

Bakery café has brio

Brioche

401 W. Cordova St.
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Reviewed by Tim Pawsey

DOWN THE STREET from the amiable clutter of Salma-gundi, and barely a tanga's toss from deLuxe Junk, Brioche is the perfect fit for this eclectic part of Vancouver that wears its heritage proudly. On the surface, the rough brick interior looks haphazard, with funky kitchen tables, wicker chairs and cheerful bric a brac on the walls from folk art to a small gallery of sepia Italian scenes.

It's a clever deceit, for beneath the eccentricity, this seemingly rustic café is highly organized, with a bonanza of specialty baked goods and a day-long menu that rewards with some of the best flavours around.

When was the last time you were blown away by a \$4 bowl of soup? You will be here, where the changing daily offerings—made always from scratch and served in a Miroesque bowl—can range from white bean and vegetable with pancetta to a velvet cream of mushroom and potato, or the equally satin cannellini with a swirl of truffle oil on top.

The clarity of flavour in these soups is emblematic of the kitchen's thoroughness and general overall passion displayed by owner-chef Eduardo Bilardello. The Sicilian born-and-raised chef, who left his comfortable post as an instructor just over at Pacific Vocational Institute for the vagaries of the restaurant business, is quick to credit the source of his success.

"The recipes all come from my mother," says Bilardello, who dutifully phones mom back in Palermo every Saturday. "She always wants to know what I made this week."

These plates may be classic and robust, but they're also a cut above, sophisticated lunch fare, with flavours that are honed and happily addictive.

The menu (colour chalked on the black back of a strong steel door that links to some vaulted past) is straightforward but inventive: eggplant parmigiano (with three kinds of cheese and topped with egg) served with a traditional salad will run you just \$7.95. The salad is lightly oiled, perked up with just a touch of chili. Sicilian "meat loaf" comes open face with a pizza-like topping—perfect for low-carbers, says the chef. It's classic country fare, he explains.



Brioche chef and owner Eduardo Bilardello uses all his mother's recipes and calls her every week. *photo* Tim Pawsey

"The secret of Sicilian cooking is to use the simplest and freshest of ingredients blended with passion and instinct," says Bilardello, who still yearns for the days when the eggplants were huge and he could walk out to pick true Sicilian oregano.

He's cooked everywhere, including at one of Switzerland's best hotels, as well as at several Vancouver "white table cloth" restaurants. But it's the relaxed setting of the café that's most appealing. "I want it to be casual," he says. "Where everyone can feel comfortable."

The day here starts early, about 1 a.m., when the oven gets busy baking for one of the city's leading cafés. Bilardello comes in around six to prepare fruit-topped, scratch muffins, specialty cakes and croissants, and to gear up for the day's corporate catering, which is

growing by leaps and bounds.

Whether you yearn for a fluffy, tall cappuccino, home-made duck, spinach and feta quiche and salad, or a remarkable vanilla bean and espresso crème brûlée, you'll find it all here—some of the freshest, tastiest fare in the city.

Wine of the Week

• Blasted Church 2002 Cabernet Sauvignon

Could that be Jean Chrétien on the label? Whatever.

The newest from B.C.'s cheekiest winery sports more than just a clever facade. Good berries and leathery notes on the nose with a truckload of juicy cassis and blackberry on the palate, balanced with firm but manageable tannins. Enjoy it now with a good steak or keep for a couple of years and it'll be even better. VQA stores, \$16-\$18.