

Review: More than typical offerings at Blue Skies Cafe

Tanya Henry

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Elva Grainger serves customers as Megan Kenyon watches at Blue Skies Cafe, part of Buckelew Programs effort to provide jobs, training and housing to those in need. (U photo/Frankie Frost)

I FIRST NOTICED the Blue Skies Cafe when I attended a meeting with the Marin County Bicycle Coalition. It was hard to miss - it's right in the middle of the lobby of the gleaming Health and Wellness Campus in San Rafael, plus a cheery sign and the staff's blue uniforms and floppy hats caught my eye.

Once home to George Lucas' ILM studios, the Kerner Street space has been transformed into a stunning complex with high ceilings and glass windows that allow for plenty of natural light. Solar panels, eco-friendly materials and a small carbon footprint have prompted some to call this almost two-year-old campus the greenest building in Marin County. So it's only fitting the food served here would also be sustainably produced, and include

organic, free-range meats, fair trade coffee and recyclable cutlery made from corn-based products.



A selection of muffins and scones is available at Blue Skies Cafe. (U photo/Frankie Frost)

The campus houses programs run by the county's Department of Health and Human Services; two health clinics, child protective services and several mental health programs. Buckelew Employment Services is one such program committed to assisting folks living with mental illness in finding and maintaining employment. Buckelew owns and operates the Blue Skies Cafe and offers clients the opportunity for on-the-job training.

Since the cafe opened a year ago, 10 people have completed their paid four-month training as baristas and cashiers at Blue Skies Cafe, Buckelew's program director, Shelley Norris-Alvarez, proudly states. Seven of them have already landed jobs.

The cafe doesn't make its own food - everything here is delivered fresh daily from Rustic Bakery in Larkspur. But with offerings such as a Diestel oven-roasted turkey with arugula pesto sandwich (\$7) and a Fra' Mani salumi with provolone sandwich for (\$6), it's more than your average cafe fare. These are not sandwiches you might find at a convenience store.

When I ordered a ham and cheese sandwich (\$7.95) and a cup of minestrone soup (\$5.50), four eager

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cashiers were ready to



From left, Dawn Stranne, Steve Ramsland, Juan Jimenez and Dan Daniels Sr. have lunch at Blue Skies Cafe in San Rafael. (IJ photo/Frankie Frost)

help with my order. The ham was from Niman Ranch and the cheese was Gruyere cheese, both on a yummy and puffy focaccia-like roll.

As I sat and munched on my moist ham-filled sandwich and fresh tomato soup dotted with slivers of onion, Israeli couscous and chunks of potato and carrot, I thought how lucky folks are to have this caliber of food on such a campus.

A few sleek white tables and chairs are scattered about the open, sparsely adorned lobby. Outside is additional seating where a colorful mural adorns the exterior of an adjoining building.

A full range of espresso drinks prepared with Equator Estate Coffees produced in San Rafael along with fresh-baked items are also available. Muffins (\$2.25), scones (\$2.75) and organic granola (\$3.75) round out the breakfast choices.

The place still has a sense of growing into itself, but little by little a diverse group of folks appear to be coming in.

Patrons have the added benefit of knowing their morning lattes give someone the opportunity to learn a skill that will help them on their own journey to wellness. That would be an extra satisfying cup of coffee.

REVIEW

Blue Skies Cafe

Address: Marin Health and Wellness Campus, 3240 Kerner Blvd. (at Bellam), San Rafael

Phone: 456-4950

Web site: N/A

Cuisine: Cafe

Service: Friendly

Noise level: Quiet

Recommended items: Sandwiches, soups and cookies

Liquor selection: N/A

Corkage: N/A

Heart-healthy and vegetarian selections: Salads

Parking: Large parking lot

Wheelchair access: Yes

Hours: 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. weekdays; closed weekends

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Summary: The Blue Skies Cafe in the lobby of the county's sparkling Health and Wellness Campus offers top-quality breakfast and lunch items weekdays, brought in daily from Rustic Bakery. Espresso drinks, fresh baked muffins and a range of salads and sandwiches are featured at this cafe owned and operated by the nonprofit Buckelew Program.

Tanya Henry, the former senior food editor at cooking.com and a judge at the James Beard Foundation journalism awards, has degrees in culinary arts and nutrition and lives in Marin. Contact her at lifestyles@marinij.com. The IJ invites readers to post their own opinions and experiences about the restaurants featured in Wednesday's dining reviews. Enter your comments at the bottom of this story online at www.marinij.com.

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