their last seven years of new ownership trying to alter what they term as a reputation for being a “sprout house.” Oppen joked, “It’s taken us a long time to live that one down.” They want people to understand their menu contains a variety of international foods, including dishes with meat and seafood.

I enjoyed tasting varieties of ethnic flavors. The Thai dish with shrimp; loaded with vegetables and sprinkled with purple cabbage, green onions, and peanuts, embodied a delightful mixture of peanut sauce, ginger and just enough spiciness to open the taste buds without overpowering.

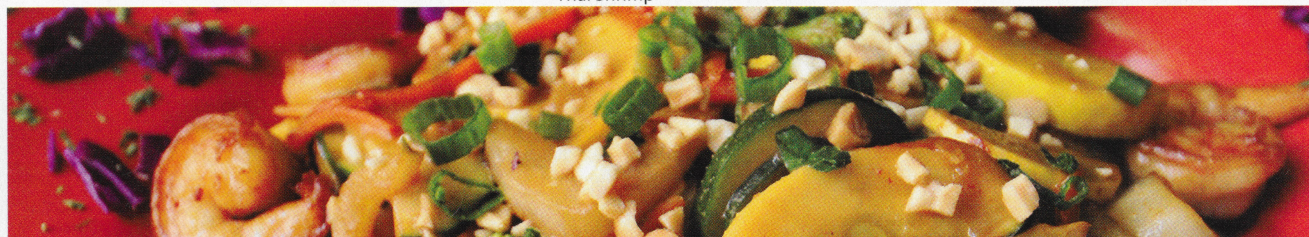
Penne with artichoke and chicken boasted generous amounts of fresh spinach and chunks of fresh basil, with fork-tender chicken and al dente pasta. The spinach ricotta ravioli was nicely accented with a roasted red pepper cream sauce, a mild yet garlicky alternative to a tomato-base.

But don’t forget those dishes for which Mountain Oasis has gained its reputation as a go-to spot for vegetarians, vegans, those with food allergies or just a discriminating palate. Kouragian challenges people to bring in their lists of foods to avoid so the restaurant can come up with something fantastic.



Spinach Artichoke Dip

Thai Shrimp





Crème brûlée



Mountain Oasis daily squeezes a large variety of juices, which are served alone, blended in smoothies, or mixed in cocktails at the full bar. Daily homemade soup specials are popular, one of which is always vegetarian or vegan. Kouragian says the only flour she uses now is wheat free and gluten free. "You can't tell the difference at all," she noted.

For a vegetarian appetizer, I thoroughly enjoyed the spinach artichoke dip, with its thick covering of parmesan and mozzarella cheeses, fresh cherry tomatoes and accompaniment of imported Greek pita brushed with garlic, baked and sprinkled with parmesan. I was particularly struck by the colorful nature of each dish, owing much to an abundance and variety of fresh vegetables.

I love a great crème brûlée, and I was definitely not disappointed by Mountain Oasis's offering. A generous portion, subtly sweet, with that wonderful juxtaposition of lightness yet dense creaminess and the plate accented with stripe trios of chocolate, strawberry and white chocolate sauces. Perfect caramelization of sugar sparkled in the dim light.

The current menu, vibe and ownership began when Opper and Kouragian embarked on a road trip from Florida. They traveled with the intention of finding the perfect restaurant, having already searched the East Coast. A friend ended up in Flagstaff on New Years Eve and told them this was the place. They liked what they saw here — the energy of the city, the restaurant — everything had the right feel.

"We agreed when we started off that we wanted some-



Pumpkin Soup





Penne with Artichoke and Chicken

place that felt comfortable,” Oppen explained. “When we arrived, I said, ‘I can do something with this.’”

Flexibility and creativity rule in the kitchen. Oppen and Kouragian put together most of the menu, but other chefs have the opportunity to create their own specials, even requesting special ingredients. “We all conspire with each other. [Our cooking] just gets better and better,” Oppen noted.

What’s to come? They’ve been playing with some new recipes, and new modifications and updates — with some

surprises — will appear in an updated menu. Yet, the chefs are quick to assert that favorites will not be eliminated. People love the pineapple tofu salad, though Oppen aches to bring on a New York style deli sandwich. He misses “big city” taste.

“You do this for fun, for the passion,” Kouragian said. “People come in and say they’ve traveled the United States and this is the best place. It’s gratifying. Some people come only to our restaurant during their whole vacation. That’s the best compliment.” ▲

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