

When Pure Food and Wine opened in 2004, I wasn't sure if the concept of an upscale, raw-vegan restaurant would take off. But, people were intrigued and, shortly after opening, the restaurant received high accolades as crowds flocked to the Gramercy Park eatery.

Now, eight years later, you still need a reservation for dinner on a Friday night as scores of people move towards a more plant-based diet. At the restaurant, you can find an array of dishes including artisanal vegan nut cheeses made by the Brooklyn-based company Dr. Cow, a vegan take on sushi, surprisingly creamy lasagna, and desserts that any sweet tooth will crave. Each follow the standard practices of the raw food movement, which means nothing is heated above 116 degrees.

Sarma Melngailis, the face behind this successful eatery (as well as the juice bar One Lucky Duck Juice and Takeaway, and the cookbook *Living*

Elegant new dining tempts foodies from all quarters

Raw Food) has been in the business of raw food for about nine years. Her trek into this dietary world started as a happy accident; she tried raw

food at the East Village restaurant Quintessence and found she liked what they were doing. After that, Melngailis moved to a mostly vegan and raw diet as an experiment, which she soon found boosted her energy, alertness, and overall well being. So, she stuck with it, and shortly after, opened Pure Food and Wine.

Before that, she worked in finance, but left it to attend the French Culinary Institute, which gave her an edge when working with the first raw menu at her restaurant. The dishes, as well as the cozy yet elegant atmosphere, helped launch Pure Food and Wine as the first high-end, raw-food eatery in New York. The restaurant itself has been listed twice in New York Magazine's Top 100 Restaurants, and has appeared in Forbes's list of All Star New York Eateries five times. No wonder it is so packed.

When we stopped in on a recent night, I marveled at how delicious everything on the menu sounded from Sunchoke



First course: King Oyster Mushroom Scallops with Brussels Sprouts and Shiitake Miso Broth, miso glazed pecans, shaved radish, micro mustard.

Gratin, to Sweet Corn and Cashew Tamales, to the Ginger Cheesecake – I wanted it all. We settled on a bottle of Spatburgunder Rose and the King Oyster Scallops to start with. The wine had a nice, crisp dryness that paired well with the savory plugs of mushrooms that looked disarmingly similar to actual scallops. The taste, of course, was far from it, but still packed a lovely umami kick that married well with the crunch of shaved radishes and the sweet nuttiness of pecan slivers.

For the main course, I went Mexican style and ordered the Hen of the Woods Tacos Al Pastor. As the waiter placed the hefty plate down on our candle-lit table, we marveled at the layers presented in the dish. First, there were three, cigar-sized tacos on top of a pile of fresh corn, which brightened with the addition of pickled hearts of palm and chayote squash. On the side, they dolloped smoked guacamole, a lovely component that played with the richness of the lacy, savory mushrooms. After that, we went for the restaurant's popular lasagna, which turned out to be an A-plus move. As we bit into the layers of thinly sliced zucchini and tomatoes, the pistachio pesto sang with the bright sun-dried tomato marinara. In between toothsome bursts of salty and sweet was the creamy rush of their macadamia and pumpkin seed ricotta, which absolutely earned a place in my heart. If anyone says non-fried vegan food can't be filling, send them here for this dish.

Dessert proved just as satisfying as we devoured the delicate Chocolate Dipped Cannoli, which came stuffed with a subtly tart lemon ricotta. On the side, they served an uber creamy pistachio gelato that worked with the cannoli beautifully. At the end of the meal, we watched as other tables

Sweet corn and cashew tamales a main dish to relish at Pure Food and Wine.



shared giant goblets of fresh juice and tried to dissect the components on their plates. Despite being completely full (though not in a heavy way), I still craved the squash blossom dish one lady was eating next to us. With a list already forming in my head of the meals I wanted to try the next time, it became clear how Melngailis keeps bringing the masses in. From the moment they opened, to today, and

probably in the years to come, Pure Food and Wine is a destination dining spot for vegans, vegetarians, and meat-eaters alike. – LINNEA COVINGTON

**Pure Food and Wine:
54 Irving Place,
New York;
212-477-1010**

