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RICE JOB

Farmers market favorite brings healthy bento boxes to new East Austin brick-and-mortar

By Brandon Watson Feb 12, 2018 | 3:57 pm



East Austin is about to get a fresher with the opening of Bento Picnic in Spring 2018. Photo by Andrew Reiner

Over the past few years, the East Austin dining scene has expanded to include everything from greasy burgers to upscale yakitori, but it hasn't exactly been a hub for customers looking for a quick, healthy meal. Now thanks to local entrepreneur Leanne Valenti, that may soon change.

Valenti announced on February 12 that she is expanding her popular Bento Picnic business to a full service brick-and-mortar. Like the catering, farmers market kiosks, and lunch delivery services the company currently offers, the shop will focus on meals designed around the traditional concept of washoku.

The term literally means "Japanese food," but there is a double meaning in the character "wa," which represents harmony. That is an apt description for a style of cuisine that not only balances flavors like salty and umami, but also takes great care in the presentation of each dish.

At Bento Picnic, this translates to colorful salads like the edamame garden bento full of guacamame (we bet you can guess what that is), greens, seasonal pickles, and Japanese pumpkin or the tofu rice bento with shredded carrot, organic kale, crispy shallots, quinoa sticky rice, and sesame tamari dressing.

The current menu offers several bento boxes along with a selection of add-ons like red bean jelly bars, miso soup, and honey butter cornbread. The new shop will also allow Valenti to expand her offerings to include curries, seasonal soups, and a greater selection of grab-and-go meals. The menu will accommodate a variety of specialty diets, from vegan to gluten-free to Whole 30. The cafe will also offer coffee and specialty teas as well as meal prep baskets.



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Moving into a renovated cottage at 2600 E. Cesar Chavez St. (the same address as healthy frozen food line Beetnik — although it is not clear if they will be taking over the space or sharing), the shop will operate between Monday-Thursday from 11 am-8:30 pm; and Friday and Saturday from 11 am-6 pm. Opening day is expected sometime in spring 2018.