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RESTAURANT REVIEW

You won't know what's missing

M Café de Chaya is redefining macrobiotic with a wholesome menu that's daring and delicious.

By S. Irene Virbila, Times Staff Writer

The juxtaposition couldn't be more delicious: Around the corner from the perennially mobbed Pink's, where hot dogs come slathered in fluorescent chili, is a jewel box of a cafe serving macrobiotic food to the health-obsessed.

Now, don't get scared. If the term "macrobiotic" conjures up visions of hemp-clothed hippies dining on bowls of tamari-soaked brown rice or loaves of bread heavy enough to break a tooth or a toe, stop right there. You are seriously out of date.

Macrobiotic cuisine has come a long way since those early days. Forget brown. The food at the new M Café de Chaya is nothing of the sort. It's so full of color and flavor that the adjective that comes to mind is vivid.

A Moroccan millet salad is a confetti of shredded carrots, green beans and garbanzo beans suffused with the taste of fresh mint and a pinch of cumin. A wedge of muffuletta, the New Orleans hero sandwich, is vegetarian, thin slices of grilled seitan (a chewy, almost meat-like food made from wheat gluten) and spicy seitan "salami" layered tall with roasted red peppers, dried tomatoes, arugula and olive paste on the house-baked sour-dough boule. It's not a grinder but a close relative, something gentler and, well, easier on the love handles.

And that precisely formed little Linzer cookie? The raspberry jam oozes berries, and the ground almond pastry doesn't seem to miss the butter.

M's take on macrobiotics is loosely and creatively interpreted. Here it means lots of whole grains, vegetables and fruits and no dairy, red meats, poultry or refined sugars. The cafe is the project of chef Shigefumi Tachibe, the muse behind Chaya Brasserie and Chaya Venice. The Japanese chef brings a more evolved and sophisticated aesthetic to the macrobiotic lifestyle championed by Japan's Michio Kushi. When Tachibe decided to open the M Café de Chaya, he recruited two other like-minded cooks. Chef de cuisine Lee Gross was Gwyneth Paltrow's private chef. Pastry chef Eric Lechasseur has cooked for the likes of Madonna and Leonardo DiCaprio. Both were interested in seeing what they could do in a macrobiotic setting.



While the new Melrose Avenue spot has an appealing, casual vibe, there's nothing casual about the way the food is put together. Following the principles Kushi laid down in his book "The Macrobiotic Way," Tachibe has used his considerable skills and imagination to create dishes that are not only virtuous, but delicious enough that many of the non-faithful will want to check out what's on offer.

Cheerful yellow awnings shade two rows of French garden tables out front, flanked by an olive tree in a sleek concrete planter. Inside, a couple of communal tables are set against the windows. You order at the counter and take a number to a table; a server brings out your food. The staff will explain the concept, answer any questions and give gentle guidance to the uninitiated.

At one table, a guy sips an excellent "latte" made with rich organic coffee and steamed soy milk as he scribbles furiously in a notebook. At a tiny table in back, a woman toys with her gado-gado salad, embellished with lemon grass, and tempeh triangles in an Indonesian peanut dressing as she leafs through her copy of "The Macrobiotic Way" (also for sale at the cafe). OK, not the most fascinating reading material, but at least it's not chick lit. Next to her, a couple of friends catch up over glasses of red wine (organic) and generously sized panini crisped in a panini grill.

Only five months old, M already has a devoted following. Small wonder: Just look at the pastry case, filled not with lumpen cookies or leaden cakes but with fragile-looking napoleons, pretty cakes and glistening lemon or chocolate tarts. These meticulously groomed pastries wouldn't look out of place in the windows of a patisserie in Paris. But remember the rules: no dairy or refined sugar. That means no butter or cream, which is quite a serious handicap, when you think about it. Some things, like those Linzer cookies or a hazelnut wedding cookie, don't suffer. But pastry crusts can be stiff and unyielding; the banana bread has an unappealing cottony texture that the sweetness can't mask.

Bright pastry flavors

Still, compared with most of the so-called "healthy" pastries around, these are nothing short of brilliant. A raspberry napoleon is made up of layers of ground nut pastry topped with a sort of raspberry mousse with a bright raspberry flavor. Chocolate tart is dark and mousse-like too, just stickier than one made with butter and cream would be. And while maybe these wouldn't tempt me to go on a pastry-eating binge, I appreciate the challenge of making them.

