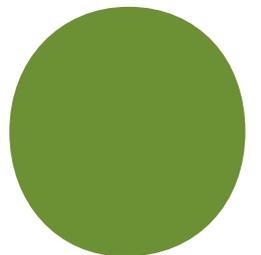
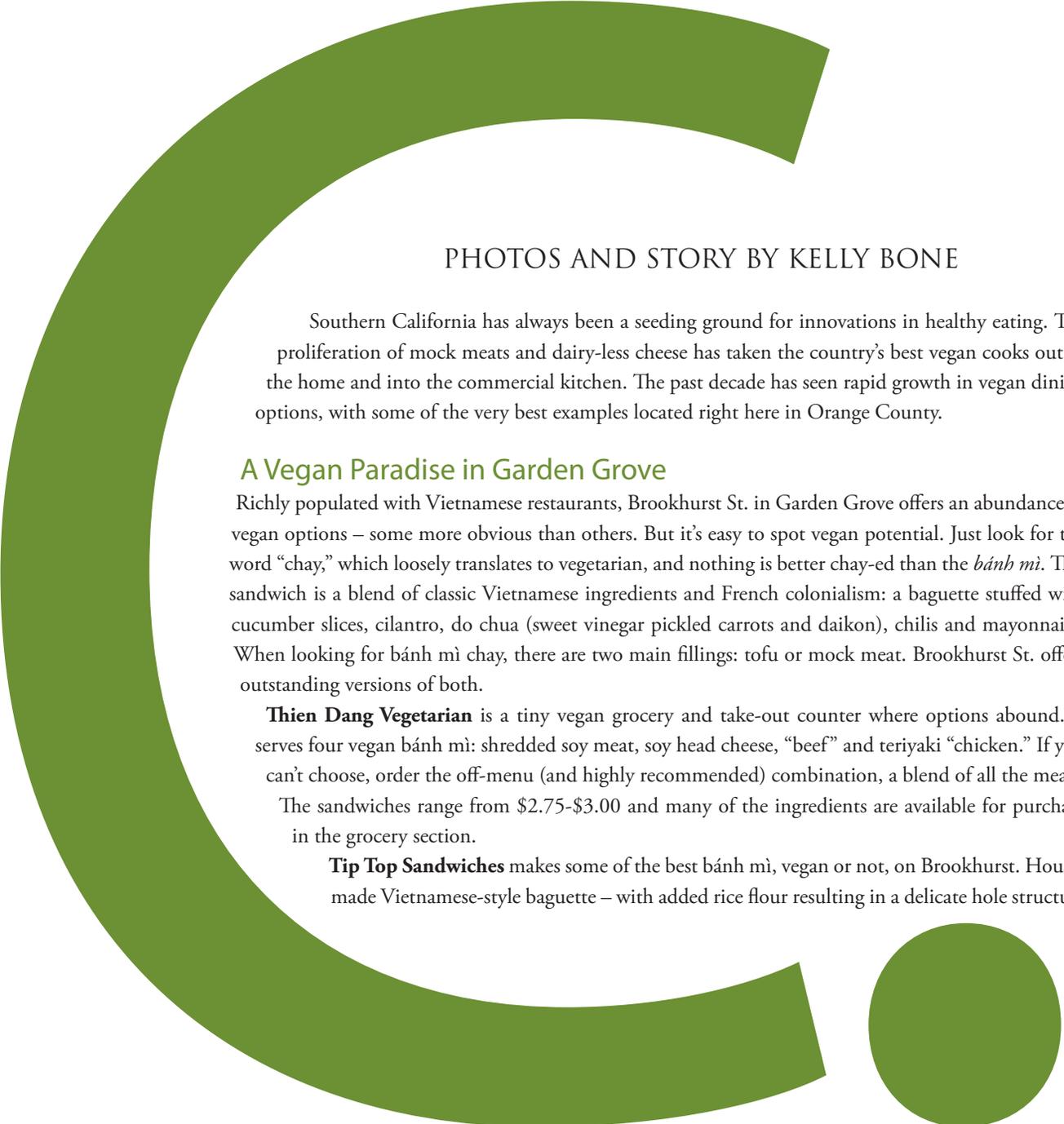


VEGAN





PHOTOS AND STORY BY KELLY BONE

Southern California has always been a seeding ground for innovations in healthy eating. The proliferation of mock meats and dairy-less cheese has taken the country's best vegan cooks out of the home and into the commercial kitchen. The past decade has seen rapid growth in vegan dining options, with some of the very best examples located right here in Orange County.

