

Eat up Jacqui Taffel

Meet, no meat

Sit, select and reminisce in a vegetarian place of long standing.

Green Gourmet

115 KING STREET,
NEWTOWN, 9519 5330.

Open seven days noon-
3pm, Mon-Thu and Sun
6-10pm, Fri-Sat 6-11pm.

Tried nori tofu roll
\$13.80, mushroom steak
\$14.80, taro fish \$13.80,
Lion King's clay pot
\$14.80, rice for five
\$7.50, tea for five \$9,
fried tofu ice-cream
\$4.20, mango pudding
\$5.20, lotus seed
dumpling \$5.20.

Bottom line for five

\$88.30

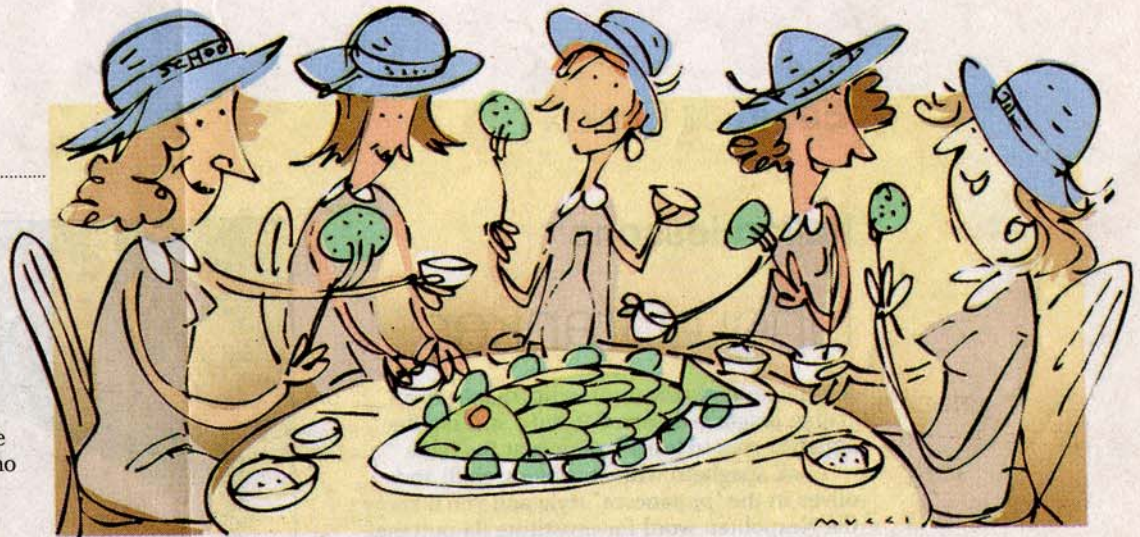
Illustration: Michael Mucci

A 20-year school reunion is always worth mulling over, so after the main event, five of us regroup at the Green Gourmet in Newtown for a good old mull. Who looks different? Hardly anyone, we agree. Who has how many kids? Who has moved to Auckland or France or Hervey Bay? What happened to the temp teacher with the tight trousers and bad breath? How young do we look in those year 7 photos? And why hasn't classmate Nicole Kidman turned up?

To discuss these important questions, we install ourselves in a back corner of the restaurant, chosen because one of us is vegetarian. The Green Gourmet is a well-established vego hang after seven years of serving up meat- and dairy-free Chinese food.

It's also the perfect spot to spend a leisurely, gossipy evening. The room is casual and cheery, with simple wooden tables; the noise level is lively but there's no need to shout. The service is at times a little too "organic" (ordering dessert took several attempts) but it leaves us free to linger. And the "alcohol-free environment" doesn't worry us - we've known each other too long to need any social lubricants.

We wet our throats with Chinese tea and water, though other drinks sound interesting, such as icy young coconut and fresh mint drink or yarrow tea (that helps with internal bleeding and hemorrhoids).



Many dishes on the vegan menu masquerade as meat. "We have trouble giving that up," our vegetarian says.

We order hot and spicy mushroom steak, taro fish with mushroom sauce and Lion King's clay pot, a version of Shanghai meatballs made with taro, mushroom and water chestnut.

The mushroom steak uncannily resembles beef, with a zippy, peppery sauce and bright green, crunchy gai lan. Classic comfort food, the "meat" balls look just like meatballs, resting on a raft of undisguised vegetables - shiitake mushroom, baby corn, asparagus - in a hearty sauce.

The least successful meat impostor is the taro fish. It looks wonderful, a fish shape fried golden and served in slices on a cucumber wave, but the taro mixture is heavy and gluggy.

Steamed nori tofu roll, a dish without meat pretensions, is one of the best - closer to fish than the

taro version and surprisingly flavoursome with a subtle combination of ginger, coriander and soy.

Between courses, the talk turns to anxiety dreams, the naked-in-public variety. One of us, always well-dressed, has her own version - she's walking down the street, fully and stylishly clothed, except for a pair of huge, fluffy, pink slippers. What does it all mean? Time for dessert.

The lotus seed coconut dumplings are wonderfully dense, gooey but not sticky, with a peanut-buttery paste inside. In contrast, the jelly-like mango pudding is delicately slippery, with creamy mango-flavoured tofu ice-cream. The deep-fried tofu ice-cream ball doesn't last long either.

Stomachs full, conversation exhausted, we get a photo taken for posterity and shuffle out, the last to leave. It's early for Newtown, 11.30pm on a Saturday, but all that food and nostalgia needs to be digested and we're not schoolgirls any more. Thank goodness.