

Split Peas pleases with its classic fare

By Maribel Villalva / El Paso Times

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EL PASO -- An acquaintance once asked me what kind of restaurant I would open if given the chance. Almost immediately, I said I would like to open a soup and sandwich shop. I got a dirty look, as if to say, "Like we need another one of those in El Paso."

Well, I'm glad someone agreed with me and opened Split Peas Soup Café on El Paso's West Side.

The small restaurant, which has been open about a month, has a limited menu, but that's almost refreshing because you can immediately home in on what you want to order.

I was surprised by the upscale look of the restaurant and the open kitchen that allows patrons to see the staff at work. This was a busy Friday afternoon for the restaurant and even the outdoor tables were taken, but we managed to find a nice place to sit near the entryway.

It's not difficult to decide what to have for lunch. You can either have soup, a sandwich, a wrap or a salad. Luckily, all sandwiches come with a small cup of soup (\$8.95 for both), so you don't have to choose one or the other.

The soup choices are split pea, split pea and ham, cream of potato, Mexican chicken tortilla, chicken noodle, lobster bisque, french onion, cream of broccoli, Italian wedding and minestrone. If you only want the soup, you can get a cup for \$2.99 or a bowl for \$6.95.

The choices for sandwiches are even more simple -- corned beef, turkey, roast beef, ham and tuna. Patrons have their choice of bread as well, everything from whole wheat to ciabatta to swirl rye.

I ordered a turkey sandwich on a ciabatta bun with a cup of cream of potato soup. The soup came first, and it was so creamy and so delicious. A garnish of cheddar cheese and crumbled bacon gave it the perfect kick.

My sandwich was just as tasty, and the portions were quite large. The ciabatta was perfectly toasted for a crispy exterior and soft interior. I was amazed at just how much turkey they actually fit between the two slices. I ended up taking half of it back to work.

My friend Yolanda ordered the corned beef sandwich on swirl rye with a cup of the Mexican chicken tortilla soup. The hearty soup was great, she said, but she was especially impressed by her sandwich, which she called "exquisite." She enjoyed the tartness of the Dijon mustard combined with the hearty corned beef.

Most of all, Yolanda said she enjoyed the ambience and the fact that the staff was friendly and took the time to start conversations with us.

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I would have to agree. It definitely made us feel at home.

Before heading out, Yolanda and I shared a slice of Godiva chocolate cheesecake, which was absolutely delicious. We were told the desserts are not made on the premises.

The restaurant also serves dinner, but I have to admit that I'm a little nervous about going back after seeing the dinner prices. They range from \$17.95 for shrimp fettuccine to \$32.95 for filet mignon. Other dinner dishes include grilled chicken breast, seared duck breast, pork chops and lamb chops. I don't doubt for a second that dinner would be just as fabulous as lunch, but I also need to fill my gas tank!

Split Peas Soup Café is owned by El Paso natives Cruz Talamantes and Richard Monroy. In a phone conversation with Talamantes after my visit, he told me the restaurant was designed to be a franchise. The El Paso location is the only current restaurant, but there already are plans to open a restaurant in San Antonio. Talamantes said he wants to keep the franchise in Texas.

If you want to learn more, visit the restaurant's great Web site, www.thesplitpeas.com.

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make plans

What: Split Peas Soup Café

Where: 7500 N."Mesa, Suite 302.

How much: \$\$-\$\$\$; credit cards accepted.

Hours: 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday through Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

Web site: www.thesplitpeas.com.

Information: 307-3705. Pros: Great food, open kitchen, classy look.

Cons: The place is very small and has the potential to be overcrowded.

Recommended: Yes.

review

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