

In the heart of Norfolk's arts district, Commune's food won't disappoint

Judy Cowling
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The vegetarian friendly field pea burger at Commune NFK is made from May peas, sweet potato, Carolina Gold rice and barley with a basil chimichuri sauce on a sweet potato bun.

Jamesetta Walker is one of my editors at the Norfolk office of The Virginian-Pilot. Readers know her as the woman with an affinity for fashion, the color purple and all things gardening. As the features editor, she kindly “volunteered” to accompany me on my culinary research to the newly opened Commune NFK, as it is within walking distance of her office.

We met there for lunch last week and settled in to peruse the menu. Jamesetta has some rather restrictive dietary requirements, and every question that she fired at our waiter, Jeff, got an immediate and knowledgeable answer.

Avoiding wheat or white flour, Jamesetta opted for the organic sorghum pancake stack with sweet potato puree, scrambled eggs, chamomile butter and hickory syrup with bacon and a sweet potato biscuit on the side. Sorghum is a gluten-free grain, and it made for some tasty cakes, along with the warm puree of sweet potato and the creamy, buttery scrambled eggs.

“I’m glad to know there is something good I can eat so close by,” proclaimed Jamesetta at the end of her meal.

My field pea burger was made of May peas, potatoes, Carolina Gold rice, barley and a benne seed tahini for binder. It was much lighter in color than a beef burger and more flavorful and tender than most burgers I’ve tasted. And it held together nicely, not falling apart like other vegetable patties I’ve tried. The basil chimichurri sauce and the toasted sweet potato bun added texture and interest to the overall flavor. Fresh greens dressed in a peppery mayo made for a tasty side.

If you imagine the original Commune in Virginia Beach and the new Commune in Norfolk as fraternal twins, rather than identical, you will not be disappointed. Kevin Jamison owns both. He also owns New Earth Farm in Pungo, a 21-acre, sustainable, chemical-free farm.

Both places follow the gospel of farm-to-table by using 100 percent locally sourced produce and 98 percent locally sourced meats. All but a few of those items come from within 50 miles away, and everything comes from Virginia. Only Virginia wines and spirits are sold. No orange juice is served, because it is not made here. Kudos to Jamison for walking the walk.

Breakfast and lunch menus are the same at both places, but the Norfolk spot has its own dinner menu and accepts reservations.

The locations look very different. Commune VB is a quaint 2,000-square-foot spot of repurposed wood, polished concrete and natural charm in the ViBe district. Commune NFK is 5,000 square feet of open space, exposed ductwork and crumbling plaster ceilings in a revived area of the city undergoing a resurgence in popularity.

It’s in the space once occupied by Work I Release in the arts district. Jamison made great use of 1840s-era barn wood from the original house on the property of New Earth Farm, placing it around the new location to add warmth and charm. The wood was used, for example, to make collars around the soaring plaster columns to support buckets filled with lush green ferns. It brings the outdoors inside, and also stops your eye from veering up to the aging ceilings.

Commune NFK is closed on Mondays and open 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 to 9 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays and until 10 p.m. Fridays, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and 5 to

10 p.m. on Saturdays, and 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sundays. Later hours with live entertainment are planned for this summer, but the schedule hasn't been set.

Even though I'm a Beach girl, I'd make the drive to Norfolk for the city experience of Commune NFK, especially when it offers the late hours and live entertainment.

Jamison hopes to open a new 2,000-square-foot farmers market building at New Earth Farm in July. Unlike its smaller produce stand, this will sell all the produce, grains and items used at both restaurants.

Upcoming classes include foraging for fruits of the field and forest, pickling with apple cider vinegar and pink salt, and recipes for summer detoxifying. For more information and to sign up, visit www.newearthfarm.org.