

Shopping Fuel

The H.G. Hills Center's four food sources provide fodder for holiday shoppers

By Kay West • Photos by Matthew H. Starling • November 1, 2007

The closing of the homegrown H.G. Hill grocery store on Hillsboro Road in the fall of 2005 sent many native Nashvillians into mourning, and the subsequent razing of it and the strip center it anchored left a desolate landscape in the heart of Green Hills. Jimmy Granbery, a native himself and CEO of H.G. Hill Realty Company, felt the pain, but knew that the ultimate realization of the grand vision of a “mixed-use lifestyle center” would be so transformational that all would be forgiven.

In the spring of 2006, the company confirmed rumors that the first Whole Foods Market in Middle Tennessee would anchor one end of Hill Center, joyous news for anyone who has shopped a Whole Foods in another city. A few months later, other tenants who'd



California Pizza Kitchen

(All Photos by Matthew H. Starling.)

signed a lease in the \$70 million development were revealed. Stylish ears perked up at the promise of Anthropologie, Francesca's, West Elm and The First Resort. But it was California Pizza Kitchen and Pei Wei Asian Diner that in the long, hot, dry summer of '07 drew curious neighborhood residents to the construction zone at dusk, cautiously picking their way through unpaved streets and unfinished sidewalks, peering behind plywood boards covering storefronts.

California Pizza Kitchen, or CPK as it's familiarly known, officially opened its doors on Sept. 1, and the mass of humanity queued from the door a good 50 feet down the sidewalk would suggest they were giving away the pies. Company officials say it was one of the biggest opening days ever, sustaining a Nashville tradition of fervidly supporting out-of-town behemoth chains like Cheesecake Factory and P.F. Chang's.

Speaking of P.F. Chang's, two weeks after CPK fired up their pizza oven, Pei Wei put their huge woks over open flame and began stirring up their signature menu of Pan Asian-American favorites. Think of Pei Wei (rhymes with "pay way") as P.F. Chang's Express, and indeed, the wildly popular Minced Chicken Lettuce Wraps lead off the Pei Wei menu, providing a touchstone of familiarity from the parent company.

With the holiday season officially kicking into gear, shoppers can happily spend an entire day—and a great deal of their credit limit—at Hill Center loading bags with gifts for family and friends, with personal fueling available at four options for dining. Here's what to expect at each.

Since its founding in Beverly Hills in 1985, California Pizza Kitchen has opened more than 200 stores, as well as introduced a line of frozen pizzas, which means Nashvillians have been pulling CPK

pizzas from home ovens for several years.

With brand loyalty established, CPK at Hill Center was a slam dunk from the day it opened, and even 220 seats—at tables and booths in an open dining room that wings left and right from the entrance, and at a circular bar that overlooks the open kitchen—doesn't alleviate a wait that can range from 15 minutes to more than an hour. In the first few weeks, service, though well-intended, was spotty and confused, an unfortunate first impression. To their credit, mishaps were promptly addressed by management and one hopes the issue will resolve itself as staff gets more experience under their black aprons.

CPK made its mark by eschewing traditional pepperoni, sausage and mushroom pizzas (though they are available) for more exotic toppings, with the crust a blank canvas for impressionist, realist and abstract compositions. Considered quite revolutionary at the time, the approach is more common now, but CPK retains its forerunner reputation with 32 pizzas on the menu, including six Neapolitan. Leading off is the one that started it all, the Original BBQ Chicken Pizza, which substitutes a sweet barbecue sauce for tomato sauce, scattering the pie with chunks of barbecue chicken, sliced red onion and smoked gouda and mozzarella cheese. The result executes the general concept behind all of the wacky combos—to create a pizza that mimics another dish. Thus, there is the BLT pizza, which to a bacon-and-cheese-topped hearth-baked crust adds shredded lettuce and diced tomato tossed in mayo. (“This tastes like a sandwich,” said my son. Exactly.) The California Club adds chicken and sliced avocados to the BLT. The Greek—with a foundation of Mediterranean-spiced grilled chicken—is topped with a Greek salad. The Shrimp Scampi slides a pizza crust under this classic Italian dish, the Mango Tandoori does the same for the traditional Indian clay-baked chicken, as does the Carne Asada for the carnivore's favorite Mexican specialty.

