

Bento Cafe

Created Loafing Atlanta

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Think outside the box

Eating out becomes fun again at deceptively named Bento Cafe

To make part of your living by dining out can be akin to a drug addiction at times. Like a rapturous high to a junkie, restaurants that really flip your switches grow ever more elusive.

But when an eatery with as much charm and savor as Bento Cafe comes along, eating out is suddenly fun again. Hidden far from the road in a semi-derelict strip mall that is also home to a branch of the International Farmer's Market, 3-month-old Bento Cafe is an utter surprise and delight. There's little indication from the plate-glass front of its austere, industrial interior. Although the current temptation for decor in fast-casual Asian eateries might veer toward neon pop, the cafe enthalls with a landscape of stark, pristine white walls, blond wood tables and chairs accented with brushed steel. A regulation 8-foot drop ceiling has been stripped away and raised to 25 feet, exposing gleaming ducts and pipes.

Concrete blocks stacked into low walls engender four-tops with the intimacy of booths and create an airy feel along one side of the dining room. In the hallway, more blocks are posed on the ground in a purposeful jumble. Tube lights are tucked into the open angles in between for a nifty DIY installation. Several long steel picnic tables — stationed at the back by a bookshelf stocked with Japanese magazines and comic books — offer seating options for parties of five and more.

Despite the name that refers to the popular compartmentalized lunch boxes in Japan, Bento Cafe isn't Japanese in the very least. Rather, it serves solidly young, modern Chinese — a perfect Western reproduction of the quick, cheap and hip eateries you would find in Hong Kong and Taipei. The menu

combines items that seem at odds with each other on an Asian menu. Pork feet with white rice alongside a club sandwich served with chips? Yes. This inclusion of what Asians perceive as classic American food is the most thoroughly Asian part of the menu. When you order braised pork in Singapore at an eatery favored by the young and nattily dressed, it's highly likely that an accompanying side will be buttered corn and peas, as it is at Bento Cafe.

Frying is a forte at Bento, where the fried snacks and appetizers are irresistible. Bento nuggets, described as “popcorn nuggets” on the menu, aren't clusters of corn but cornstarch-dusted, deep-fried chunks of pork. Served in a shallow stainless steel mixing bowl with bamboo skewers as utensils, the nuggets have crunchy, cayenne-sprinkled crusts and steaming, moist interiors. Bento's fried pork dumplings would make the finest dim sum house proud. The bottoms are seared golden brown — not charred — with plump pockets of juicy filling, and four graceful pleats on top. The cabbage-to-meat ratio included in the filling is perfect, resulting in airy puffs of pork instead of stony little meatballs.

For those who aren't fry-aholics, cold side dishes serve nicely as lighter starters. No leafy greens are involved with a tofu salad featuring a deliciously chilled block of medium-firm tofu that is scored into cubes and dressed with cilantro, green onions and hoisin sauce. Seasoned peanuts could do for a bit more salt, but will tickle the boiled peanut fan nonetheless. Seaweed salad with a chili pepper spike and a generous flavoring of sesame oil is the sort of refreshing summertime eating you could never tire of.

The Bento Drum, with its striking presentation, is a must. A chicken leg, with thigh attached, comes splayed down the middle, and the meat is cleanly butterflied from the bone to create “wings” that arc up from the plate. As the server marches it to the table, you're shocked into thinking for a split-second that you inadvertently ordered a deep-fried manta ray. The skin is a shatteringly crispy lace of batter, underneath which lies poultry of a succulence you thought existed only in Butterball commercials.

Peas and corn and spicy braised cabbage accompany the dramatic chicken leg, as does a dome of white rice napped with a pork sauce touted as “awesome” on the menu. The sauce lives up to its hype. It filters through the rice until the meaty bits are left on top, while the decadent, porky juices and fat soak into the grains.

This same pork sauce tops the Chop Noodle, a tangle of spaghetti (called “white noodles” here) in chicken broth served with a tender fried pork chop on the side. And it appears again on the Mix 'n' Toss noodle, a bowl of spaghetti dressed with bean sprouts, scallions, crispy fried onions, cilantro and a tea and soy sauce-infused boiled egg.

The Bento Rice Noodle might sound vegetarian, its filmy vermicelli stir-fried with shiitake mushrooms, carrots, Chinese mustard greens and cilantro. But it's lashed with the omnipresent pork sauce, which, I must admit, I was no less fond of on the fifth serving as I was on the first.

The only entrees in which you won't find a bit of pork are the Bento Stew, a sweetish, tomato-based beef stew that misses the East-meets-West boat entirely and tastes a lot like Dinty Moore, and the yellow Bento Curry of chicken that disappoints with a sauce that has the grayish tone and mealy texture of lentil soup. In a menu of out-of-the-park hits, these are the only two misses.

No alcohol is served at Bento, but a variety of tapioca-spiked, fruity bubble teas provide giddy fun. Drink responsibly, though. The cooling elixirs will send you into a caffeine-abetted delirium that will keep you up until dawn, wondering how it was so shockingly easy to consume what feels like a pound of tapioca.

Sometimes, though, being jolted awake is exactly what you need.