

FOOD



Carolyn Rago dines with her sons, Vincent, 3, and Lenny, 2, in the Zoo Cafe at the Staten Island Zoo, West Brighton.



Alicia Reinsh, owner of the Cafe Botanica, relaxes on a wicker couch in front of Just A Bite concession stand.

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Both the eye and the palate are satisfied at Island eateries

Head Chef Jorge Munoz

CAFE BOTANICA

"This is our fourth season here and we've developed about 1,000 customers a week," said Alicia Reinsh, owner of Cafe Botanica and Just a Bite concession stand on the grounds of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Livingston.

"About two-thirds are local people, which is good. That's what keeps us going."

Food service is offered daily between the restaurant and the concession stand. And more patrons are anticipated in the future as Cafe Botanica, which already serves dinner on Friday nights, makes plans to be open on Thursday and Saturday nights beginning Oct. 12.

Just a Bite, serving customers on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays near the Staten Island Botanical Garden greenhouse, is a big hit with families.

Quick, satisfying casual foods include hamburgers, hot dogs, corn on the cob, fries, sandwiches, ice cream and an assortment of sweet treats and soft drinks as well.

The casual repast can be enjoyed beneath a canvas-covered gazebo with wicker-style furniture and lush-potted plants.

"Children have grass to run around on, and it's less confining than sitting in a restaurant," Mrs. Reinsh observed. "The gazebo has been such a respite for people; it's just such a comfortable area."

Cafe Botanica, which specializes in upscale American-style food, has seating for 80 outdoors and another 25 inside the French Empire cottage that was completed in 1885.

Breakfast and lunch items are provided throughout the day, and wine and beer now are available. Mrs. Reinsh's Year of the Dog menu includes such breakfast items as Broiled Grapefruit, Eggs Benedict With Ham or Smoked Salmon, and Homemade Corned Beef Hash With Eggs Any Style.

Diners are serenaded by live music, and that nicety will continue into the fall.

Patrice Swingle of West Brighton was dining on the porch of the cafe recently with her daughter-in-law, Jody Atkinson, of Tompkins Cove, N.Y.

While Mrs. Swingle has been to the restaurant numerous times, it was Mrs. Atkinson's first visit.

"It's a wonderful restaurant, I love it," the first-timer said.

"I like old houses; I live in an old house. I'm a gardener as well," she continued, noting the proximity to the sights and scents of the Botanical Garden.

THE ZOO CAFE

If you prefer your dining on the wild side, consider a visit to the Staten Island Zoo Cafe, where the aim is to serve each customer in less than two minutes.

The cafe provides a wide variety of breakfast, lunch and snack foods. Big draws for the children are combination



M. Bennett Cafe Pastry Chef Neel Hadunkutti makes a crumb-topped fruit dessert at the Richmond eatery.

"At no other venue on Staten Island do you have the opportunity to view ponies grazing and prairie dogs popping their heads out of burrows, all of them watching us as we're eating," said Steven Gattullo, head of food service at the zoo.

Completed about three years ago, the cafe was part of the zoo's original master plan. Zoo planners always envisioned it as a bona fide food service operation, according to Gattullo, who noted that for many years visitors bought food from a trailer and ate at outdoor tables.

A long time in the making, the bright, airy indoor cafe ultimately garnered Chamber of Commerce Building Awards and is used as a template for other parks and aquariums looking to add or upgrade their eateries, Gattullo said.

Depending on the season, the cafe is air conditioned or heated, but always bathed in natural light from skylights. Custom-made bamboo tables are decorated with images of frogs, parrots, angel fish and other inhabitants in the zoo's menagerie.

"The cafe is state-of-the-art not only in its design, but also in its format and flow," Gattullo said. "The design incorporates the outdoors, bringing it inside. When dining, customers have wonderful views of the exhibits while looking through a large expanse of glass."

Two-year-old Lenny Rago, of Tottenville, celebrated his birthday at the zoo with his brother Vincent, 3, and mother Carolyn.

"They eat better here than if I packed a lunch," Mrs. Rago said. "It's convenient. They like to eat in restaurants. They think it's exciting."

M. BENNETT CAFE

Nothing makes John Guild, executive director of Historic Richmond Town, happier

Adding to the relaxation factor of the bucolic setting is the M. Bennett Cafe, located in a former cellar-bakery of the Bennett House, which was built around 1839 and added to in 1854. The cafe caters not only to curious tourists, but anyone seeking quick, fresh, affordable food.

"We're trying to expand, to open up more to the general public, to bring people back to Richmond Town, to make it more of a point of destination," said David Cavagnaro, president of Wynnewood & Shaw Management Co. of Richmond, which operates it. All proceeds go to the owner, the Richmond Town Historical Society.

In an attempt to attract more Staten Islanders, a 5-cent cup of coffee was offered as a summer promotion.

"It's kind of nostalgic in a way," Cavagnaro said. "It's what it used to be years ago: a cup of joe for five cents."

