

STORIES WHAT THE CHEF EATS

Chocolate Croissant Bread Pudding

By Pamela Hunt-Cloyd | Published Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2010

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Recipe by Karen Krasne, executive chef, Extraordinary Desserts

What's unusual about me is that while I am a pastry chef, I lead a very healthy lifestyle. I do raw food sometimes and there are periods where we are vegan and periods where we are vegetarian and periods where we eat fish. I have always had a passion for being active and healthy.

Yoga is also a big part of my life and I've been practicing for about 12 years. I discovered yoga after I had already been studying desserts for over 20 years and was traveling to Asia regularly. There was something that I responded to in the spiritual life over there as well as the aesthetics. Yoga was a part of that and it really resonated with me.

It's very stressful to operate a growing business. Without yoga and meditation, I don't think I could source the energy I need or be as comfortable doing what I'm doing. It taught me who I am and what I want. I spent a lot of time at the Chopra Center and it was the greatest thing I ever did. Because you can get lost just baking and making everyone's wedding cakes. It was important for me to learn why I was doing this.

When I learned that I loved serving people, it became apparent that I wouldn't be retiring anytime soon. It turned out that I was having the optimal experience for me. And that's what makes me feel really good about what I am doing on a daily basis.

My life has a lot of yin and yang. By creating desserts, I offer something completely pleasurable and not really necessary. But it makes people really happy. I deal with purple and orange and green and all of these beautiful colors. I know that I am doing what I love when I hear people singing in the dining room. You don't really hear that when you bring out an entrée.

INGREDIENTS

Vanilla Crème Brûlée

4 cups heavy cream
¾ cup lowfat milk
1 whole vanilla bean or 2 tsp. vanilla extract
12 large egg yolks (use egg whites for something else)
1 cup granulated sugar

Chocolate Croissant Bread Pudding

10 medium/large croissants, cut into 2" pieces
2 cups coarsely chopped bittersweet chocolate (Valrhona 61 percent)

HOW TO DO IT

In a medium saucepot, heat cream, milk, and vanilla to almost — but not quite — a boil. In a separate bowl, whisk egg yolks with granulated sugar until smooth. Carefully stir the hot cream mixture into the egg mixture and then whisk until smooth. Strain the mixture by pouring it through a strainer lined with cheesecloth into a separate bowl. Let cool.

Preheat oven to 275 degrees. Place one and a half cups of the crème brûlée mixture in the bottom of a heavy oval baking dish. Layer the croissant pieces on top of the crème brûlée mixture. Sprinkle two cups of the chopped chocolate on top of the croissant pieces. Add another layer of croissant pieces followed by one cup crème brûlée mixture poured on top. Place the remaining croissant pieces on top and cover with the remaining crème brûlée. Bake at 275–300 degrees for 50 minutes. Serve hot or warm.

Editor's note: To save reserved egg whites for more than a few days, beat lightly to mix and freeze (all at once or in portions) in freezer bags. They may be used for macaroon-type cookies, meringue pie toppings, or in flourless chocolate cakes (where, beaten stiff, they serve as the main "lift" to lighten the cakes.) Use in smaller quantities for glazing breads and pastries before baking or (beaten fluffy) to lighten matzoh balls. In Chinese cooking, they are invaluable as quick marinades to "velvet" shrimp, fish, or cut-up poultry, or as a vital ingredient in "Lobster Cantonese." Otherwise, use as you might use Egg Beaters, for healthy breakfast dishes and omelets.

STORIES DOWNTOWN | TIN FORK

Anything but Dessert

By Ed Bedford | Published Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2008



Extraordinary Desserts
1430 Union Street, Little Italy, 619-294-7001

Sunday evening. Light's fading. Wandering up Ash and Union, the echoey streets of the world above Broadway. You know, wrong side of the tracks. All the cool eateries are in the Gaslamp. Up here, especially tonight, it's empty, clattery. You kinda watch your back. Wrong place to look for a snack.

That's when I see this kinda industrial building behind a big metal screen with bubble-shaped cutouts. And a big sign. "Extraordinary Desserts." Huh. Thought they were up Fifth, by Balboa Park. Maybe this is their, like, factory. I try the big industrial door, just out of curiosity. It swings out at me and...whoa! People, lights, action! The place is an eye-popping party, groups packing tables and lining counters blazing with fruit tarts and chocolate displays. Black uniformed assistants run around with tongs. A miked voice says, "Twenty-three, twenty-three?"

I mean, who knew? This is everybody's secret except mine, it seems. And it's too cool, right to the giant pewter Buddha's face at the end of a long counter. Problem is, all I want is something savory. BLT sandwich, whatever. Not up for sugar and spice right now. Still, can't help hanging around. Moth to the flame.

"How many?" says one of the über-beautiful servers.

"Uh, one." Damn. Getting sucked in.

"Counter or table?"

