

Farm-to-Counter Done Right

BY RICH HIGGINS



From top: Jeff Mason, a veteran of the SF hospitality scene, is one of the owners of Pal's. With old-school "guest check" book locked and loaded, ready to take orders; Mason jars of housemade pickles

I'll admit it: In lean times like these, I'm on the lookout for comfort and reassurance. The other day, my search led me to Pal's Takeaway, tucked inside an unlikely corner store in the Mission, and my comfort tooth was mightily sated. Pal's lullaby of food and its antidote to the economy's bitter pill come in the form of sandwiches, salads and fruit crisps. Each menu item is healthful, affordable, artful and tasty, a harvest equally committed to farmer and diner.

This fantastic food is crafted in front of your eyes at their lunch counter in Tony's Market, at the corner of 24th and Hampshire streets. A few steps into the orderly, well-lit market, I was greeted by two men, their arms resting on the stainless steel counter, with an old-school "guest check" book locked and loaded, ready to take my order.

The two men, Jeff Mason and David Knopp, are the owners, chefs, farmers market shoppers, ingredient deliverymen (by bike, when they can) and overall friendly faces behind the counter. "We're as nice to you as you are to us" was how Mason put it, reminding me of the tough love of a New York deli. He's a veteran of the San Francisco hospitality scene, having once been a nightclub owner. Knopp worked the stoves at the Hayes Street Grill for almost a decade before toiling within the farmers market community. He lends market pedigree and culinary chops to the menu at Pal's Takeaway; the results are blissful.

Flanked by a case of Mason jars of house-made pickles on my left — green garlic shoots, shallots, and horseradish, to name a few — and a strawberry-rhubarb crisp on my right, my mind waded through that day's menu, which was inked on the wall. The sweet crisp, still warm from the oven, cooed at me, but I was in the mood for a couple sandwiches and salads. Soon, I was out the door with a bag of food and a compostable fork.

The specialty *bahn mi* sandwich (\$7.50) was a delight of Vietnamese counterpoint — a symphony of sweet, sour and savory, chewy, crunchy and crispy. It's succulent, sustain-

ably raised tri-tip was soaked in a lemongrass marinade. After being grilled medium-rare to a delectable char, ours is topped with all the fixin's: daikon, carrot, cucumber, jalapeno, cilantro, sesame seeds and a squeeze of lime juice. Sandwiched by an Acme torpedo roll spread with herbed mayo, this *bahn mi* is the real deal! And talk about field fresh: In a final swoop, Knopp spied and removed a stowaway sprig of chickweed hiding amidst a tassel of cilantro.

My vegetarian almond butter and jam sandwich on Acme seeded wheat (\$5.75) was great too, even if the slices of mango made it look more like grilled cheddar cheese. The mango was a luxurious addition, and its smooth, al dente texture played nicely off the crunchy nut butter. Unfortunately, Knopp was out of al-



Pal's specialty *bahn-mi* sandwich is the real deal.

mond butter, but peanut butter filled in nicely. He makes the strawberry jam himself, and it contained an intense expression of spring's ripe berries.

In between bites of sandwich, two tasty salads (only \$2.50 each) offered extra seasonality on the side. In one, sugar snap pea pods were sliced on the bias and mixed with radish disks and the year's first Brentwood sweet corn — these were all tossed with olive oil, chives and mint. Though I loved the fresh crunch of the peas, I preferred the red-and-white carrot salad that combined two types of carrots shredded with celery root, oil and rice vinegar. A pinch of black mustard seed added a nice kick.

I left the two men as they discussed who was going to pick up the ingredients to star in the next day's sandwiches. Yum, yum. I left already yearning for my next fix of Mason's and Knopp's unique farm-to-counter comfort. 🍴

» Pal's Takeaway

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Open weekdays 11 a.m. - 2:30 p.m.