

## Review: Tender Greens offers casual, farm-to-fork delights in Walnut Creek

By Jackie Burrell  
Bay Area News Group

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Sometimes you don't even know there's a niche that needs filling -- until it's filled.

So when Tender Greens, a casual, organic, farm-to-table SoCal chain, announced it was opening a Walnut Creek outpost last year, we took note. We didn't start singing hosannas or anything, but the fact that the small chain -- with seven eateries, including six in Southern California -- is co-owned by Erik Oberholtzer, whose résumé includes stints at Chez Panisse, Lark Creek and Left Bank, was promising.

That the executive chef was to be Orinda resident Charles Hechinger, a French-trained chef who worked at Berkeley's Claremont Hotel and San Francisco's Boulevard and Sutter 500, was also a good sign. And when

Hechinger and Oberholtzer started talking about sourcing all the ingredients from local farms, such as Brentwood's Frog Hollow, Nicasio's Devil's Gulch Ranch and Guinda's Full Belly Farm -- well, our hearts beat a little faster.

Turns out, this is exactly the kind of casual, laid-back, inexpensive place Walnut Creek needed. It's a quick-bite eatery with a Slow Food twist -- house-made charcuterie and pastries, lavish salads and grilled meats, and reasonable prices. Plus, there's wine by the glass, craft beers and artisanal sodas.

It's the kind of place you drop into before a show at the Leshner Center, after a movie, midway through a shopping expedition, or just because the weather is lovely and the patio beckons.

So although we normally give you just a snapshot glimpse of a restaurant -- our impressions based on a single visit -- we can't help ourselves here. We've been to Tender Greens for lunch, dinner and lunch again. Our teens have visited, with and without us. And together we've made a few inroads into that voluminous menu.

The space is cavernous, but it's cozied up by wood paneling and enormous, framed black-and-white photographs of farmers and farm scenes. Outside, shaded tables invite diners to linger in the summer breeze. In short, it's a welcoming space and pretty darn classy for what is, essentially, a cafeteria. You order at the counter, move along the line and receive your food and drinks at the cash register around the corner.

The menu is posted on an enormous chalkboard near the counter, but if you haven't been here before, grab a pale-green copy from the basket and retreat to a quiet spot to peruse it. It's not that the menu is particularly complicated or enormous. It's just impossible to decide.

### A menu of temptations

Everything sounds pretty heavenly, from creative, enormous salads to the five grilled entrees that can be served three ways: tucked in a ciabatta roll, a longside mashed Yukon golds or tossed in a salad. Those grilled showstoppers include a marinated steak, salt-and-pepper chicken, chipotle-barbecue chicken, albacore and a selection of Brentwood vegetables that change according to season.

Our favorite salad was the Southern Fried Chicken (which, like all the salads, sandwiches and hot entrees, was \$10.50). It included freckled romaine and butter lettuce topped with sliced fried chicken, paper-thin radishes and cucumber, and was tossed with a fresh dill dressing that put ranch to shame.

The Chipotle Barbecue Chicken salad and Grilled Chicken Cobb looked enough like each other that we had to ask which was which. It was a little odd. A classic Cobb is a chopped salad, served in layers, so the flavors remain distinct. Here, the elements -- hearts of Romaine, blue cheese, bacon, egg, avocado and tomato -- were left fairly large and had been mixed together with a degree of enthusiasm that left the flavors muddled.

It may have been a case of overripe avocados and a too-generous hand with the dressing, because the barbecue chicken salad suffered from similar issues -- a lack of crisp, bright, distinct flavors and textures.

That day's salads stood in marked contrast to every other salad we've tried there. In other words, we'd take a chance on those salads again -- if, that is, we could tear ourselves away from the Southern Fried Chicken salad or the divine Backyard Marinated Steak sandwich.

Cooked medium-rare and sliced thinly, the Backyard Steak was pretty darn fabulous tucked into a ciabatta roll with roasted red peppers and aioli, with a small salad alongside. But you can get the same steak as a "hot plate" entree or served atop interesting greens with equally intriguing vinaigrettes -- tarragon, balsamic or cabernet, for example. And the chicken sandwiches, which use the salt-and-pepper and chipotle-barbecue versions of the bird, are equally lovely.

### Abundant variety

Really, there are no wrong choices here. Nor, realistically speaking, are there enough days in the year to sample everything.

A Fritto Misto salad offers crisp Monterey squid, fennel and frisee with a lemony vinaigrette. A Happy Vegan salad features a trio of whole grains -- farro with cranberry and hazelnuts, quinoa with cucumber and beets, and green hummus tabbouleh. And the very tasty Chinese Chicken salad gets added zip from pea sprouts, roasted peanuts, cilantro, mizuna and a sesame dressing.

Tender Greens also offers soups, including a roasted roma tomato and a rustic chicken soup (\$4 each), and an array of side salads (\$5.50).

Our only quibble was with the desserts. All the bakery items, from the gourmet "poptarts" (\$2) to the fudgy brownie squares (\$3), are house-made. They're enormous and they look fantastic. But the two we tried were so sweet and so cloying, we gave up after a bite.

The orange bar -- think classic lemon squares -- lacked the citrusy zest and brightness that makes these things delightful, and the texture wasn't great either. Lemon bars typically play up the contrast between smooth, sticky filling and crisp, shortbreadlike base. These melted together into a rather gummy oneness. And the peanut butter-chocolate fudge bar (\$3), so promisingly filled with generous layers of peanut butter frosting and chocolate, lacked peanut flavor. Mostly, it tasted like sugar.

Tweak the desserts and Tender Greens would be sweet from beginning to end. As it is, we certainly will be back. Heck, we've already been back -- multiple times. You should go, too.

## Tender Greens

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FOOD:\*\*½

AMBIENCE:\*\*½

SERVICE:\*\*½

WHERE: 1352 Locust St., Walnut Creek.

CONTACT: 925-937-5100, [www.tendergreensfood.com](http://www.tendergreensfood.com).

[tendergreensfood.com](http://tendergreensfood.com).

HOURS: 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. daily; until 10 p.m.

Fridays and Saturdays.

CUISINE: California.

PRICES: \$; entrees are \$10.50 each.

VEGETARIAN: Several options, including a Happy Vegan salad and grilled veggie entrees.

BEVERAGES: Wines by the glass, craft beers and GuS (Grown-up Soda) artisanal sodas.

RESERVATIONS: No.

NOISE LEVEL: Medium to loud.

PARKING: Inexpensive pay parking lot next door.

KIDS: There are plenty of things to delight even picky eaters.

PLUSES: This is a super-casual place -- you order at the counter and carry your own tray -- but between the fresh seasonal fare, generous portions and wallet-friendly prices, Tender Greens is a great addition to the downtown Walnut Creek scene.

MINUSES: The desserts need work.

DATE OPENED: April.

### Policy

We don't let restaurants know that we are coming in to do a review, and we strive to remain anonymous. If we feel we have been recognized or are given special treatment, we will tell you. *We pay for our meal, just as you would.*

### Ratings

Restaurants are rated on a scale of one to four, with four representing a truly extraordinary experience for that type of restaurant.

### Price code

\$ Most entrees under \$10

\$\$ Most entrees under \$20

\$\$\$ Most entrees under \$30

\$\$\$\$ Most entrees under \$40