

Gabe's Country Bake Shoppe ? and Hot Table in Caledon East

By Constance Scrafield

When the Caledon East Bakery was closed for three weeks in late 2012 for renovations, it seemed to the anguished of us much longer.

Every drive by, while the shutdown was in effect, brought the coffee deprived ? not to mention the absence of beautiful goodies ? nearly to tears. What joy there was, when the newly named Gabe's Country Bake Shoppe was finally opened. As soon as one dashed into the shiny new interior, there was a greatly expanded menu, groceries, goodies and a fresh, roomy layout.

The eating space has neat little round tables and chairs, as well as a counter with stools, just right for a bit of lunch or a hot drink and a treat. All the food is made onsite, with attention to the quality, buying locally as much as possible.

In the hot trays is a variety, changed daily, of entrées and snacks, with side orders of rapini, grilled vegetables, broccoli ? whatever suits the chef. Veal and chicken are often on the menu, stuffed pork tenderloin was there one day; other days, there might be ribs.

There are always vegetarian options, not so much as a concession to the non-meat eaters but as the normal choice of a Mediterranean diet. Pasta and tomatoes are basics, but the stuffed eggplant is filled with a rice base.

There is homemade pizza and focaccia and other pastry filled with savories ? spinach and cheese or tomato and ham.

On to the sweet delicacies: tiny chocolate mousses, or vanilla; cupcakes with towering icings; all sorts of little pastries, danishes and croissants for the mornings. And bread pudding.

The place is still owned by the Giraldi family that has owned the store since 2001. A sit-down and chat with Gabe Giraldi himself, son of the family, explained the reasons for the overhaul and life since then.

At age 25, in 2001, Giraldi had finished studying marketing and finance at college. He discovered quite quickly that marketing was not his talent, but numbers were. So he worked together with his parents and brother-in-law to open the bakery and café in Caledon East by the gas station at Airport Road and Old Church Road.

His parents had been in the baking and food business for years and his brother-in-law was a ?brilliant chef? who had just come over from Italy. Giraldi did the numbers to make the business plan.

?We could see there was a need for something and there were a lot of Italians living in the area,? he said of their initial intent to provide the populace with good food.

However, over the years, the village has changed.

?As the town is developing, we wanted to revamp and expand,? he said. ?We did a 180.?

Now open seven days a week rather than six, as formally, Giraldi also has much more to offer customers. The extended hours and increased stock have meant an increase in staff and for this, the family looked to Robert F. Hall Catholic Secondary School.

?They're fantastic,? he said. ?We try to keep the atmosphere fun, both for the staff and the customers. I tell them it's very important to at least acknowledge the next person, even if they're busy with someone else. It makes people relax and feel more patient than being ignored.?

The young people who work there do seem to enjoy their employment. Giraldi is adamant about paying them fairly.

?They get tips,? he commented, ?which we never touch. Some places pay less because of tips but we don't do that. We also have a few seniors who work here. There is very little turnover. I have people who have worked here for seven or eight years.?

Giraldi and his family are aware of the changing dynamics in the region and vary the menu to attract a wide range of customers.

?We have actually doubled our hot table and pastry. Sometimes, we make couscous or stir fry? he said. ?But we make it here so it is all clean label ? no additives, all fresh. We do takeout ? it's really as though people cooked the meal themselves because it is clean label. There is a selection of frozen meals. That's very convenient if the parents are away and the kids can have something good to eat.

?In the spring, we have salads with pasta, rice or potato ? the menu is constantly changing.?

?We are baking our own bread now,? he added. ?There's a nice cinnamon loaf.?

There are more groceries than before. Giraldi said he is always on the lookout for natural products ? a prosciutto from Italy with no additives. He is working on organics as well. But people need to be prepared to pay more for them.

Of his ambitions, he said, ?I'm happy with this. We are rebuilding our clientele and the store is a different entity. The hours are really long and this industry could take you over if you allow it. As time goes on, you get to manage your time. It's a learning curve ? who knew how to make bread pudding??

He offered a sample of the bread pudding when he learned how much my husband enjoys it. When asked if it should be warmed up or should one just dig in.

He smiled: ?Just dig in.?



Gabe Giraldi stands behind the counter at his Country Bake Shoppe in Caledon East, in front of a fine array of pastries. Photo by Constance Scrafield