

Turning Tables | Bakehouse has cure for winter blues

By Judy Cowling
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IT SEEMED LIKE just the other day it was an unseasonably glorious 70 degrees and I was on a joy ride around town in my girlfriend's convertible.

And now, a short week later, my brrrrrr-ains are shivering while I shovel the snow off my driveway and see the world trapped under a solid sheet of ice.

As I write this, we're suffering through historic low temperatures in Hampton Roads, and all I can think of are warm comfort foods, which is a perfect reason to visit The Bakehouse at Chelsea and try some of its wood-fired breads and pizzas.

My brain began to thaw with the first whiff of the warm, spicy smell of the burning, seasoned oak that feeds the oven at this Norfolk spot. Then the dizzying array of golden-brown baked goods displayed behind the Lucite divider sent my taste buds into a frenzy.

Would it be a mushroom asiago turnover? Chocolate chip pistachio roll? A bacon smoked gouda croissant? Or a cheese and herb savory scone?

Oh, maybe a pizza.

Yes. Of course a pizza.

In addition to the regular margherita, pepperoni, three cheese, white, carnivore and vegan pizzas, the Bakehouse always features a pizza of the day. My visit introduced me to the bacon gouda, with house-made tomato sauce, smoked gouda and mozzarella, caramelized onions and uncured, applewood smoked bacon.

The pizza dough is organic and naturally leavened, which produces a pie with a thin crust that has a crisp bottom but is chewy and ever-so-slightly puffed around the edges - just like I like it.

The smoky cheese, the sweet onions and the charred bubbly bits of bacon on top were a perfect flavor combination. All pizzas are available in 10- and 14-inch sizes from 11 a.m. until 8 p.m.

The 10-inch was plenty for lunch and dinner, but my appetite doesn't stop until I have a little something sweet. A large, rather flat square of coffee cake with a crumbly pecan topping was just the ticket. The Bakehouse makes it not too sweet and not too bready... just right.

It's fun to watch the rolling, punching, braiding and tossing of dough as you can see the bakers in action via the restaurant's open space. Painted cinder block walls retain the heat of the wood-burning ovens to provide a cozy feel. And though the indoor seating is limited, it expands to two large round picnic tables outside when warmer weather returns.

I hear The Bakehouse often sells out of favorite pastries early, so you might want to make this your first stop during these cold days, or call to reserve your order.

The place is open 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays.

**The Bakehouse at Chelsea, 1233 W. Olney Road, Norfolk, 644-6939,
www.chelseabakehouse.com**

One of my favorite comfort foods is a grilled cheese sandwich, and the recently opened Grilled Cheese Bistro on Granby Street in downtown Norfolk has mastered this art.

Made with half-inch-thick slices of various artisan breads from both The Bakehouse at Chelsea and The Bakery at Riverside Farms on the Eastern Shore, these golden beauties are over-stuffed with decadent ingredients.

My "Don Quixote" was a sumptuous ooey-gooney melange of gouda, sweet caramelized onions, buttery sauteed mushrooms, salty roasted red pepper and olive tapenade on sourdough. The portions here are generous - so much so that I took home half for dinner.

The bistro itself is small but feels less so with the tall ceilings and open kitchen. I watched as the chef spread butter on the grill before cooking each sandwich. He then placed a square stainless steel cover over each creation. This hood helps steam and melt the ingredients as well as ensure each sandwich is equally browned to perfection.

It took all my self-control not to ask the stranger seated next to me at the long, skinny communal table for a bite of her "Hang-Over" - a black truffle mac and cheese-stuffed sandwich.

Everything that came out of the kitchen was equally impressive, and patrons were all smiles.

The dapper and friendly fellow behind the bar, Carl, informed me that the owners, Dina Taylor and Chris Streebing, are both locals and worked for an area catering company.

I expect this menu to constantly change as they try new combinations of ingredients and types of breads. If Carl gets his way, something involving sun-dried tomatoes and artichoke hearts will appear any day now.

As little as this spot is, the Bistro makes room for live acoustic music from 6 to 9 p.m. every Thursday, Friday and Saturday night.

Grilled cheese, live music and a glass of wine? It doesn't get any better than that.

The Grilled Cheese Bistro, 345 Granby St., 233-2512, www.thegrilledcheesebistro.com (<http://www.thegrilledcheesebistro.com>) or www.facebook.com/GrilledCheeseBistro.

Turning Tables keeps you up to date on the local dining scene. Send submissions to turningtables@pilotonline.com.