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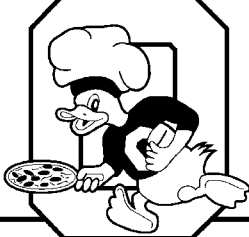
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Hot & Cold Quickies

Sundance has the fresh, organic "grab-n-go" grub.

BY VANESSA SALVIA

It's the start of the workday in the tiny Sundance Natural Foods kitchen, and Beverly Lynn Bennett walks past rows of shiny silver pots, heading straight for the cutting board where a pile of fresh, organic veggies awaits her.

Bennett is not just any chef, she's The Vegan Chef, with her own website (www.veganchef.com) and a freshly-inked publishing deal with Penguin Books for *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Vegan Living*. She's just one of a dozen skilled employees in Sundance's kitchen responsible for lovingly preparing primarily organic vegetarian and vegan dishes.

Sundance's hot bar and salad bar are local treasures, well-known by people seeking ready-made, tasty fare. There's no excuse for choosing fast food when you're in a hurry with hot dishes like scrumptious shells and cheese, enchilada pie or vegan Asian phyllo pie with tempeh, cabbage, ginger and onions available. Delicious cold salads beckon, like Bennett's favorites tomato Florentine and cilantro slaw.

To make a healthy choice even simpler, the kitchen produces a selection of wrapped-and-ready food to grab on the go like delectable dolmades, vegan pakoras, hot soups and to-die-for vegan chocolate cake. A polite sticker warns that the cost of organic ingredients pushes up the price customers pay for prepared foods, but hey, it's a small price to save planet Earth from pesticide poisoning.

The chefs take care to have sides available that complement the hot entrees, so you don't have to worry about bringing home two tastes that don't taste great together. For instance, chef Bennett's spicy rice with cashews pairs up with chipotle tempeh diamoniques and roasted yam and black bean salad. Chef Joel Straw has created a soul food plate of red beans, coconut thyme corn and garlic greens to round out his unchicken strips. (See recipe p. 14)

Kitchen manager Kevin Kuney said their hemp nut chocolate chip cookies fly off the shelf, and they can't stock their cold salads fast enough, even in winter weather. With typical selections such as artichoke hearts, croutons and peas, and fabulous marinated tofu and tempeh, a gourmet salad is as easy as lifting a few spoons. Top your masterpiece off with Toby's or Annie's dressings or Sundance's own wasabi dressing or agave Dijon. It doesn't come cheap, however. Piling on those baby corns, un-bacon bits and grated carrots adds up to the tune of \$5.39 a pound. It's worth the extra bucks in time saved not washing and chopping, and for two to eat a hearty pile of organic grub it's less than what you'd pay at a moderately-priced restaurant.

Kuney proudly states most of the kitchen's ingredients are organic (95 percent) and unprocessed, which adds hours to the prep time. "We choose to maintain a lower markup than the industrial standard and we choose not to pass on that significantly high cost of our ingredients as much as possible," Kuney remarked.

Sundance purchases locally-grown produce in season when possible. "We try to use whole food, whole grains and unprocessed products of every kind," Kuney said. "The dry storage areas have only a few canned products. Everything else we try to get as fresh or as wholesome and local as possible."

At Sundance, you can get take-out without the karma-clogging guilt of Styrofoam and plastic, thanks to stacks of compostable, plant-based plastic containers and biodegradable forks and spoons made from cornstarch. One taste of the gingered greens, spicy sesame noodles or the mélange of veggies the kitchen calls "organic space food" and you too will be a Sundancer. Give the hot bar a try next time your tummy growls!

EW