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INSALATA

Upbeat salad and sandwich shop serves plenty of cheer

You can't help but smile, or at least feel cheered, when dining at Insalata restaurant in Troy.

Yellow-mustard decorative hues blend with purples, limes and oranges to create an energized, upbeat environment, capped with modern lighting. Great big colorful posters pepper the walls, while booths and high-top tables invite everyone from sandwich and salad lovers to those just seeking a good old-fashioned malt. Big letters that spell out E-A-T also draw the eye.

Insalata's bright atmosphere is just as refreshing as its salad bar. Beyond the typical mushrooms, shredded carrots and hard-boiled eggs, the healthful, self-serve layout brims with several types of lettuce, spinach, a variety of nuts, dried fruits, even a binful of fresh blue cheese.

My guest and I created our own super salads, topped with personal favorites, and were amazed at the prices; at $5.50 per pound, each of ours was around $4 for a salad that could easily feed two. You'll be forced to hold up the line if you ponder for too long the more than 40 toppings and 15 dressings. Insalata, by the way, is Italian for salad.

Owner Mickey Mardirosian once owned restaurants and sundries outlets in Detroit's financial district. One of the more popular spots that he ran for 12 years was The Green Room, which featured salads. "It was the size of a bedroom, and we always had people out the door," he recalls.

He remembers the days of visiting a Southfield carryout salad joint that was just to his liking, as it was to many others. "It was always jammed with health-conscious diners," recalls Mardirosian, who lived in Southfield at that time. "We needed more places like that with lots of salad options."

So the Bloomfield Hills resident closed his businesses in Detroit and opened Insalata last April in Troy to attract the busy workaday crowd. "It's great being in Troy," he says. "There are so many offices in this area with people who crave healthy salads.

Patrons at this cafeteria-style eatery also can opt for a variety of sandwiches, many of which include Insalata's famous panini assortment. Panini, incidentally, is actually the plural of panino, which also is Italian and means "small bread" and refers to a sandwich or roll. A panini sandwich is made from a small loaf of bread, typically a ciabatta that is usually cut horizontally and filled with meats, vegetables and cheeses and is often served hot.

The Tuscan turkey panini ($6.25) takes on a lovely nutty appeal thanks to pine nuts sprinkled atop sun-dried tomatoes, Kalamata olives, Monterey Jack cheese and turkey. In the mood for lots of meat? Try the panini Insalata ($6.25), oozing with salami, capicolla, ham, pepper rings, Monterey Jack cheese and pesto mayo. A tuna melt on grilled sourdough bread ($6.25) comes steaming with white albacore tuna, red onion, tomato and Cheddar, while a favorite sandwich is the Troy City Reuben ($6.25), jammed with corned beef, sauerkraut, Swiss cheese and Thousand Island dressing on grilled marble rye bread.

While moving through the line, be sure to turn around to take a peek at candies and nuts you may want to take back to work or home for future nibbling. Sacks of Germack nut varieties (The Germack Pistachio Co. is based out of the historic Eastern Market in Detroit) and jars of individually wrapped candies (gum, Smarties, etc.) line shelves. Nearby, a rack of greeting cards draws patrons who, perhaps, forgot a colleague's or friend's birthday.

A kids' menu tempts with grilled cheese, meat and cheese sandwiches, peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and hot dogs (all are served with juice and small frozen yogurt for $4.49).

Besides our salads and the filling turkey panini, we also opted for chicken salad on a croissant ($5.49) and a baked potato with broccoli and melted Cheddar ($4.79) The sandwich was fresh and good, but unless you order a baked potato from the potato menu that doesn't include cheese (plain or sour cream and chive), you're better off without a spud. We both agreed the cheese tasted powdery and not real, while the broccoli seemed too crunchy and almost uncooked.

But dessert time had us smiling once again. Frozen yogurt cups or sundaes (hot fudge or caramel, $2.50) can be enhanced with a variety of toppings. There also are milkshakes and malts ($3.50), which Mardirosian often makes himself; he's a hands-on entrepreneur who chats with customers on a regular basis. Large wrapped cookies ($1.75) that are the size of salad plates satisfy the sweet tooth, with snickerdoodles, peanut butter and other varieties all coming from Rebecca's Bakery in Oxford. Fruit smoothies ($3.99) blend everything from strawberries and guavas to bananas and pineapple juice. These concoctions are a great way to get your daily fruit requirements.

The place is clean and sophisticated with a neat industrial-style ceiling, my dining partner noted. While studying the modern cement-style flooring, we both agreed that Royal Oak architect Jon Sarkesian succeeded in creating a whimsical environment that can brighten the dullest, grayest Michigan day. As Mardirosian explains: "It's upbeat. People like that."

We can tell.

To prevent restaurants from giving special service, The Oakland Press dining reviewer is anonymous. Each review is generally based on a single visit.

INSALATA
1919 E. Big Beaver Road, Troy
(248) 528-2250
★★★

HOURS: 9:30 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Friday; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday
PRICES: Sandwiches $5.49-$6.25; salads $5.50 per pound; soups $2.85-$3.50; shakes, malts, smoothies and frozen yogurt $2.50-$3.99
CREDIT CARDS: All major
LIQUOR: None
NONSMOKING: 100 percent
PARKING: Shopping center lot
WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes
RESERVATIONS: None

★★★★ Outstanding
★★★ Very good
★★ Good

A panini Insalata sandwich (bottom) is served with a Greek salad served at Insalata in Troy.
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