

The Magazine of
the East Bay

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AMAZING GRACE

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the 9/11 tragedy,
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Bailey** has
found peace

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Casual Gourmet //

Order at the counter at **three new restaurants** for a surprisingly fine dining experience.

by **ETHAN FLETCHER**



“OK, let me take a moment because I don’t want to get this wrong,” says a worried Claudio Ricciolini in his rolling Italian accent. The owner of 54 Mint Rosticceria, a new Italian eatery tucked away in a Concord strip mall, is having a helluva time explaining exactly what the concept is behind his new place.

A regular full-service restaurant for dinner, 54 Mint is something different during the day: a place where you can stroll in on your lunch break, order at the counter, and a few minutes later, enjoy rotisserie-cooked organic chicken, or a mouth-watering porchetta sandwich, or a square of lasagna so authentic that Don Vito Corleone would nod his head in appreciation.

“It’s sort of like the Italian version of fast food,” Ricciolini finally says, for lack of a better explanation. Except it’s not. It’s better. Way better. It is affordable food, but it’s made from scratch every day, using quality ingredients, and served in a quick, casual, to-go-friendly environment.

The fact that Ricciolini struggles to find an adequate translation for his *rosticceria* (they’re common in his native Italy) exposes the gap between more formal sit-down establishments and cheap (and often unhealthy) fast-food spots in the United States. But with such restaurants as Grégoire and Slow in Berkeley, and Sideboard in Danville, this casual-but-quality niche is starting to blossom in the East Bay. Below are three new restaurants that we think are particularly good examples.

54 MINT ROSTICCERIA & FORMAGGI

ATMOSPHERE: Ricciolini exudes that particular brand of confident Italian charm, something reflected in his establishment: 54 Mint feels comfortable, like you’re in someone’s home. The service can bog down as Ricciolini holds court on each of the ingredients in that day’s specials, all as he plates and rings up other customers. But hey, it’s all part of the charm.

PRICE RANGE: It’s \$7 for sandwiches and around \$10 for hot meals such as half-roasted chicken and veggies or meatballs in tomato sauce. Interestingly, some prices actually drop a couple dollars if you order to go.

DON’T MISS: The comforting lasagna made with fresh pasta or the decadent porchetta: slow-roasted pork belly with a lively seasoning of fennel, rosemary, and garlic, with a crackling,



Opposite Page: Fruit tarts at Summer Kitchen Bake Shop. This Page (clockwise from top left): the sleek interior and seasonal veggies at Tender Greens; sandwich-making at Summer Kitchen; the final product.

fire-crisped skin. Try it on its own or in a sandwich with greens on house-made focaccia.

785 Oak Grove Rd., Concord, (925) 969-9828.

SUMMER KITCHEN BAKE SHOP

Located in Berkeley's charming Elmwood neighborhood, Summer Kitchen is owned by husband-and-wife team Paul Arenstam and Charlene Reis. The restaurant carries jams, pickled vegetables, and other locally made foods, but don't miss the seasonal menu, filled with comforting farm-inspired favorites such as roasted chicken and braised pork shoulder made with market-fresh ingredients.

ATMOSPHERE: Filled with homey touches such as a chalkboard menu, Summer Kitchen feels cozy—but the small space and limited seating make to-go ordering its main business.

PRICE RANGE: Sandwiches range from \$7 to \$9.50, pizzas from \$11 to \$16, and the nightly dinner specials hover around \$14.

DON'T MISS: The fluffy, vividly yellow egg salad sandwich and house-made pastries are great, as are the brick oven-fired pizza; a Burrata and white corn pleasantly surprised. The stand-out was the roast chicken. Marinated in Dijon, garlic, lemon juice, parsley, and olive oil, and served with creamy mashed potatoes, it's the perfect example of Summer Kitchen's ethos: straightforward rustic food made with A-list ingredients and prepared really well.

2944 College Ave., Berkeley, (510) 981-0538, summerkitchenbakeshop.com.

TENDER GREENS

The first NorCal outpost of a popular SoCal operation, Tender Greens is packing 'em into its new downtown Walnut Creek location, with salads, sandwiches, and hot plates all sporting ingredients from small, sustainable California farms and ranches. But it's not environmentalism that keeps Tender Greens packed: It's the taste of those fresh (fruit from Brentwood's Frog

Hollow and Knoll farms) and yes, tender (delicious cage-free chicken) ingredients.

ATMOSPHERE: Befitting its L.A. roots, Tender Greens exudes a sleek, modern feel—like 54 Mint's eco-chic opposite. Its ordering system can be a little haphazard: After choosing your meal, you're shuttled down to the register to mill aimlessly with a pack of other hungry customers while the staff sorts out the orders.

PRICE RANGE: Everything's priced under \$11—barely. Most salads, sandwiches, and hot plates cost \$10.50.

DON'T MISS: The huge signature salads are big enough to share: The craft, with salumi, feta, and an array of wonderfully tart pickled vegetables, and the chipotle barbecue chicken, with a zippy, south-of-the-border cilantro lime vinaigrette, were two standouts. Also, make sure to sample the excellent house-made pastries.

1352 Locust St., Walnut Creek, (925) 937-5100, tendergreensfood.com.