



Dining review: Improved offerings at Westroads' new Flagship Commons are tasty, trendy yet fairly cautious

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I spent my teenage years eating at the Westroads Mall food court. In those days, I put away a lot of fries and milkshakes from Burger King and smoothies from Orange Julius.

The teenagers who now populate the mall's new and improved food hall — **Flagship Commons**, which opened Dec. 29 — will have an entirely different set of memories than I do, ones populated with foods much trendier than a frothy orange drink or a fast food fry.

Flagship Commons serves a wide array of food, including tacos, ramen, pizza, rice bowls, sushi, burgers, falafel and salads. I tried every restaurant in the hall over the course of three visits.

It's worth noting that the place gets packed over the lunch hour, and even with the crowds, we often got our food in fewer than 10 minutes. It took us longer to find a place to park than it did for us to order and get our meal.

Across the board, dishes were well-executed and tasty.

But there's also some similarity between the new food hall and the food court of yore: There's nothing that pushes the city's food scene forward. The food is good, but it's also safe.

I'll admit, I wished for, perhaps, a Korean barbecue concept, or a Chinese soup dumpling concept, or a South American arepas stand, because those are things I've eaten at other food halls around the country in the past year, and those are foods that Omahans don't yet get to experience. A food hall seems like the perfect breeding ground for such creativity.

Tony Gentile, head chef for Flagship Restaurant Group, said Flagship Commons was developed in tandem with Westroads Mall officials, so the approach was somewhere in between a traditional mall food court and a food hall designed for gourmand, adventurous eaters.

“We didn’t want it being too scary for a certain demographic,” he said. “But we wanted to push the envelope.”

He and Flagship Chief Operating Officer Anthony Hitchcock cited a few examples of that envelope-pushing: a variety of pizza that’s new to Omaha, one of its first ramen shops and one of its only make-your-own-salad spots.

The rest of the food hall caters to the less adventurous, and also to the more than 500 employees at Westroads who want things like burgers and tacos on their breaks.

The hall itself is wonderfully designed. Each restaurant has its own branding and signage, and the storefronts are varied. Juan Taco has a shiny Airstream trailer worked into the front of its counter. There’s a stand-alone bar on one end next to Aromas, the coffee shop. Blatt has its counter as well as an enclosed area with the same design and full-service, larger menu as the other two Blatt restaurants in Omaha.

The main seating area has lots of different styles of seating: high- and low-top tables, couches and chairs. I saw retirees next to teenagers, families next to couples in their 20s and 30s.

The bar, which serves wine, beer and a list of craft cocktails, including a tasty version of a Moscow Mule, is a popular spot for dads and husbands waiting for the women in their life to finish shopping. Aromas, too, was popular with mall-goers who weren’t eating full meals, and the thing to get here is the cold brew on a nitro tap, which has the creaminess of a stout beer but the caffeine kick of a coffee. Aromas’ baked goods also looked popular.

Perhaps the surprise favorite of what I tried are the customizable rice bowls at Yum Roll, which also serves sushi.

I had brown rice topped with lemongrass chicken, sweet chili Brussels sprouts, Korean barbecue sauce, spicy Korean slaw and fried shallots. The protein-vegetable-sauce choices are vast, but the dish is still approachable. I liked mine a lot, with its mix of flavors and textures. There’s also a full list of sushi rolls at the stand, and I tried two nigiri, one salmon and one yellowtail, which were fine. But I’d go for the bowl again.

Yoshi-Ya Ramen is serving the Japanese broth and noodle bowls in their purest form, a classic Tonkotsu ramen, a good choice especially after I heard the people waiting in line asking questions. And though I’ve eaten a lot of more creative ramen, I had no complaints.

A combination chicken and pork broth had a savory, silky texture. It came topped with a classic combination of a soy marinated half egg, sliced pork belly, marinated bamboo

shoots, sprouts and green onions — all topping kinky, al dente noodles. An order of pork pot stickers had a slightly spicy filling and a nicely crisp-tender wrapper.

I'm familiar with the offerings at Amsterdam Falafel, which has a location in Dundee and another in downtown Lincoln. Amsterdam has a few newer items, though, and we sampled one, the spicy falafel. It was spicier, but had the familiar toppings between grilled flatbread: garlic and herb sauces, hummus, cabbage slaw. The curry fries were as good as ever.

Fries at Blatt were standout, too. Skin on, hot and super crisp. The jalapeño Polish sausage, one of the sausage choices for the Blattwurst sandwich, was great. Meaty and spicy with a definite kick, it comes topped with tangy kraut on a soft pretzel bun.

Juan Taco serves small tacos, quesadillas and chips and salsa, among other Mexican street food. Pork carnitas and beef carne asada fared better than the chicken, which tasted dry inside a taco. The fried fish inside the fish taco wasn't as flavorful, either, though a smear of chipotle mayo was good. Hitchcock said the chicken is a work in progress, with plans for change.

Two dining partners preferred the cheesier quesadilla over the tacos. Two small sides of salsa were highlights: a green made with roasted jalapeños and garlic emulsified with olive oil, and a kickier brownish-red made from charred tomatoes.

We got two big slabs of rectangular pizza from Weirdough, which turned out to be enough pizza to feed a small family. We liked the crispness of a made-to-order slice more than the pre-made one from under a heat lamp.

The style of pizza, called pizza taglio, is popular in Rome, and it's got a thick, bread-like crust. The Butcher, one of the pre-made slices, came topped with an acidic red sauce, mozzarella and a variety of meats, including tender prosciutto, soppressata and mortadella salamis. I really liked the made-to-order Pistachio slice, topped with pungent chèvre, crushed pistachios, red onion, spicy arugula and ricotta salata. I appreciated the originality of the toppings.

I stood in line at Clever Greens with seven other women also waiting to make their own salads or order pre-made ones; the one I tried, Inside Artichoke, came with artichokes, feta, charred red onion, garbanzo beans, tomatoes and a blend of romaine and arugula. I especially liked the lemon tahini dressing made in house. Would I order it again? Maybe.

But there are more exciting choices at Flagship Commons than a salad. To me, Clever Greens feels like the spot that could have been something more adventurous.

Flagship Commons is certainly an upgrade over the kind of food court we've come to expect. The ingredients and quality of the food, and the execution at each spot, are great, and if I lived or worked near Westroads, I'd find myself there often.

Without the new concepts I hoped for, though, I'm less sure when I might return. For adventurous eaters, the food hall might in some ways come off as bland.

Flagship Commons

Address: 10000 California St., inside Westroads Mall

Phone: 402-932-9993

Website: flagshipcommons.com

Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 9 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Hits: A rice bowl from Yum Roll was the surprise hit. Other tasty bites: the classic ramen at Yoshi-Ya, the spicy falafel at Amsterdam and the jalapeño Polish sausage at Blatt.

Misses: A fried fish taco from Juan Taco fell flat, and a \$10 salad from Clever Greens was nothing special.

Drinks: Each restaurant has its own signature drink, and there is a bar with cocktails, wine and beer. Soda, water and other nonalcoholic drinks are available. Aromas serves a full coffee menu.

Prices: A wide range: a slice of pizza will run \$4.50, but I spent upwards of \$20 on a bowl and some nigiri from Yum Roll.

Noise level: Noisy, especially during peak times like the noon hour.



http://www.omaha.com/go/dining/dining-review-improved-offerings-at-westroads-new-flagship-commons-are/article_18ae4007-ddbc-5d52-a330-714251aaf590.html