

dining HOPE PHILBRICK

Atlantic Station café might cure what ails diners sick of hoity-toity elegance or greasy drive-throughs.

South Pacific in Atlantic

IT'S TELLING THAT THE MAJORITY OF diners wandering into the new Tahitian Noni Café in Atlantic Station on a Friday evening are carrying bags of shoes. This is a restaurant shoppers enter for its convenient location. The food satisfies hunger but seems unlikely to elevate the restaurant to a destination in its own right.

Of course there is a need for decent food served fast. What distinguishes Tahitian Noni Café from its competitors in this growing restaurant niche is not its food, but the novelty of its namesake plant.

Noni fruit is green, knotty, about the size of a potato and found only in the South Pacific. High in antioxidants, it supposedly offers health benefits like strengthening immunity, supporting digestion and increasing energy. If this place attracts any regular customers, they'll be those seeking its exotic juices and teas.

The atmosphere is welcoming but can't shake that franchise feeling. High ceilings, exposed ducts, plastic fixtures, wooden floors, bright lights and a citrus color scheme achieve an industrial-meets-tropical look. The result is attractive, even familiar — though this is the first location in Atlanta and only one of three in the nation.

A short line at the counter necessitates a brief wait. Ah, but what to eat? One week after the grand opening, menus are scarce. Clearly there are plans to post one: a blank wooden base hangs overhead. The cashier distributes menu copies then walks away. Decisions are made by the time she returns.

Some take their order to go; most eat in then rush to a nearby store or movie theater. There's typically a line at the cashier station, but tables never fill to capacity and turn relatively quickly. Finding a clean table is a challenge and just one of several missteps.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES' WAIT, NONI Lemonade (\$3) arrives first in an insulated glass. It's refreshing with an unusual tinge of spice. A gentle reminder yields delivery of the two-ounce noni juice shot (listed at \$3.25 but charged at \$2.20) in a festive tiki vessel.

A friendly server advises that the bitter juice of the Polynesian noni fruit is best consumed in one gulp. Those who sip the stuff, he says, rarely finish it. I manage but don't want more, despite the health claims listed on table cards.

Appetizers and entrées arrive together in a parade of square plates and oval bowls. Avoid the Tahitian Crab Cakes (\$5.95). Mostly breadcrumbs with essence of crab, they're fried and seem out of place on a menu touted as healthy. The accompanying Remoulade sauce is yummy, though the menu promises tropical salsa.



The corporate atmosphere at Tahitian Noni Café complements the high style of Atlantic Station, but several missteps make the experience less than perfect.

I order and pay for Tahitian Salad (\$5.95) but get Tahitian Crab Cake Salad (\$8.95). Tossing aside the disappointing cakes, the greens and vegetables are crisp and fresh. Unique elements are mango pieces and delicious noni orange lemon dressing.

The Polynesian Chicken Pita (\$6.95) is missing its peanut sauce. The rubbery pita detracts from the straightforward pleasant taste of the tender chicken.

Polynesian Pizza (\$8.95) has a soggy white-bread flavored crust. I can't determine if it includes the advertised macadamia nuts. Its mild flavors and lukewarm temperature remind me of childlike taste preferences.

AFTER WAITING IN LINE TO ORDER Banana Noni Crepes (\$4.95), I learn that most desserts aren't available due to a missing cream delivery. Sitting in plastic wrap under a bright light, the assorted pastries (\$1.25 to \$4.95) look sad and unappetizing.

Hot drinks, then. Another long wait. T'espresso Mocha (\$3.95) is sickly sweet. I order T'espresso Latte (\$3.95) but receive T'espresso Chai (\$3.95). A happy accident. The Noni leaf tea flavored with spiced milk and foam is the best taste of the evening.

The diverse crowd looks comfortable. But eavesdrop on a few conversations and hear enthusiastic talk about new shoes, not the food.

i FOOD FILE

Tahitian Noni Café

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Food: ★★☆☆☆
Service: ★★☆☆☆
Comfort and Aesthetics: ★★☆☆☆
Value: ★★☆☆☆
Scene: ★★☆☆☆