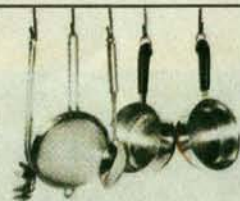


Culinary Corner



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FEATURE



Urbana is a contemporary city spa and tea bar with hip New York loft-style interiors.

Calming down

Nutrition for your body, well-being

by Heidi Billotto
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Step into the calm that is Urbana. Take a deep breath and forget about the traffic, outstanding invoices, piles of laundry, appointments, work, meetings and even that bad haircut. Relax. Nourish your body inside and out – a cup of tea soothes the soul, a massage soothes tired or stressed muscles. Urbana is a place to escape and forget about everything else, at least for a while.

The city spa and tea bar opened just 10 weeks ago in South Charlotte's new Carmel Village at the corner of Pineville-Matthews and Carmel roads. The parking lot is off Little Road, which intersects with Carmel, but it's not the easiest shopping center parking lot to access. If one is coming from Highway 51, there is no left turn allowed from Carmel onto Little, so U-turning is required a bit up the road. Avoid Highway 51 traffic by taking the back way – Walsh Road off Johnston and then a right turn on Little and you are there in a flash.

But getting there is worth the hassle. Two flights up, on the second floor of the shopping center, Urbana is contemporary and hip, New York loft-style. The tea bar offers more than 60 varieties of white, green, oolong and black teas and some herbal or botanical blends and herbal elixirs as well. Tea is available hot or cold.

Why tea is hot

Urbana's tea bar is staffed by two full-time tea barristas of sorts, Foster Newkirk and Lindsey Goodwin. They know their tea. Goodwin explained that all true teas come from the same plant – the color and intensity of the leaves depend on the drying and roasting processes and the time of year the leaves are harvested.

Tea is steeped for samples, served hot or iced, in small glass teapots. After sampling the brew of the day, clients may order from the tea bar menu and enjoy pots of hot tea steeped from loose-leaf tea blends, a refreshing herbal elixir designed to help cure what ails you, bottled iced tea beverages from Teany Teas, Voss water and a special steeped and blended matcha tea.

Green is good for you

Matcha is made from premium Japanese green tea leaves whisked to a froth in warm water. It is the tea used for Japanese tea ceremonies. The green tea leaves for matcha are handpicked and then stone-ground into a fine powder. While there are different grades of matcha, the basic preparation is the same: less than a teaspoon of the fine green powder measured in a special bamboo tea scoop makes the perfect cup. The powder is hand-whisked into the warm water with a specially designed bamboo whisk until foamy and well blended.

Unlike other green teas, which are steeped and then separated from the leaves for drinking, matcha tea leaves are consumed along with the emulsion. The taste, sharp and almost grassy, grows on you. Traditionally a sweet is eaten with the matcha to lighten its intense flavor. Newkirk and Goodwin rec-

URBANA CITYSPA & TEABAR

Location: 7510 Pineville-Matthews Road in Carmel Village.

Phone: 704-543-1700 or 866-5-URBANA.

Price range: Tea bar prices range from \$2.50 to \$6; loose-leaf tea to go (packed in 2-oz. packages, enough for 30 cups) from \$2 per ounce to \$14 per ounce; wines from \$6 a glass to \$35 a bottle; massage services from \$50 to \$230.

Hours: Monday through Friday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday 11 a.m.-6 p.m.

Details: Tea and wine bar; handpicked, loose-leaf teas; small retail area; spa is an 18-and-up environment dedicated to massage for men and women; services available by appointment or walk-in; group events are welcome.

For more information: Visit www.escape2urbana.com.

ommend a touch of Tupelo honey instead of an accompanying cookie to sweeten the matcha.

Known for their antioxidants, all green teas and matcha in particular give you a steady input of energy for hours after drinking. Unlike the caffeine blast and buzz, then crash and burn that comes from coffee or other highly caffeinated drinks, a cup of matcha gives you energy that slowly builds and keeps you going for hours without any of the headachy side effects that often result from other energy beverages.

If you'd like to nibble on something while enjoying tea at Urbana, the city spa offers French bread with



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marmalade and cheese, filled croissants, black and white cookies and a variety of dips, spreads and hummus with pita chips or French bread.

The tea bar also offers a selection of wines in red, white, blush and sparkling varieties available by the bottle and the glass.

Nourish your skin and body

Urbana is a city spa. Without spa amenities like saunas and steam rooms, this spa concentrates on massage. The massage menu offers 10 different options available for singles and couples. The Mama's massage for expectant mothers past their first trimester, the Ashiatsu Barefoot massage treatment and the four-handed massage may be among Urbana's most unique offerings.

The four-handed massage consists of two therapists (four hands) and one client. Clients have said that once they got used to the idea, this unique Swedish massage was a fabulous treat. Having already enjoyed a wonderful deep tissue couples massage, I'm anxious to try the Ashiatsu foot massage next.

The couples massage took place in a room fitted for two massage beds arranged at an angle – head to head, so that couples are close enough to chat. Called the midnight room, the space is

outfitted with walls of black, soft lighting and bubbling tabletop fountains that provided gentle background noise. The two therapists spoke softly when they had a question. After an hour of deep tissue work we left warm, relaxed, re-energized and stress free.

Fancy footwork

The Ashiatsu foot therapy is not a massage for your feet. Rather, it is a massage by the feet of a specially trained therapist. Suspended by bars affixed to the ceiling, the therapist holds herself above the client and uses her feet and body weight to work the client's muscles. The technique was described to me by Urbana's owner as a well-choreographed dance.

Other massage offerings at Urbana are geared toward pain relief, energy and sports therapy. The hot stone massage adds a unique warmth to the procedure. The Marakesh Express massage is a 30-minute session designed to concentrate on the back and shoulders, where most of us carry our stress. For those who want to combine exercise and massage, there is a Thai floor massage, where the client lies clothed on cushions on the floor and is manipulated into a variety of yoga positions by the instructor. Aromatherapy, cocoa butter or shea but-

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