A Vegan Paradise in Garden Grove

Richly populated with Vietnamese restaurants, Brookhurst St. in Garden Grove offers an abundance of vegan options – some more obvious than others. But it's easy to spot vegan potential. Just look for the word “chay,” which loosely translates to vegetarian, and nothing is better chay-ed than the *bánh mì*. This sandwich is a blend of classic Vietnamese ingredients and French colonialism: a baguette stuffed with cucumber slices, cilantro, do chua (sweet vinegar pickled carrots and daikon), chilis and mayonnaise. When looking for *bánh mì chay*, there are two main fillings: tofu or mock meat. Brookhurst St. offers outstanding versions of both.

Thien Dang Vegetarian is a tiny vegan grocery and take-out counter where options abound. It serves four vegan *bánh mì*: shredded soy meat, soy head cheese, “beef” and teriyaki “chicken.” If you can't choose, order the off-menu (and highly recommended) combination, a blend of all the meats! The sandwiches range from \$2.75-\$3.00 and many of the ingredients are available for purchase in the grocery section.

Tip Top Sandwiches makes some of the best *bánh mì*, vegan or not, on Brookhurst. House-made Vietnamese-style baguette – with added rice flour resulting in a delicate hole structure



A variety of vegetarian bites from
Van Hahn Vegetarian in Garden Grove

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– is soft and chewy with a thinner crust than its French counterpart. The *bánh mì chay* (\$2.95), prepared with marinated tofu is made vegan by ordering without mayo.

The *bánh xèo chay* is another known secret among vegans. **Van's Restaurant** specializes in the southern version of this Vietnamese sizzling crepe – made with rice flour, coconut milk and turmeric. The crepe is fried to a crisp and stuffed with tofu, bean sprouts and mushrooms (\$4.95). It's served with a generous amount of lettuce, mint, mustard leaves, basil, perilla and, sometimes, an adorable bit of clover. Eating the *bánh xèo chay* can be challenging for the uninitiated; and don't expect the staff to help. Basically, pile a lettuce leaf with herbs and a hunk of the crepe, roll it all up and eat it like a lettuce roll. Pay close attention to the experienced diners and you'll be fine. Just be aware that the *Nuoc'Mam'* served for dipping is fish sauce. But you can MacGyver a vegan sauce out of water, soy sauce and Sriracha.

Or, for something completely different, head to the strip mall for **Van Hanh Vegetarian**. This vegetarian buffet has strong ties to the Buddhist community and serves curious, unmarked dishes from a lukewarm steam table. The staff speaks no English, but with a few gestures, finger pointing and apologies, you'll end up with a massive, cheap meal. The deeply hued lemongrass tofu and brothy yellow coconut curry are easy to spot and highly recommended.

The Expansion of Vegan Chains

Founded in 1994, **Native Foods Café** won the hearts and palates with its house-made tempeh and seitan. Four Orange County locations offer flavor-packed dishes like Nuevo Native Nachos (\$7.95). Homemade corn tortilla chips are bathed with black beans, native taco meat, chipotle crema, native cheese, salsa fresca and guacamole, and then topped with corn, green onions, cilantro and spicy jalapeños. This hardy appetizer is easily a meal in and of itself. The ravenous eater can move on to the Portobello and Sausage Burger (\$9.95). The grilled Portobello snuggles with homemade sausage seitan, caramelized onions, salsa, sweet roasted garlic, creamy pumpkin seed pesto and mayo. Served open faced with a confetti of chopped bell pepper, this is one of the best veggie burgers out there.

