

# Bento Cafe

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WALKING INTO BENTO CAFE, my dining partner and I couldn't believe we were in a scraggly Jimmy Carter Boulevard strip mall. The place felt far too hip for that, with its wireless Internet stations and vague anime vibe. Once we tasted the flavorful interpretation of Taiwanese street food and home cooking, we knew we'd found a lunchtime gem. Born in Taiwan, owner Peggy Wu grew up snacking on its street food and eating bento lunches (similar to a to-go tray) — the flavors and mood of which she's tried to replicate at her cafe. With her mom as one of the cooks, that home-cooking flavor infuses every dish.

**STREET FOOD:** The Bento Drum is billed as a seasoned drumstick. What we got was more like a Sunday chicken dinner, Taiwanese style. The chicken, which we opted to have fried, was more a leg and a thigh, butterflied, then seasoned with five-spice seasoning. It came with steamed rice topped by a succulent pork sauce, green beans and bits of seaweed tied into little bow ties. The rice noodle plate was satisfying as well with its array of shredded shiitake mushroom, carrots and cilantro. My dining companion enjoyed the chicken curry, relishing the sweetness of the fresh carrots that brightened the dish. The kitchen has also taken a staple of the American drive-through menu and given it a decidedly Asian spin: chicken nuggets, or as they're called here, Bento nuggets. They are chopped pieces of chicken breast seasoned with Chinese five-spice and a dash of curry, then deep-fried with whole basil leaves. Perhaps the one thing we found less successful was the beef noodle soup. The broth was rich and deep, made from meat that had been marinated overnight and the noodles had just the right amount of tooth. It was delicious, but the beef itself had little flavor.

**GRAPHICALLY SPEAKING:** From the parking lot, the place looks unassuming. Once inside, it's apparent that someone with a young, urban sensibility designed the spot. Basic building materials — cinderblock, plywood, concrete and warehouse lighting — are used to great effect in this cavernous space. Booths are divided by low cinderblock walls. Tables are simple stainless steel work trestles, which is fitting since some booths host Internet stations. Exposed rivets in the white drywall suggest buttons on a jacket rather than unfinished installation. An area in the rear is set up with long tables and benches, while magazines and comic books lie around. It's vintage industrial chic on the cheap, with a palette of gray, white and shots of flame yellow.

**WITH IT OR NOT:** Since bubble tea began in Taiwan, of course this restaurant serves it. (For the uninitiated, it's usually made from a flavored black tea, sweetener and milk shaken until frothy.) At the bottom of the cup swirl purplish black beads of chewy tapioca. I tried the peach flavor made with black tea, but without milk. The beads on the bottom were as close as it came to dessert at Bento, and that was OK.

**NEXT TIME:** We'd like to try the braised pork on rice (the menu claims it's for the adventure seeker). There are two weekend-only specials that seem great to try, especially the Tainan sticky rice with meat sauce, peanuts, pickled cucumber and cilantro. Also check out the Mix 'n' Toss Noodles.

**HOURS:** 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Sundays, closed Mondays

**PRICES:** Soups \$3-\$7; entrees \$6-\$7; snacks \$4-\$5

**CREDIT CARDS:** Visa/MasterCard

**RESERVATIONS:** No

**PARKING:** On site

**RECOMMENDED DISHES:** Bento nuggets (chicken nuggets with fried basil leaves mingled in), Bento Drum (drumstick grilled or fried), beef noodle soup, Bento curry, jasmine milk bubble tea

**CHILDREN:** No kid's menu, but the chicken nuggets would please and fill most kids.

**WHEELCHAIR ACCESS:** Yes

**SMOKING POLICY:** Nonsmoking

**NOISE LEVEL:** This loft-like space has the potential to be loud, though during slow periods, it's generally quiet.

**TAKEOUT:** Yes

**THE VERDICT:** A bright spot among ethnic restaurants