

## Cafe Flora marks 20 years as a vegetarian trendsetter

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Executive Chef Janine Doran and owner Nat Stratton-Clarke in the dining room of Cafe Flora, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this month. The art on the back wall is by artist James W. Sutherland, a former operations manager at the restaurant.

Some restaurants are ahead of their time. You could say that about Café Flora, except for one thing: It was a hit from the start.

Born in an abandoned laundromat in October 1991, it became an immediate fixture in Seattle's Madison Valley neighborhood. It looked good and felt right in a rustic but casually sophisticated kind of way. And it had lines out the door, especially for weekend brunch.

What made it extraordinary was that the food was upscale vegetarian, presented with flair. Elsewhere at the time, vegetarian in Seattle generally meant hearty but unremarkable dishes. Café Flora took it to a new level.

"I've got to tell you, I was kind of intimidated that it was vegetarian. I thought, 'I don't know if I can do this,' " said Janine Doran, who started as a line cook at the restaurant in 1992 and is now its executive chef. "The food was very lively and colorful. The flavor combinations were surprising. It was new."

Still thriving as a vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free mecca, Café Flora is celebrating 20 years in business with a fundraising party June 2.

Its original owners – David Foecke, his wife Pat (Gracie) Close and Scott Glascock – were Madison Valley residents. They had no restaurant expertise, but they had a good idea of what they wanted and the neighborhood lacked. They envisioned, according to Café Flora’s website, “a friendly, community based vegetarian restaurant close to home ... that could stand as a model business in attending to the health of the planet.”

With that idealistic goal, the restaurant featured organic and sustainable produce from local farms – common now, but not then.

Setting the culinary direction was founding chef Jim Watkins, now director of food services at Bastyr University in Kenmore. He created one of the restaurant’s iconic dishes, Oaxaca tacos. A subsequent executive chef, Catherine Geier co-wrote the Café Flora cookbook in 2005.

Current owner Nat Stratton-Clarke joined the staff eight years ago, keen to strengthen and broaden ties with local producers. Foecke quickly made him general manager and sold the restaurant to him four years later.

Stratton-Clarke grew up as a vegetarian in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he was impressed and inspired by the connection between top restaurants such as Alice Waters’ Chez Panisse in Berkeley and local farms.

As Café Flora’s buyer, he continues to work with area producers and makes a point of supporting the smaller farms selling goods at Seattle-area farmers markets.

With such roots, Café Flora became the first pick-up location for the Community Supported Agriculture program run by Full Circle Farm, which began with Andrew Stout and Wendy Munroe farming five acres near Mount Si in 1996 and now includes a network of farms delivering organic produce throughout four states.

Stratton-Clarke remembers working with Full Circle back when “it was just Andrew and a pickup truck.”

While maintaining its commitment to local organic products, the restaurant has undergone a series of physical changes. It started out serving no alcohol, but soon added beer and wine. It enclosed its atrium in 1996, creating a handsome room with fountain, plants and heated, stone-slab floor. It installed a full bar where the pastry station had been.

When the main dining room was remodeled three years ago, staffers did some of the work and the décor was augmented with a gate and other wood salvaged from the restaurant's producer farms. More recently, outdoor seating was added to the herb garden behind the atrium.

Some things will never change, Stratton-Clarke said, noting that commitment to local products extends even to the beverage list, where the listed soft drinks are from Seattle-based Dry Soda.

"There's no Coca-Cola in our bar and there never will be," he said.

Café Flora's ideals extend to other areas. Goals posted in the front of the restaurant include giving back to the community, inside and out. Staffers are taken to farms to see where and how the food grows. They also are encouraged to contribute ideas on how to improve the restaurant.

"I like to have workers that are not just bodies at stations," Doran said. "I don't want robots. I want them to contribute to the betterment of Café Flora."

The June 2 anniversary party will be a combination dinner with live music and farmers market with a dozen or more growers and vendors represented. Tickets can be bought at <http://cafeflora.eventbrite.com/>

Proceeds will benefit the Bailey-Boushay House, which is near the café on East Madison Street and provides care for people with HIV/AIDS and other serious illnesses. Bailey-Boushay also is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year.