



BREAKFAST BURRITO



AÇAÍ BOWL



LATTE

CHARLOTTE'S COFFEE HOUSE

AN ECLECTIC DELIGHT

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

What makes a good coffee house?

A quick place you can stop on the way to work and pick up a good latte to boost you in the morning? A lazy place to hang out on a wet fall afternoon desultorily pecking at your computer? A cozy brunch place to spend quality time with friends on a weekend? Or maybe sit on a patio on a sunny day sipping cold coffee immersed in a good book?

Charlotte's Coffee House wants to say "Yes!" to all of the above. A warm inviting space that starts out on the corner of 11th and White St. and expands into numerous nooks, crannies, and even outdoor spaces, Charlotte's wants to cater to everyone while maintaining a secure and still evolving identity. You cannot help but notice endearing oddities that dot this place: a door handle made out of an espresso filter holder, copper panels over the fireplace, a map of Dubuque hanging on a side wall, gorgeously carved wooden doors (more on that later) and pillars, and so on... Even the chairs are mismatched! When asked about this quixotic feature, Barista Tom Unger told me that some of the chairs were rescued from the fire and they just chose others to somewhat match the saved ones.

Ah, yes, the fire! If Charlotte's has been in the news recently, it is because it re-opened after a fire gutted the place, and the history of that fire is reflected in many of the odd details about the place. Let us back up a little bit and let Cheryl Rusk, one of the owners, explain the history.

Back in 2015, Cheryl had retired from John Deere after nearly four decades and decide to start a vacation rental place with her husband Don. The corner building on 11th and White, attractively located on the edge of the just-reinvigorated Millwork District was available. And suddenly, the building next door went on foreclosure. As they were planning on combining the two building and converting them to vacation rentals, they went on a California vacation and stumbled upon the idea of a coffee shop on the ground floor. Cheryl wanted to name it Charlotte's after her mother, and the vacation rental got the moniker Drake House, after Don's mother's maiden name.

Charlotte's was a small affair at first, all about the coffee. Cheryl and Tim, her son, ran into Up Roasters from Minneapolis, MN and the idea of using coffee from a small batch roaster appealed to them. Cheryl

loves baking and soon her baked goods started gaining a following. Eventually, Charlotte's became a breakfast and brunch place. Until the disastrous fire...

July 30, 2018. A trash can fire soon engulfed the building causing extensive fire and smoke damage. There was nothing to do but gut the place, redesign, and start over. The next 13 months would involve lots of decisions, big and small, while they tried to keep the business going using a coffee truck. The community helped—for example, women from the Clarke volleyball team helped scrub the decorative pillars rescued from the fire. Anything they could rescue and refurbish became part of the building blocks for the new coffeehouse. Cheryl had bought two elaborately decorated doors and two pillars from an old Indian palace through a Galena store. Cleaned and refinished, they occupy prime spots in the new space.

The food and drink menu also went through a redesign process. Where the menu grew somewhat wildly based on customer demand and feedback, they could now focus on what they wanted to do and what they could accomplish well. Cheryl, Tim, and Tom put their heads together, tested and tasted their way through everything, and came up with a well-curated menu that packs quite a punch. Tim and Tom even went to coffee school in Tacoma, WA to learn both the aesthetics and business of coffee!

So, let us start with the coffee! Tom Unger was kind enough to sit with me and walk me through the different beans they use and techniques that yield ideal flavor results.

First, the coffee everyone knows: drip coffee. This is the process most of us use in our home coffee makers. Hot water dripping through ground coffee beans, nothing fancy. I prefer medium roasts, smooth and bright. The roasting is not too strong to yield those deep dark nutty notes you find in dark roasts, but it retains more of the light acids, floral notes, and fruity odors that good coffee beans often have. Charlotte's house brand is Ethiopian, the birthplace of coffee. Grown in the highlands of this East African country, the beans have a well-rounded flavor profile and medium roast drip coffee preserves many of those flavors. The volatile acids contribute a mild sourness redolent of green apple.

Espresso: that wonderful method Italians invented to extract flavor under high heat and pressure! Almost steaming water is forced through finely ground beans leading to a creamy concentrate that is rich in both the brighter and darker notes of coffee. Charlotte's uses Matador, a seven bean mix specially blended at Up Roasters to capture the spectrum of flavor. The espresso itself is strongly bitter with woody, nutty and malty flavors and a complex sourness that slowly develops a smooth aftertaste. Of course, espresso is best experienced by me in a latte where creamy frothy milk adds a whole another dimension to espresso. Milk frothed by steam adds a sweetness that perfectly balances the sour and bitter notes of espresso.

Then, there is the cold brew, the latest craze. Charlotte's plans to change the beans they use regularly, sticking to a single origin bean each time. Right now, they have a lovely Columbian coffee that has buttery and spicy notes and an aftertaste of roasted pecans! The beans are soaked in cold water at room temperature for 24 to 48 hours, and the brew is stored in the refrigerator. If you wanted another experience, try the nitro cold brew where nitrogen is bubbled through the cold brew. Bubbling nitrogen helps some of the volatile flavor molecules get trapped in the foam bubbles revealing new complexities. The nutty flavor of the Columbian is more pronounced, with additional creamy sourness a grace note.

The food menu is small but expertly curated. Let us start with their top seller, the açai bowl. A tangy açai sorbet sits at the bottom of the bowl topped by sliced fruit and granola and drizzled with honey. A scoop of peanut butter on top makes it a meal unto itself. As you gather a spoonful of peanut butter, fruit, granola, and sorbet into your mouth, it is a symphony of flavor and texture: creamy fat, crisp fruit, cold crystalline sorbet, and crunchy granola with sweet and sour notes perfectly balancing each other.

On a breakfast trip, I ordered a breakfast burrito and my mom had Peanut Butter Banana Toast. I was impressed with how each ingredient was identifiable and the whole worked in harmony. The breakfast burrito had sausage (or bacon), scrambled egg, hash browns, cheese and veggies and came with a side of salsa and



sour cream (optional). In many burritos, the ingredients become indistinguishable from each other with some kind of blended flavor. Freshly assembled burritos, like Charlotte's, have identifiable components working towards a greater whole. The same was true of my mom's toast. Hearty ciabatta bread formed the base of the toast, slathered with peanut butter, topped with sliced bananas and granola, and drizzled with honey. Each ingredient held its own while the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. I would have happily stolen more from my mom's plate if I didn't hate bananas so much. Next time, I will order it with strawberries, and I am already salivating at that prospect!

The attention paid to balancing textures is not surprising when you learn that Cheryl is a baker. She bakes the scones, muffins, and cookies that tempt you in the glass case beside the ordering counter. The flavors change depending what Cheryl feels like: cranberry-white

chocolate, blueberry lemon, caramel apple, apricot ginger, apple walnut, and so on. The cranberry white chocolate scone I had was divine: soft and crumbly and surprisingly moist. Most scones achieve the crumbly texture, but not always the moisture. Indeed, my first question when I sat down with Cheryl was about the fat she used (butter)!

Cheryl and her team have bigger plans once they settle in and get used to the new space. Cheryl wants to add cinnamon rolls, pies, cheesecakes, and dessert empanadas (definite yes from me on the last one!). Tom wants to be more ambitious about the coffees—they currently have a Ugandan single bean for hot coffee that is not on the menu, but the barista will happily make it for you if you ask for it. There may be coffee tastings on the horizon...

While those changes are somewhere in the future, there is a cozy spot somewhere in Charlotte's, a hot cup of joe, and food awaiting. ■



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