

FOOD

Out

THERE THIS WEEK

EatLocal Café Options

Fresh, tasty lunches and a path to future

By **Kristen Browning-Blas**, *The Denver Post*

Work Options for Women helps its students aim higher. Now, the nonprofit that trains women in culinary arts is raising the bar on lunch downtown with its new restaurant, Café Options.

Not only does the soup-and-sandwich eatery give graduates a great place to work, it gives downtown workers a new choice for lunch. And it's challenging the other sandwich-makers in town with house-roasted pork, chicken and beef, from-scratch soups and even homemade pickles. Developed by Denver restaurant veterans Max McKissock and Craig Dixon, the menu emphasizes clean, pure flavors, and teaches culinary skills that graduates of the welfare-to-work program can take to other jobs.

"Everything's made in-house, so the other places, we got 'em beat," says Dixon. "Other places, they get a box of food and cut it open. Here, it's practice what you preach. These woman are absorbing everything we throw at them."

The menu offers five hot and six cold sandwiches, each with a distinct blend of flavors. The Cubano uses citrusy braised pork, braised ham and those sweet-tart house-made pickles. The baked caprese warms up the usually chilled mozzarella-tomato combo and adds roasted peppers and tapenade on perfect ciabatta.

(Tip: Get a regular-sized one, as a half will just leave you wanting more.)

The chicken salad sandwich brings in the Thai flavors of peanut, cilantro and lime-juiced slaw, all piled on multigrain bread.

Vegetarians should be happily surprised by the full flavors of the caprese and the grilled eggplant pita.

The mod space, by Semple Brown Design, is inviting and bright, with a bank of windows, blond wood and black and red accents.

So far, the cafe is staffed by Work Options graduates, but the program will eventually place interns at Café Options.

In addition to lunch, Café Options has an espresso bar and offers oatmeal, muffins, yogurt and granola.



Aytan Evans, who graduated from Work Options two years ago, thanks Work Options for teaching not just kitchen skills, but helping her confidence. "They build your esteem up; they make you feel you're ready," she says as she cleans the espresso machine and jokes with fellow grad Billie Conner. *Kristen Browning-Blas, The Denver Post*

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CAFE OPTIONS. Breakfast and lunch. 1650 Curtis St. (just off the 16th Street Mall), 303-573-0733. Open Monday through Friday, 6:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.