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elf café: an exotic rapture

by nancy nazarian

You're in a band. You know someone in a band. You listen to music made by bands. What do you do for dinner? Right, you start your own organic vegetarian restaurant. Therein lies the inspiration behind Elf Café, the exuberant veggie oasis flavoring the eclectic Echo Park scene.

Owned and operated by members of the local band Viva K (Scott Swiezen, Ween Callas, Ravi Dhar and Evan Haros), Elf Café will transport your taste buds to uncharted territory. The refreshingly vegetarian menu boasts fresh, organic cuisine, packed with the richest greens and vegetables. You won't find any tofu concoctions of wannabe meat dishes here. Instead, Elf offers an array of uniquely exotic Mediterranean plates, organic re-inventions of traditional foods and a growing list of baked tarts.

But be careful not to miss this culinary haven: Elf chooses not to sport a storefront sign, relying instead on the fawning word-of-mouth of Eastside veg-heads. As the 7pm dinner hour turns over, you can spot the restaurant by the couples loitering around the few outdoor tables. The interior, though dimly lit and quaint enough for conversation, is bursting with life. Locals chatting with the staff, diners mingling over a fabulous garlic potato puree or students tantalized by literature all become part of the community instantly.

If after the potato puree you'd like more to munch on, try an order of the fresh and subtle tahini-avocado puree. Choose from a list of baked tarts, served on a bed of mixed greens with caramelized pear onions for a light evening, or the sink your fork into the organic mac and blue cheese for a unique twist on an old favorite.

Surprisingly, in a time when vegetarian restaurants are growingly available, it

can be difficult to find a vegan dish that doesn't rely on tofu "meats," but Elf doesn't bother with imposters. Here, it's all about the veggies, such as the Moroccan-inspired organic tagine (an aromatic clay pot dish) that's sure to jumpstart your evening. Served over powder soft couscous, this dish is packed with vegetables like eggplant, squash and bell peppers, and the soft almonds and plump raisins add the perfect complement. To add a little fire to your fare, drizzle on a little harissa, a spicy Tunisian condiment made from red peppers. Before you wrap up the bill, know that the saffron pudding has a growing reputation of magically cooling your palette.

Adopting their band name from Vivekananda, the Vedanta spiritual leader known as one of the first swamis to introduce Hinduism, yoga and Vedanta to the West, the owners have created an eatery that exudes the energy of conscious living and peaceful coexistence. Whether you are seated

between a hip couple with an even hipper five-year-old—and a party of six taking a break from production, or up at the kitchen's counter mingling with the staff watching the magic happen, you can't deny the vibrant energy wrapping smiles around everyone's face.

Then there's the wine. Bring your own bottle for an insignificant \$5 corkage fee and really watch smiles widen as you learn that in response to Elf's insistence, the liquor store around the corner now carries organic wines.

Open for dinner Wednesday through Sunday, Elf Café introduces a fresh take on a growing trend. Skip the pretension, but add some exotic decorations with low lighting, accompanied by organic vegetables and unique culinary creations for an evening to inspire your more eclectic flavors.

Elf Café
2135 Sunset Blvd.
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