But the best (chain) veggie burger comes from **The Counter**. The restaurant has a comprehensive allergens chart that clearly indicates which toppings, sauces and sides are vegan. The patty is comprised of brown rice and wheat with mushrooms, cranberries, carrots, black beans, roasted red peppers, panko breadcrumbs, zucchini, onions and spinach, and is 100% vegan. Unfortunately, none of the beans are. So order the burger on a bed of organic

Coconut Ceviche from 118 Degrees



Where to find it ...

Thien Dang Vegetarian

14253 Brookhurst St.
Garden Grove, CA 92843
(714) 531-4888

Tip Top Sandwiches

14094 Brookhurst St.
Garden Grove, CA 92843
(714) 530-9239

Van's Restaurant

14122 Brookhurst St.
Garden Grove, CA 92843
(714) 530-6858

Van Hanh Vegetarian

13906 Brookhurst St.
Garden Grove, CA 92843
(714) 590-9189

Native Foods Café

Multiple Locations
nativefoods.com

The Counter

Multiple Locations
www.thecounterburger.com

Veggie Grill

Multiple Locations
www.veggiegrill.com

Rutabegorz

264 North Glassell St.
Orange, CA 92866
(714) 633-3260
www.rutabegorz.com

118 Degrees

2981 Bristol St.
Costa Mesa, CA 92626
(714) 754-0718
118degrees.com

FreeSoulCaffe

191 East Main St., Ste. 1B
Tustin, CA 92780
(714) 371-0976
freesoulcaffe.com

Phoney Baloney's

4880 Irvine Blvd. #102
Irvine, CA 92620
(949) 885-6237
phoneybaloneys.com

Healthy Junk

201 Center St. Promenade,
Unit B
Anaheim, CA 92805
(714) 772-5865
www.thehealthyjunk.com



Organic carrot cake and flavorful teas are favorites at Free Soul Caffe in Old Town Tustin

ter and breaded fried chickin,' lettuce, tomato, red onion, avocado and spicy vegan mayo. It may sound understated, but this is a balanced combination that never gets old.

Highlights Across Orange County

Established in 1970, **Rutabegorz** is one of the oldest vegetarian-friendly restaurants in Orange County. For having this claim to fame, it's surprisingly unvegan-friendly. The restaurant's classic appetizer, Hummus with warm whole-wheat pita (\$5.50), is wholly vegan and wholly delicious. It's a loose blend of chickpeas, tahini, garlic, lemon and parsley dusted with paprika; made even better with a spritz of fresh lemon juice. For non-salad vegan entrées, you'll have to look at its Daily Specials (a.k.a., the modern menu). The highlight is the Quinoa Tacos (\$9.50). Doubled wrapped in soft corn tortillas, mounds of avocado, quinoa, corn, peppers and lettuce are served with a cup of requisite salsa; the tacos are fairly bland without it.

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With two new locations opened this summer, Costa Mesa's **118 Degrees** creates innovative dishes that almost make you forget that everything is raw. What makes this vegan restaurant unique – besides being raw – is the lack of soy or wheat meat. 118 Degrees allows the vegetables to shine on their own. The one partial exception is the Coconut Ceviche (\$11). Tender and fleshy, like raw squid, the citrus marinated coconut is tossed with mango, cilantro and green onion, and topped with a fan of avocado and served with oddly dense and chewy raw corn chips. The Florentine Lasagna (\$14) is a favorite entrée. Layers of zucchini and tomato are stuffed

mixed greens (\$8.95), which is ideal since the patties tend to fall apart when compacted between bread. The veggie burgers (okay, maybe it's more of a salad at this point) can be customized from a selection of 18 vegan toppings – like sprouts, avocado, sautéed mushrooms and roasted corn and black bean salsa – and five vegan sauces.

