

TABLES FOR TWO



ANGELICA KITCHEN, 300 E. 12th St. (228-2909)—They won't go so far as to pretend to think it's funny when you ask for a medium-rare filet, but for the most part the staff at this sunny ten-year-old vegan café in the East Village traffics more in friendly Zen vibes than in pious culinary politics. The front of the Japanese-influenced, mostly organic menu proclaims Angelica's "deep respect for the environment and our gratitude toward the dedicated people who produce our food," but, unlike a lot of other serious vegetarian places, the food tastes like a reward rather than a punishment.

If one of the scruffily elegant waitresses arrives, practically brokenhearted, with the news that the kitchen will not substitute baked tofu for tempeh in one of the inventive daily specials, a Dragon Bowl is just as nice; it's a heaping, layered dish of things that leave you feeling both satisfied and virtuous: rice, beans, tofu, sea vegetables, and steamed vegetables topped with a choice of dressing. The dressings, spreads, and sauces here—tahini-scallion, carrot-ginger, rich sesame, and live curried cashew (which sounds revolting but is actually hard to stop eating)—help boost the food onto a higher plane; most of them taste great just drizzled on a slice of the moist, rustic cornbread, which is thick as a brick, and almost as heavy.

Lunch is serious wheat-head time, but at night a more relaxed (and less P.C.) crowd brings bottles of wine, the candles on the little wooden tables give the cinnamon-and-gold-stencilled walls a warm glow, and otherwise regular meat eaters dine peacefully alongside vegetarians. After a plate of garlicky pickled kelp and vegetables and a bowl of *dashi* and noodles, it's pleasant to savor the remains of your wine (or twig tea or apple cider), have a little blueberry kanten parfait with almond-cashew cream, and watch the crowd lumbering up and down Twelfth Street. (Open daily for lunch and dinner. Entrées \$5-\$14.)