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### Lydia's Kitchen turns out vegetarian love

#### Marin Dining

By Leslie Harlib

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Lydia Kindheart, whose latest organic vegan and raw-foods restaurant, Lydia's Kitchen, opened at 31 Bolinas in Fairfax 2½ months ago, has had quite an odyssey in the culinary business.

The Lagunitas-dwelling, France-born founder of Lydia's Organics, who says living foods are a spiritual as well as nutritional journey for her, opened California's first raw-food restaurant on Broadway, in 1995. It lasted a year and a half.

Then she launched a raw-food catering business. A few years later, in 2003, she also opened Lydia's Lovin' Foods at 31 Bolinas, a combination raw and vegan restaurant. It ran for a couple of years.

She closed it to focus on her wholesale raw-foods business and festival catering.

Always evolving, always ready to try something new, Kindheart launched Lydia's Lovin' Foods, a fresh-food line sold in Marin County stores, a year ago. She's also been steadily growing her business of several years' duration, Lydia's Organics, a line of raw, organic vegan foods that includes crackers, cookies, energy bars, breads, grainless cereals and snacks.

Because of popular demand, to have a dedicated place to sell her Lydia's Organics line and to try out new products, she reclaimed the space at 31 Bolinas Ave. to open Lydia's Kitchen. To my taste, it's her best enterprise yet.

The homey, community-oriented counter-service eatery is dishing out some of the most satisfying alternative cuisine in Marin without the rhetoric. It's simply about good, healthful, gluten-free, sugar-free, fat-free dishes both raw and cooked, prepared by a staff that includes Kindheart, chef Michael Munerantz and several others.

"People are so happy I'm back," said Kindheart in a phone interview following my meal. "They tell me they're really enjoying the food."

The interior of Lydia's Kitchen has the colorful cheer of the Caribbean, with lime-green and acid-lemon walls, purple trim, plum velveteen chairs and padded banquettes along one wall. Seating is mostly at communal tables. Dominating the far corner of the room is a campy table for two with curved benches that appears to grow out of a towering plaster and fabric tree. I like this spot. It offers the best view, and in its ovoid shape, makes me feel as if I'm dining in Bilbo Baggins' house.

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PRIVETTE/MARINSCOPE The staff at Lydia's Kitchen in Fairfax, above, includes Michael Munerantz, owner Lydia Kindheart and Noah Griffen.

Service is simple. You order at the counter; when your food is ready (it comes very quickly), it's brought to your table.

I started out with a glass of cool, just-pressed watermelon juice (\$3.50 small, \$5 large). It had no sweetener, just the ripe, soothing character of the fruit. There was so much flavor, it came across like a boozeless cocktail.

With this type of cuisine, it's always fun to go for variety. I loved the combination of vegetables and seasonings in a salad called Lydia's Favorite (\$7.50 small, \$11 large). A finely grated concoction of raw beet with purple cabbage and carrot shared a plate with raw kale massaged within an inch of its fibrous life so it became floppy and tender (I could use this kind of massage) and was mixed with arame seaweed, celery, carrots and sesame seeds. Slices of raw avocado on top of both mixtures was at custardy ripeness. Two sheets of nori seaweed came with it. I wrapped both salads and avocado in the seaweed to make a raw burrito. The end result was delicious, since the sauces on the two types of salads were rich in olive and sunflower oils, pumpkin seeds, parsley, basil, cilantro, lemon and salt.

There are nightly cooked specials, such as a Chinese brown-rice risotto, amazingly creamy considering that it was dairy free, punctuated with nuggets of crimini mushroom and grated fresh ginger. Kachira, an Indian-inspired grain dish of lentils, was scented with mild curry, deepened with cubes of carrot and snippets of onion. None of these were more than \$11.

Among the cooked items, savory buckwheat crepes are a must-try. I loved the Mediterranean version (\$10), a foot-long tube of tender, musky-tasting pancake wrapped around a ratatouille of eggplant, zucchini, onions, spinach, tomato sauce, fresh basil and Kalamata olives. Zigzags of cheeseless pesto on top were so aromatic with basil and voluptuous with walnuts, I never missed the parmesan.

Blueberry cheesecake (\$5), a staple on the dessert menu, thick and smooth yet light, because it's made with almonds, walnuts, coconuts, dates, apples, cashews, agave, vanilla, Irish moss, lemon, coconut oil, cinnamon and salt, was filling but in no way cloying. The fruit character was pure and strong, standing out from all those other ingredients.

I was also impressed with the raw-chocolate nugget (\$1.50 small, \$3 large) centered with a dollop of raspberry-cashew dairyless ganache. This was bittersweet, but without the roughhewn quality that I so dislike and that so many raw chocolates have. This one was a treat.

Lydia's Kitchen is rife with technique and plenty of culinary charm. If you like vegetables —or even better, if you're not used to eating a lot of vegetables but want to start adding them to your diet — this is a wonderful place to introduce yourself to creative, sustaining combinations. And you can't beat the prices. Two people can have a fulfilling meal for less than \$25, because each dish is so complex and full of texture, it's easy to share.

Lydia's Kitchen is at 31 Bolinas Ave., Fairfax, 258-9866, [lydiaskitchencafe.com](http://lydiaskitchencafe.com). It's open Sunday, Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m., Friday and Saturday until 10 p.m. Closed Tuesdays. Free street parking.

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