CPK offers standard or honey wheat dough, which has a touch of sweet if that's your predilection. The six Neapolitan pizzas are thin and crispy discs which shimmy under the weight of just one or two toppings. In fact, all of the 26 pizzas can be ordered Neapolitan-style, but that would definitely require the use of a fork lift. The best Neapolitan is the simple Margherita—Roma tomatoes, basil, mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses.

It must be noted that CPK pizzas are just 9", slightly larger than individual pan pizzas in other restaurants; the four teenage boys with me made such quick work of the two placed before them they might as well have been appetizers.

The rest of the menu is a voluminous repertoire of dishes that traverse cultures and cuisines in quixotic fashion: Tuscan hummus, Singapore shrimp rolls, Adobe chicken chowder, chicken Marsala, Thai curry noodles, chicken tequila fettuccine, jambalaya, and, oddest of all, Kung Pao spaghetti. Diners looking for something light can turn their attention to salad, being cautious of add-ons and heavy dressings. The best we sampled was the newly added Miso—a fresh plate of chilled shredded Napa cabbage, avocado, cucumbers, daikon, edamame beans, carrots, green onions, cilantro and crispy rice noodles tossed in a tangy Miso dressing.

CPK has a full bar, super-sized desserts, and offers curbside service from the adjacent parking garage; be sure to check your bag for incomplete orders before driving off.

Pei Wei Asian Diner, one brand-new block away, is so user-friendly they do everything but hand-feed customers. The fast-casual-style room is warmed by a rich red floor, gleaming wood tables, upholstered banquettes and booths, black chairs and Venetian blinds.

Two separate well-marked entrances guide diners to two options—take-away or dine in. Flanking the aisle that leads to the dine-in counter, frequently occupied by a fast-moving line, is the menu printed on large panels; another is on the wall over the take-away area. Orders are efficiently taken by helpful counter workers. Take-away customers will receive a wand to indicate when their order is ready—ten minutes has been the maximum even on a busy Saturday night—and a cup for a complimentary drink while waiting. Dine-in diners also receive beverage cups to fill, and then take a seat either inside or on a small patio to await the speedy delivery of their meal.

Though the Pei Wei menu is streamlined, certainly in comparison to CPK, it purports to cover Thailand, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and China. Indeed, there are dishes representative of all those countries—Pad Thai, lo mein noodles, udon noodles, Mandarin kung pao, teriyaki bowl and Vietnamese salad rolls, for example. Seven noodle and rice bowls and 11 signature dishes are prepared with your choice of chicken, beef, pork, shrimp, scallops or vegetables and tofu. The scallops don't hold up well under the fast stir-fry and high heat, but all of the add-ins were generously portioned and well-seasoned, though even the ones labeled spicy were not so much. Vegetables were less of a presence on the plate than one expects from this style of cooking; the shiitake mushrooms, caramelized onion, baby spinach and Napa cabbage in the udon noodle dish were as scant as garnish. On the other hand, the Blazing Noodles were chock full of sugar snap peas, carrot coins and long strips of scallion. Oil is disbursed with a heavy hand, but customers looking to cut down on fat can order any dish “stock velveted,” which means it's cooked in stock instead, which in many cases enhances the flavor. Other light and very tasty options are the Asian chopped chicken salad and the Vietnamese chicken salad rolls, which wraps shredded chicken, lettuce, mint, carrot, rice noodles and chopped peanuts (a cautionary asterisk might be added to this) in rice paper, three to a

serving.

Pei Wei has wine and beer, with dessert in the form of cheery fortune cookies (“Doors will be opening for you in many areas of your life”—always good to hear!).

Already familiar to Nashvillians, Zoe’s Kitchen, the very successful Greek-influenced fresh food café specializing in chicken and salads, has moved from its original Hillsboro Road location to larger and brighter digs on the corner opposite Pei Wei.

And finally, for its part, with 47,000 square feet, Whole Foods will require multiple visits to uncover all that’s offered under its roof, but look for a 4,000-square-foot produce department, fresh seafood deliveries five days a week, in-house smoked meats, a dry-aged meat case, fresh-baked artisan breads, pastries, cakes and cupcakes, a house-made gelato bar, a coffee and espresso bar, more than 100 selections of beer, a carving station with prime rib, pork roast and other meats, 75-plus chef-prepared foods on the salad and hot bar, and a 24-seat bistro counter with an emphasis on seafood. Seating will be available on the main floor as well as the second floor, which is also the location for the Whole Foods cooking school.

As if anyone in Green Hills will ever need to cook again.

