

Saving the Planet *with Style*

By Kuvy Ax

Boulder was doing natural, organic, local and sustainable well before the rest of the country could say “quinoa.” Now that everyone else is going green too, what’s next for Boulder?

“It’s eco-fine dining,” says Phil Thyen (pronounced somewhere between Tin and Ten), whose hip Organic Orbit opened last spring in Boulder’s up-and-coming NoBo neighborhood. “Our restaurant is L.A. chic, with a generous dash of Boulder funk. We take the Birkenstocks out of organic food, and the stuffiness out of fine dining, with the mission of reconnecting with nature through food.”

Thyen firmly believes that first and foremost, food has to be delicious. But he also places high importance on the “energy and value” of the food the restaurant serves. “Since it’s almost completely organic, it’s also a step towards global damage control. People feel nourished when they leave here,” Thyen says.

Organic Orbit offers something for everyone—except wireless Internet service. Thyen aims to provide an environment for social connection, where people can talk over a meal that comes from nature. About 30 percent of the restaurant’s business comes from diners who are vegans, vegetarians, raw foodists, or people with allergies, so it’s a good place for couples or groups with different food requirements to eat together. The clientele, both locals and Denverites, most often hear about the restaurant through word of mouth—which is helpful, since it presents different faces at different times of day, and that takes a little explaining.

It’s a Café—a Bar—a Chic Restaurant

From 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., it’s a sunny, speedy, casual café called Organic Express, offering pre-made salads and wraps from a deli case, as well as made-to-order sandwiches and “hot food from the kitchen,” including veggie, rice and black bean bowls, unusual pizzas such as sweet potato, goat cheese and caramelized onion, and burgers (both nut loaf and bison).

The Orbit Bar offers all-organic juices and nutritional smoothies all day long. One option, the coconut-avocado smoothie (\$6 for 16 ounces), is made with coconut water, avocado, lime, flax seeds, dates, Brazil nuts and *sole*—not the fish, but a Himalayan salt-crystal solution prized for its nutritive value. From 4 to 6 p.m. the bar offers Happy Hour specials on organic Martinis; beers like Samuel Smith organic lager and ale, Lakefront Organic Extra Strong Bitter, and a gluten-free beer, Lakefront New Grist; and organic and biodynamic wines. (In a nutshell, Thyen explains, the biodynamic approach is a “whole-farm system that goes several steps beyond organic agriculture,” requiring detailed attention to the seasons, moon cycles, farm animals, and much more.)



When evening falls, Organic Orbit’s dining room becomes an oasis of eco-fine dining.

At 6 p.m., Organic Orbit turns into a fine-dining restaurant with white tablecloths, candlelight, soft music and a wine list that is on its way to becoming 100 percent organic and biodynamic. Dress is typical Boulder—casual to spiffy, as you wish. On Friday and Saturday nights the bar and restaurant hop with live acoustic music. Neutral colors and exposed ceiling pipes are warmed by a romantic burgundy curtain and chair cushions.

Thyen designed the restaurant to use green building materials: soapstone countertops, hemp drapes, wheatboard tables, reclaimed wood floors and cabinets, and low-volatility paint. The floor mats in the kitchen are made of reclaimed tires. To-go materials are compostable, recyclable and biodegradable, and the use of china dishes (even at lunchtime) helps reduce overall waste. According to the California environmental organization Sustainable Berkeley, “On average, one restaurant that implements fundamental ‘greening’ practices can divert 200 cubic yards of waste from the landfill; conserve 4,400 kilowatt hours of energy; and save more than 70,000 gallons of water while reducing costs by thousands of dollars each year.”

The Upside of Allergies

Thyen’s interest in wellness started at a young age, when the food allergies he had had since childhood led him to study health and nutrition in his 20s. He switched to an organic diet and his

health improved dramatically. It was his studies at the University of Denver, however, that set him on his path as a restaurateur.

"My family had a big manufacturing business," Thyen says, "and I grew up at the supper table with the idea of the power of big corporations in creating change. When I did my M.B.A. in marketing, I was perplexed that so much money was spent to promote things that weren't so good for you. I started thinking how cool it would be if it was spent on really good things that reconnected us to nature. And food is our primary connection with nature."

In the '90s, Thyen was making organic salads in his cabin in Evergreen and selling them out of the back of his Subaru. He realized he needed to reach a wider audience if he truly wanted to make a difference, so he opened the first Organic Orbit in Denver in 1998. He brought the concept to Boulder in March 2007.

Thyen's dinner menu showcases seasonal food, clean flavors and free-range proteins. Recent offerings included molasses pork tenderloin with Gruyère grits, braised collard greens, and caramelized pears (\$24); an upscale mac and cheese (\$9/\$16) with whole-wheat *chiocciola* (snail-shaped pasta) with Vella dry Jack cheese, shiitake mushrooms and truffle oil; a three-greens salad



After opening the first Organic Orbit in Denver in 1998, owner Phil Thyen, left, brought the concept to Boulder in March 2007. Right: Seared halibut with sweet corn succotash, pancetta-coriander vinaigrette, and sage garnish.



(\$9); and "Living Pizza," a vegan dish with a raw crust topped with basil pesto, cherry tomatoes, and Brazil nut cheese. It's \$9 for an appetizer-size portion.

Some favorites will likely appear on the menu over and over, as seasonality allows: a braised buffalo short rib, served with truffle whipped purple potatoes, wild mushrooms and cipollini onions (\$27); seared salmon with grilled frisée, butternut squash and butter-poached fingerling potatoes (\$22); and grilled polenta (\$19), a vegetarian dish with black bean mojo, avocado and a cilantro herb salad. The chocolate pot de crème (\$9), made with Dargoba organic chocolate and organic cream, is so popular that some diners order it every time they come in.

Sounds like eco-fine dining is one "trend" that's here to stay. ♦

Organic Orbit is at 1200 Yarmouth Ave., with the entrance on Broadway. It is open Tues-Sat from 10am-3pm for juice-bar services and lunch; 4-6pm for Happy Hour; and 6-10pm for dinner. 303-440-8348; www.organicorbit.com.

Kuvy Ax was born in Boulder, grew up in England, and now lives in Denver. She's been a foodie since she was old enough to play with the pots and pans in her mother's cupboard.

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