What does work for everybody are the salads: Most are terrific by any measure. The Chopped M, a colorful heap of vegetables cut in a variety of shapes, is topped with sweet little pink beets, avocado and cubes of marinated tofu (bacon's stand-in). There's interest in every bite, and the soy ranch dressing isn't as cloying as a traditional one. (They sell it by the bottle too.) There's also a lively New Mexico barley and black bean salad, with fresh corn kernels and jicama to give it a refreshing crunch. This one has some heat, too. Pesto with pasta and potatoes, though, is underflavored.

I can't help but marvel how cleverly the chefs have woven spices into the fabric of the dish and created variations in color and texture by the way the vegetables are cut. Take the breakfast panini of tofu "scramble" stained a deep yellow with turmeric to mimic scrambled eggs. It's flecked with carrots to add color, and topped with tempeh bacon made from soybeans. Packed into a crusty house-baked roll, the panini is toasted to a deep gold. It's beautiful to look at and beautiful to eat.

Wild salmon Benedict doesn't look too promising covered with a beige "hollandaise," but cut into it and the bright yellow "eggs" and emerald kale with the coral salmon give it a palette worthy of Matisse. The taste isn't bad either.

Not everything makes the translation. The falafel wrap features such dense falafel you'll need a powerful lot of the tahini-soy yogurt to get it down.

The biggest crossover hit has to be the tuna burger. Seared



rare and presented on a whole wheat bun, the tuna is dressed up with shiso leaf, ginger, spicy daikon sprouts and a terrific yuzu mayonnaise. Tuna never had it so good: The flavors just dance across the tongue.

Sushi rolls, the kind with the rice on the outside and a filling of various vegetables and seafood, are heavy enough that, for me, they're more dutiful eating than pure pleasure. And while I love the look of the inari sushi — little tofu pouches filled with organic brown rice and wearing festive toppings such as lacy lotus root, mushrooms or a thatch of seaweed and buckwheat noodles, in the end they are somehow glum. It's that brown rice again.

Not to worry, you can pick up some lavender biscotti or delectable little cats' tongues made of crisped nori covered in sesame seeds. A lollipop, maybe? People are always snatching one more goodie off the counter as they pay.

"Are these rice crispy squares any good?" one woman asks a cashier in a towering print turban.

"They're delicious," she coos.

Everybody orders with abandon. It's healthful, right? No question.

While not everything at M Café de Chaya is convincing enough to make me convert to the macrobiotic way of life, M is thrilling in its way. It's daring, understatedly chic, wholesome and — in a word, unique. It's a terrific place for a spot of green tea and a salad, for lunch with a vegetarian friend, or for a virtuous sweet to fuel some scribbling in your journal. Who knows, this may be the start of something big. A macrobiotic café in every neighborhood. In L.A., it just could happen.

M Café de Chaya

Rating: ★ 1/2

Location: 7119 Melrose Ave., Los Angeles; (323) 525-0588, mcafedechaya.com

Ambience: Macrobiotic café with a fresh urban vibe and food that will appeal to both the health-obsessed and somebody who just wants a good salad or a tuna burger. Communal tables share space with tiny two-tops and a handful of French garden tables outside.

Service: Helpful and friendly. Order and pay at the counter; a server will deliver your food to the table.

Price: Soups, \$3.50 to \$5.75; salads, \$7.95 to \$13.95; rice bowls, \$10.50 to \$14.95; sandwiches and wraps, \$7.75 to \$13.75; patisserie, 90 cents to \$5.95.

Best dishes: Breakfast panini, wild salmon Benedict, Moroccan millet salad, M chopped salad, tuna tataki, tuna burger, Linzer cookies, black cherry almond muffins, chocolate truffles.

Wine list: Small selection of organic wines from California and France. Corkage, \$5.

Best table: One on the sidewalk terrace.

Special features: Takeout.

Details: Open 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. Wine and beer. Street and lot parking in front.

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality.

★★★★ Outstanding.

★★★ Excellent.

★★ Very good.

★ Good.

No star: Poor to satisfactory.