


Essence Bakery Cafe, 4.5 stars


by Nikki Buchanan - Dec. 23, 2009 02:42 PM
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 Essence Bakery Cafe

Cuisine: French-inspired American food, Mediterranean specialties, French pastries and American baked goods.

Hours: 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays-Fridays, 8 a.m.-3 p.m. Saturdays.

Details: 825 W. University Drive, Tempe. 480-966-2745, essencebakery.com.

Rating: 

Price: Under \$20.

At her light-filled, green-designed Essence Bakery Café, chef-owner Eugenia Theodosopoulos preaches the gospel of local-seasonal-organic as well as anyone I know.

She buys produce from Bob McClendon, grass-fed beef from Power Ranch and olive oil from Queen Creek Olive Mill, all the while baking her own breads, making otherworldly desserts and bestowing each dish with the small flourishes that demonstrate her culinary training at Ecole Lenôtre in Paris.

It's astonishing, really, to find food of this caliber at such reasonable prices - not because it's so la-ti-da (it isn't) but because it manages to be simple but sophisticated, healthy but decadent all at once. The sautéed mushrooms that accompany the Big Breakfast, for example, are deglazed with white wine, while uniformly wonderful homemade soups (sweet potato, for example) may get a splash of sherry, a swirl of cream or both.

Let's start with dessert because (1) the place is as much bakery as café, (2) the pastry case is the first thing you'll see coming in the door and (3) you would be insane to forgo sweets here.

Theodosopoulos makes the best macarons in town. Period. That's macaron, with one "o," not macaroon, the coconut-y American cookie. These sandwich-like French pastries contain a filling of chocolate ganache or flavored pastry cream, while the domed cookies that form the "sandwich" have the crisp, airy quality of baked meringue coupled with the chewy texture lent by almond paste.

If this isn't the most exquisite hand-held dessert on God's green earth, I don't know what is. Eugenia and her husband, Gilles Combes, continue to come up with new flavors to support their online macaron business, most recently ultra-tart Meyer lemon and very soon, pink grapefruit (\$3).

When the café opens its doors each morning, the pastry case is stocked with seven to nine different goodies, plus one or two daily, seasonal specials. Dainty pecan sandies, powdered sugar-dusted kourabiethes (akin to Mexican wedding cookies) and chocolate truffle cookies are standbys, but if you're lucky, you might find a rustic apple-pear galette offered with Chantilly cream (\$5.50); ultra-chocolate-y, mocha-flavored crepes (\$4.95); dreamy vanilla brioche bread pudding with caramel sauce or a fabulous chocolate-almond cookie crust tart, filled with dark chocolate ganache and topped with toasted walnuts (\$5.50).

Get there early. Sweets this crazy-good sell out quickly.

The same advice applies to the compelling daily specials - a series of rotating soup, salad and sandwich combos.

One day, the Yukon Gold mashed potato cake, topped with wild Alaskan smoked salmon, sour cream and chives (sided with spinach salad, tossed with lemon-honey dressing, \$8.95) was gone by noon, and I understand why. It's classy comfort food, sold for a song.

Choosing among Essence's salads and specialties is always a tough one. Will it be organic greens, tossed in Zinfandel dressing with caramelized onions and toasted pecans, accompanied by red wine-poached pears and a mini grilled blue cheese sandwich (\$7.95)? Or the Mediterranean Platter, which so eloquently conveys Theodosopoulos' upbringing. It combines a chunky Greek salad of tomatoes, cukes, olives, bell peppers and feta with hummus, toasted baguette and perfectly rendered dolmathes: mildly astringent (not tinny) grape leaves and fragrant rice filling studded with currants and pine nuts (\$7.95).

Sandwiches may sound commonplace, but wait 'til you taste them. There's nothing ordinary about either the free-range chicken salad (\$7.95) - sparked with lemon and basil and served on house-made brioche with spinach and cuke - or the open-face steak sandwich, which bolsters tender beef slices with sautéed mushrooms, Cabernet butter and Maytag blue cheese (\$8.75). Essence turns Croque Monsieur (which usually requires knife and fork) into a warm, hand-held ham and cheese, spiked with jalapeño, spooned with béchamel and baked until the bread is slightly crisp (\$7.95). Sides include green salad or excellent French Dijon potato salad.

Breakfast can be as savory or as sweet as you want it to be, but sweet often wins out in light of old-fashioned hot chocolate, dreamy iced caramel coffee and floral raspberry jam imported from Switzerland. Try tender scrambled eggs (with Dijon, cream and Parmesan, \$6.25) or the Big Breakfast - eggs with mashed potato cake, sautéed mushrooms, toast and European-style breakfast sausage (\$8.95) - and you might be too full for a pecan sticky bun (Friday and Saturday only, \$2).

Thankfully, I never am.

Reach the reviewer at dining@arizonarepublic.com.