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Quick Bites

JULIO DIAZ • JDIAZ@PNJ.COM • APRIL 23, 2008

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The lunchtime choices downtown are much better these days with the recent addition of Hopjacks Pizza Kitchen & Taproom and Jordan Valley Cafe.

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Hopjacks, in the old Margarita's space at 10 S. Palafox Place, opened a couple of months ago, but I finally got my first chance to check it out last week. What I found was an exciting pizza menu with dozens of toppings to choose from and unique specialty pies.

The pizza I had was fantastic. Generously topped with feta cheese, spinach and red onions, it stood toe-to-toe with some of the best pizzas in the area.

The menu is filled out by an interesting array of salads and appetizers. I've been hearing raves about the Belgian Fries, cooked in duck fat and served with a roasted garlic dipping sauce. And beer fans will love the extensive beer list.

Hopjacks is open until 2:30 a.m. daily, and is a great place to hang out for drinks and a bite, even into the wee hours.

Check out www.hopjacks.com for more information.

Jordan Valley Cafe opened this week at 128 S. Palafox Place, the former home of Lucci's Pizza, and is winning raves around the news- room for its Middle Eastern food.

I got a taste of the stuffed grape leaves yesterday, a delicacy I'd never tried. They're filled with rice and seasoned with lemon juice for a unique flavor. I'm looking forward to going back and checking out other choices, including falafel, humus and baba ghanoush.

Vegetarians, the menu is filled with great choices for you. But never fear, carnivores, you have plenty of choices, too, including shish kabobs and beef kibbi.

For details, call 607-2780.

Foodies will flock to Orange Beach, Ala., for the return of the Southern Breeze Wine and Culinary Festival. Set for May 2 through 4 at The Wharf, the festival is one of the Gulf Coast's premier culinary events.

This year's event features a wine dinner at Villaggio Grille with celebrity chef Tim Creehan and Villaggio's Brody Olive; the Gulf Coast Chef Challenge, where chefs compete for the title of Orange Beach's Top Chef; Saturday's Grand Wine Tasting with as many as 200 wines; a "Walkabout Brunch" on Sunday featuring 10 to 12 restaurants; seminars and more.

For tickets and details, visit www.southernbreeze.com/winefest.

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