

Caribreeze Vegetarian Café

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Any restaurateur wants to keep customers happy. Dave King, owner of Caribreeze Vegetarian Café in Spring Valley, doesn't stop there. He and chef Tony Monroe want to keep their customers happy and healthy. They take pride in the array of healthful foods - all-vegan, with a Jamaican accent - they serve, noting that customers appreciate the fact that the meals have balance. What they don't have is a set menu.

Every day Monroe prepares a soup, a multigrain porridge and some half-dozen specials. For the latter, you choose a small, medium, or large container (\$5, \$7 or \$8, respectively) and let him know what you want and in what proportions.

Seasoned brown rice is a staple, as are one or more types of greens - often kale, collards or spinach-like callaloo. Then there are various stews, pastas, curries and other dishes that seem to embody two culinary traditions - Jamaican and hippie cuisine. Picture eating at a Caribbean counterculture commune.

Tofu holds down the protein role in some dishes, legumes or soy chunks - rendered to stand in for fish, chicken, duck, beef and even goat - in others. Even if soy chunks are not normally your thing, it's worth trying the jerk version. It's spicy but not incendiary, with a hint of sweetness from the allspice. Seasoning generally, even in the curries and jerks, is tame at Caribreeze, but customers can crank up the heat by choosing from a buffet of hot sauces. One recommendation: the kidney bean stew over brown rice. Like everything else we sampled, it's tasty, satisfying and leaves you feeling, yes, healthy and balanced. Although not too virtuous, because sugar has not been banished.

One of the more interesting desserts at Caribreeze is the coconut drop, a rough-looking treat that is to American packaged macaroons what the Ramones are to Abba. Rather than those finely shredded, highly sweetened and precisely extruded coconut cookies, coconut drops consist of a pile of small cubes of coconut, spiked with a hearty dose of ginger and just enough brown sugar to cement everything together. Not pretty, not uniform, but loaded with flavor and a fibrous, almost meaty texture that keeps you happily gnawing: a cookie with attitude. For a more conventional pastry, try the satisfying but not-too-sweet currant roll.

The beverage cooler deserves mention because it holds some options with an island twist - Ting grapefruit soda, as well as bottles of coconut water, ginger beer and deep-ruby sorrel, a beverage brewed from hibiscus flowers that is tangy, sweet and spicy all at once.

Caribreeze is set up more for takeout than eat-in, with only one table and five seats in the sparsely decorated storefront. Even if you chose to stay and eat there, you'll be eating from takeout containers. Still, Tony Monroe's warmth makes it a homey and friendly place to enjoy a meal.

Reviews:

Delicious homemade vegan food!

I have only been vegan for a little over two months and have already found several wonderful restaurants through Happy Cow. The first ones I found were while traveling but, happily, Caribreeze is right in my own backyard! I stopped by for the first time last night on the way home from work and got two large takeout containers, a soy patty, and a vegetable patty, and a slice of zucchini cake. The menu changes daily and you choose your size container and you can get a little bit of everything if you like. I decided to try a little of everything (BBQ tofu, roasted chicken, curry lentils, spinach and bok choy, curried goat, lima beans, spicy jerk, dumplings, ziti and eggplant, black beans and peas....quite a variety, and I may be missing some too, and all vegan!!!). Dave, who I believe is the owner (I asked his name and if he was the cook and he said no but did not tell me that he was the owner...but the website says the owner is Dave King so I assume that is who helped me) was wonderful and labeled everything on the cover of the container so I would know what I was eating! Everything was delicious and even my non-vegan family loved it. And two large containers (\$10 each) and the two patties (\$2 each) fed five of us! And the slice of zucchini cake (also delicious) was only \$2.50 for a very generously sized slice. I will definitely be back, and often! Oh, and when I told Dave that I recently became vegan he recommended a cooking show (Christina Cooks) and several other vegetarian/vegan restaurants in the area.

A big gem in a small town

I've only recently come across Caribreeze, and I am happy to have visited such a lovely kitchen. The family owning the cafe are as warm as their fresh patties. Speaking of the patties, I had to sample a few of the most popular Jamaican street food. I'm always on the run. What a delight they are Delicious! I took a few to work to share with some of my die hard meat eating Jamaican brethren, and they placed an order for 10 patties to bring all the way to the Bronx. If you find yourself around spring valley, and you don't want unhealthy eats. Visit Caribreeze!

The best vegan food I ever had

I stumbled across this place by mistake (but I know there are no coincidences) one day. Since I was trying to eat healthier I decided to try it. Note, that I have been to at least ten vegan places across the USA in this lifetime and fully enjoyed all except maybe one.. The minute I tried the beef stew (not beef of course) I was hooked! The cashew mac and cheese is awesome as well (the two together would make you slap your mother). But once you think you're done, then comes the Zucchini loaf, which is by far the best in the world! I frequent there often now and took a co-worker who fell in love at first bite. Even my 12 year old loves it!

it is not in the richest part of nj, and the neighbors may be a bit lower on the stratification system but they are friendly and harmless. Don't miss out on this place! You would be happy you tried!

Great food - worth the trip

Loved the jerk satay - nicely spiced. Soup of the day was delicious. Not fancy and has 3 tables. You'll get your food in a take-out tin and soup in a container, but don't let that deter you. Prices seemed pretty reasonable. Park diagonally across the street in free parking lot.