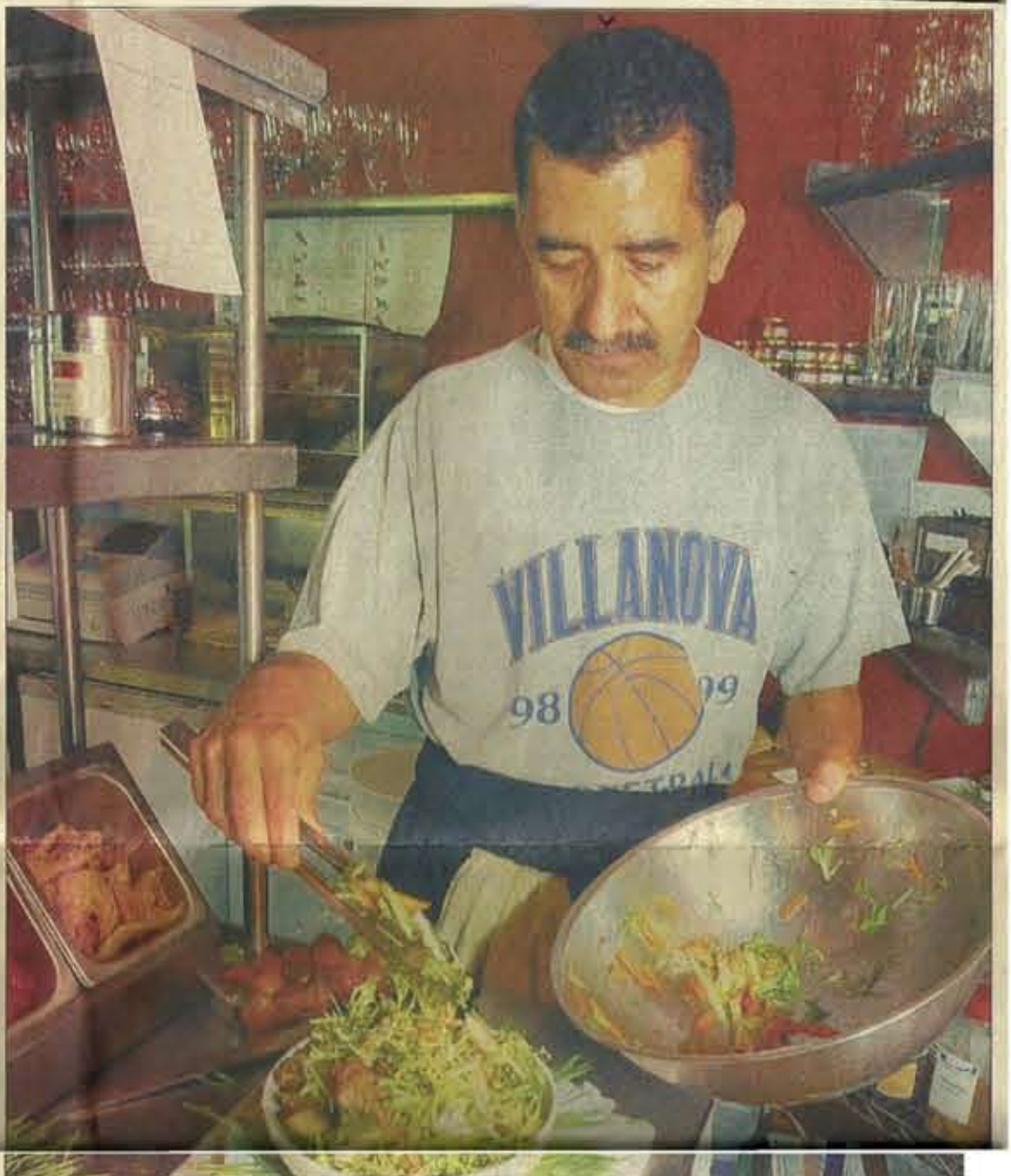
But this isn't any old cup of joe; it's high-quality, environmentally friendly, gourmet Green Mountain Coffee of Vermont. Those with more time to spend there, can dine in the cafe, with its cobblestone floors and walls decorated with framed silhouettes, or take their food to go.

"We can serve people who want to stay there and eat in the cafe as well as people who want to grab something on the run and take it back to work, or go out on the grounds and picnic," Guild noted.

Parking is available nearby on Richmond Road and on a few side streets.

Among the quick bites offered here are bagels, croissants, scones, fruit tarts and muffins as well as blue cheese and walnut bread, which Cavagnaro says enjoys a loyal following.

Those seeking something more substantial can order sandwiches, like a grilled Caesar chicken wrap, as well as



Chef George Munoz prepares a salad at the Cafe Botanica on the grounds of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, Livingston.

The cafe also takes orders for birthday and other special occasion cakes and is planning to refurbish the brick oven that is original to the 19th-century building for baking pies.

"The key lime pie is the best I've ever had," commented Gale Cirigliano, the new director of development at Richmond Town. Mango Mousse cake is said to be another seasonal favorite.

In September, part of the cafe will be turned into a "farmer's store," offering whole bean coffee, baskets, freshly baked pies and pancake mixes, syrups, jams and jellies. The cafe will be open during the Richmond County Fair, scheduled for Sept. 9 and 10.

The sites mentioned here include:

Cafe Botanica, Cottage #4 Snug Harbor Cultural Center, 1000 Richmond Terr., Livingston, 718-720-9737; hours are: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and 6 to 10 p.m. on Friday; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Saturday and Sunday. Additional hours of 6 to 10 p.m. on Thursdays and Saturdays will begin Oct. 12.

M. Bennett Cafe, 3730 Richmond Rd., 718-351-1611, extension 256. Hours are: 7:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., seven days each week.

The Zoo Cafe and Gift Shop, 604 Boulevard, West

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WINE MAKING CLASSES OFFERED

Once again The Wine Room is seeking prospective winemakers to join its next wine making program scheduled for the fall.

Classes start in September for the amateur winemakers who will attend three sessions designed to take them through the wine production process.

First, from September through November, grapes to be used are selected. There are 25 different kinds of grapes from California and Washington State to choose from. Next, professional equipment separates grapes from stems and crushes the grapes. After seven days, the crushed grapes are pressed in authentic Italian wine presses and pumped into American oak barrels to age and develop. Finally,