



New garden spot for food is in bloom

After one strolls past the irises, gazanders at the model trains and observes the butterflies at the Chicago Botanic Garden, a strong appetite and thirst can arise.

In past years, visitors grabbed a tray at the Garden View Café and, after standing in line with fidgety children, munched on typical cafeteria food. But a recently completed \$3 million renovation has changed the atmosphere — and the fare.

A new wood-fired oven creates offerings from a Roasted Vegetable Calzone to a Ham & Cheese Flatbread. A range of salads, artfully presented, are available. For the kids? The Top Secret Mac & Cheese (that's a perfect name for youngsters to bite on ordering it) includes butternut squash — Chef Boyardee it is not.

The trays have been jettisoned; food is now delivered to tables. Booths have been added, along with a barista station. A map pinpoints the 150-mile radius where produce comes from (fruits and vegetables often are transported a few hundred yards from a nearby island). The blinds have been removed to enhance the beautiful view — after all, gazing at a garden is a little more uplifting than staring at a road.

“This café is clearly part of the Botanic Garden, but that used to get lost as you walked in. It didn't match the glorious look of the gardens,” explains Harriet Resnick, vice president of visitor experience and business development.

“People use the Botanic Garden as their personal health club. The ingredients are part of our mission to help them lead healthy lives.”

Adds chef Michael Kingsley, “We don't serve fountain soda anymore. We're trying to show awareness

about sugar.” He notes the menu will change seasonally (the fall and winter will constitute one season, given the Chicago weather; don't expect raspberries in January).

Both admit it was challenging educating the café regulars about the changes introduced this spring (some who yearned for their standard yogurt parfait have found a Greek yogurt in its stead). But those visitors are also heartened the outdoor grill — where one can order anything from salmon to skirt steak while enjoying a glass of wine on the deck — is set to open for summer nights.

Since the café was designed back when the Botanic Garden drew 500,000 visitors a year (1 million arrived in 2013), it also was expanded into a nearby room. The renovation money — from a bond financing by the Forest Preserves of Cook County — paid for that as well, along with new water fountains that accommodate bikers' water bottles.

Given that about 40 percent of Botanic Garden visitors stop in the café, which is operated by Maryland-based Sodexo, it looks to be money well spent. Resnick hopes couples and others will be persuaded to show up at the Glencoe spot simply for the dining itself.

“This is a destination restaurant on the north Shore,” she says. “You sit on the deck, and you feel like you're on vacation.”

enjoy the weekend.

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