I take the counter. It reminds me of the old Long Bar in TJ. Little less raucous, of course. Guy and his date are just attacking a little plate of...hey, something savory. Buffalo Mozzarella Bruschetta, he tells me. John. Paid \$6.50 for two crispy little bread boats loaded with cheese, tomato, and pesto. I mean, yes, they do look elegant. They probably taste great. But from the gut-filling point of view, I don't think so. On the other hand, now John and his lady friend Rosillo are filling up with a strawberry and raspberry scone (\$3.95) and a double white chocolate ice cream (\$6).

"This is the kind of place you bring a girl if you want her to fall in love with you," John says. "It's the atmosphere. It's the feeling that you're treating them like a lady. I've gotta be careful. Rosillo's gonna think I'm getting serious."

The server, Eric, comes up. He points out a savory menu. Great. "Bar snacks" are the cheapest items on the menu. They start at \$6 for almonds in olive oil. Spreads range from hummus or tzatziki for \$7, to a sample platter at, uh, \$20. Then they have salads such as mixed greens (\$10) on up to a Cobb (\$18). Something tells me to move. Now. Back out that industrial door.

But at least the bruschettas start off at "3.5," as they write the price in the menu. And it's not that they don't have intriguing-sounding flavors. Like "avocado with artichoke tapenade." Tapenade? Think it has something to do with a paste: olives, anchovies, capers, that sort of stuff. Then they have funghi misti — mixed mushrooms — or, hey, "surfing goat ping pong cheese." I try to get Eric to explain that one, but all I retain is goat cheese with mango chutney.

Whatever, I'm tempted. Yes, two bites and they're gone, but, I tell myself, think of the taste experience. Quality, not quantity.

With panini, it looks as if you get more quantity. 'Course, they start at \$10 and go to \$12. From straight ol' turkey breast to goat cheese to...wait a minute, this looks interesting: feta cheese with grilled eggplant, tomato, and pesto, \$10.

But right now, I just can't make myself do it. Instead, natch, I do something stupid. I order a cheese plate, just because they come, as Eric says, with as many bits of (toasted) bread as you want. And it's only "6.5" for one cheese. So I order the most unheard-of cheese on the list: *Fromage d'Affinois aux herbes*. It's "Brie-like," has fresh herbs, and comes from France.

I start pecking as soon as Eric clacks it on the frosted green-glass countertop. And it's nice: herby, liquidy, agreeable, but a little boring, like a girl who agrees with every damned thing you say. Still, the lightly toasted French bread slices are perfect, and the cheese comes with a little pot of jam that's delicious. Turns out it's made from *dulce de leche*, the Mexican caramel sauce, and — who knew? — tomato sauce.

I think I'm being pretty clever by not ordering anything to drink, except the free water 'cause, like with the many teas, you're looking at \$6; and for beers and wines, start there and head skywards. Then I blow it and order that feta cheese panini I'd been eyeing 'cause I'm sill hungry. Ten clams. Crazy. But it comes in a forest of fresh salad leaves and with a juicy piece of grilled eggplant, and the bread is terrific, crisp, soft, everything right.

Except the feta cheese. I think of feta as briny goat cheese; a tangy, wake-up-your-gills kinda cheese, right? But this is mild, a little afraid to speak for itself. "Is this mild cheese thing catering to our American tastes?" I ask Eric. He's from Geneva, Switzerland. He nods. I mean, no biggie, and this panini does stuff me to the gills. Just coulda done with a little more kick. But what do I know?

Lordy. Big breath. Spent a Jackson already. Well, at least I resisted the zillion temptations, such as chocolate macadamia torte, or lemon praline, or — ooh lah lah — *truffe framboise*. But I've got one more purchase. Call it survival instincts. Something sweet for Carla. Heh-heh. Sweeten her up before she finds out how much I spent on myself.

The Place: *Extraordinary Desserts, 1430 Union Street, Little Italy, 619-294-7001; also at 2929 Fifth Avenue, 619-294-2132*

Type of Food: *Euro-American*

Prices: *Bar snack, almonds in olive oil, \$6; hummus and bread, \$7; sample platter of spreads, \$20; mixed green salad, \$10; Cobb salad, \$18; all bruschetta \$3.50 (two for \$6.50), including avocado with artichoke truffle tapenade, funghi misti (mixed mushrooms), and "surfing goat ping pong cheese" with mango chutney; turkey breast panini, \$10; goat cheese panini, \$10; feta cheese panini with grilled eggplant, tomato, pesto, \$10; fromage d'Affinois aux herbes and bread, \$6.50; mini-coffeecake, \$2.50; strawberry-raspberry scone, \$3.95*

Hours: *8:30 a.m.–11:00 p.m., Monday–Thursday; 8:30 a.m.–midnight, Friday; 10:00 a.m.–midnight, Saturday; 10:00 a.m.–11:00 p.m., Sunday*

Buses: *11, 30, 50, 150*

Nearest Bus Stops: *First and Ash (11); Front and Ash (30, 50, 150, southbound); First and Ash (30, 50, 150, northbound)*

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