

# ROOTS CAFÉ

## Offers an Oasis Away

W

hen most people talk about wanting to make the world a better place, rarely do they think they can do it through food. But the owners of Roots Café believe otherwise.

Nine years ago, Jodi Sardanis and Dean Orfas opened Roots Café adjacent to their gym, RAW Fitness, in Northvale. They saw that people were putting all this effort into working out, but then filling their body with unhealthy foods. Individually, they had already adopted an alternative diet and wanted to share that with others. It only made sense to create the space for it themselves.

When the café first opened, it was known as one of the few vegan options in Bergen County [Editor's note: It was even featured as one in our Spring 2019 issue.]. But since then, they've adjusted their philosophy to accurately portray the food they serve. They now describe it as a whole foods, plant-based diet with absolutely zero processed ingredients. They felt this distinction was necessary because vegan doesn't necessarily mean healthy, and health is their primary focus.

"We obviously support vegan," said Kira, the head chef at Roots and Jodi's daughter. "We're vegan for the animals and the environment. But health wise, I think the key is whole food, plant-based. Because you can go vegan and be just as unhealthy, eat all these processed soy everything, but once you adopt a whole food plant-based diet, that's the game changer."

Due to their decision not to use any processed ingredients, menu items like the Beyond Good Burrito and Avocado Toastie with the Mostie require a lot more time, effort and money to make. The wraps are made from plantain and flaxseed by hand, not opened from a package. Their cinnamon bread is made from juice pulp. Their sprouted chickpea and flax tostada comes from their very own sprouting mechanism.

By Natalie Zisa

This extra attention to detail may mean they don't sell as much, but at the end of the day they count the people that they've educated and influenced and often use that as their metric of success, especially when they attend food truck festivals that don't necessarily already have a health-conscious audience.

"When we first took the truck out, we would sit back and think, 'Ah, we didn't make as much. But wait, we gained a lot of customers and we educated a lot of people and opened up a lot of minds and that's really cool,'" expressed Kira.

Since alternative ways of eating have become increasingly more mainstream, they're aware that many people have hesitations about what they consume. Therefore, they continue to educate themselves and are constantly reading articles on the latest research. They also encourage their customers to be just as curious and read labels on food packages.

"When things start to become very trendy and popular, red flags go up. We start looking into it because you know something is going to change," said Jodi.

It might not always be easy to convince people that their philosophy works - even their staff expresses hesitation at times. So, when they're faced with confrontation and questioning, Dean looks to the past for his answer.

"How did we do it 30,000 years ago?" he asked out loud. "There are no nutrition labels on apples and cucumbers. In order to eat, we had to climb a tree, run after something, we had to dig."

"Food is naturally made the way you're supposed to eat it," added Kira.

They believe that this way of thinking can help you navigate through the maze of information and opinions even though, ultimately, no one can grant you the universal stamp of approval.

Regardless, positive reviews certainly help. Dean remembers a particular moment in which a woman walked in and actually started crying.

"This is what I was looking for! I thought I could only find it in California," he recalled her saying.

There are other elements to the business and the lifestyle that Dean, Jodi and Kira preach - because in reality, the two go hand-in-hand. They have goals for the café to be completely waste-free, which is why cinnamon raisin bread made from juice pulp felt groundbreaking. It's the same reason they have a residency at Bell-Ans Farm in Orangeburg, N.Y., where not only can they grow fresh fruits and vegetables, but also feed their compost to the animals. They host natural net-



working events, open mic nights and meditation and sound baths, and they spend time outside every day, regardless of the weather.

"I think convenience is the killer. Every time you take something out of comfort, something that's the easier way to go, you're jeopardizing your health in some way," expressed Jodi.

And as expected, Dean's philosophy from 30,000 years ago applies here as well.

"In order to clothe ourselves, in order to eat, in order to protect ourselves, we had to be physically active. Now, that's gone," he said. "We have escalators, elevators, Uber, food being delivered to us. We're programmed to relax any way we can because of all the work that we used to have to do. We're still programmed to relax, but we don't have anything to do, so what do we do? We grow, we get sick..."

"...we get depressed," added Jodi.

"We get depressed, we stay inside, we don't want to be uncomfortable. But life is uncomfortable," declared Dean. "And now we've made it so comfortable that we're diseased."

Their mission is to educate people enough that they eventually adopt these diet and lifestyle changes in their everyday lives. That people eat healthy, stay active, and spend time in nature before their health is jeopardized, rather than wait until they're forced to make a change.

That's why Jodi, who is also a third and fourth grade special education teacher in Northvale, is implementing this kind of health and nutrition information in her classes. Her students have already begun telling their parents they should have apples instead of PopTarts as snacks.

"My students were interviewing me the other day and they said, 'But Ms. Sardanis, why are you doing all this stuff?'" Jodi shared. "So I said, 'Guys, to make it simple, my goal is to just make the world a better place. The way I look at it, if somebody is feeling heathy, they will be happy and happy people can't hurt people.'"

She continued, "If we can get people to exercise, if we can get people to eat right, feel better about themselves, that equals a happier person, equals less harm in the world. Isn't that what everybody wants? As cheesy as that is, you can't be mean if you're happy."

Earlier, it was mentioned that they were more focused on the amount of people they impact than the money that they make, but that's not entirely true. Dean acknowledged that without making a profit, you can't expand and continue to help more people. So, what does expansion look like for Roots Café?

They want to continue to incorporate other lifestyle habits with the café, such as tai chi. They're very passionate about their residency with Bell-Ans Farm where you can indulge in art, yoga, acupuncture, and more in the same space. And they want to inspire the next generation to take care of themselves and in turn, others. Having already implemented a sustainable garden in her school, Jodi envisions kids programs at the farm.

There are a lot of moving parts to the mission of Roots Café. But Dean sums it up best: "When you see somebody eating right and being physically active, they have a presence. They have an energy that you can pick out like that. You know it when they walk in the room. And everybody should have that."

To learn more about Roots Café, visit their website, [rawrootscafe.com](http://rawrootscafe.com) and their Instagram, [@rawrootscafe](https://www.instagram.com/rawrootscafe).

