

ENTERTAINMENT

Restaurant review: LJ's Deli melds old-school Marin with classic deli fare

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For some long-time county dwellers, it's not the hot tubs that stand out as a '70s memory but rather the powerfully impressionable flavor of the Subhut Special. I hadn't heard of this steeply stacked sandwich heaped with five meats, three cheeses, oil and balsamic vinegar, and the kick of hot chili peppers until I took a detour off the freeway for a visit to LJ's Deli, housed in a low-rise office park off Smith Ranch Road in San Rafael.

"People used to ride bikes here and bring their kids along," says LJ's co-owner Kaity Galvez. "It's a huge part of why my husband, Roberto, and I became interested in this cool, unique Marin thing."

Her mom happens to be one of those early bicycling fans and was in full support of her daughter and son-in-law purchasing the deli in August from L.J. Callan, who had owned it for 15 years. The original Sub Hut opened in 1969 and when Callan took over, he changed the name to L.J.'s Deli. At the height of popularity, there

I cannot comment on whether the LJ's version of this meaty goodness lives up to the idealized nostalgia, but with a 50th birthday in June, the Subhut special (\$8.95) has clearly reached sandwich icon status.

As for the other sandwiches on the menu, some are fairly standard issue — an assortment of Bordenave's breads and variety of deli meats, crisp iceberg lettuce and melted cheese if requested (which one should as a heated sandwich, as long as the bread stays out of the microwave, just makes it better).

In addition, there are a number of level-up gourmet options like sandwiches made with smoked chicken and hot tri tip from Lombardi's Gourmet BBQ in Petaluma. The bahn mi (\$9.95 and \$10.95) is my favorite of the bunch. Thinly sliced house-made lemongrass ginger sauce penetrates boneless chicken breast that melds into a toasted sweet roll spread with sriracha mayo. Crunchy cucumber rings, matchstick carrots and fresh cilantro create appealing texture and taste.

Dark rye bread swiped with house thousand island dressing wasn't substantial enough to handle the heft of lean corned beef, melted Swiss and moist sauerkraut on the Reuben (\$8.95). The combination has satisfying flavor but the sogginess detracts from this classic.

There's far more to explore on the menu aside from sandwiches. Galvez has updated the menu with healthier choices.

Soups (\$3.75) are prepared daily, and I can taste why these are wildly popular. We had rich, piping hot minestrone stocked with kidney beans, potatoes, serrated carrots, spinach leaves and penne pasta, topped with toasted croutons and melted cheese. The soups sell out so plan accordingly.

An extensive array of fresh salad fixings can be assembled into a specialty salad or made into a custom medley. House creations include taco and chef salads (\$9.95), chopped Italian (\$9.95), vegan (\$10.95), barbecued chicken ranch or chicken Caesar (\$11.95), chicken Cobb (\$12.95), Asian chicken (\$12.95) and even a Subhut salad with all the sandwich meats and cheeses on top of romaine lettuce (\$10.95).

Make-your-own salads start at \$9.95 and include spring mix or romaine lettuce and five veggies, fruits or nuts or both. A few premium add-on ingredients are extra, such as the Lombardi's tri tip (\$4) or chicken (\$3); a scoop of tuna, egg or chicken salad (\$3), avocado (\$1.75) and bacon (\$1.50). Dressings include house-made thousand island, balsamic vinaigrette, spicy Thai peanut and Caesar, all of

Ordering takes place at a counter on the deli side, with racks of chips, a refrigerator case of beverages with, at least for now, one bottled white wine (\$20), Lagunitas and Corona beer (\$4.50), and a coffee bar. Adjacent to it is an enclosed all-season patio hemmed in by a strip of trees with about a dozen wood plank tables with metal foundry chairs on a rough cement slab floor. Windows are set high above pale yellow cinder block walls and provide a scenic visual of open space above Lucas Valley in the distance. The patio is in the process of being updated and will include new light fixtures and a Marin-themed mural painted by a local artist.

Galvez says her pleasure is bringing people together in the area where she and her husband grew up and are now raising their own family. Her desire to establish and maintain connection is evident with friendly and accommodating service. This area is somewhat of a dining desert so the deli provides a good lunch option for classic deli and fresh healthy offerings that's also an easily accessible stop off the freeway.

Leanne Battelle is a freelance food writer. Send her an email at lj.battelle@gmail.com with your comments or restaurant recommendations. Or you can follow the Marin dining scene at [instagram.com/therealdealmarin](https://www.instagram.com/therealdealmarin).

LJ's Deli

Address: 4380 Redwood Highway, Suite B15, San Rafael

Phone: 415-479-8081

Website: ljsdeli.com

Cuisine: Deli specialties

Service: Counter

Noise level: Low

Liquor selection: Beer and wine

Corkage: N/A

Vegan dishes: Limited

Gluten-free selections: Yes

Parking: Free lot

Hours: 7:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays

Prices: \$10 and less

Reservations: N/A

Summary: Hardcore, meaty sandwich fans and homemade soup and salads are features of this casual deli stop on the freeway frontage road in northern San Rafael.

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