ROB YAFFE

RI vegetarian restaurant and cafe owner was a true culinary trailblazer

Remembering



Rob Yaffe opened Garden Grille, the Pawtucket restaurant, in 1996. He also opened Wildflour Vegan Bakery and Cafe in 2010 where this photo was taken. KRIS CRAIG/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL FILE

Gail Ciampa Providence Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

When Rob Yaffe died earlier this month, Rhode Island lost a true culinary trailblazer. His Garden Grille restaurant in Pawtucket wasn't the first vegetarian restaurant to open in the state, but it was the longestrunning and still going strong when he died on Feb. 12.

● Yaffe was about as close as you get to a vegetarian aristocracy. ● Yaffe recalled his grandmother, Reggie Jaffe, who became a vegetarian back in the

1940s while practicing yoga and meditation. In 1982, he and his mother, Erna Yaffe, opened The Golden Sheaf on Wickenden Street in Providence. It was a vegetarian and natural foods market. He added the Beach Cafe inside in 1990. ● He was also the owner of the neighboring Wildflour Vegan Bakery and Cafe (both straddle the Providence line at 727 East Ave. in Pawtucket). The bakery, which opened in 2010, offers vegan pastries and has a juice "farmacy" with fresh pressed juices, smoothies, shakes and freshly made wheatgrass shots. ● He ventured west to Broadway in Providence in 2013 to open and run The Grange with a plant-based menu, seasonally-inspired and starring organically and locally grown vegetables. It operated for nine years before closing in 2022.

'If you give people flavor, they don't care if it's vegetarian'

Yaffe was not preachy but he did have a mantra. "If you are what you eat, you want to a put a food's energy into your body," he said.

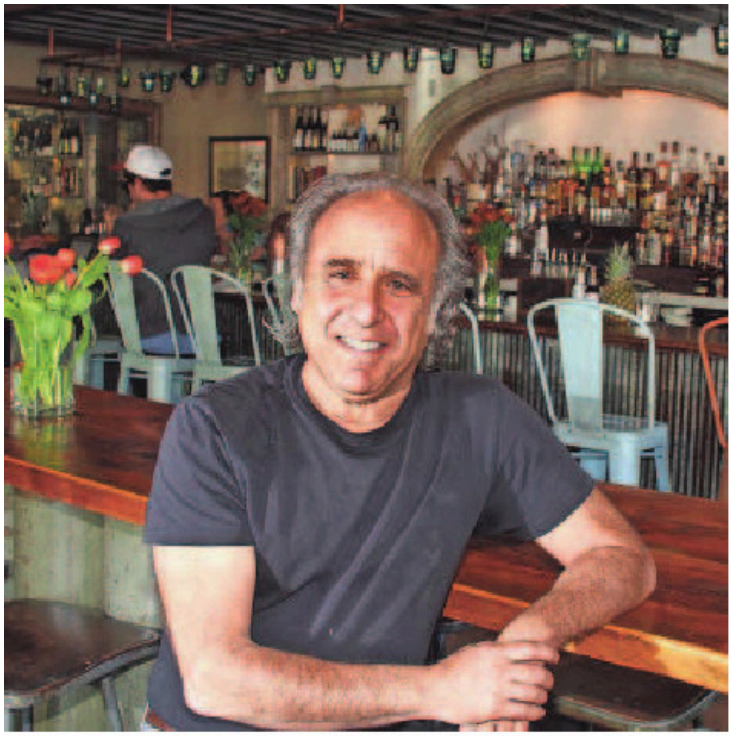
He was adamant that his food not be dull.

"We don't want to be boring," he said. "We want food to be delectable."

He was also a good and thoughtful neighbor, lending support to a variety of causes over the years including the Southside Community Land Trust and the Pawtucket Soup Kitchen. He supported the urban agriculture movement with an annual Table to Farm event. He participated in nutrition lecture series with cooking demos.

Advertisement

Ten years ago he promoted “an environment of connection,” offering 10% off a dining bill for (Un)Mobile Mondays – Leave your phones at the host stand, get a discount off your bill, and enjoy a device-free evening out. Yaffe, 70, was born in Miami and grew up in Fall River. Raw juice bars were his introduction to healthy eating. He recalled them as a 1950s-era trend, especially in California and Florida.



Rob Yaffe opened The Grange on Broadway in Providence in 2013. It had a nine- year run before closing in 2022. SANDOR BODO/THE PROVIDENCE JOURNAL FILE

“I was three or four when my grandmother took us around to juice bars. She was a raw foods vegetarian in the ‘40s and ‘50s. “She was an extremist. She had a spiritual teacher in India . . . she was into meditation,” Yaffe told The Journal.

Yaffe’s grandmother and mother were on the cutting edge with their lifestyle choices, he said. When he opened Garden Grille, his overwhelming demographic was women. Maybe 15% of his diners were vegetarian. By the time the restaurant was 25 years old, he estimated that 30% of his diners were committed to a plant-based diet.

Today’s plant-based diets are mainstream, both men and women, young and old subscribe to them whether for their health, animal or climate concerns or simply personal preference.

As for his early menus, Yaffe said the secret was to give the food “a familiar structure with a new content,” including soy substitutes. That meant meatless meatloaf and meat-free chicken nuggets. Not only did the dishes have the names of meat right there next to the vegetarian or vegan description, but the grilled vegetarian “chicken” wrap looked like a chicken sandwich. Burgers and even cutlets were made of vegetarian ingredients, but they still look like burgers and cutlets.

Advertisement

He touted the fact the food didn’t have all the cholesterol and fat of meat.

Today’s plant-based menus have moved toward farm-fresh foods.

But there’s one thing that never changed in Yaffe’s mind.

“If you give people flavor, they don’t care if it’s vegetarian,” he said.

Business will continue as is at the Garden Grille and Wildflour under culinary director Jon Dille and Deanna Lockard, director of operations.

Copyright © 2025 The Providence Journal 2/26/2025
Use of this site signifies your agreement to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.
Copyright © 2025 The Providence Journal 2/26/2025
Use of this site signifies your agreement to the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.
Powered by TECNAVIA