

Tula Kitchen Brings Balance to Bayshore
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By Tara Lamberti

To enter Tula is to enter a sanctuary. Flickering candlelight only enhances the red of the walls and ethereal flow of black curtains. Rows of ornate pillows lined up along the cushioned bench entice you to sit down. If the ambiance of the restaurant is able to make one feel so calm from the outside, imagine what the food can do from the inside? At Tula, eating is not just a necessary activity, it's a way of life; hence Tula's motto, "live to eat, eat to live."

A vegetarian since the age of three, owner and Chef Jackie Sharlup, 37 of West Islip, knows the benefits of a healthy diet. As graduate of the Natural Gourmet in Manhattan she interned as a chef in a spa in Capetown, Africa. Her desire not only to open a restaurant, but her drive to help people as well, has shaped Tula's menu. Eight years ago Sharlup was a personal chef serving up dishes to nourish special needs patients that would boost their immune systems. It was that type of cooking that she wanted to "bring to the mainstream."

I brought along a friend to sample what Tula had to offer. As a former vegetarian she looked over the menu and was ecstatic about the choices. And even I who never entertained the notion of becoming a vegetarian was tormented by the difficult choices. Now that's not to say that only those who don't eat meat are welcome or would find something to their liking. Of course there is something for everyone at Tula, and even their turkey is natural and free range. I was completely in awe of the various salads available and how interesting and delicious they all sounded for anywhere from \$8 to \$10. One comprised of Baby field greens, goat cheese, roasted beets, cherry tomatoes and toasted honey walnuts with maple balsamic dressing; another salad included roasted asparagus, string beans, feta cheese, cannelloni beans, red onions, chopped tomatoes and red wine vinaigrette. After much indecision, we finally decided to split the popular Mediterranean Spread for Two: filo spinach pie, vegetable rice, hummus, grilled pita and Greek salad. The spinach pie with its flaky crust was just excellent and my friend and I split the last one in half so we were sure we both savored the same amount. And keeping in line with its healthy appeal, everything at Tula is baked and not fried. The mixture of flavors blended incredibly well together. Having never experienced hummus before, I was pleasantly surprised and excited that I had found something new to enjoy. In a very short amount of time the adorable square plates set in front of us were wiped clean. It was extremely refreshing to eat an appetizer that didn't consist of mozzarella sticks and hot wings that left you feeling guilty. Already a bit stuffed we anxiously awaited our main course.

Our "center" portion of our meal was selected from another wonderful set of dishes. On the menu to choose from were such items as seared tuna with wasabi soy dipping sauce, smashed potatoes and baby bok choy; coconut and brazil nut crusted

tilapia; tofu crab cakes, dairy free tartar sauce, with veggies for the vegans; Jackie's famous turkey loaf and a fusilli bowl with fire roasted vegetables, grilled chicken with smashed garlic and shaved parmegiano. My friend Nicole the adventurer tried something new for herself and ordered salmon cakes with Asian slaw. I, on the other hand settled on balsamic parmesan baked chicken over baby greens. Numerous oohs and aahs followed as we dug into our platters. Every so often our forks would meander over into one another's plates to sample. The salmon cakes were unbelievable, and as someone who never tries seafood, I think I have to amend my statement that I just don't like it, because these were amazing. My chicken was perfectly prepared and was so full of flavor I didn't want to sip my sangria and lose the taste.

The way the drinks are served here is also unique. Ever the martini lover my friend chose a pomegranate martini and I had to order my favorite, sangria. When our drinks came we were shocked at the presentation. In a little chill bowl filled with ice sat the top of a martini glass, something neither of us had seen before. In order to sip the drink, you have to lift the top part out of the bowl and up to your lips. It was simply original and fantastic.

When we ordered desert even the coffee came out in a unique way with its own little pitcher for milk and small sugar bowl filled with, of course, natural brown sugar. We held up the red desert menu to the candle on the table so we could read our last choices for the evening. We chose to share an old fashioned brownie sundae dripping with chocolate syrup and whipped cream. It was the perfect ending to a great dinner. Each spoonful seemed to come with a large chunk of brownie. Even though I thought I was full, I couldn't wait to get to the bottom and get to the largest piece that had wedged itself way down inside snuggled in sauce.

Everything at Tula is made with care. That is how you know Tula has been a dream of Sharlup's since she was a child, it can be seen in every detail. From the beautiful décor to the dinnerware, she has put her heart and soul into it. She said that she has "always felt a strong connection to Spanish Mediterranean culture" and the influence is evident. Sharlup's life philosophy is what the Tula experience is all about. On the back of the menu she writes, "Each and every one of us has our own personal goals in life that we strive towards everyday. The most important things in my life have always been family, friends, love, laughter, health, and belief in one's cause. They key to maintaining all of that is through balance. When I discovered the word "tula" which is the Sanskrit meaning for balance, I knew in my heart it was the perfect name."

Jackie Sharlup is now living her dream. When she realized that the time was now or never, she dove in to the project. She believes that you should never "let your fears stifle you" and because of this, Tula has been open on Main Street in Bayshore for just over three months. Tula is just one example of how it is possible to balance your passion, your work, and your play while living a healthy lifestyle. If you want to truly enjoy yourself, switch off your cell phones, don't stress about work, and get off the couch and into Tula and bring some balance into your life.

Tula Kitchen is located at 41 East Main Street, Bayshore, NY and you can phone them at 631.539.7183 or visit them on the web at www.tulakitchen.com. Hours are from 5-10 Tuesdays thru Thursday, 5-12 Friday and Saturday and 5-9 on Sunday.