The **Veggie Grill** opened its very first location in Irvine in 2006. It all began when founders Kevin Boylan and T.K. Pillan grew weary of their (doctor ordered) low/no meat diet. They conceived of a plant-based quick service restaurant aimed at omnivores. Wrangling Chef Ray White (co-founder of Native Foods), they developed a fast fresh menu relying on their own mock meats, sauces and dressings. Menus across the county have become saturated with kale salads, but Veggie Grill's All Hail Kale (\$8.45) remains one of the best. Marinated raw kale and red cabbage are tossed with corn salsa, agave-roasted walnuts and punchy but light ginger-papaya vinaigrette. It's light, faintly sweet and will convert any kale skeptic. Though they recently expanded their menu – which now includes addictive Buffalo Wings (\$6.95) – the classic Santa Fe Crispy Chickin' (\$8.95) is still the top sandwich pick. The whole-wheat bun is piled with coconut milk bat-

Tacos are one of many savory dishes at Rutabegorz in Fullerton, Old Town Tustin and Old Towne Orange

with a macadamia ricotta – so rich and creamy, you’d swear was the real thing – and sweet basil marinara. Finished with a drizzle of creamy “cheese” and marinated Portobello mushrooms, this dish is served “warm” at 118 degrees and makes a strong argument to toss the pastas out of all lasagna recipes.

In Old Town Tustin, **FreeSoulCaffe** serves some of the prettiest desserts in town. If not for the pile of PETA literature next to the bathroom, you’d never know this place is 100% vegan.

Breakfast offerings include cooked-to-order oatmeal and green tea waffles. Lunch is rounded out with creamy soups and sandwiches, such as the Atlantic: “tuna” salad spiked with briny capers and olives. The frothy ice blended teas and coffees are outstanding but taste predominantly of soy milk. The desserts are where they truly shine: cheesecakes, buckles (similar to a coffee cake), muffins and cupcakes fill the display case. The Red Velvet Cake (\$6.95) and Coconut Pecan Cream Cheese Pie (\$5.50) are solid choices, but the rich and extremely shareable Cheesecake (\$6.95) is the star. Key Lime and Oreo are particular standouts. The spacious patio is anchored by a babbling fountain and offers free wi-fi. There is a noticeable lack of outlets for laptop wielding guests. Nonetheless, it makes up for it by having one of the nicest bathrooms in the area.

The Irvine sandwich counter, **Phoney Baloney’s**, is difficult to find. But tracking down these vegan renditions of traditional favorites is worth the effort. Opened in May 2012, you’ll find Phoney Baloney’s tucked into the back portion of the reception desk inside Custom Bodies Fitness. It’s hard for anyone, vegan or omnivore, to not get excited by these savory combinations. The immediate favorite is the Grown Up Grilled Cheese (\$5.95). Fig butter lined slices of whole-wheat sourdough ooze pepper jack Daiya cheese tempered with juicy hunks of apples and onions. It’s almost cheese overkill ... almost. The Sonoma Chicken Salad (\$5.95) stuffed with shredded chicken, sliced almonds, red grapes, onion, celery, lettuce and tomato, on a squaw sandwich roll, will make you forget you’re not actually eating chicken. But the quintessential sandwich is the BLTA (\$5.95). Stacked with house-made bacon, lettuce, hyper-local tomatoes, avocado and Vegenaïse, on

www.edibleorangecounty.com



FreeSoulCaffe ... Breakfast offerings include cooked-to-order oatmeal and green tea waffles. Lunch is rounded out with creamy soups and sandwiches, such as the Atlantic: “tuna” salad spiked with briny capers and olives.

toasted whole-wheat sourdough, it’s worth ordering just to try the smoky dehydrated coconut bacon.

The newest player to the vegan restaurant scene is Anaheim’s **Healthy Junk**. Opened in July 2012, this vegan stall anchors the Good Food Court. Its mascot is the Anaheim Chili Burger (\$7.95) with a side of fries (\$1.75). The Anaheim chili marinated patty (which tastes suspiciously of Boca) is stacked with lettuce, tomato, red onion and mayo. It’s a tall messy delicious delight. The Better BLT (\$7.20) with thick pink slices of soy ham, lettuce, tomatoes avocado and mayo is a lighter choice. It also leaves room for dessert, like the Triple Chocolate Brownie (\$2.95) with chocolate chips and fudge frosting. The brownie is so delectable and moist, the dusting of powdered sugar glistens as soon as it’s applied.

As you can see, Orange County offers a plethora of restaurants that cater to diehard vegans, as well as people, who simply long for healthier alternatives. ❧