

## Santa Cruz Sentinel Review

### **Dining review, March 4, 2009: Asana's distinctive diversity suits Santa Cruz to a tea**

By ANN PARKER - Sentinel correspondent  
Posted: 03/04/2009 01:30:32 AM PST

Asana defies easy classification. At first glance, this colorful new downtown addition looks like a hip little store devoted to tea. Walking in, you feel a coffeehouse/cafe vibe: overstuffed chairs, a dim nook for laptopers, earnest students conversing.

But the big wall-mounted menu and a cold case lined with tempting housemade desserts defines its serious restaurant energy -- not surprising, considering the head chef is Christopher Howe, formerly of Cafe La Vie.

Waiting to order at the counter, I studied a paper menu: breakfast on one side, lunch/dinner on the other. A new dinner menu is in the works. Vegan and organic vegetarian coexisted with sustainable shrimp and free-range chicken. Soups and small plates, all vegetarian, included miso soup, hummus, grain bowls and hard-to-find ochazuke, a Japanese mixed veggie/rice bowl containing tea. Panini with imaginative ingredients, from roasted butternut squash to curry chicken, made up the rest of the non-breakfast menu.

I started with Fresh Spring Rolls small \$3.50 and Miso Soup small \$3, adding Sweet Potato Dumplings \$2 to the soup. The panini that caught my imagination was Chili Lime Shrimp small, \$6 with bay shrimp, housemade chili lime dressing, butter lettuce, tomato and red onion. Tempeh or avocado can be added for an additional cost. Panini are served on housemade white, wheat or spelt bread; I chose spelt, curious to see how a pressed sandwich would work on this sometimes crumbly non-wheat bread.

Adding a glass of Weibel Brut Sparkling Wine \$5, I considered my seating choices, including the softly lit laptop area, sunny window seats and stools around a low rattan table. Be aware: Asana is often busy and people linger over their drinks and meals, so be patient.

I chose a central table, better to watch the scene and directly under a gaggle of brightly colored, wide-open paper parasols suspended gracefully from the ceiling. Sipping my wine, I unabashedly eavesdropped on the next table's conversation -- grad school and shamanism -- before trying Asana's daily tea samples. The hot tea du jour was Ti Kwan Yin, a rich oolong; the cool one, Green Pear tea, was so enchanting I ordered a glass \$2 of this lightly fruity tea with its stunning aroma.

The friendly server delivered my creamy-looking white miso soup, its clean, healthy flavor accented by bits of carrot, scallion and, best of all, fresh edamame beans. Translucent spring rolls arrived next, roundly and deliciously packed with thin udon noodles, fresh mint and basil, carrot, almond and a touch of coconut. Although I enjoyed the accompanying sauce, rich with almond butter and spices, I missed the traditional peanut flavor.

My spelt panini held together beautifully -- and the bread impressed me with its slightly nutty taste and substantial texture. This sandwich's flavors were right on, its wickedly piquant aioli jazzing up the tender little shrimp and just-picked freshness of the lettuce, tomato and onion slivers. I dressed my small side salad of perfect baby greens with olive oil and other condiments from a side table.

Returning the next day, I ordered a pot of Imperial Gong Ting puerh tea small pot \$4.50 and scrumptious-looking chocolate tart \$6.50. Anyone leery of raw food should try one of Howe's raw

vegan desserts. Layered on crunchy coconut-based crust, my tart was velvety smooth, cacao-rich and satisfyingly sweet but not overwhelming.

A gracious server explained the small tea ritual involving an ornately decorated pot of hot water, tiny ceramic steeping pot and small handleless cup. Charming. And the tea was earthy, woody, mossy -- a full experience.

The music at Asana? Appropriately eclectic, from Mexican love ballads to Dylan.

Designed as a community gathering place, Asana offers live music and other events weekly. Wednesday, says Casey, is Game Night: "We supply game boards or people bring their own."

Ann Parker is a freelance writer and public relations consultant; she welcomes your comments and feedback. Suggestions about reviews for area restaurants? Contact her at [atparker@pacbell.net](mailto:atparker@pacbell.net).

## ***More About Asana***

British-born Christopher Howe, Asana's head chef, is as multifaceted as the teahouse/cafe itself. Classically trained in French cooking, Howe says, 'I try to apply what I learned,' substituting healthier choices for traditional rich ingredients. His raw vegan chocolate tart, for instance, contains avocado, agave, cacao butter and ground cacao. Howe was chef for three years at local raw foods restaurant La Vie, which recently closed.

Opened last July, Asana is the creation of owner Shanna Casey. 'We have over 60 teas in all categories,' she says. White, green, oolong and puerh fermented teas are available by the cup, pot or in bulk -- and bear poetic names like Lu Shau Clouds and Night, Vanilla Starry Night, Immortal Nectar. They are organic, wild-crafted and biodynamic, from fair trade sources around the world. Customers can also order tea 'elixir' shots and specialty tea drinks, as well as fair trade coffee. And free tea compost is available for the asking.

## ***Restaurant Review***

WHAT: Asana

WHERE: 103 Lincoln St., Santa Cruz

HOURS: 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 8 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday, 10 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday. NOTE: Breakfast served until 1 p.m.

SERVICE: Friendly, relaxed counter service and table delivery

FOOD: HH

VALUE: HH

AMBIANCE: Relaxed, colorful, comfortable, eclectic but accessible

COST: Reasonable (lunch panini \$4.50 to \$8.50)

DETAILS: 425-8327,

[asanateas.com](http://asanateas.com)

Ratings are based on a four-star basis: 0=Poor, 1=Fair, 2=Good, 3=Excellent, 4=Exceptional