

# FOOD & DRINK

## COMFORT FOOD FOR THE NEW ECONOMY

The Mixing Bowl's approach is well-suited to the times.

By Matthew Stafford

A good and inexpensive meal has never seemed more important than in these final hours of 2008. Sure, the election season was fun-filled and the outcome was historic and satisfying, but in a year marked by war, melting icecaps, Prop 8, Sarah Palin, Rod Blagojevich, projectile footwear, and, above all, the tanking economy, the need for culinary sucor was positively essential. Happily, The Mixing Bowl cafe opened in Oakland's Temescal district just in time to provide imaginative and often tasty cuisine to the shallow-pocketed masses in search of house-baked pastries, bountiful salads, soul-warming soups, and other proletarian foodstuffs. And with 2009 promising an equal helping of belt-tightening, the Bowl's brand of comfort food is more imperative than ever.

Owners Grace Lee and Armando Koghian opened The Mixing Bowl last summer, employing recycled wood from an old Lafayette bridge in the decor and construction. The place is large and airy, with little wooden tables arranged around the industrial-utilitarian setting, while vibrant art adds color and texture. You enter this barnlike space from Telegraph Avenue, place your order at the counter, find a table,

and await your meal over a macchiato or house agua fresca. (The droll house menu makes good reading while you wait, rife as it is with haiku-like insights — “we make the granola here, cows make the yogurt on the farm and Mother Earth makes the fruit everywhere” — and witty item descriptions — the maple-pecan scone is “a perfectly reasonable way to cope with your problems.”) Chef Lee uses produce and honey from her father's gardens in her culinary creations, and the pastries and granola are made on the premises, so the kitchen's priorities are in order. And if some of the dishes lack that final spark that separates the memorable from the merely perfunctory, others are tasty indeed.

The sandwiches, for instance, are uniformly delectable. The pulled pork variety is all simple soul-satisfying goodness: just slow-roasted, finely shredded, sweet and smoky pig meat, lush and just slightly spicy, melting its way into a soft, yielding bun. Or the hanger steak sandwich, a thick, juicy filet marinated in honey and soy sauce, grilled until tender, slapped on a roll with cilantro-edged mayonnaise and ribbons of caramelized onion. An especially successful example of the kitchen's cross-cultural inclinations is the Mixing Bowl Sandwich, thick, moist shards of grilled chicken with a hint of five-spice plus crunchily shredded carrot, pickled daikon, and more of that yummy cilantro mayo: the flavors and textures of Southeast Asia in easy-to-handle miniature.

Some of the salads weren't as successful as the sandwiches. The Cobb, one of the triumphs of classic California cuisine, was ponderous and unexciting here, with the chicken, bacon, eggs and avocado — even the blue cheese — refusing to interact or assert themselves. The salad Niçoise was slightly better, offering delicious little boiled potatoes, tender string beans and a snazzy lemon-Dijon dressing, but the tuna was just a bit too Chicken of the Sea to stand out in this elegant preparation. But the tamarind chicken salad, a



The pulled pork sandwich is sweet and smoky goodness.

Chris Dufley

sort of big-platter version of the Mixing Bowl Sandwich, was a bright, bountiful feast: lots of sweet, tender chicken meat tossed together with fresh mint, cilantro, shallots, carrots, toasted coconut, and crunchy honeyed peanuts into a jazzy, spiky, citrusy bowl of fun. There also are two or three soups prepared daily; the smoky split pea was on the watery side, but the clam chowder was perfectly rich, warm and buttery, with plenty of juicy clams and an absolute minimum of starchy glop — the perfect winter restorative.

The Mixing Bowl opens for breakfast at 8 a.m. with a wide selection of daily baked scones (cheddar-chive, chocolate chip, maple-pecan) and breads (carrot-zucchini, banana) as well as cookies, bread pudding with caramel sauce, a chocolate-peanut butter coffee cake, and rich, flaky butter croissants. Heartier fare includes egg sandwiches on your choice of croissant, bagel, or Kaiser roll (cheese, ham and bacon optional), bagels with cream cheese or smoked salmon, hot oatmeal, granola with fruit, honey and yogurt, and a scrambled egg burrito with black beans, salsa, and avocado.

You've got to get to here early if you want to snag one of the in-house bakery items for dessert. Be sure not to miss out on the triple chocolate chip cookie, the only professionally baked cookie in my experience that approaches the Toll House cookies you bake at home and eat warm from the oven. Soft, chewy, buttery, and brown-sugary, with lots of semisweet chocolate chunks ribbioned throughout, it's a homey, positively Proustian triumph. Vanilla and Mexican chocolate ice creams from the incomparable Mitchell's of San Francisco also are available to

satisfy the post-meal sweet tooth.

The Mixing Bowl is a morning-pick-me-up/afternoon-cafe-hangout kind of place, and as such brews and pours a fine cup of joe as well as lattes, cappuccinos, and Americanos. They also prepare a warm, rich hot chocolate doloped with whipped cream, nine teas custom blended for the place by Art of Tea imports, a small selection of beers, and Izze, a vitamin-fortified juice 'n' seltzer beverage in a cool cinnamon-red can (the sparkling pomegranate is particularly tasty). Aguas frescas, meanwhile, include honeydew, pineapple, watermelon, plum, and a fresh, light cantaloupe variety.

There's a minimal selection of vegetarian items on The Mixing Bowl's lunch menu. The only meat-free salad is a tofu preparation with soba noodles, napa cabbage, carrots, and shiitake mushrooms. There are also three vegetarian-friendly sandwiches, a tomato-pesto variation with fresh mozzarella, a grilled Portobello-zucchini sandwich ideal for vegans, and a tofu burger that can be prepared with soy-ginger tofu steak instead of a patty; the daily soup might be gazpacho, roasted pepper, carrot-apple, or mushroom-barley. The breakfast menu, on the other hand, is almost exclusively flesh-free (breakfast tortas and burritos with black beans and avocado; housemade granola with yogurt, fresh fruit and honey from Dad's hives; steel-cut oatmeal; three kinds of bagel), with the lox platter and the egg sandwiches with ham or bacon the only meaty options. House-baked scones, croissants, and coffee cake are also available. ●

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### The Mixing Bowl

4920 Telegraph Ave. (at 49th St.),  
Oakland. 510-655-5630. eastnow.  
com/mixingbowl. Cash, MasterCard,  
Visa. Open daily from 8 a.m.-7 p.m.  
No reservations.

### Sample Menu

Clam Chowder	\$5.25
Tamarind Chicken Salad	\$8
Pulled Pork Sandwich	\$8
Hanger Steak Sandwich	\$8.25
Triple Chocolate Chip Cookie	\$1
Cantaloupe Agua Fresca	\$4