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Hot damn, Hot Yam!

Student-run vegan spot is downscale but stunningly good

BY STEVEN DAVEY AUGUST 26, 2009 3:03 AM



Michael Watier

Ashu Jain (left), Brige Chugh (middle, with hat) and Anum Rahman chow down at Hot Yam!; Giovanna Thron prepares cornbread; Cumberland House is home to vegan student haven Hot Yam!

HOT YAM! (International Student Centre, 33 St. George, at College) Complete lunches for \$4, first week of the month pwy. Open for lunch Thursday noon to 2 pm. No reservations. Unlicensed. Cash only. Access: barrier-free. Rating: NNNNN



The words "vegan," "student" and "collective" in the opening sentence of a restaurant review are enough to make any well-seasoned foodie run - in the opposite direction.

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That's exactly what I'd done until I finally gathered up the courage the other week to visit Hot Yam!, the quirky student-run café that operates one day a week out of U of T's Cumberland House. I'm expecting a staff dressed in organic burlap bags and a card consisting of dreary but well-intentioned mung bean casseroles but instead find some of the most idealistic young cooks I've encountered in a long time.

"Hot Yam! is a volunteer-run, vegan, mostly local and organic eatery serving the greater U of T community, where our members learn by doing and by following equitable decision-making practices," explains Dulcie Vousden, one of the group's organizers. "We aim to achieve this by providing a space to learn and educate about food issues, by bringing people together to share a meal and by being accessible, inclusive and affordable."

All very laudable intentions, but how's the grub? In a biodegradable nutshell: superb.





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One week, lunch starts with a light, nutty sweet 'n' sour beet soup laced with coconut and dolloped with Ontario cucumber salsa. It's followed by bruschetta topped with garlicky white beans in balsamic vinegar, a salad of lemony orzo dressed with roasted season-peak tomatoes, zucchini and peppers, and a square of super-moist raspberry cake.

Another day, it's an impossibly creamy potato salad thick with silken tofu and grainy mustard, a savoy cabbage coleslaw in a dilled dressing sided with al dente green beans and raw red onion in basil pesto, and a dessert of syrupy diced peaches and a delish slice of flaxseed cornbread. Or how about a sandwich of roasted veggies and tempeh on house-baked rosemary focaccia spread with black-olive tapenade, coupled with cayenne-dusted corn on the cob and a spinach salad tossed with caramelized shallots?

Hot Yam's culinary canon also includes curried apple soup, hand-made gnocchi in cashew cream, roasted asparagus in couscous, rhubarb muffins and vegan chocolate pudding. Did we mention that each meal goes for all of four bucks? Or that it's pay-what-you-can the first Thursday of the month?

Sure, the set-up's self-serve, the only tuneage you're likely to hear is some vintage Madonna wafting from the kitchen (no difference there, then), the drink list's limited to free lemon-balm tea and the seating's at communal tables just like far trendier Oddfellows (936 Queen West, at Shaw, 416-534-5244) and Swirl (946½ Queen East, at Carlaw, 647-351-5453). And you don't have to be a U of T student to eat there or volunteer. Where do we sign up?

"No experience is required, just a profound love for the chaotic!" writes Vousden on the Hot Yam! blog (hotyam.blogspot.com).



"But please don't call Hot Yam! a restaurant," cautions Vousden. "I wouldn't want people to get the idea that things are normal around here."

That shouldn't be a problem.

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