



TANYA BARHAM

Tastes like chicken

By Tanya Barham

New Year is the time when throngs of Americans stampede to local gyms and fitness centers to atone for holiday gluttony. From November through January, it's ham, cheesecake, cookies, chocolate, egg nog and ginger bread. Once we've swept up the New Year's confetti, life goes from lush, delicious feasts to an hour on the elliptical stepper and sliced tomato on lettuce. That is, until we abandon our new, austere and completely tasteless fare for the first flirtatiously iced cupcake that looks in our direction.

Yet for every weary traveler on the grueling New Year's quest for health, there is hope. In a tiny corner of the Pearl is an oasis of bamboo tabletops, the whisper of water falling over river rock and lilies, and calm, smiling, effortlessly beautiful people. Yoga in the Pearl's (925 NW Davis St.) bustling, high ceilinged lobby houses The Blossoming Lotus Café.

The first time I visited, I was so caught up in enjoying the food and atmosphere that I never noticed what the meal lacked: Meat. For those who cringe at terms like tempeh, tofu or vegan — never fear. The Lotus Sample Plate's (\$6) Tempeh Salad tasted so convincingly like tender chicken breast in a creamy mayo dotted with thinly sliced green onion, that I would have bet money I was eating chicken salad. The cashew hummus is much like what you would expect from a Mediterra-

nean restaurant, but less pungently garlic and lemon flavored. The plate's generous portions of dip are served with six of the tastiest crackers I have ever eaten. Blended pumpkin, flax and sesame seed make a nutty, slightly smoky substrate for the hint of lemon, cumin and mixed spice in the cracker.

For those who crave comfort food in winter, the café's internationally inspired bowls (\$7) derive their flavors from all of the colorful corners of the globe. I sampled the modestly named Noodle Bowl, a hearty helping of *kamut udon* noodles, carrot, *daikon* radish, chard, spring onion and sesame seeds in a *maitake*, *kombu*, ginger *dashi*.

Dashi is better known as the traditional stock used in Japanese broths and simmering liquids. Fresh *dashi* made from kelp and *katsuobushi* is rare today, even in Japan, but The Blossoming Lotus makes their *dashi* daily from scratch. Describing a good *dashi* is difficult for my western vernacular, but the *dashi*'s uniquely earth and sesame tones, along with the dish's sweet and tart accents of *daikon* and carrot, are a lovely backdrop for dense, soft and salty bites of noodle and smoked tofu. Fresh seasonal greens, a dash of toasted sesame seeds and green onion punctuate the dense, nutty flavor of the dish.

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