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Ya Ya restaurant in Norfolk emphasizes quality with Asian menu

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Judy Cowling | For The Virginian-Pilot
Two generous and fresh lunch specials from Ya Ya Asian Gourmet House on College Place in downtown Norfolk.

When I drive, I keep my eyes open for new restaurants and ones I have passed many times yet never tried, like Ya Ya Asian Gourmet House.

My pal Gwynne had spoken highly about Ya Ya, on College Place in Norfolk, so when I decided to check it out, I asked her to join me for lunch last week.

Street parking is limited, so I chose the Freemason Street Garage, a short jaunt over to Ya Ya. Gwynne had a much longer, chilly trek, but a pot of green tea

warmed us as we looked over the menu.

Ya Ya is small and intimate, with seating for 46 and an abundance of granite and stone on the walls and floors and in the rather regal bathrooms. Otherwise, the decor is modest and minimal.

Gwynne suggested an appetizer of honey wings with sesame seeds. She found them to be delicious, licking her fingers to get all of the honey.

The lunch menu – 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays through Fridays – offers a wide variety of vegetarian, chicken, beef and shrimp specials for \$5.95 to \$6.75.

I ordered the curry chicken with fried rice and received a generous serving of sauteed carrots, green peppers, zucchini, mushrooms, onions and moist chicken in a spicy curry sauce with a round mountain of fried rice. The slight sting of heat on the back of my throat felt good on that brisk day. Gwynne's combo plate included a large serving of garlic string beans, pork fried rice and a pork egg roll for \$7.95. The green beans were divine – not too much garlic, and not overcooked and limp.

These combo plates, priced at \$7.95 or \$8.50 during lunch, are available during dinner for the same price, carry-out only.

After lunch, I introduced myself to the manager, whom everyone refers to as "CC." A member of the Chen family, which owns and operates Ya Ya, she's been there since they opened the restaurant four years ago.

CC said the main focus of Ya Ya is the food, mostly Chinese but also some Thai, Japanese and Filipino. To keep food as fresh as possible and limit waste, they cook everything to order.

"Word of mouth is our best advertising" she said. "We call ourselves the 'back kitchen' of Norfolk, as lots of other downtown chefs and cooks eat at Ya Ya. We keep quality high and prices reasonable."

Delivery is available through Order Up before 4 p.m., with a fee and a minimum order of \$10, and Ya Ya will deliver by bike afterward, with a \$10 minimum, to its downtown Norfolk neighbors.

Open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Mondays through Thursdays, 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Fridays, noon to 10:30 p.m. Saturdays, and 4 to 10 p.m. Sundays.

Ya Ya Asian Gourmet House, 109-A College Place, Norfolk, 757-282-6688, www.yayaasiangourmet.com.

I took a windswept stroll to Selden Marketplace to do some after-Christmas shopping. As good fortune would have it, the Doughminion Donuts shop still had some monstrous beauties in the case. I asked proprietor/baker Stephanie Dietz which was her favorite. She pointed to the vanilla old-fashioned doughnut, so I picked that one.

Doughminion Donuts are yeast-raised doughnuts created by Dietz, a Virginia Beach native who returned from New York with lots of culinary experience and her husband, Jonathan Urena, now a chef at Nordstrom.

Dietz sees the Selden location, where the lease is up on March 31, as a launching pad for her business.

She plans to open a new spot in a building three times the size – with room for a cafe, an outdoor patio and plenty of parking. The larger space also will bring a larger menu of breakfast sandwiches, coffee, fruit parfaits and, in the summer, ice cream. Dietz says she hopes to have the new place open in mid-April. Until then, you can find her at Selden Marketplace 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Saturdays or @doughminionva. Get there early on the weekend or you may find her sold out.

Doughminion Donuts, 215 E. Plume St., Norfolk, www.facebook.com/doughminion.

Send tips to Judy Cowling at turningtables@pilotonline.com.