

I Ordered the Whole Menu at

PROTEIN BAR

BY JEFF RUBY

Now that my bench-pressing days are ancient history, the idea of obsessing over how much protein I eat is filed away in some dusty corner of my brain between *America's Funniest Home Videos* and slap bracelets. But Chicagoans far fitter than I am swear by Protein Bar & Kitchen, the locally born fast-casual empire with 13 area outlets. In the spirit of sorta healthy eating, I wanted to see if their dishes are more than just nutrient delivery vehicles. So one afternoon I went to the Michigan Avenue location, ordered one of *everything*—40 items in total—had the food delivered to this magazine's offices, and locked myself in a conference room until I'd tried every dish. Hundreds of grams of protein and a metric ton of quinoa later, I can give you this unvarnished review.



THE GOOD

1 SPICY KOREAN BOWL
"Spicy" may be a stretch (get that kitchen some gochujang, stat!), but I liked the straightforward Korean flavors: tender caramelized beef, crisp cucumber wedges, sharp pickled carrots, and fresh spinach leaves—plus quinoa, of course. \$10

2 SPINACH AND PESTO BAR-RITO
Moist cubes of all-natural chicken mingle with nut-free pesto, creamy Parmesan, and quinoa filler in a brawny, lightly grilled low-carb tortilla. It doesn't taste healthy, and I mean that in the best way. \$8

3 VEGGIE CHILI
Greek yogurt—the probiotic workhorse of health food—lends richness and depth to an already flavorful bowl of chili stocked with zucchini, carrots, cauliflower, and various other denizens of the garden. \$4

4 WRIGLEY PEELED SMOOTHIE
Thick with peanut butter, banana, chocolate, and agave nectar, the Wrigley Peeled gleefully erases the line between smoothie and milkshake. Wince-y name, clever brew. \$6

5 KALE CAESAR SALAD
A generous allocation of sliced chicken is flanked by vitamin-rich avocado slices, finely chopped kale, and crouton-like Parmesan crumbles, for lots of texture and crunch. Bonus points for the heady Caesar dressing made with Greek yogurt. \$10

FOOD STYLING BY MICHAEL DEUSON



THE BAD

6 BEAUTY BREW SHAKE
This coagulated iced coffee sludge features tantalizing ingredients such as collagen peptides, espresso whey protein, and bubbles big enough to bear their own ZIP codes. \$8

BROWNIE (not pictured) More brick than brownie, this blunt mass has a skeezy, grainy texture and almond slivers that resemble fingernail clippings. \$4

7 STEAKHOUSE RANCH BAR-RITO
An oppressive beast stuffed with chewy beef, black beans, blue cheese, and a gloppy Greek yogurt ranch dressing. Not worth the 720 calories. Or the \$10.

THE UGLY

8 MEXICALI BOWL
If the road to hell is paved with good intentions, its ditches overflow with chipotle yogurt. The stuff is so liberally applied here that it annihilates the avocado, kale, and cheddar, merging with the tomatillo-lime sauce to create something unholy. \$9

9 BAJA GUAC SALAD
Stale blue tortilla chips, mountains of guacamole (yes, there is such a thing as too much), and a bunch of lettuce slicked with cilantro-lime vinaigrette. Maybe just skip the Mexican food. \$10