

There's a little bit of everything at Angelou's Cafe & Grill

**DOWNTOWN EATERY
IS NOTHING FANCY,
BUT IT'S GOOD**

By Amy Pizarro

for the Mercury News

Cafe-style menus that seem to have it all leave me skeptical. Faced with Italian, American, Mexican, Indian and more, I wonder which cuisine a place really knows.

But it's hard to make a bad choice at Angelou's Cafe & Grill, a charming hole-in-the-wall diner in downtown San Jose that opened two years ago in the former home of Second Cup Coffee and Eatery. The small 20-seat cafe on Second Street off Santa Clara Street has a worn, comfy neighborhood feel and food that wins high points for freshness, variety and imagination.

Walk up to the counter to place your order. The menu hangs from the ceiling, and daily specials are laid out on plates, so you can see dishes exactly as they are served. There's a cold case for salads, fruits, yogurt and Jell-O, plus a full coffee station. Pick a seat with a view of the flat-screen TV, or sit by the picture window that overlooks a small park.

The menu's high points are the specials. Three new dishes are rolled out each week: an "Angelou's Taqueria" special, a broiler special, and an entree that often features chicken or pasta. One week I sampled the taco plate (\$7.25), three traditional street tacos served on a pretty hand-painted earthenware platter. I chose carnitas tacos, with juicy morsels tucked into the soft corn tortillas, along with fresh cilantro and a little hot sauce. The meat was nicely charred. I found the side of pinto beans a bit watery and bland (though my companion described them as "authentic"). However, the Spanish rice was fresh, fluffy and expertly seasoned, pack-

ANGELOU'S CAFE & GRILL

21 N. 2nd St., San Jose;
(408) 971-2287,
www.angelouscafeandgrill.com

Hours: Monday-Friday, 7 a.m.-4 p.m. Late-night snack taqueria on Fridays and Saturdays, 9 p.m.-3 a.m.

Types of food: Sandwiches, wraps, burritos, burgers, salads, breakfast and much more

Average price: \$7

Good choices: Chicken scampi, tacos

Attitude: Casual

Amenities: Free coffee with breakfast meals, free soda with lunch meals; outdoor seating

Vegetarian options: Salads, veggie burger, roasted veggie sandwich, quesadilla

Drinks: Coffee, soda, juice and tea

Eat in car: Maybe a wrap or burrito

Next-day edibility: My burrito and chicken scampi hold up nicely.

Who goes there: Neighborhood office workers, students

Credit cards: Accepted

Parking: On-street parking is metered; otherwise, there are several nearby garages. Validation provided for Third Street parking garage.

Restaurant reviews are conducted anonymously. The Mercury News pays for all meals.

ing a nice burst of heat.

On another visit, chicken scampi (\$7.50) was the entree special, and I'll confess that I'm a bit biased about this dish, since it tastes like my favorite childhood meal: mom's chicken and rice. In Angelou's hearty version, chunks of tender white-meat chicken are tossed with chopped tomato, diced mushrooms and squares of yellow onion in a lemon butter wine sauce. Ladled over

tender rice pilaf, this is pure comfort food. It came with a side of buttery julienned carrots, zucchini and yellow squash. I was impressed that my veggies weren't tossed into the saute pan until after I placed my order.

The regular menu has solid offerings as well. Try the delicious drive-in-style hamburger in the cheeseburger deal (\$7), a juicy third-pound patty topped with melted American cheese. It came dressed in mayo, ketchup and mustard, plus tomato slices and a tangle of shredded iceberg lettuce. The meal includes a clump of thin golden fries and a soft drink.

Those with a lighter appetite should check out the cold-case offerings. I enjoyed the soybean salad (\$2.25), in which tender beans are tossed in a light dressing of cilantro, soy sauce and sesame oil, and a bit of red pepper giving it a spicy kick. My friend fell in love with the housemade Manhattan clam chowder (\$3.25 small, \$4.50 large). The light herbed broth was chock-full of clams and potatoes.

There are many little extras at Angelou's. Burritos are served with three kinds of salsa: spicy orange, earthy dark red, and bright green with hints of lime and cilantro. A shabby-chic cabinet holds an overwhelming variety of hot sauces, mustards and other condiments. Paintings of the Angelou's storefront hang on the walls, and colorful mismatched plates and giant flying-saucer art deco lights give the place an eclectic feel.

And surprises seem to never end on the menu, which in recent weeks has featured eggplant curry, kalua pork, spaghetti Bolognese, paella, and barbecue chicken served with sweet baked beans and a slice of watermelon. Angelou's is a place where you can embrace the variety.