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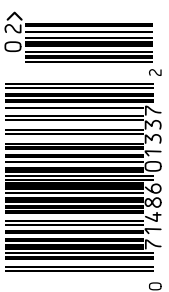
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London Calling

Community-oriented restaurant Plant Matter Kitchen brings together local businesses and a return to home cooking to create the most wholesome vegan food that the *other* London — London, Ontario — has to offer.

by NICOLE AXWORTHY



Just north of Lake Erie and the US-Canada border, the quaint city of London, ON is carving out a place on the vegan map. At first glance, London's restaurant scene seems to be bustling with only mainstream restaurant chains, but look a little closer, and you'll find that the tide is changing with an emerging market for local businesses offering healthy, plant-based fare. This shift can be credited in part to entrepreneurs Glenn Whitehead and Melanie Wendt, the duo behind Plant Matter Kitchen, an organic, vegan restaurant that opened last summer to rave reviews—despite initial pushback from friends and neighbors who were unconvinced that the concept would flourish in London. Now, the restaurant's

dinnertime rush makes it difficult both to find a seat and to imagine how there was ever a doubt that the community of London would support this homey, forward-thinking restaurant.

Plant Matter Kitchen aims to unite nearby, eco-minded businesses under one roof by offering their products, putting a vegan slant on "going local," and bringing new meaning to the old adage that it takes a village. The "village" in this case ranges from organic farms and flour mills to small-batch beer, wine, and tea producers, adding diversity and localism to the menu while helping to fulfill the mission of creating scrumptious meals in a sustainable way. Add to that a strong commitment to providing nourishing whole foods without

additives, and Plant Matter Kitchen pleases everyone from health-conscious vegans to curious carnivores.

Slow food forward

The focus and patience necessary to nourish customers with food made from scratch is a fundamental part of the restaurateurs' vision. Taking principles from the slow-food movement—creating quality food that is good for you, good for those who grow it, and good for the planet—the offerings at Plant Matter Kitchen feel less like they were made at a restaurant and more like they stemmed from the loving labor of a doting relative with a desire to feed. Even the unlikeliest of menu items are made mostly in-house—onion jam is slow-cooked; soft tortillas freshly baked; beans are made

from scratch. Bright-green sprouts, used to garnish every dish, are picked fresh from garden containers that line the front counter. “We could save a lot of time and money by doing things differently,” explains Whitehead, “But that’s not how we want to do things.”

Whitehead’s commitment to creating change with food became the springboard for the restaurant’s unique way of doing business. An athletic and enthusiastic father of five, he stopped consuming meat more than 30 years ago, and completely embraced veganism in 2014, ditching dairy and eggs for good. While attending the VegFest London in 2015, he realized the plethora of possibilities in the booming vegan scene and committed to stepping up his own game in order to further this burgeoning movement. Whitehead says the restaurant came together easily after partnering with restaurant veteran Wendt, and finding the ideal location in the heart of London’s Wortley Village—a thriving historic neighborhood.

Farm to table

The attention to clean food and community engagement is reflective in the welcoming and cheerful ambiance of Plant Matter Kitchen. Spacious and bright, the eatery features electric-green and white walls and loft-like open ceilings. There is a smattering of pieces with a rustic aesthetic thrown in, such as enough reclaimed-wood tables to seat 60—most of which were made by local supplier Wood On Steel. The restaurant also showcases an open kitchen where diners can easily spot energetic cooks flipping tortillas on dry skillet, chopping vegetables, and plating meals.

The globally inspired menu highlights comfort food such as classic meatless burgers and hearty vegetable enchiladas, as well as more virtuous options such as spiralized zucchini bowls and fresh-pressed juices and smoothies. The produce is supplied by a community supported agriculture program, just another example of how Whitehead and Wendt prioritize making local, organic produce the rule and not the exception. The menu emphasizes bean-based protein and raw dishes such as the Raw Ginger Bowl (spiralized zucchini, beets, and carrots with a spicy

ginger sauce) and the Brunch Bowl (layers of rolled oats with autumnal overtones of apple cider and cinnamon, made extra sweet with blended fruit).

Good food first

If you arrive midday and are in the mood for a wholesome meal, start with the pizza—made with a thin, salted crust and topped with your choice of sauce (such as herb-infused marinara or zesty pesto) and toppings (sweet potato, mushrooms, tomatoes, spinach, garlic, and basil are some of the possibilities). For pasta lovers craving familiarity, the Mac & Cheese satisfies with its creamy, tangy sauce—created with sunflower, hemp, and chia seeds. It is presented with a side Caesar salad complete with tempeh bacon crumbles and a housemade parmesan cheese.

Pair your meal with a cold glass of locally made organic kombucha in seasonal flavors, or the daily selection of draft beer from local artisanal brewers like Beau’s or Anderson Craft Ales. Don’t leave without trying the legendary chocolate cake. Baked fresh every morning, it’s a dark, moist, triple-layer showstopper layered with sweet avocado-cacao icing and plated with a drizzle of raspberry coulis and a dusting of cacao powder.

Despite the ample food selection, Plant Matter Kitchen is also known for its organic, made-to-order juices and smoothies, which can be customized to your taste. The Power smoothie will satisfy your sweet tooth with its decadent blend of chocolate, banana, cashew milk, dates, and hemp seeds. If lighter juices are more your speed, the Energy juice strengthens and invigorates with its colorful blend of celery, beets, ginger, and carrots.

For those lucky enough to have Whitehead wait on them, there will be an added ingredient to an already delicious experience: his enthusiasm. It’s his palpable lust for building community mixed with his eagerness to please the palates of his curious customers that turns an already delectable meal into one that is nothing short of soul-satisfying. **VN**

Nicole Axworthy is a writer, food photographer, and co-author of the cookbook *DIY Vegan*.

Dessert Haven

Plant Matter Kitchen is turning heads with a growing selection of desserts that are proving to Londoners that you simply don’t need dairy and eggs to create sweet, satisfying, and decadent treats. Here are some crowd favorites.

Winter Fruit Crisp

Paired with a scoop of cashew-based ice cream, this deep-dish dessert made from local, in-season fruit is a twofold sensory experience with notes that are equal parts hot-and-cold and creamy-and-crisp.

Chocolate Cheesecake

Chocoholics will swoon over this rich, cashew-based cheesecake with a creamy, mousse-like filling and date-cashew crust—and plated with a dusting of cacao powder and mint leaves.

Lemon Poppyseed Cake

Three glorious layers of moist lemon cake with a bright vanilla-lemon icing are refreshing, uncomplicated, and light.

Chocolate Trifle

For a sophisticated end to any meal, this espresso-soaked chocolate cake layered with sweet soy cream, espresso toffee, and raspberry coulis will leave you wanting seconds.

Doughnuts

Available during weekends only, signature flavors include Boston cream, peach, maple walnut, blueberry lemon glaze, chocolate raspberry cream, and blue swirl (made with spirulina).

