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The Rebirth of Root 66



Root 66 owner/chef/baker Jack Egber... and it's all vegan, too. (Kiley Larsen)

Vegetarians and vegans rejoice!

By Kiley Larsen

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With new ownership and a refreshed menu, nearly everyone should be able to find something delicious at Root 66 Vegan Café.

As I sat down to talk with owner Jack Egber, a guy who looks like a cross between Santa Claus and the guitarist from Lit (complete with braided goatee) pulled up in his pickup truck, a valid

question emerged as we watched customers continue to arrive well after the cafe had already closed for the weekend: Is there even any food left?

When most Santa Feans think of the famed Route 66 highway, plant-based food is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. The Egber family is changing that as they reboot **Root 66 Café (1704 Lena St., (505) 780-8249, Monday-Thursday 10 am-3 pm; Friday 9 am-3 pm)**, a vegan deli and bakery nestled amongst the eclectic offerings on Midtown's Lena Street.

Jack recently purchased the eatery with his parents, Andrew and Julie (who run the business side of things), from its previous owner after it closed during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Today, Egber's endless vegan ingenuity and self-taught baking skills are changing the story quickly.

Root 66 had its grand re-opening a little over a month ago, complete with a new vision and new menu. Monday through Thursday, you'll find a menu consisting of classic deli favorites, like an egg salad sandwich (\$12), which Egber has updated for modern times with silky tofu and seasoned to perfection with black salt and a flavor profile enough to fool even the most devout carnivore. While the egg salad is a great introductory point, Egber says the chickpea version (\$12) has been gaining popularity, perhaps because of the inclusion of fresh celery, carrots and cranberries that fit the fall season. Couscous with currants, pine nuts and parsley (\$4) is also an enjoyable dish, and the blueberries were extra plump in a delightful mixed berry salad (\$4) when I visited.

Egber bases menu selections around his true passion, which is baking. It's why the café was bustling when I stopped in on a Friday afternoon, the day each week that Root 66 focuses solely on baked goods sold under the moniker Jack's Magic Bakery. The menu includes items like rugelach, babka buns, Jerusalem Bagels and Jack's Magic Challah—the very bread that started Egber on his journey.

Originally from Los Angeles and vegan for many years, he'd originally wondered what foods he'd miss most by going plant-based. The only real answer was challah, a longtime tradition in the family. As Egber experimented with his recipe, a road trip to New Mexico inspired him to attend the Vallecitos Mountain Retreat Center in the Tusas Mountains west of Taos.

During his time at Vallecitos, Egber worked with head chef Katie Gall to hone his trade, and, when given the opportunity, whipped out his recipe for vegan challah on Friday nights. It proved an instant hit, and when a satisfied retreator hired him to cater a dinner for 40 people based on the challah alone, Egber knew he really had something.

Initially envisioning a catering business or food truck, he instead took a front-of-house role at Santa Fe's Chocolate Maven restaurant and bakery, learning another side of the restaurant business. When the moment came, though, the Egber family pounced at the opportunity to purchase Root 66 and keep the café's vegan origins intact.

One of the best parts of the revived café is Egber's commitment to keeping a rotating menu of flavors for the baked goods. Given that my visit came shortly before Halloween, the challah came in a pumpkin variety for the day. While planned as a one-time offering, it has already

proven popular enough to become a fall menu staple, and I say that as someone who gave up on the overdone gourd fad years ago. The delightfully fluffy bread is also available in a bite-sized variety (\$6).

Challah may be the introduction for Jack's Magic Bakery and Root 66, but the rest of the bakery menu deserves just as much attention. The rugelach (\$2.75 each, two for \$5, or six for \$12) is available in chocolate, with each layer superbly crunchy and just the right amount of sweet. My favorite, however, would have to be the Jerusalem Bagels (\$5), which are nothing like traditional bagels and instead come in an oblong shape and covered in a tahini sesame crunch; they will surely satisfy anyone who knows a good bagel requires a crisp outer layer.

Root 66 Café's desserts are also a must, with house-made peppermint patties (\$3 each or six for \$15) leading the way. Cool from the fridge with a delicious confectionary center, these things are enormous, and you'll never want another York version again. Plus, for all of the veg-head New Mexicans who can no longer eat grandma's lard-laden biscochitos, Jack's Magic Bakery has a buttery (but, like, not really butter) vegan variety (\$3 each or six for \$15). With the holidays coming soon, it would be wise to grab either dessert—and they're apparently selling out fast.

Not to leave our furry four-legged friends out of the party, Root 66 also features the Magic Barkery, inspired by family dog Coco. With baked treats featuring only a few ingredients, they are also another hot seller, and Egber notes there are a lot of owners with picky pooches saying the pint-sized cookies are the only thing their problem child will eat.

Root 66 is a welcomed addition to the small plant-based scene in Santa Fe, and vegans and vegetarians will rejoice at having such a stellar option for baked goods and deli offerings. For those who have been hesitant to try the lifestyle, here's a great first impression.



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Kiley Larsen is a culture writer constantly in search of the next great sandwich and indie album. When he's not digging through record crates, you can find him running Check This Out!, a twice-weekly music newsletter featuring reviews, commentary, and artist interviews.