

Slow Food in the Fast Lane

BY RICH HIGGINS

How often do restaurants try to create healthy community? A lofty goal, certainly, and if it's possible, Amanda's Feel Good Fresh Food in Berkeley could be the most likely candidate. Just up the street is Alice Waters' venerable Chez Panisse, a retreat for perfection and ideology, and a mecca for farm-to-table pilgrims. But for every foodie out there who promises never to eat fast food again, there's a naysayer who's convinced that slow food is only affordable for the wealthy. The economics of calories spurs endless debate, and at times I need a sherpa to help me through the morass. And sometimes I'm just in the mood for a quick burger.

Enter Amanda West and her eponymous fast food restaurant. In a region in which restaurants are chef driven, West has opened a restaurant that is purpose driven. Amanda's offers nourishment, guidance, inspiration, and hope in the form of healthful, affordable fast food. With West at the helm, the restaurant sets a new standard in environmental awareness, choosing and embracing "green" in almost every decision. The building is a renovated historic landmark, the furniture is single-component recyclable, the wood is reclaimed and FSC-certified, the paint is low VOC, and there are no garbage cans, because everything in the restaurant is recyclable or compostable. The restaurant is airy, light, and comfortable, and each table is kept company by a planter of fresh herbs.

The cuisine is wonderfully tasty and is a perfect combination of being good for both planet and consumer. Aside from the Heinz ketchup (organic, of course), the whole-wheat buns (from a local bakery), and just a couple other ingredients, everything is made in-house with natural, non-GMO, good-for-you ingredients. Sodas? House-made (try the spicy ginger ale, \$1.75). Veggie burger? Amanda's special recipe. Refined sugar or corn syrup? Nope — agave nectar and stevia (a beautifully sweet herb, I found out). No grease and sodium hangover here.

» **Amanda's Feel Good Fresh Food**
2122 Shattuck Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94704
510-548-2122
amandas.com
Open 11 a.m.–9 p.m. daily



Fast food is often frighteningly high-calorie. Compared to the calories in the big guys' marquee items, you can almost count the calories on one hand at Amanda's — nothing on the menu weighs in at more than 425 calories, and meal combos are all less than 600 calories. Some of this is achieved by limiting the amount of high-calorie oils and starches that make their way into the food, but some of it comes down to good old-fashioned portion size. A Quarter Pounder at McDonald's is called that because it originated as a way of marketing that burger as a "big" burger — four ounces versus the regular two-ounce hamburger. After decades of super-sizing and scarfing cheap calories as quickly as our government can subsidize them, a "quarter pounder" seems more like a requirement than a weight.

Well, at Amanda's, all the patties are a realistic three ounces, be they veggie, beef, or chicken (antibiotic- and hormone-free, of course). In an attempt to try multiple items on the menu during my visit, I felt as if I were missing the point by ordering two sandwiches. I tried but didn't feel the need to finish either of them — my stomach would have been content with the three-ounce idea. At Amanda's, I was sated by taste and nutrition, which doesn't happen often when eating fast food.

The burger and veggie burger (each \$3.75) were great, moist sandwiches piled high with sauce and crispy, fresh fixin's. I splurged and added olive oil-roasted onions (\$0.50) to the

burger and creamy avocado slices (\$0.75) to the veggie burger. The russet and sweet potato "fries" (\$1.50–\$1.75) aren't fried but baked with a drizzle of oil to get crispy on the outside and soft on the inside, making friends with both my palate and my waistline. My dining partner ordered one of the five salads, opting for the grilled citrus chicken salad (\$6.45). Plastic-entombed Salad from the Living Dead this was not, and we loved the crunchy combo of lettuce, radicchio, and jicama, and the citrusy vinaigrette. The freshly-baked cookies — chocolate chip, oatmeal raisin, and sugar (\$0.75 each or \$2.00 for three) — were great little bites for my sweet tooth. Fresh fruit is another term that has lost its, well, freshness in the hands of large restaurant chains, but at Amanda's, freshly-cut apple "fries" (\$1.50) are another dessert option, along with honey-roasted almonds (\$2.50, and you guessed it: house-roasted).

In the daily quest to do right by my stomach, my planet, my wallet, and my schedule, Amanda's is a satisfying oasis. West has done the work for us, keeping her food approachable, affordable, and transparent. Eating at Amanda's is a pleasure, and it feels good to be part of her healthy community. 🌱

Rich Higgins is a foodie, brewer, and cicerone, and he pairs great beer and great food wherever he goes. Contact him at richhiggins.com.